"History Bleeds": Graphically Recording Time
in *Maus* and *Safe Area Goražde*

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Abstract

   The format of comics and graphic novels makes them uniquely suited to playing with representations of the passing of time. Techniques of comics creators allow the representation of history, memory, and trauma visually on the page. Two works that demonstrate this clearly are Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* volumes I (1986) and II (1991) and Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-95* (2000). The narratives of these graphic works are based upon second-hand memory and are self-consciously framed with the process involved in recreating their characters' stories. The traumatic events they depict constantly threaten to overwhelm the narratives, leaking into and mixing with the present. For Sacco and Spiegelman history is a fluid construct and this is addressed consciously in their formal choices on the page. This essay explores the ways in which both writers approach the issue of representing time, using *Maus* and *Safe Area Goražde* to draw comparisons in their use of comics form, and arguing for the unique advantages of the medium in representing the flexibility of temporal space.

   Shortly after the publication of his graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), writer and artist Joe Sacco described his impression of the insistence of the past on the present: "It's almost as if history bleeds. In people's minds, one bit of history bleeds into another bit of history. […] And it gives you this idea […] that history hasn't really stopped" (cited in Chute, 2011). His words here call to mind the work of another comics creator, Art Spiegelman, whose *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* volume I (1986) is subtitled "My Father Bleeds History." The suggestion is that the process of drawing out the past is a bloodletting, a "slow, painful effusion of history" (Chute, 2006, p. 203), but Sacco's choice of words also points to a quality specific to the format of comics, that of the simultaneity of past, present, and future in panel-based graphic representation. Comics are uniquely equipped to play with representations of the passing of time, often engaging directly with issues of history, memory, and trauma through their formal elements. Spiegelman's *Maus* I and *II* (1991) and Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-95* (2000/2009) are two works that represent a narrative based on second-hand memories, framing their narratives with the process of recording history. In *Maus* this narrative is a reconstruction of conversations the author had with his father Vladek, a Jewish survivor of Nazi Germany. In *Safe Area Goražde*, the narrative is a retelling of stories Sacco heard from residents of Goražde in former Yugoslavia, during the years in which the enclave was brutally besieged by Bosnian Serbs. History is a fluid construct for Sacco and Spiegelman, leaking into and mixing with the present, and this is addressed consciously in formal choices on the page. This article explores the ways in which comics creators approach the issue of representing time, using the graphic texts *Maus* and *Safe Area Goražde* to draw comparisons in their use of comics form to depict the trauma of violent histories, and arguing for the unique advantages of the form in representing the flexibility of temporal space.

   Comics narratives are created by the sequencing of images and text in "panels," the (usually) rectangular

frames that provide windows into the story. In his seminal book, *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott Mc-Cloud described the concept of "closure," the process of the human mind connecting two comics panels using past experience: "Comics panels *fracture* both *time* and *space*, offering a *jagged, staccato rhythm* of *unconnected moments*. But closure allows us to *connect* these moments and *mentally construct* a *continuous, unified reality*" (p. 67, emphasis in original). The effect of closure is caused by the existence of gaps between the panels, known as "gutters." Usually an empty space between panels, the gutters necessitate the reader filling in the blanks with their own understanding of the story. Scholar Hillary Chute has commented on the implications of this space: "The effect of the gutter lends to comics its 'annotation' of time as space. […] Emphasizing how comics deals in space […] highlights how this contemporary, dynamic medium both informs and is informed by postmodern politics in a productive, dialogical process" (2006, p. 202). Using a variety of different panel-to-panel transitions and experimenting with the role of the gutter, comics define time in spatial terms. McCloud breaks down the different types of closure into six degrees of panel relatedness, from "moment-to-moment" transitions at one end of the spectrum, to "non-sequitur" transitions at the other (1993/1994, p. 70-2). As the majority of American and European comics tend to present time through closure types defined by McCloud as around the center of his transition scale, between "action-to-action" and "aspect-to-aspect" (p. 75-6), instances of closure at the extremes of the spectrum become all the more noticeable where they appear.

