
DETAILING THE TRACES OF WAR: COMICS, CONFLICTS, AND DOCUMENTARY

by Leena Roomu





Hillary L. Chute. *Disaster Drawn – Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge & London, 2016. ISBN 978-0-674-50451-6. 359 pages.

A substantial amount of research has been written about Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Keiji Nakazawa's comics about Hiroshima, and Joe Sacco's graphic reportages – works that very much have helped define how nonfiction genres of comics have developed last the past few decades. However, in her book *Disaster Drawn – Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, Hillary L. Chute unequivocally shows that there is still much to discover. Chute's insightful point of departure is to contextualize these works in relation to the history of documentary drawing. Alongside Spiegelman, Nakazawa, and Sacco's works, Chute analyzes war-related drawings, starting with the 17th century French series of etchings by Jacques Callot, *Les Grandes Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre*, and continuing with Francisco Goya's prints of the Spanish War of Independence in the 19th century. Chute's beautifully and abundantly illustrated book provides examples of those preliminary works side by side with modernist art as well as early and contemporary comics.

The book is divided into five chapters, of which two construct the historical, contextual and methodological framework. In the first chapter, Chute introduces the documentary works by Callot and Goya, establishing them as exemplary for later documentary comics. Goya was inspired by Callot's attempts to render the brutality of war, whereas later cartoonists have mentioned both artists as influential inspirations for their own work. Chute's book's indisputable merit is its building of a bridge between the early war illustrations and later documentary comics. The journey from 17th century etchings to contemporary comics is long, but, in chapter two, Chute assists the reader by providing a brief but explanatory history of comics, mentioning the key figures and works of the medium. The chapter does more than just repeat the now well-known history of comics – it crystallizes Chute's views on the most central formal characteristics of comics and theoretical standpoints which she has introduced in her previous writings. As such, the chapter works as a nice prelude to the following three chapters which concentrate on in-depth analyses of Nakazawa's comic book *Ore Wa Mita* (1972) or *I Saw It* (1982), Spiegelman's first "Maus" story (1972), and Sacco's graphic narratives *Palestine* (1992–1995), *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–1995* (2000), *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003), and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009). A chapter per artist is a structure that Chute also used in her previous book *Graphic Women – Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), in which she analyzes the works of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Marjane Satrapi, Lynda Barry, and Alison Bechdel.



Dedicating one chapter for each artist is not only a reader-friendly format, but it also enables a detailed and descriptive analysis of each artist – a matter which I will discuss later in this review.

The tension between form and accuracy motivates the main claim of the book. In the introduction, Chute reflects how the form of comics has not been considered the most appropriate form for documenting history and presenting accurate evidence about historical events. In the age of photography, hand-drawn images have been regarded as subjective and intrinsically fictional, whereas objectivity has been seen as the mechanistic recording of reality. Although hand-drawn images in documentary comics strive to operate with evidentiary force, they always bear the subjective mark of their maker. Drawn images consist of choices, both in terms of style and content. As in her previous book, Chute suggests that hand-drawn images make the artist's physical labor visible for the reader – composing comics is “a way of to put the body on the page,” as she writes in *Graphic Women* (p. 10).

In *Disaster Drawn*, Chute concentrates more on the embodied experience of the reader, and comics' potential to create an affective and, thus, corporeal effect. One could claim that Spiegelman and Nakazawa's certain artistic and stylistic choices – e.g. anthropomorphic animal characters in *Maus* and a simplified realization of the characters in *I Saw It* – estrange the reader from the depicted cruelties. However, Chute shows that the minimally rendered characters against the detailed and almost realistically drawn backgrounds produce affective images – images that convey the lived experience of the people witnessing or experiencing the disaster. As Chute notes, Spiegelman and Nakazawa's comics picture the mundane alongside atrocities, the everyday with extremities. The comics resonate with the reader's embodied experience, thus activating their ability to imagine the pain of the depicted Others. In Spiegelman and Nakazawa's works, the minimalistic style and animal metaphors facilitate readerly identification with the sufferers.

The potential of comics to create affects and emotions in the reader was associated with the medium already in the 1950s. Reading comics was connected to affective bodily reactions, which worried parents and authorities, who demanded more cultivated and intellectual reading habits.¹ Since then, especially feminist literary critics have highlighted the need to reconsider the embodied aspect of reading, and have tried to dismantle the evaluative dichotomy of emotional and intellectual or rational reading. In *Disaster Drawn*, Chute proves that the exploration of the bodily aspects of reading is essential, especially regarding comics that clearly and powerfully aim at affecting the reader with stylistic and structural choices or content.

