

Witnessing and Empty Empathy: A Comparison Between Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Jérôme Ruillier's *The Strange*

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Abstract: This article compares two graphic novels dealing with the subject of modern border crises, namely Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Jérôme Ruillier's *The Strange*, by considering empathy creation in visual media. Ruillier's *The Strange*, whose stated goal is to elicit empathy by presenting the viewer with as many narrative perspectives as possible, is a graphic novel dealing with the translation of a refugee in a nondescript fantasy world which only vaguely alludes to the recent refugee crisis in France. Ruillier gives passersby, police officers, activists, and the protagonist's own smuggler equal self-representation, which results in a fragmented narrative structure that does not bring the refugee's own voice to the fore. This technique, combined with the lack of a specific socio-political context for the protagonist's translation, engenders empty empathy in the viewer's reaction to the refugee's trauma, mainly due to *The Strange* being a patchwork creation of refugee stories whose common denominator is personal pain, something which cannot elicit authentic empathy. This article proposes a comparison with Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, which illustrates specific stories from Gaza and the West Bank, and whose events compel Sacco to throw in his lot with the refugees; this second perspective highlights the difference between empty empathy and witnessing, and in the process underlines what Ruillier's work lacks in its treatment of borders and refugees.

This article looks into the ways in which two graphic novels, Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Jérôme Ruillier's *The Strange*, depict the trauma of dislocation in the context of a refugee crisis, while focusing on the role of contextualization in the emotional impact of the story. Recent scholarship on the connection between comic books and its representation of trauma focuses on

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what the medium can achieve in the merging of image and text, as posited in Jennifer Anderson Bliss' *Picturing the Unspeakable: Trauma, Memory, and Visuality in Contemporary Comics* (2014) or Harriet Earle's *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (2017). These books argue that the visual medium of comic books has lent itself easily to representing traumas relating to war, dislocation, or other life-changing events by using the specific circumstances surrounding those experiencing it, i.e. their names, ages, distinct cultures, and especially the broader socio-political context, in order to elicit empathy. The decision to sweep aside the particulars of the socio-political context would preclude authentic empathy, as the subjects of the story would end up becoming faceless individuals devoid of a background, and would therefore limit the affective quality of the narrative. By comparing Ruillier's *The Strange* to Sacco's *Palestine*, I aim to show the importance of context in the formation of refugee narratives, and I do this through Anne Kaplan's work on "empty empathy" and "witnessing" in the visual media representations of traumatic events. In addition to this, I am also considering Edward Said's critique of the prevalent Western representation of the exotic Other, a practice which also confiscates their chance of self-representation. While Sacco's work is wary of the pitfalls of representation in the media, in Ruillier's case the author ends up speaking for the displaced and taking away their self-representation via the graphic novel's own narrative technique. This is especially noteworthy considering the fact that *The Strange* is not autobiographical like *Palestine*, and also the fact that the socio-political context is not only fictive, but never made explicit within the narrative itself. Despite Ruillier's intentional erasure of context and his designating the main character as the diasporic "everyman," the author does, in fact, point to the specific psychological and physical damage that assail the Other due to their marginalization. Taking this into account, Frantz Fanon's

writing on this subject can contribute to providing an even approach when critiquing the graphic novel in question.

Jérôme Ruillier's *The Strange* (2016) and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1993) present themselves as graphic novels about displaced individuals in the context of a traumatic event, each using different perspectival and artistic techniques to render the characters and events. Sacco's *Palestine* tells the story of the author's visit to Israel, particularly areas like the West Bank, and is a first-person narration that focuses on listening to the plight of the oppressed Palestinians. Ruillier's *The Strange*, on the other hand, is not autobiographical in its presentation of refugees, but rather shifts from multiple first-person perspectives, all of which revolve around one main character, the eponymous refugee, who leaves his unnamed country to settle in an oppressive new environment. While Sacco weaves the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into his story and then inserts himself as an active element within this context, the same does not occur in Ruillier's comic. There is no such background in *The Strange*, either in terms of its own fantasy world or in terms of the real world. To create the world of *The Strange*,

