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The Fourth Estate and The Ninth Art: Re-evaluating the Comics Journalism of Joe Sacco

Joe Sacco is something of an oddity among contemporary cartoonists, and, given the collection of self-identified neurotics and social outsiders that populate this artistic community, that may indeed be saying something. His colleague, the Canadian cartoonist known as Seth, puts it simply: “He's definitely an oddball cartoonist, because he has very excellent social skills” (McGrath 2004:7). Aside from the personality quirk of relative normalcy, Sacco’s work stands out, not simply for the technical proficiency of his comics but for their remarkable ambition and clear mission of social advocacy as well. In a field dominated by – at one end of the market – super-heroic fantasy and – at the other – self-deprecating autobiography, Sacco’s comics represent a relatively new generic configuration within the medium. His major works, *Palestine*, *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-95*, and *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo*, are non-fiction comics based on his travels through refugee camps and war zones. He writes and draws about his experiences getting to know people who have been victimized and marginalized by conflict and political repression and often strives to place their testimony in an historical and social context for his readers. In doing so, Sacco introduced a set of issues surrounding representation and truth that had not been part of the conversation of comics criticism and theory.

Sacco himself refers to his work as “comics journalism”. While he is undoubtedly engaged in a form of reportage, the label of journalism has never seemed to me to be a compelling way of classifying the mode of representation that is deployed within his comics. Because of the specifics of Sacco’s artistic practice and the formal characteristics of the comics medium, I believe that it will prove more productive and useful to conceptualize Sacco’s work as part of the documentary tradition. This examination of Sacco’s comics as documentary will not only help clarify what our expectations as readers should be of his work and others who are following in this genre, but also serve to provide a new perspective on the relationship between documentary filmmaking and journalistic reportage. The figure of Joe Sacco, the war correspondent with a sketchbook, provides a unique way of engaging with these issues.

Joe Sacco was born in Malta in 1960 (Marshall 2005:7). According to Marshall, his parents’ experiences growing up in Malta during World War II, as the strategically valuable Mediterranean islands were bombed by Axis forces, provoked his early and lasting interest in “others’ war stories” and “how people survived in occupied territories” (2005:8). Sacco’s family immigrated to Australia in 1961 and subsequently moved to the United States in 1972 (2005:10,17).

Sacco holds a degree in journalism from the University of Oregon and had originally desired to pursue a career as a foreign news correspondent, inspired and influenced by writers such as Michael Herr, George Orwell, and Hunter S. Thompson (2005:22-23). However, he found that the post-Watergate

romanticization of journalism had made for a tight job market, making "finding a job where he could pursue his immediate goals of reporting on world politics and events was impossible"; his only job offers came from "small newsletters and trade journals" (2005:28). After a stint living and working in Malta, Sacco returned to Portland, Oregon where he began to make connections with the West Coast independent comics community and eventually obtained work copyediting a local magazine (2005:38). In 1985, Sacco started a monthly humour magazine called *Portland Permanent Press* with a friend (2005:39). Though the magazine did not last, it put Sacco in touch with Fantagraphics, publishers of the *Comics Journal* and a number of leading alternative cartoonists, who offered him a job (2005:40). While working for Fantagraphics, Sacco began editing a comic magazine that he renamed *Centrifugal Bumble-Puppy* (2005:43). Sacco was frustrated by the experience, though, "[because] I wanted [*Bumble-Puppy*] to have a social focus, and it just didn't pan out because there weren't [enough] people doing that work" (qtd. Marshall 2005:44). After *Bumble-Puppy*'s cancellation, Sacco started a new comic book entitles Sacco started a new comic book entitled *Yahoo*, which featured his own comics and was published by Fantagraphics (2005:48). As Sacco sums it all up, he "studied journalism and … worked in the field and got sort of fed up with the kind of jobs [he] had, and then reverted to doing comics as a means of self-expression" (Lindsay 2005).