For instance, in one scene in *Safe Area Goražde*, Sacco painstakingly showed the process of lighting a cigarette and inhaling its smoke over four consecutive panels. The moment-to-moment transitions that occur between these four panels emphasize the relative serenity of this scene and demonstrate the luxury and importance attributed to the process by the character Nudjejma. Cigarettes are frequently presented in the graphic novel as objects coveted by citizens, often used as a form of currency to barter for essentials. The action of smoking, a process that is highly significant to the character, is conveyed to the reader with a sense of the weight which it holds for her. There is a strong focus on these instances of the apparently mundane in Sacco's book, and their appearance in such slowly transitional panel series emphasizes their capturing of still moments of time, particularly when contrasted with the stark transitions that function to depict violent moments in the narrative.

As well as differences in panel transition, the time frame of comics narrative can be slowed down or sped up by the size and shape of panels. As Spiegelman has explained, a "large panel allows you to enter, pause, and understand the importance of a moment" (2011, p. 175). Such large panels are used sparingly in *Maus*. The two largest images in the first volume of the graphic novel operate as a frame for the characters Vladek and his wife Anja's experience living under Nazi rule, from the first moment they see the Nazi flag to the moment they arrive at Auschwitz. The two pages are similarly constructed, with a page-spanning image at the top showing a moving vehicle (in the first a passenger train, and in the second the Nazi truck that carries them to Auschwitz), a second tier that is split into two panels, and one large image taking up the remainder of the page (1986, p. 32 and p. 157). The jarring use of these large panels disrupts the narrative time with powerful scenes that Spiegelman wished the reader to spend more time viewing. The similarity between the construction of the pages in panel size and shape also indicates, if only on a subliminal level for the reader, the significant contrast in context between the presence of Nazism while Anja and Vladek are still free, and the consequences of Nazism that results in their arrival at Auschwitz.

In *Safe Area Goražde*, in contrast to *Maus*, Sacco often makes use of large panels, sometimes including images over two-page spreads (2009, pp. 14-5, for example). He also frequently makes use of silent or sparsely-captioned panels, such as in the long series of panels depicting the grueling march back from Grebak (pp. 139-42). The use of such techniques may be because Sacco wishes the narrative to spend more time in a suspended period of reflection, something he indicates in relation to his *Footnotes in Gaza*: "[the Palestinians] never had the luxury of looking back and isolating things, and thinking about it and coming to terms with it.

…I think it's important to isolate things… you've got to stop it sometime and have a look [at] it" (cited in Chute, 2011). The variation of transitions, panel size and shape, and the primacy of image over text are some examples of formal elements that all work towards creating such a space for reflection in comics, and elements both Sacco and Spiegelman exploit to profound effect in their work.

As McCloud has explained, however, there is more to the process of comics time than merely the individual panels themselves: the juxtaposition of panels representing different moments in time over the space of a page also has implications for the structure of the narrative. The presence on a single page of panels representing the past, present, and future of the narrative opens unique possibilities for the comics artist:

> *unlike* other media, the past is more than just *memories* for the audience and the future is more than just *possibilities*! Both *past* and f*uture* are *real* and *visible* and *all around us*! Wherever your eyes are focused that's *now*. But at the same time your eyes take in the *surrounding landscape of past and future!*" (1994, p. 104, emphasis in original)

Rather than the pages of comic books simply holding the text of a story, each is carefully crafted to create a relationship between the panels, so that a moment of time in comics narrative is not represented just by a single panel, but also over the course of a complete page and in the contrast established across each double-page spread. For instance, Sacco often presents scenes from various instances of time juxtaposed on a single page. One page features a full-page picture of the "Blue Road" that operates (within the gutters themselves) as a background to a map, a panel featuring three characters with speech balloons, and captions that further the present day narrative retelling of the Blue Road's history (2009, p. 57). Each of these elements is grounded in a particular time, whether in the time they represent or the time the information is conveyed to the reader. The effect created by the juxtaposition of these elements is the positioning in history of the various page elements against each other, which become defined by their temporal contrast.