Ruillier worked with a friend from the charity Réseau Éducation Sans Frontières to collect accounts from migrants, police officers and the wider public, and sets the resulting tales in a world peopled by animals. That gives his tale a surreal, universal twist, though he tethers it to France by interspersing the action with bleak quotes from Nicolas Sarkozy and Marine Le Pen. (Smart)

Other allusions to France are not present in the fantasy world of the graphic novel. The language that the eponymous protagonist speaks is also fictive, as well as the eponymous term used to

describe a migrant stemming from the same country as the main protagonist: “a strange.” However, the choice of character design is not a proxy for ethnicity, a method also used in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980) whereby Jews, Germans, and Poles are each represented by different animal species. Ruillier’s technique is similar to Spiegelman’s, as his characters are similarly rendered anthropomorphized animals of different species, with a divergence in the way different ethnicities are represented: when the main character manages to find someone from his homeland, as in the episode with “the woman at the hostel” (Ruillier 78-9), this other person appears to be a different anthropomorphized animal than the protagonist, and not the same panda-like creature. Compared to the worldbuilding in *Maus*, “the choice to use anthropomorphic characters allows Ruillier to hone in on his character’s humanity by abstracting the differences between people” (Hoffman), meaning people as individuals and not ethnic groups, which precludes the kind of symbolic moral coding that Spiegelman inserted in his choice of animal groups, for example in his portraying Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs. The technique that sets *The Strange* apart from both *Maus* and *Palestine* is the fragmented narration, wherein most of the characters take turns in presenting their own perspective in the episodes concerning the eponymous “strange.” Only the first and last episodes deal with the main character’s point of view. In-between these two poles of self-representation, other narrators interpret the actions of the refugee, ranging from passersby to police officers. By contrast, Sacco tells his story as a first-person narration, letting the Palestinians he comes into contact with give their own perspectives on the border conflict. *Palestine* is similar to *Maus* in its narrative technique, where a fictionalized version of the author gives the stage to a third person so that they may narrate their trauma. Despite the fact that, “at first glance [Sacco’s] consistent, striking style renders all the sequences self-referential, even when the sequences represent the perspectives of others who are recounting their own past suffering” (Scherr 20), the

comic book artist manages to create empathy through his use of a tactile form of representation called “haptic visuality” (Scherr 21). The *haptic* manages to bridge the distance between the work and the reader through Sacco’s artistic distortion of bodies and body language, for example in his rendering of hands (Scherr 21). Thus, Sacco’s visual style, compared to *The Strange*, is consistent in how it seeks to represent this political situation for his readers.

The fragmented narrative technique that Ruillier uses in *The Strange*, meant to engender a diverse array of empathy-creating perspectives, works against the character development of the eponymous refugee. Amnesty International’s afterword in the book mentions the fact that,

the succession of characters ensures that no single point of view prevails. Instead, we gain insight into the many ways people perceive the circumstances of this uprooted, exiled refugee, whose name and background we’ll never know.

Along the way, we come to realize that we could all be one of these characters. The plurality of voices forces us to recognize that this isn’t just somebody else’s story—that of the strange - but our story as well. (n.pag.)

While it is true that Ruillier ensured that “no single point of view prevails,” what the afterword does not mention is that this situation turns into the other characters speaking *for* the nameless protagonist, instead of presenting the reader with the refugee’s own voice. For instance, in Edward Said’s analysis of the West’s portrayal of the Orient, he draws attention to the same process, whereby

what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West . . . the Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks. (50)

There are multiple layers at work here: Ruillier's largely silent protagonist is figuratively "identified" and "depicted" by the other characters, through whom the reader gets to know the "strange." These perspectives are usually those of figures of authority (his smuggler, his paranoid neighbor, and the immigration services who attempt to "discipline" him) but also those who are friendly or neutral with respect to his struggle (the activists and the passersby). Secondly, the protagonist is literally "contained" and "represented" within the physical frameworks of the graphic novel's panels, and the matter of authorial control is thus more visible due to the specific vocabulary of comics: the author is one of the figures of authority exerting their own perspective of the drama of the diasporic individual, and who literally "illustrates" it, albeit through the guise of the narrators of the story. *Palestine* also illustrates this matter of authorial control via its depiction of the journalists' cameras and how these objects might have something in common with the oppressors' guns: an object of power, of containment, and capturing, notions which also surface in the language of taking pictures (Scherr 28). The refugee is an object inside the text as well as outside it due to the one-sidedness of his dialogic relationship with the world. According to Paulo Freire, "because dialogue is an encounter between women and men who name the world, it must

not be a situation where some name on behalf of others” (62). The refugee’s story must be told *through* someone else in order to be heard, something which chips away at their agency.