Sacco says his peculiar artistic practice "developed organically, based on the fact that I was a cartoonist and I studied journalism" when he "went to the Middle East for the first time," intending "to do a story about [his] experiences in

the Middle East" and finding himself "interviewing people, and behaving like a journalist" (Lindsay 2005). However, it is important to note the role that stories like "In the Company of Long Hair," "More Women, More Children, More Quickly," and "How I Loved the War," all of which are reprinted in the collection of early work *Notes from a Defeatist* (2003b), play in the development of this method. These are all nonfiction comics and, while they represent a very different kind of non-fiction storytelling than his later work, obviously belong to the same corpus of texts. "In the Company of Long Hair" is a travelogue relating Sacco's mishaps touring with a rock band around the European continent. Though lacking the political and historical content of many of his other works, the journey structure of this story prefigures his longer books. "More Women, More Children, More Quickly" finds Sacco recollecting his mother's girlhood memories from World War II. This story, reconstructed from letters his mother wrote describing her experiences during the bombing raids on Malta, has Sacco switching from autobiography and short satirical comedy to a kind of reportage:

> So, you see, I've already got this autobiographical thing going and I'm also trying to tell other people's stories so its not much of a hop, skip and a jump going someplace using autobiography and telling other people's stories. (Sacco 2004)

"How I Loved the War" chronicles Sacco's experiences "living in Berlin, breaking up with his stateside girlfriend after a failed long-distance love affair, and becoming addicted to following conflicts in the Middle East" (Marshall 2005:51). It is a heady combination of personal autobiographical content and an increasing amount of political material, both relating to the first Gulf War and the

Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The main elements of Sacco's craft were in place at this point; all that remained was for him to take the act on the road.

That was precisely what happened when Sacco travelled to the Occupied Territories to do the research for what would become *Palestine* (2001a), his look at life during the first intifada. In his interview with Bethany Lindsay (2005), Sacco acknowledges the connection between his earlier, more fundamentally autobiographical material and his later works:

> And I was also doing autobiographical work back then. You know, where you just write about your own life. And so when I went to Palestine for the first time, I thought what I'd do is portray my own experiences there. So, I was initially thinking of it in terms of, "this is autobiographical," to some extent. But, like I told you before, because I had a journalism degree there was something else that ticked … in my head, and it became journalistic.

Palestine features the cartoon Joe Sacco travelling through Israel and the Occupied Territories, though admittedly concentrating on the latter, getting to know people and listening to their stories. Originally published as a series of nine comic books beginning in 1993, *Palestine* was collected into a long-form "graphic novel" (an ill-fitting moniker for a work of nonfiction) with an introduction by Edward Said.

Sacco's next book, *Safe Area Gorazde* (2001b), took him to the former Yugoslavia. Having obtained a press pass from the United Nations, Sacco was able to travel to Gorazde, a town that had been designated a sanctuary for Muslim Bosnians well within the territory held by Serbian Chetnik forces (Marshall 2005:76, 80-81). This book represents a more ambitious attempt to combine Sacco's own recollections from his time living in Gorazde, the stories he

collected from interviewees there, and – to a significantly larger extent than in *Palestine* – the historical background to this conflict.

Sacco's most recently published book, as of this writing, is *The Fixer* (Sacco 2003a). It is a return to more character-driven narrative, centering on Neven, a friend of Sacco's from Sarajevo. Neven served as a fixer, the local informant who guided foreign journalists to battle sites, introduced them to the victims of atrocities, and translated for them, for Sacco during his numerous trips to the city. *The Fixer* retreats a little from the broad historical analysis present in *Gorazde*, instead focussing on Neven, his personal history, and his relationship with the American cartoonist.