A section towards the end of the first volume of *Maus* provides a similar example in its use of layering different moments in time. At the top of one page, Vladek sits on his Exercycle, relating his story to Art. Beneath this in the second tier is the moment in 1941 he is describing, and features an extreme close-up of a Nazi poster. In the third tier the narrative skips ahead, and in the final tier and over the page the narrative slows to action-to-action transitions, showing a conversation occurring later in 1941. Behind this conversation, however, is a large image depicting a history told within that history—a layering of flashback-upon-flashback (1986, pp. 82-3). The transition allows the reader to dip deeper and deeper into the history of the narrative, visually representing the layers of time and how they are uncovered through story-telling.

In contrast to this, the use of simple, same-sized panels allows the passage of time to move unhindered. Much of the present in *Maus* is depicted in this way, for instance in the scene where Art and his wife Françoise are awoken by Vladek calling their bedroom telephone, in which all the panels are uniformly sized and spaced (pp. 96-7). As Spiegelman explains, this technique allows the narrative to be quickly furthered: "The boxes become invisible, so one can enter into them and see, for example, Vladek and Art walking around a Rego Park street" (2011, p. 181). The unobtrusive quality of such sections allows the retelling of history in the present day to remain as simply a frame to the history itself. Where past and present meet in the text, however, these two techniques are shown in contrast. As Vladek explains the layout of the Auschwitz camps to Art, for instance, the regular structure of the present-day panels is disrupted by Art's imagining of an aerial-view image, creating a jarring contrast between past and present (1991, p. 51). Such instances occur frequently, as Spiegelman strives to keep his father's dialogue in the foreground of his narrative, while simultaneously playing with distinctions of time.

The passage of time, considering such techniques as these, is further complicated by the route the reader's eye can take through the page. As opposed to other mediums, such as film or theater, comics does not insist on the primacy of a single image at any one moment, as Spiegelman has explained: "the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present—one doesn't displace the other the way it happens

in film" (2011, p. 165). Futhermore, whereas other mediums "[strap] the audience to a chair and [hurtle] you through time," that which is "dramatic in a comic can be stopped with the blink of an eye" (p. 166). The reader of comics is afforded a freedom not available to the audience of other mediums, as their eye can follow the progression of panels in whichever manner they choose, revisiting the past and skipping ahead to the future if they so wish. This constant availability of past, present, and future means that time in comics need not be restricted to a linear progression, but can be experienced with an immediacy unique to its form.

In *Maus*, the presence of the past is also presented literally in certain panels, by having images from the past infiltrate the space of the present. In one panel, for instance, Vladek is telling Art and Françoise about four girls hanged in Auschwitz, and the reader is presented with an image of the legs of the girls, dangling from trees in the present as Art, Vladek, and Françoise drive through the Catskills (1991, p. 79). On another page, Art is pictured at his desk atop a pile of emaciated corpses, as he explains his reservations and depression about finishing his Holocaust narrative (p. 41). As Art leaves his studio to visit his psychiatrist, the corpses are even seen strewn in the street (p. 43). The urgency and availability of the past and its influence upon the present in *Maus* presents a visual metaphor for the insistence of traumatic events upon the conscious mind in the present. Sigmund Freud described such a repetition of trauma as a manifestation of "imprisoned" pathogenic situations, which are "preserved as a lasting charge and a source of constant disturbance in physical life" (1910, p. 188). It is precisely this latent charge that disrupts the narrative chronology in *Maus*. The past is an inescapable presence for Spiegelman, bleeding inexorably into the panels of the present.