Both Ruillier and Sacco are at a safe distance from the events portrayed in *The Strange* and *Palestine* from the point of view of their background, but in the former’s case the nonspecificity of the characters and events impinges upon the creation of real empathy. According to Anne Kaplan, the creation of empathy (or lack thereof) in the representation of trauma lies in the way the respective images form a narrative in a piece of media. In the case of *The Strange*, Kaplan’s “concept of fragmentation leading to empty empathy” (264) is particularly relevant:

Here the array of separate images of suffering without any context or background information provided, and focusing on the pain of strange individuals whom we see at a distance cannot elicit more than a fleeting empathy. There is then a rapid diminution of the affect. There is no socio-political context for actually putting ourselves in the situation of those suffering from catastrophe, for experiencing it deeply and enduringly. (Kaplan 264)

These are also elements which make up *The Strange*’s narrative structure, seeing as how the protagonist’s struggle is almost always seen through an outside lens, and how ends up distancing the reader instead of drawing them in. The narration does not mention the “socio-political context” of the displacement, beginning with the assertion of intent in the made-up language of the main character: “We had decided to leave. Unfortunately, it had become almost impossible” (Ruillier 5-6). Beyond this utterance, the narration does not let the reader know the reasoning behind the protagonist’s translation into a different culture, as the “surreal, universal twist” to the world of *The Strange* does not allow for any particulars to develop. Compared to *Palestine* there is no

specific “socio-political context” derived from the real world from which *The Strange* seeks to arouse empathy. Sacco incorporates personal interactions and listening to victims of oppression in his book in order “to spotlight the overlooked minutiae of oppression—the humiliation, the tedium, and the inconveniences of all shapes and sizes—in addition to the statistics-friendly horrors” (Sacco, “January Interview”). The real individuals that Sacco listens to are the bulk of his story, with the historical context as the overarching theme that brings cohesion to these conversations. By contrast, the knitting together of the narrative structure in Ruillier’s *The Strange* comes from the testimonies of various “undocumented immigrants and their families, as well as police officers and other people close to the issue” (Ruillier n.pag.), the names of whom are not known. While there is an element of veracity to the events depicted in *The Strange*, the author’s method of distilling the stories of real people involved a process in which he “selected, scrambled, combined, and wove together pieces of their stories to create this fictional account,” (Ruillier n.pag.) therefore ensuring that the character creation stems from the common denominator of all these stories: personal pain. Yet, “as if personal pain is politics” the images in *The Strange* end up “leaving no room for a concept of the collective or of our collective response-ability” (Kaplan 275) and in its erasure of any context to present a story of the contemporary refugee crisis, it cannot “elicit more than a fleeting empathy” (Kaplan 264). Instead, multiple perspectives, among them detached observers of the protagonist’s plight, are the bulk of the graphic novel’s narration, which fails in its proposition of creating empathy due to the fact that, in order “to complete the situation, we would need to be presented with the perspective of the ‘Other’ who remains invisible. That’s why images of these kinds only elicit empty empathy” (Kaplan 264). Paradoxically, in Ruillier’s attempt to make a traumatic narrative relatable to as many people as possible by levelling not just

the particulars but also any broader or recognizable context, *The Strange's* worldbuilding undermines its own intention as stated in the afterword.

