

# JOE SACCO: PANELS, JOURNALISM AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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The article focuses on the work on Palestine by journalist and cartoonist Joe Sacco. Member of the current denominated *journalistic comic*, Joe Sacco, through his direct, committed drawings, offers his particular view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He tries to avoid preconceptions and common places. In this text we analyse his main comic books, such as *Palestine* or *Footnotes in Gaza*.

#### Key words:

Joe Sacco, journalistic comic, cartoons, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestine.

For some time now, contemporary comic has approached current events and narrates stories of social and political interest. The so-called graphic novel tackles aspects of real life that have little to do with the fantasy and escape topics attributed to traditional comics. Art Spiegelman with his work *Maus* established a way of working graphic narrative so that it told of personal, social and political difficulties through the panels of the story. Such direct and clear manner of narration captures the reader's interest with text and images. An example of this are works such as *Birmanian Chronicles* by Guy Delisle, *Fax from Sarajevo* by Joe Kubert, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, *Waltz with Bashir* by Ari Folman and David Polonsky or *Poppies from Irak* by Brigitte Findakly and Lewis Trondheim. In this context comics and graphic novels on Israel and Palestine are ever more frequent. *Shrapnel* by Rutu Modan, *An American Jew lost in Israel* by Sarah Glidden, *Jumping the Wall* by Maximilien Le Roy, *A Boy in Palestine* by Naji al-Ali or *Jerusalem, A Portrait of the Boaz Yakin Family* by Nick Bertozzi are examples of the interest the convulsed and agitated history of the area awakens. One of the most curious cases is the comic called

*The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* by Oreet Ashery and Larissa Sansour that tells the story of two artists that have superpowers (alter egos of the two authors of the comic) and fifty female ninjas who have the mission of saving Palestine. But in this realm, the work of the comic artist and journalist Joe Sacco (Malta, 1960) leads the trend of comic-journalism that approaches reality to narrate, as a journalistic report, armed conflicts such as the one that is taking place between Palestine and Israel.

Joe Sacco spent two months in Palestine between 1991 and 1992 "My interests in the Near East," he remarks, "did not begin as a consequence of the war itself, but rather as a matter of social justice. I grew up thinking the Palestinians were terrorists and for many reasons. I mean, it is true, they have committed terrorist acts but, what is the context? What has led them to this? Then, in a given moment, I felt the need of understanding the origin or the nature of the injustices that happen there. I felt I needed to see them with my own eyes and do something about them". So in the middle of 1992 Joe Sacco began to write and draw *Palestine: in the Gaza Strip*, work with which he won the American Book Award in 1996. In 2002, when the Palestine conflict flares again, he receives the prize to the best graphic novel in the Book Expo America. *Palestine: in the Gaza Strip*, initially serialised in nine comic books between 1993 and 1995 and later gathered in a single volume, relates the violent oppression Israel exerts on the Palestinian territories, centering on the first Intifada. Joe Sacco says, "I do journalistic comics because it is the best manner of uniting my two passions: comics and journalism. I don't have a theory to explain this. I just have always been interested in current affairs and sometimes, things happen around the world, that make me want to do something about them. And what I think is most useful is to go there and inform of exactly what it is that is

1 BARROS, DIEGO E.: Joe Sacco: "Yo entiendo el periodismo como el primer escalón de la historia", <<http://www.jotdown.es/2014/06/joe-sacco-yo-entiendo-el-periodismo-como-el-primer-escalon-de-la-historia/>> [10/10/2016].

happening. I think comics are a great means to present complex information<sup>2</sup>. Joe Sacco's drawings devoted to the Palestine-Israel conflict reveal a desolating panorama. Even though the realism of his illustrations sometimes make very hard images, his stories are highly suggestive narrations to which we cannot be indifferent.

The fact is that the work of this specific journalist on the Palestine-Israel conflict is a testimony of the condition of those people dispossessed by colonial violence. His images, close to photo-journalism show difficult and dangerous situations, very hard lives, ridden by hidden conflicts of complex solution. His work speaks of those excluded and displaced, on how transitory and fragile is the life that, in this case, is forced upon the Palestinians. Joe Sacco's drawings speak of the uprooting, the difficulty of surviving day to day, the disorientation, the no-place, the absence of home, the displacement and how life is faced when living under occupation. His images bring to light what we nearly never see in communications media, since they picture and relate personal and specific stories. The detailed interviews Joe Sacco carries out and documents introduce us to the problems and experiences, in principle, unique, but that can actually be extrapolated to a great part of the Palestinian population.