This body of work shows a very complex, sophisticated approach to nonfiction storytelling. Sacco's comics juggle autobiography, biography, reportage, and historical narrative in ways that call into question whether this is, in fact, journalism as usual. Given his background, however, it should not surprise us that when Sacco began to combine his cartooning hobby with his professional interest in stories of conflict, he conceptualized this simply as journalism being practised within a different medium. Yet, in the translation of his education and experience to comics, some elements of what he was doing inevitably changed. These crucial differences have led me to argue that Sacco's work has more in common with the documentary tradition than it does with journalism.

Journalism and documentary filmmaking have a tangled, problematic, and under-theorized relationship. The debacle surrounding the much-bandied-about allegations of bias on the part of Michael Moore in his documentaries *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* suggests that there is a fairly widespread confusion about how they relate to one another. What is the difference between a documentary and journalism? Do we hold documentary films to the standards of fairness, balance, and objectivity that we hold journalism? Do we in fact hold journalism to these standards after all? Sacco's comics, as a liminal case that seems to exist uneasily in the space shared by these two forms of reportage, challenges their relationship and force us to question the assumptions we make about each of these genres.

The fact that I am approaching journalism and documentary as *genres* of nonfiction representation will determine how I attempt to define them and their relationship. It would perhaps be simpler to talk about them solely on the terms defined by their practitioners, but genres are a function of audiences' expectations of individual works and their relationships to larger groups of somehow similar works. As Steve Neale writes:

> Genres do not only consist of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with a means of recognition and understanding. They help render films, and the elements within them, intelligible and therefore explicable. (Neale 2000:158)

Such expectations may include formal and textual conventions associated with the genre as well as the institutional contexts surrounding production,

distribution, and consumption of the work in question. Furthermore, these expectations always invoke generic regimes of verisimilitude, "various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification, and belief" that help the audience to know "what is appropriate and therefore probable (or probable and therefore appropriate" within the texts that make up a generic corpus (2000:158). A genre's particular regime of verisimilitude helps the reader to define what seems "realistic" within the context of a work; thus, it is particularly important to understand how such systems of expectation and hypothesis work to construct "realism" within nonfiction genres. This is not to suggest that what journalists and documentarians say about what they do and how they do it is unimportant, but that this professional discourse exists in a mutually constitutive, dialogic relationship with audience expectations.

Journalism, however, seems to be a genre in which professional discourse, professional practice, and audience expectation have diverged sharply from one another. Kovach and Rosenstiel's *The Elements of Journalism* (2001) represents the first, a book attempting to defend contemporary journalism with a fresh investigation of its principles and ideals. It is based on a series of studies by the Committee for Concerned Journalists, a group comprising "editors of several of the [United States'] top newspapers, as well as some of the most influential names in television and radio, several of the top journalism educators, and some of the [US's] most prominent authors", intended to "engage journalists and the public in a careful examination of what journalism was supposed to be"

(2001:10-11). The resulting discussion revolves around a list of nine best practices, the eponymous “elements of journalism”:

1. Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience. (2001:12-13)

That doesn’t sound like such a bad list. However, we must realize that it is a rearguard action, the product of an attempt to defend journalism as an institution (and, let us not forget, industry) from a public that “increasingly distrusted journalists, even hated them” (2001:10). Given this context, it is essential to realize that this is a hopeful vision of what journalism ought to be and necessarily a fair and balanced assessment of what journalism is in the here and now.

A significant issue presented by the list is the absence of objectivity and neutrality as fundamental elements, though they are undoubtedly still among the expectations brought to bear upon journalists by their audiences, as continued mudslinging over the issue of bias in the media from all segments of the political spectrum attests. Parallax between the standards used by journalists when they produce the news and the standards used by audiences when they consume the news should be an occasion for concern. Kovach and Rosenstiel suggest in response that “many ideas about the elements of journalism are wrapped in myth and misconception … The concept of objectivity has been so mangled it now is

usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct" (2001:13). They prefer to use language of accuracy and truthfulness. While they are aware, if somewhat dismissive, of the challenges to claims of truthfulness, they prefer to bracket these discussions, which are "usually not grounded in the real world" (2001:41). Kovack and Rosenstiel claim that debates about the epistemology of the journalistic method, "sometimes guided by political ideology and sometimes guided by post-modern deconstructionist academics," simply "founder over semantics" (2001:40-41). "Journalism," they write, "by nature is reactive and practical rather than philosophical and introspective," so journalists can set aside debates about what they do for discussions among philosophers in the ivory tower while they search for the "journalistic truth," a "practical or functional form of the truth … by which we can operate day to day" (2001:41-42). If journalists were willing to actually set aside claims to objectivity, fairness, and balance, then perhaps such journalistic truth would be good enough, at least as a way of satisfying instrumental needs for information. But a quick survey of institutional publicity produced by the journalism industry indicates that this has not happened. And, despite their claims to have done so, Kovach and Rosenstiel just cannot seem to leave these concepts behind either.

In their opinion, "the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification," which is "what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction, or art" (2001:71). It is through such a process of verification that the authors hope to recover the higher form of objectivity that has been lost by contemporary journalists. As Kovach and Rosenstiel recount the history of journalism, the

concept of objectivity “began to appear as part of journalism early in the last century … out of a growing recognition that journalists were full of bias, often unconsciously” (2001:72). It was intended, not as an attempt to remove subjectivity from journalism, but, as a call “for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work,” as a corrective to it (2001:72). Walter Lippmann, who argued that journalists ought to invest their practice with “the scientific spirit” and create “a common intellectual method and common area of valid fact”, is cited as one of the key originators and proponents of this version of objectivity (qtd. Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001:73). The authors sum up: “In the original concept, in other words, the method is objective, not the journalist. The key was in the discipline of the craft, not the aim” (2001:74). Based on their surveys of “journalists, citizens, and others who have thought about the news,” they have draughted a “core set of concepts” that are the fundamental “intellectual principles of a science of reporting”:

1. Never add anything that was not there.
2. Never deceive the audience.
3. Be [as] transparent as possible about your methods and motives.
4. Rely on your own original reporting.
5. Exercise humility. (2001:78)

And, thus, objectivity comes creeping back into the picture, and perhaps in an even more deceptive form. Previously, while the audience might have expected that journalists should aim to be as objective as possible in their reporting of current events, in all likelihood they understood that this was an ideal strived for

and not a fact in itself. The recovered notion of objectivity of journalistic method, cloaked in the borrowed meta-narrative of science, elides the ideological work of journalism even further since it proposes that no matter how biased a journalist might be, if he or she follows this discipline of verification, the result of the process will be reliable as objective journalism. It seems that, at least from the perspective of this post-modern deconstructionist academic, that the professional discourse of journalism is still making promises that its professional practice is both willing and essentially unable to keep.

At the end of this examination, we find that journalism is defined primarily by claims of accuracy, veracity, instrumental (if provisional) truth, and objectivity of method. This surely suggests that we must consider the relationship that such a mode of representation has to documentary filmmaking. Most theorists seem to acknowledge that documentary and journalism share some common territory but this territory has not really been mapped. However, there is a practical need to theorize their relationship. For, while there are certainly journalistically oriented documentaries somewhere in the middle of this generic Venn diagram, there are also a number of conventions and practices that are acceptable within the documentary tradition but that would be beyond the pale of the journalistic method. Without a decent grasp on what the difference between these two kinds of nonfiction is, we risk leaving such documentaries undefended, vulnerable to charges of being bad documentaries because they are not suitably journalistic when, in fact, such charges would entirely miss the intent and context of the film.