In *Safe Area Goražde*, Sacco generally presented the presence of the past through another technique of graphic juxtaposition. Sacco showed past and present images as invariably separate from each other by means of panel borders, and also by separating the accounts of interviewees onto pages with black, rather than white, gutters. The closest that images of the past physically come to the present is where Sacco shows them in large "bleeds" (frameless pictures). Sacco used these bleeds frequently, often depicting the most harrowing details of each page in a bleed that serves almost as a background to the other panels, for instance when showing the character Suada's experience of discovering the bodies of her neighbors (2009, p. 127). The effect is that traumatic events of the past are depicted as being figuratively (and literally, on the page) behind the present at all times, a kind of constant background presence to Goražde and its citizens in the present day. The effect a borderless panel can have on the reader, as McCloud has written, aids these graphic representations in depicting past trauma as present:

> Most of us are so used to the standard *rectangular* format that a '*borderless*' panel… can take on a *timeless quality*. …Time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the *closed panel*, but instead *hemorrhages* and escapes into *timeless space*. Such images can *set the mood* or a *sense of place* for *whole scenes* through their *lingering timeless presence*. (1994, p. 102-3, emphasis in original)

While bordered panels hurry along the narrative, in other words, using bleeds slows that narrative down, focusing the attention of the reader on the image of the bleed, which declares its presence with a pressing insistence. With Sacco's two-page bleeds this is especially the case. The large size of these pictures, along with their lack of a border, suspends these moments in time, and creates highly memorable images. Juxtaposing bleeds alongside panels also aids in this process, especially when using particularly large bleeds that can border multiple panels. On one page, when hearing the account of a deserter from the Yugoslav People's Army, the details are relayed in panels that frame a large bleed of a war-torn street in Goražde. In the center of the street is a dismembered citizen. The graphic implication, by having the focus of the page on this centrally positioned bleed, is that what this image represents is as central to his testimony: his witnessing of the destruction of Goražde and similar towns is crucial to understanding the reasons for his desertion (2009, p. 126).

If we are to see these graphic depictions as a means of attempting to represent the effects of past trauma on the present, then the works themselves could be seen as a means of working through this trauma. In this sense, they are a graphic version of the therapeutic method of the "talking cure" pioneered by Freud and Jo-

seph Breuer, for as one critic suggested: "Spiegelman […] writes out of a compulsion to understand the heavy weight of the past as both a public and a private burden" (Orvell, 1992, p. 126). The compulsive act of repeating the past could thus be a means of coming to terms with traumatic history. The graphic narratives themselves are showing the protagonists' attempts at ordering the information they have received about the past, through interpretation of the interviews into the language of comics. Several critics have made the assertion that Spiegelman produces *Maus* out of an attempt to bring order to the past. As Chute pointed out: "[Spiegelman] reconstructs history in his own language—comics—in frames and gutters, interpreting and interrupting as he rebuilds. Comics frames provide psychic order" (2006, p. 203). The psychic order for Art, however, is notably different to the psychic order sought by his father, Vladek. Whereas Art is constructing a narrative, and literally giving a form to his father's story, Vladek's ordering involves a destruction of texts, as we see with Vladek's confession of the burning of Anja's notebooks: "After Anja died I had to make an order with everything… these papers had too many *memories*. So I burned them" (1986, p. 159). Art's anger at his father's actions here is telling of the very different means the two characters have of establishing their own psychic order.

The form that this ordering takes for Spiegelman is one framed by a narrative of its own construction. The use of this narrative frame is not something unique to comics (Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is a prominent example of this technique in written form), but there are methods employed in producing this frame that utilize the formal advantages of comics. Spiegelman reveals in *Metamaus* (2011) that his choice of framing the narrative by its own process is an effort to avoid claiming knowledge of a time he cannot fully access: "Visibly juxtaposing pasts and presents allowed there to be a continual kind of flashing back and forth that wouldn't feel like a total flashback to an ersatz reconstruction of the past. …One doesn't want to give a counterfeit experience; better to give the problematics of reconstructing that experience" (p. 208). This depiction also prefigures the experience of the reader, as Jeanne C. Ewert has written: "[Vladek's] account assumes knowledge that Spiegelman doesn't have; the son's position in the narrative is of an audience trying to 'see' the story told to him, much as his reader will" (2000, p. 92). The use of the frame of process allows Spiegelman to present the information as he receives it, self-reflexively preempting any dispute over narrative authority. The information is displayed as Art receives it, providing the reader with an equal access to the original source information and preventing the story from being warped too significantly by the process of being transformed into a narrative.