Joe Sacco studied journalism at the University of Oregon and defines himself as an illustrator who does journalism, showing the most political facet of the Palestine-Israel conflict. He calls himself a comic artist and considers himself to be a very political person. For Sacco drawing is a subjective act, but he tries to be truthful and rigorous in panels when he is telling the stories of other people, always aware of journalistic ethics. His work is an example that, in this case, politics cannot be separated from everyday life. In Joe Sacco's drawings we see the day-to-day of the Palestinians and how the conflict affects everyday affairs. "Journalism" says Joe Sacco, "is a privilege. It is the best way to get to know lots of people, of many different types. It is a privilege because they open their lives to you because you are a journalist."<sup>3</sup>. Joe Sacco, who admires Goya, Bruegel and especially, Robert Crumb, tells us the complete and detailed story of those he interviews with his drawings. He draws everything with great realism. His crowded illustrations describe tortures, attacks, deaths and all types of violence with precision.

In many of his stories Joe Sacco inserts a self-portrait which he justifies saying, "I have always drawn myself in my panels. The readers understand that what they see is my personal point of view. I studied journalism, but I think objectivity is an illusion. When we prepare a story we select the

material. I am not objective, but I do try to be honest. That is why I enter the scene, it is my way of stating clearly that I am a filter and a magnifying glass in the story<sup>4</sup>." Joe Sacco takes between two and three years to complete a comic, and uses his appearances in the panels to do self-parody and introduce a lighter note and certain dose of humour in the story, such as when he draws himself tired of drinking so much tea.

It should be pointed out that Joe Sacco's panels refer so adequately to the complex situation the Palestinians and Israelis are going through that they have captured the attention of personalities such as Edward Said, an American of Palestinian origin and author of relevant texts such as *Orientalism*, *Gaza-Jerico*, *Pax Americana* or *Palestinian Chronicles*, who defends Palestinian self-government and human rights. Edward Said tells that he discovered Joe Sacco's work because his younger son brought home the first number of *Palestine*. "I had before my eyes," commented Edward Said, "a comic of political and aesthetic content which was extraordinarily original, very different from any of the other, many, and often dense and twisted debates that occupy the Palestinians, Israelis and their sympathizers."<sup>5</sup>. He was so interested in the story Sacco drew and told that he wrote the introduction to *Palestine: on the Gaza Strip*. Joe Sacco included an additional page in *Palestine: on the Gaza Strip*, telling how the scholar influenced his work. In it we see that Joe stayed in the apartment of Larry, an American who teaches English in Gaza and that he found, among the books in his host's house Edward Said's *Orientalism* which the artist began to read. "I like Edward Said", wrote Sacco in *Palestine*<sup>6</sup>.

Sacco's images reflect direct contact with the situations of conflict and colonialism. Sacco's drawings are evident, direct, and occasionally overwhelming. Technically his line is close to engraving due to the great amount of details shown and because of the rigorous black and white that make his illustrations even more dramatic. Joe Sacco includes colour in short stories such as *Hebron: A Look Inside*, coloured by Rhea Patton or in *Underground War in Gaza* which appear in the book *Journalism*.

Normally Joe Sacco draws from photographs he takes himself in the places he visits. In the introduction to his book *Journalism* he wrote, "No two illustrators will ever draw in the exact same manner a UN truck, even if both base their work on the same reference material"<sup>7</sup>. Joe Sacco's composition and framing have much to do with photo-journalism; in such a way that Joe Sacco seems to follow the theories Hal Foster presents in his text, *The Artist as Ethnographer*<sup>8</sup>. Since Joe Sacco acts as an ethnographer that observes and describes charac-

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BARROS, DIEGO E.: *La paz no va a pagarme el alquiler: Joe Sacco* <<http://www.jotdown.es/2012/11/la-paz-no-va-a-pagarme-el-alquiler-joe-sacco>> [11/10/2016].