On the other hand, Sacco's representation of the victims of trauma is an attempt to let the subjects of his art speak for themselves in order to create empathy. According to Kaplan's concept of "witnessing," the lens of visual representation can also move people out of passive viewership. This is due to the fact that the "pro-social aspect of empathy sets the stage (. . .), since taking responsibility for injustice by listening carefully to victims or actually doing something about injustice (. . .) is required for witnessing" (Kaplan 270). *Palestine* itself is a representation in comic book form of how "witnessing" might work, as Sacco

has gained access to unusually intimate testimony, giving space to details and perspectives normally excluded by mainstream media coverage. The enthusiasm and frequency with which Sacco is hauled into the homes of those he meets—to listen, take notes and drink endless cups of tea—underlines the desperation of the people he encounters; their hopes are pinned not on political promises but on telling their stories to a stranger who writes comic books. (Thompson)

Despite being a stranger, Sacco felt compelled to go to Palestine, and is self-aware and self-deprecating about his relation to the victims. Sacco acknowledges the fact that for the Palestinians depicted in his comic, there is no exit, whereas he could (and does) get into a taxi and flee whenever conflict starts flaring up: "Ok, I'm sated, that's enough of that . . . I've had my fun . . . I've got some burning tires and automatic fire to add to my collection" (Sacco 125). However, by letting the oppressed share their perspectives, Sacco makes the reader a witness too, therefore enabling

the pro-active empathy of “witnessing.” Despite the fact that in *Palestine*, just as in Ruillier’s case, the Other is “contained” and “represented” by the author of the comic book, this is offset by Sacco’s self-awareness of himself as an outsider and by his “giving space to details and perspectives” of the Other, who is “normally excluded by mainstream media coverage” (Thompson). In Said’s preface to the 2003 edition of *Palestine*, he remarks how Sacco uses his powers of representation to depict the Palestinians’ unrest:

These are rendered with almost terrifying accuracy and, paradoxically enough, gentleness at the same time. Joe the character is there sympathetically to understand and to try to experience not only why Gaza is so representative a place in its hopelessly overcrowded and yet rootless spaces of Palestinian dispossession, but also to affirm that it is there, and must somehow be accounted for in human terms, in the narrative sequences with which any reader can identify. (v)

The precision with which Sacco represents the Other’s plight and also its context bypasses the trappings of empty empathy, since Said’s interpretation is that “in Joe Sacco’s world there are no (. . .) assumed or re-confirmed representations—all of them disconnected from any historical or social source, from any lived reality” which would characterize the Palestinians as “rock-throwing, rejectionist, and fundamentalist villains whose main purpose is to make life difficult for the peace-loving, persecuted Israelis” (v). Compared to Ruillier’s refugees in *The Strange*, in *Palestine* there are no simplified representations of individuals without a context or without “the concept of the collective or of our collective response-ability” (Kaplan 275). Through “witnessing,” Joe the character becomes more involved in the Palestinians’ struggle and their

storytelling, so much so that Said remarks that the protagonist “spend[s] as much time as he can sharing, if not finally living the life that Palestinianians are condemned to live” (v). Sacco’s experience with the Palestinians sets the stage for his evolution from an initial biased outlook to a more nuanced perspective. Sacco starts the story with the admission that the portrayal of Palestinians in the American media had not managed to elicit his empathy (Sacco 8). For instance, in the first chapter he refuses to engage with shopkeepers after getting upset with two Palestinian boys (24). After hearing many stories of incarceration and beatings, Sacco is still shocked by the nature of the violence, saying that he “was raised a suburban schoolboy [and that] horror was at the movies” (94). Sacco’s detachment is broken when asked in what way the subjects of his reporting are to benefit from his writing, a query to which Sacco does not bring a conclusive answer (242-243). Around chapter nine, “witnessing” takes effect: Sacco has heard enough stories about the plight of the Palestinians to take their side during a conversation in Tel Aviv (263-264). The protagonist’s conversion from empty empathy to “witnessing” therefore complements Sacco’s aim in affecting the reader through his comic book style’s “haptic visuality.”