Safe Area Goražde similarly frames its narrative by process, showing Joe Sacco's character in the act of interviewing eyewitnesses of the effects of war in Goražde. This narrative frame when representing the stories of war has further implications, for, as one critic has written, journalists and writers who frame their narrative with their own process "attempt to accept a preexisting responsibility for the other by discursively substituting the stories of those they cover for their own. In doing so, [they] attempt to rehumanize those who are dehumanized and violated by their experiences in war" (Bartley, 2008, p. 51). This idea has relevance both to Sacco's narrative and to Spiegelman's, in the dehumanization of Muslims in Goražde, and of Jews during the Second World War. As in the case of *Maus*, *Safe Area Goražde* presents the protagonist in a manner preempting the question of narrative authority. From his earliest arrival into Goražde, Sacco shows the remove his privileged status gave him from the experiences of those living in the town. This is instantly apparent from the chapter title, "Red Carpet," as well as his distorted tour of the area: "They whisked us off to a hotel! A hotel! Yesiree, they were patched up and re-opened for business in Gorazde" (2009, p. 5). Aryn Bartley has written at length on this issue, and argued that certain moments in the narrative "expose Joe the character as an imperfect, at times unethical, witness—one who grapples with his privileged status" (2008, p. 66). The difficulty for Sacco and Spiegelman is in accessing a moment in time far removed (though noticeably more recent in Sacco's case) from their own, something self-consciously evident in their decision to frame the narrative in the process of its own construction.

Accessing this distant time is doubly complicated, as *Maus* explores in some depth, by the limitations of memory. This is another issue treated by the use of the narrative frame. Where memory is an unreliable source, it is safer to acknowledge its limitations, as Spiegelman explained: "Perhaps the only honest way to present such material is to say: 'Here are all the documents I used, you go through them'" (2011, p. 34). As a result, Vladek's voice is foregrounded at all times in the narrative construction of the past, displaying both the source material and the resulting graphic shaping of the story. The difficulty of accessing and relaying memory is something that haunts *Maus*. Spiegelman described this focus: "The subject of *Maus* is the retrieval of memory and ultimately, the creation of memory. …It's about a cartoonist trying to envision what a father lived through" (p. 73). The problem is visually cued as Art tries to ascertain a precise timeline of Vladek's work detail at Auschwitz. Spanning the three tiers of panels in which their conversation takes place is a diagram of the timeline of 1944 that Art is trying to produce. The page represents a complex combination of moments in time: Art and Vladek are in the present, discussing a past that Vladek struggles to remember and Art struggles to recreate, in panels literally arranged around a timeline. The timeline begins in the top right panel and seemingly interrupts Vladek by obscuring part of his speech bubble. The effect is compounded by the interruption of the journey of the readers' eyes: the timeline interrupts Vladek mid-sentence, so that both Vladek and the reader are confronted by the intrusion of the timeline into the sentence. This interruption shows the conflict between Art and Vladek's attitudes to time, as Chute explains: "Spiegelman presents his own desire for linear order and Vladek's resistance to that kind of order" (2006, p. 210). Art becomes frustrated by his father's uncertainty about dates: "You *told* me about that. How many months were you in the tin shop? …But wait! That would be 12 months. You said you were there a total of 10!" Vladek's retort shows their difference in perceiving time: "So? Take *less* time to the black work. In Auschwitz we didn't wear watches" (1991, p. 68). As Spiegelman has explained, this is also an indication of their different perceptions of time: "my attempt to rationalize his story by putting it on what's literally the grid of time was not the way he experienced it at all" (2011, p. 207). The page shows the complex relationship of the two characters' subjective approaches to the issue of time: while Art seeks the ordered structure of a visual diagram, Vladek has no need for this.