¹ Gardner 2012, 84–85.



Instead of considering comics' potential for affectivity as a hindrance, Chute suggests, it could be regarded as an ability to produce emotional visual languages. Many contemporary comics encourage the reader to slow down the process of reading, to scrutinize drawn lines, text boxes, and page layouts. Chute argues that the hand-drawn images of comics could be reconsidered as a new way to materialize history, and offering a "new seeing" (p. 38). On the one hand, drawn images enable the reader to see disastrous events such as the Holocaust, the A-bomb of Hiroshima, or the crimes in Palestine, Sarajevo, and Goražde. On the other hand, Chute suggests that seeing is a more multilayered issue in documentary drawings. The drawings of Callot, Goya, Nakazawa, Spiegelman, and Sacco all have in common their representation of the act of witnessing. Documentary drawings and comics compel the reader to become aware of herself as a seeing subject "looking and looking at others looking upon horror" (p. 60). This "triangulated ethics of vision" draws the attention to looking and seeing as an act of witnessing.

Chute connects the formal experimentation of contemporary comics to the comics of the early 20th century, especially those of Winsor McCay, whom she calls a bold experimenter of conventions and a pioneer of treating the space of the page as an essential unit of information. The importance of treating space as a medium-specific quality of comics echoes in Chute's comprehensive analyses, which epitomize her methodological approach to comics as an art of details. Chute's comics analyses are precise and thorough, which makes the book an enjoyable read. Especially in Sacco's case, Chute provides lengthy ekphrastic descriptions of visual details, such as the number of houses, cars, or people on the page.

Sacco's visibly labor-intensive work and closely packed pages may exhaust the reader, as Chute notes. The density of Sacco's comics makes them work against easy consumption – a quality that very few graphic narratives possess, according to Chute. Sacco's comics are time consuming for both the artist and the reader, but this discussion would have benefitted from some mention of other works of underground and alternative comics that also demand substantial cognitive engagement from the reader. In addition, I would have appreciated more reflection on the qualities of graphic narratives that challenge easy reading – and definitely more critical questioning of the role of the reader. Chute seems to share Spiegelman's claim that graphic narratives are the last bastions of literacy², but is there really a need to build a canon of more or less demanding comics? Chute manages to prove the formal complexity of the comics in question, especially those of Spiegelman and Sacco – a point which, in the light of a plethora of previous scholarly work, seems quite obvious. Nevertheless, Chute's observations about the formal,

² See Chute 2008.



aesthetic, narrative, and affective qualities of graphic narratives inspire further research on the rhetoric of comics.

What Chute brings into the discussion of the much-researched comics she analyses is her skill at weaving a rich descriptive analysis of the comics together with contextual information about the depicted conflicts and theoretical insights about documentary, trauma, and ethics. As a result, the micro and macro levels of comics analysis merge in her work in a beneficial way. Only the last part, “Coda – New Locations, New Forms,” reveals that Chute could have a lot more to say about the political aspect of cartoons and comics. In her Coda, Chute refers to many contemporary events that demonstrate the possibility of drawn images to affect people and cause material damage. Chute discusses the Danish Jyllands-Posten’s Muhammad cartoons and Charlie Hebdo briefly, but their relevance for the book’s overall arguments about documentary and witnessing remains a bit unclear.

By situating contemporary comics in a long line of works of witnessing war, *Disaster Drawn* provides a rich and well-contextualized source for readers interested in the questions of visual witness, comics, and documentary form – as the subtitle of the book promises. It also exemplifies the importance of a detailed analysis that takes into consideration the spatial, graphic, verbal, and visual qualities of a comics page. Further, the book is exemplary in its multitude of well-printed images that facilitate the reader’s ability to take part in the in-depth analysis. I recommend Chute’s book for all those who share the view that well executed close readings and culturally sensitive contextualizing are crucial for the development of comics studies.

REFERENCES

Chute, Hillary. 2008. “Comics as literature? Reading graphic narrative.” *PMLA* 123 (2), 452–465.

Chute, Hillary L. 2010. *Graphic Women. Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gardner, Jared. 2012. *Projections. Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.