How, then, do we begin to define documentary? What are the systems of expectation and hypothesis at work and what constitutes realism within the genre? While documentary is, like journalism, a form of evidentiary representation – that is, it exists as a record of people and events – it handles evidence and its relationship to this evidentiary function in a very different way. John Grierson's famous and often-cited definition of documentary as the creative treatment or interpretation of actuality (qtd. Nichols 2001:24; Rabinowitz 1994:182) suggests a markedly different approach to representing reality than the scientific reporting of Kovach and Rosenstiel. Stella Bruzzi observes that

> a clear distinction exists between 'newsreel' and 'documentary,' and, following on from this, that whilst the newsreel is limited to showing events, it is the function of documentary to provide structure and meaning. A documentary, a structured and motivated non-fiction film, does not aspire to convey in as pure a way as possible the real material at its core because that is what newsreel or other comparable forms of amateur, accidental and non-narrative film do. (2000:22)

Though the American direct cinema movement conceived of itself as a sort of journalism, "virtually the entire post-*vérité* history of non-fiction film can be seen as a reaction against its ethos of transparency and unbiased observation" (2000:6). This reaction is a result of the fact that direct cinema "successfully 'proves' two mutually exclusive things: that documentary's driving ambition is to find a way of reproducing reality without bias or manipulation, and that such a pursuit towards unadulterated actuality is futile" (2000:68). Like journalism, such ambitions have led to an epistemological dead end for documentary filmmaking. However, rather than hiding this failing, documentary has attempted to forge new articulations of "complex documentary truth" and authenticity, "arising from an

insurmountable compromise between subject and recording, suggesting in turn that it is this very juncture between reality and filmmaker that is the heart of any documentary" (2000:6). This the recognition that "documentaries are performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming" (2000:7) allows documentary the freedom to explore and experiment within the project of representing truth through a number of different techniques that would probably be unpalatable to the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Somewhat paradoxically, while journalism has attempted to veil its workings in quasi-scientific objectivity, documentary has instead attempted to demonstrate that the truth represented by a recording becomes more truthful and more authentic as it displays the fact of its own recording. Because its aim is to produce truth without the constraints of journalists' notions of objectivity, documentary authenticity seems to be strengthened by the acknowledgment of its subjectivity, partiality, incompleteness, and artificiality.

The task now before us is to figure out how Sacco's work relates to these two genres. Intriguingly, even the proponents of the idea of this kind of practice as a form of journalism cite the way "its inherent subjectivity contrasts sharply with the newsroom's dispassionate prose" (Williams 2005). If subjectivity is so inherent to comics journalism in a way that is not the case for prose or televisual journalism, perhaps this suggests that comics journalism is not, in fact, journalism. I do not make this argument in order to cast aspersions at the quality of Sacco's comics or the gravity of their content. It is not that he lacks the rigour

of journalism. On the contrary, my assertion is that, as a form of documentary, Sacco's comics "journalism" is a more complex and more nuanced form of nonfiction representation than is generally seen in the pages of the morning paper or the evening news. This is a function of both specific aspects of Sacco's artistic decisions and more general properties of the comics form.

The first property of comics that must be accounted for is the fact that it primarily relies on drawn images. Unlike cinema or television, the iconic signification at work in comics is not accompanied by an indexical relationship to the referent. The subject of a photographic or filmic image is assumed to have existed in reality if it was present to be photographed. In this sense, comics are inescapably hyperreal, as they do not allow the reader any access to the referent outside of the system of simulacra contained on the page. This is not to say that comics are entirely non-indexical, however, as Philippe Marion points out:

> Beyond the very distinction of narration and monstration [what is told through language and what is shown by images], the reader-spectator of the comics is invited to achieve a coincidence of his [sic] gaze and the creative movement of the graphiateur [the cartoonist's subject position]; it is only be acknowledging and identifying the graphic trace or index of the artist that the reader can fully understand the message of the work. From this viewpoint, graphiation [the graphic enunciation undertaken by the graphiateur] is eminently self-reflexive and autoreferential. (qtd. Baetens 2001:149)

That is, while comics do not have a necessary logical relationship to objective reality, they do have such a relationship to the subjectivity of the artist. A drawn image implies that someone drew it. Comics always refer back to the cartoonist. Sacco intuitively understands some of this, as he demonstrates when he explains why he continues to include the cartoon version of himself in his comics:

> I've always kept the character—not always, there have been cases in my comics where I've cut myself out—but generally, I've learned to realize that having myself in the comics themselves is a good thing, because it shows that this is my perspective, this is a subjective viewpoint, I'm not pretending to be the all-knowing journalist. (Lindsay 2005)

However, it goes further than this. Sacco is not simply present as a character in the narrative. He is present in every aspect of the world portrayed in the narrative because the reader must necessarily access that world through Sacco's pen.

A growing awareness of the hyperreality of nonfiction comics forces the reader to engage with the issues of realism and representation. After all, what guarantees do we have that Sacco is being truthful, that he even went to any of these places or met any of these people? Perhaps he is putting one over on his audience, as Seth did by fitting his fictional comic *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (2003) to the conventions of autobiography so closely that many readers mistake it for a truthful recollection of events from his life. It is only through a commitment of faith on the part of the reader that Sacco's reportage can be taken as fact. However, once this commitment has been made, Sacco is able to take advantage of the opportunities it provides him.

For example, chapter four of *Palestine* is devoted to describing the role that prisons play in Palestinian life, beginning with a section on the desert prison Ansar III, constructed "specifically to deal with the intifada overflow" (Sacco 2001a:82). Sacco describes the process behind depicting the prison:

> In this case, I am talking about one particular prison called Ansar, Ansar 3. And, I had never seen Ansar 3, and I mean, chances are the Israelis were not going to let me get near it or to let me take photographs or draw it so I had to come up with this compound from visual descriptions. So, I sat down with, say--I didn't want it to

> be many people--with their experiences in prison. So, I sat down with three guys in particular, and said, "Ok, I want you to draw me a map of this prison. Show me what it looked like." And, so they described it to me: "Two fences going around the compound; barbed wire on top." They described how the tents were, how the cots were laid out and how the personal belongings would be tied up on the tents and things of this nature. And, also even the guard tower. They'd say, well, they are just like the guard towers you see down the street. So, as much as possible, I tried to recreate this. It might not be a perfect representation, but I tried to be as true as possible to the essential truth of the facts on the ground, as you will. (Sacco 2004)

Intriguingly, Sacco's solution to his inability to photograph this prison for reference finds him working around the same issues as Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah*, a film that holds a particularly important place in discussions of documentary representation. Paula Rabinowitz writes that "Lanzmann's refusal to sue the by now clichéd images of the [Nazi concentration] camps recorded by the SS themselves or by the Allies after liberation" signifies, as a kind of present absence, their inability "to reveal the stories of death and survival locked in the survivors' memories" (1994:31). These official records do not embody the holocaust survivors' own perspectives and experiences, so Lanzmann eschews archival footage, instead focussing entirely on interviews, making "visible the unseen, the witnessing of an event without witness, through speech" (1994:28). *Shoah* is an "expression of this struggle between the possibility and the impossibility of representation" and "exemplifies the documentary as quest, as search, as the place for documenting and recording what many would want to remain hidden and others find too painful to recall" (Bruzzi 2000:106, 114). Lanzmann's film challenges the audience, arguing that "it is not necessary actually to look at the footage of the extermination camps, it is

enough … to look at those who have looked and hear their emotional testimony" (Rabinowitz 1994:29). Sacco's treatment of Ansar III takes advantage of comics' semiotic characteristics to deal with this same problem of "constructing evidence where no documents exist" (1994:28). Sacco is able to take the testimony of his interviewees and convert it into visual material that is constructed on the same representational order as everything else in the book. Once the reader has made the initial commitment to accept the book as a factual account, Sacco is able to perform a bit of textual judo and create visual evidence out of speech.