Although *The Strange* erases the context of its refugee protagonist in order to try to achieve greater reader-empathy, Ruillier added details that could have only come from his interactions with real people in refugee camps. After the main character goes through various limit-situations, such as almost getting run over by a car (Ruillier 58), and getting arrested by the immigration officers (Ruillier 89), his trauma begins to manifest itself as a depressive episode, narrated through the lens of a sympathetic activist named Kader: “He was still traumatized by the experience. He hadn’t slept in 48 hours, and he couldn’t stop crying. He was confused, demoralized. He couldn’t cope with it all. His dream had become a nightmare, and he wasn’t able to sleep anymore” (Ruillier 102-3). The protagonist’s condition culminates in extreme physical exhaustion and vomiting,

where, in the words of another carer, Cornelia, “it almost seemed like he’d been cursed” (Ruillier 113). These psychosomatic collapses bring to mind Frantz Fanon’s analyses of pathological cases of mental disorders stemming from colonial North Africa, particularly “among Algerians, some of whom were interned in concentration camps. The main characteristic of these illnesses is that they are of the psycho-somatic type” (Fanon 234). In one internal monologue of an activist’s narrative segment, the protagonist’s condition comes across as psycho-somatic in nature:

I think he had no physical strength left. The strain of his life had exhausted him... the way he held his hands, he seemed like some wild creature. Even with pills, he couldn’t get to sleep... I was worried about him... I found a CD I thought might help him relax. It was by a singer from his country. She had a gentle voice. He’d concentrate as he listened... and it would relax him for a moment. (Ruillier 123-4)

Some of the symptoms Fanon identifies are the same that the protagonist suffers from, namely “intense sleeplessness caused by idiopathic tremors” and “generalized contraction with muscular stiffness” where the individual “of the masculine sex . . . find[s] it increasingly difficult . . . to execute certain movements: going upstairs, walking quickly or running. The cause of this difficulty lies in a characteristic rigidity which inevitably reminds us of the impairing of certain regions of the brain” (Fanon 236). Here, the protagonist’s inability even to go to the bathroom unaided (Ruillier 113) signals “an extended rigidity [where] no relaxation can be achieved” (Fanon 236). After the protagonist’s translation, he encounters a hostile environment where his kind is continuously marginalized by the majority culture, and where he is reduced to an “Other” by figures of authority like the immigration officers. This leads to symptoms which correspond to the

examples identified in Fanon's analysis of the Algerian colonial situation, showing that the common denominator in Ruillier's patchwork of refugee stories is also the real psychological impact of displacement.

In conclusion, Jérôme Ruillier's *The Strange* inadvertently reinforces the voicelessness of the displaced through its own narrative structure, even while purportedly trying to establish authentic empathy, which stands in stark contrast to Joe Sacco's representation of the displaced in *Palestine*. In *The Strange*, the main character's voice is not the main one, as various different narrators in the book end up interpreting the world in the protagonist's stead, and in the process of "representing" the refugee make him the object and not the subject of the events in question. The passersby, activists, officers, and neighbors all speak *for* the protagonist, rendering his dialogic relationship with the world one-sided not just because of the language barrier, but also because of the way it impinges on the empathic bond with the reader. Compared to *Palestine*, where the events are autobiographical and in which Sacco inserted himself into the plot, Ruillier's depiction of the events in the book does not stem from his own biography, but rather from a patchwork narrative composed of fragments from various stories of faceless immigrants. This engenders "empty empathy" as expounded by Anne Kaplan, where the lack of specificity and context in a narrative of trauma does not lead to more identification with the victims, but rather curtails the possibility of creating real empathy. On the other hand, Joe Sacco's talks with various Palestinians about their situation lets the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict take center stage while still acknowledging individual stories. This engenders "witnessing," the obverse of "empty empathy," wherein a spotlight on specific stories of resistance within the broader socio-political context can elicit authentic empathy and move the viewers to take action. This affects both the reader and Sacco's character in the book, as in the latter case it leads him to throw in his lot with the refugees.

The Strange's lack of any socio-political background and its "focus on individual pain made public" does not establish authentic empathy, but simply highlights the public consumption of pain in the culture in which the graphic novel is situated. Despite the fragmented nature of Ruillier's patchwork composed of disparate individual voices that do not reveal anything with respect to the refugee's perspective, its common denominator is an authentic one, namely the psychological damage that displacement brings about. The psycho-somatic symptoms that the protagonist experiences are akin to Frantz Fanon's description of Algerians being oppressed because of their colonial status, where sleeplessness, rigidity, and the inability to relax is the result of the intense stress that their situation entails.

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