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BARROS, DIEGO E.: *Joe Sacco: "Yo entiendo el periodismo como el primer escalón de la historia"*, <<http://www.jotdown.es/2014/06/joe-sacco-yo-entiendo-el-periodismo-como-el-primer-escalon-de-la-historia/>> [10/10/2016].

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MAGÍ, LUCIA: "No soy objetivo pero sí honesto". *El País*, 25 de octubre de 2009.

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SACCO, JOE: *Palestina: en la franja de Gaza*, Barcelona, Planeta de Agostini, 2007. (3ª edición).

## 6

*Ibid.* P. 177.

## 7

SACCO, JOE: *Reportajes*, Barcelona, Reservoir Books, 2012.

## 8

FOSTER, HAL: *El retorno de lo real. La vanguardia a finales de siglo*, Madrid, Akal Contemporáneo, 2001.

teristic aspects of a specific human group (in this case, the Palestinians) and of their life and social conditions. But Joe Sacco is an ethnographer who takes sides. His view penetrates the conflict and mixes in the day to day of the Palestinians and Israelis and openly criticizes the situation of oppression that the Palestinian people suffer.

Sacco is the champion of comic journalism and thus his chronicles and stories, even pretending to be objective, show his own point of view. Joe Sacco tells specific stories that are very well documented. Nothing is anonymous for him. There are names, personal stories, places, dates, etc. The comic artist, from his perspective as author, seems to adopt as his the statement that art is perception and information, as artist Antoni Muntadas defends.

Joe Sacco's illustrations show his great knowledge of history. His interest in journalism has led him to mix with Palestinians to investigate facts such as those he tells in *Footnotes in Gaza*, awarded the Ridenhour Book Prize in 2010 and that begins in 2001 when Harpers magazine commissioned Joe Sacco and the journalist Chris Hedges a work on the Gaza Strip.

Joe Sacco had read Noam Chomski's book *The Fateful Triangle* on the great slaughter of civilians in Khan Younis in 1956 during the War of Sinai. The artist reconstructs what happened there in a type of "retrofuturism" based on photographs of the archives of the UNRWA (United Nations Agency for Refugees of Palestine and Near East. The terrible part is that although Joe Sacco rescues and relates happenings occurred in 1956, what happened and the images that serve to demonstrate it continue being totally valid. The recent history of the Palestinian people seems to dwell in an interminable "eternal return." Walter Benjamin pointed out that the past is shown to us through the remains and vestiges of it that have reached us. For the author of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* the past is an inevitable reference. In the first place because, like it or not, the past leaves evidence in ruins that become a point of departure of the return to other times. The ruin is the manner in which the legacy of the past becomes evident, it is the tip of the iceberg that discovers our historical legacy. Therefore, it is from the ruin and from the trail that we rescue history.

The story and history Joe Sacco rescues and represents in his comics is sad and desolating. The artist, very interested in the past, affirms that the comic allows "carrying people to the past"<sup>9</sup> and following the trail that remits us to the past and present history of the Palestinian people. Actually the story the author of *Palestine: in the Gaza Strip* brings to light through a ruin is a *continuum* as a counterpart to the story of discontinuity<sup>10</sup> of which Benjamin speaks. "I like

to think," says Sacco, "about my books as if they had no end, as if it were only a new paragraph, and OK, something new will begin but the story continues"<sup>11</sup>. To the contrary, in Walter Benjamin, the *continuum* of history would be broken by a number of specific events which would, in turn, form a part of history. However, Joe Sacco's honest images speak of a constant present, of happenings that do not change and continue happening in the same way as they did decades ago, something that the artist exemplifies very well in his graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza*. What Sacco tells happened in 1956 but could well be happening today. The stories Joe Sacco reflects are the result of violence and attacks. Sacco establishes the dialectic between past and present and is an example of the creative diversity typical of the end of the 20th century, characterised by questioning totalitarian conceptions in respect to social, philosophical and artistic discourse.