If we view this formal trick as an aberration that makes us question more general questions of visual representation, then we might place Sacco's work somewhere between the reflexive and performative modes of documentary, as defined by Bill Nichols. Reflexive documentaries foreground "the processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer," forcing the viewer to "attend to the filmmaker's engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well" (Nichols 2001:125). The reflexive mode of documentary representation "draws our attention to our assumptions and expectations about documentary form itself" by calling into question "realist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable proof, [and] the solemn, indexical bond between an indexical image and what it represents" (2001:128). If a moment like the Ansar III sequence is interpreted as a gap in an otherwise seemingly realist representation, then it performs a this reflexive function, as similar gaps do in films of this mode. However, I would suggest that Sacco's work is not purely

reflexive and incorporates elements of the performative mode as well. Performative documentaries endorse the proposition that "knowledge is better described as concrete and embodied, based on personal experience, in the tradition of poetry, literature, and rhetoric" and "[underscore] the complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions" (2001:131). It is significant that Nichols describes "recent performative documentaries" as being concerned with representing a kind of "social subjectivity that joins the general to the particular, the individual to the collective, and the political to the personal. This expressive dimension may be anchored to particular individuals, but it extends to embrace a social, or shared, form of subjective response" (2001:133). Though they may approach "the domain of experimental or avant-garde cinema," performative documentaries, in the end, give "less emphasis to the self-contained quality of film or video than to its expressive dimension *in relation to* representations that refer us back to the historical world for their ultimate meaning" (2001:134). This is a strikingly apt description of the way that Sacco structures his books around vignettes, connecting his own individual experiences to the interview material he collects and to the historical and political context of the social situation, which always provide an interpretive framework for understanding individual fragments of memory and narrative.

Works of comics "journalism" are so reflexive and so performative, that they begin to lose the characteristics of a reproduction of the external world entirely. As hyperreal simulacra, as pure representation without that important

indexical relationship to the referent, the entire narrative becomes like a docudrama. Though based on extensive notes and reference photographs, Sacco's accounts are structured, narrativized, and drawn after he leaves the setting of the story. Thus, the finished product is necessarily a recreation of events, not a record of them. Perhaps in the end, this is the final factor that cements Sacco's work within the documentary tradition. For, while recreation has been part of documentary filmmaking since Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and documentary audiences have learned that it is not necessarily an obstacle to the articulation of documentary truth, it is still rejected by most journalists as part of their practice. Kovach and Rosenstiel have harsh words for the docudramatist: "An important parallel … is the rise of fiction posing as nonfiction. It has had different names in different areas. On television, producers have called it docudrama. It is making stuff up" (2001:78). Sacco does not write fiction posing as fact, does not make information up. But even the simple practice of producing visual representations of events for which there are no visual records, which seems like a straightforward, organic technique for an artist telling a story in comics form to employ, is a method of pursuing the "practical truth" that professional journalistic discourse is unable to handle and that audiences have come to expect from documentary approaches to filmmaking rather than from the network news.

Joe Sacco's non-fiction comics are intriguing texts. On their own, they are engaging, informative, technically accomplished pieces of cartooning. They are

simply good comics. However, when given the title of “journalism” they are inserted into a generic framework, comprising both institutional discourse defined by professional journalists and systems of expectation deployed by audiences, that does not seem suited to account for the very characteristics of the comics that make them so good. It has been my argument that his comics would be better understood as representative of the documentary genre. In order to present this argument, it was necessary to re-evaluate the relationship between journalism and documentary as related but distinct modes of nonfiction representation. Where journalism tends to elide the construction of the reportage itself, documentary has come to see itself as a genre where the tension between actuality and the process of recording and presenting that actuality is emphasized. Indeed, at a fundamental level, that tension is precisely what numerous contemporary documentaries are “about”. The documentary tradition and journalism share a similar evidentiary function, but, as a *creative* treatment of actuality, documentary also provides room to value the subjectivity present in both Sacco’s very personal narratives and the lines that make up the drawings he uses to tell them.

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