Comics form provides for an apt depiction of memory, for its combination of visual images and bursts of language seem to mimic the construction of memories. The medium also has access to memories that others do not, in its ability to take a snapshot of the past, as Sacco has explained:

> There are very few photographs—and we know them very well—that capture an exact moment, and that image is always with us. The guy getting killed in the Spanish Civil War, the Vietcong suspect getting shot by the Saigon police chief… Now, when you draw, you can always capture that moment. You can always have that exact, precise moment when someone's got the club raised, when someone's going down. I realize now there's a lot of power in that. (Cited in Chute, 2011)

Sacco explores such moments of the past in *Safe Area Goražde* through his use of pages with black backgrounds, where much of the most violent depictions of the war occur. These sections appear whenever the narrative is taken over by an eye-witness account. The transition to black borders and gutters is reminiscent of the transition to the setting of a theater or cinema, or of the black plastic frame of a television screen, highlighting the documentary nature of *Safe Area Goražde* as well as the voyeuristic nature of media representations of war. Media is a constant presence in Sacco's depiction of Goražde, such as in one scene in which Sacco and his Turkish colleague, Serif, are compelled to watch amateur footage of war atrocities. The reader is not presented with the images on the television, but we are told them in graphic detail in the captions: "children sheared in two [,] […] legs getting sawn off without anesthetic [,] […] Half her face sliced off!" and so on. However, the focus of the panels is on the faces of characters, illuminated in the glow of the television screen, with their host's constant and compulsive calls to keep watching: "You must look! You must look! […] You must see this!" (2009, p. 120). The television is a coveted item in Goražde, as the character Edin ex-

plains: "At the end of '92, for a T.V. you could get 10kg of flour. People in villages couldn't watch T.V. There was no electricity. But they wanted to have a T.V." (p. 135). Television is not just a means of capturing past moments, but also informs the citizens' present, in their consumer desire, and in their desire to engage with Western culture, as in one scene in which the "silly girls" start "MTVing" Riki, holding up an "air video camera" and "air microphone" (p. 151). Media is valued in Goražde, particularly when considered alongside the comparative disadvantage the town is in because of its low news media coverage, as compared to Sarajevo, "a city gagging on tape recorders and cameras" (p. 24). Sacco's graphic narrative therefore highlights the faces of the television viewers in the scene with Serif, rather than focusing on the graphic narrative depicted by the television itself. In this respect, he shows his narrative to be capturing a different side to the story of Goražde. In another scene, Sacco notes the one-sided nature of the majority of media coverage of the conflict: "most journalists blew in with the U.N. convoy in the morning, hit the hospital for some English-language quotes from Dr. Begovic, noted the mini-centrales on the Drina, did some man-in-the-street and/or a quickie stand-up on the second bridge, and blew out with the U.N. convoy in the afternoon" (p. 130). Scenes such as this set Sacco's narrative in sharp relief to portrayals in other mediums.

As we have seen, both *Safe Area Goražde* and *Maus* utilize a variety of formal elements unique to the medium of comics in their efforts to represent time. The process of recording a past time, in both works, is framed by a narrative of its own process, confronting the issue of narrative authority in situations disadvantaged by their reliance on memory. In their formal choices on the page, Sacco and Spiegelman blur the boundaries between past, present, and future. The comics creators play with the reader's expectations of narrative chronology and linearity, using the comics form as a means to explore temporal transitions through spatial means, such as panel size, shape, bleeds, gutters, closure, and juxtaposition across panels, pages, and double-page spreads. The potential of comics form offers a singular environment for these authors to explore postmodern concerns of spatial representations of time. In doing so they present a history which bleeds into present and future, a hemorrhaging of a traumatic past which constantly threatens to break through boundaries of chronology.

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