In this sense, Walter Mignolo, author of *Local Histories/Global Design*, maintains that modernity and its consequences cannot be approached only from the point of view of the West. The other, what is different, must be also considered to make an accurate analysis of history. Thus, before the apparent bewilderment caused by the loss of credibility in the historic naturalist discourse or in the great stories to which Jean-François Lyotard<sup>12</sup> referred, from the mid seventies diversity and relativism have imposed themselves in all realms. Joe Sacco appears to follow these proposals and, in an exercise of objectivity, includes testimonies of Jews in order to give a diverging point of view in his stories. Nowadays the proliferation of individualities is such that the concept of totality fades to give place to an off-centred and polysemic vision of which Joe Sacco's work bears witness. In contemporary comics there are considerations on politics, capitalism, gender, mass media or activism. But all the discourses stated in the graphic novels of the last decades form part of the same scenario, interconnected and reflecting the complex network of current events, fragmented, dispersed and disoriented.

It must be pointed out that the stories described and the images presented in Joe Sacco's publications are tangential since they are out of the media spotlight. In fact, the manner in which Joe Sacco works is getting to places when the other journalists have left, when what happened there ceases to be interesting in the sense of urgent information. Joe Sacco speaks of a limited space, a borderline, inscribed in a panoptic, technological and global world. Étienne Balibar in his text *Violence, identity and Civility* speaks of the frontiers heterogenous character and ubiquity<sup>13</sup>, and it is because the frontier is no longer just a line dividing nations. There

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BARROS, DIEGO E.: *Joe Sacco: "Yo entiendo el periodismo como el primer escalón de la historia"*, <<http://www.jotdown.es/2014/06/joe-sacco-yo-entiendo-el-periodismo-como-el-primer-escalon-de-la-historia/>> [10/10/2016].

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VV. AA.: *Modernidad y postmodernidad*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1988.

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BARROS, DIEGO E.: *Joe Sacco: "Yo entiendo el periodismo como el primer escalón de la historia"*, <<http://www.jotdown.es/2014/06/joe-sacco-yo-entiendo-el-periodismo-como-el-primer-escalon-de-la-historia/>> [10/10/2016].

## 12

LYOTARD, JEAN FRANÇOIS: *La condición postmoderna*, Barcelona, Ediciones del Drac, 1984.

## 13

BALIBAR, ÉTIENNE: *Violencias, identidades y ciudad. Para una cultura política global*. Barcelona, Gedisa, 2005. Pág. 84.

are frontiers in ideologies, in regions, in culture. The frontiers limits are no longer only the separations between territories, they go further. Joe Sacco gives us a good example of what the frontiers suppose in Palestine or Israel each time he crosses the complex border passes to enter Gaza, tedious and intimidating checkpoints that remit to what was written by Balibar on the frontier.

Joe Sacco composes a story centered on the traditional script made up of an introduction, crux and outcome. He gives voice to the Palestinians, lets them have the word and becomes an accurate and committed narrator. He describes the impoverished and improvised lives produced by the imposed exodus of a forceful migration. He shows an over-populated and indigent Gaza Strip full of displaced persons. And, sadly, observation of Joe Sacco's panels on Palestine submerges us in a sort of "eternal return" since Sacco's illustrations could have been drawn during the last months. The conflictive situation that the Gaza Strip lives does not vary, history repeats itself through decades and the fragile houses continue being destroyed by Israeli tanks.

Joe Sacco's publications have been banned by certain book stores in North America for their open criticism to Israeli authorities. The conflict between Arabs and Jews seems to live a sad eternal present whose solution seems neither easy nor near. In a way, Sacco's panels on Palestine, despite having been drawn more than a decade ago, are fully valid. Sacco's comics, far from being only entertainment make the reader take sides on determined conflictive situations in places all over the planet. Bosnia, Iran, Chechenia or Hebron are the subject matter in volumes such as: *Safe Area Gorazde*, *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo*, el web-cómic *War's End: Profiles from Bosnia*.

In November 2012 the General Assembly of the United Nations granted the Palestine Territories the condition of "non-member observing state". In December 2014 the European Parliament supported the recognition of the Palestinian state. But more than 4.5 million Palestinians live in a complex present where Israeli settlements continue and the peace process, paralysed since 2014 does not seem to advance.

Joe Sacco who is also the author of works such as *The Great War July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme* which speaks of the battle of Somme during World War I, and the satiric comic *Bumf*, presents specific realities in his stories, personal stories and experiences of the people who speak of their past and their day-to-day. A before and a now that are hardly different. His work shows aspects of every-day life, straddling politics and epic, they show a complex present that unfortunately does not seem to be about to change.

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