

"I was an Eye-witness": The Framing of Human Rights in Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde*

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Abstract

Graphic narratives use the comics medium to enmesh and bring forth an existing culture of visual aesthetics, and representation into popular culture. *Safe Area Goražde*, a graphic narrative by the Maltese-American graphic journalist Joe Sacco is a collection of witness narratives from the 1992 Bosnian war. The text establishes a three-way dialogue amongst the state-sanctioned history of the geopolitical conflict, the representation of the subjects within the framework of a human rights discourse, and the affective accounts of trauma of the subjects as relayed to Sacco. This paper presents *Safe Area Goražde* as a graphic human rights narrative that problematises the categories of victimhood and historiography as established by existing political discourse. The visual culture of the medium enables Sacco to engage with these discourses in a complex manner not only without mitigating the importance of individual trauma, but also by facilitating a productive and safe space to negotiate memory through various textual techniques. Sacco places witness accounts of the Goraždans along with official state histories, and human rights discourses enabling the reader to receive all three narratives together. The reader is thus made aware of the systematic discursive, and physical erasure of the humanity of the Bosniaks, and their relegation into an ahistorical realm. The interaction between the frames, the gutters, the readers' active participation in the narrative, and the author's narrative itself assists Sacco in his task of constructing a diligent history of the subaltern. The paper argues for a need to see human rights frames and historical categories through interventions like *Safe Area Goražde* in order to examine them, rethink them, and engage meaningfully in the act of critique.

Keywords: Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Goražde*, graphic narrative, human rights, frames.

Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde* (hereafter *Goražde*) opens with the author and his main liaison in the UN enclave, Edin, sitting in a crowded bar "waiting for the end of the war." Like most of Sacco's graphic narratives (to use Hillary Chute's term), *Goražde* is a historiographical collection of accounts accumulated from witnesses to a geopolitical conflict, this time the 1992 Bosnian war. Sacco visited the municipality of Goražde in eastern Bosnia four times in late 1995 and early 1996 on a UN supply convoy during one of the ceasefires. Although Sacco interposes himself and his own experiences in Goražde as a framing device, the core of the narrative is based on interviews with the safe area's residents. These include witness accounts of hardship and escape from Serbian massacres as well as glimpses of everyday life in a town under siege. Sacco also documents the stark absence of media in the life of the Goraždans while they were isolated during the Bosnian war. Chute suggests that the importance of graphic narratives lies in the exploration of what can be said and shown when collective history and individual memories intersect (2008, p. 459). This is not to suggest that the creative interventions graphic narratives partake in are contradictory to historical accuracy. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud writes that the

panels within a graphic narrative have the ability to fracture both time and space, and together with the gutter, offer both a frame of recognition and an opportunity for closure in a unified reality (1994, p. 67). The multi-layered structure of comics facilitates a meaningful proliferation of historiography into the graphic narrative. The visual culture of the medium further enables authors like Sacco to engage with discourses of human rights, their violations, and state intervention in a complex manner not only without mitigating the importance of individual trauma, but also by facilitating a productive and safe space to negotiate memory through various textual techniques. Comics as a form also demand considerable participation from the reader to foster what McCloud calls an intimacy in closure (1994, p. 69).

The following essay examines the prevalent frames of vision delineated by the dominant human rights narratives and national discourses as well as alternative frames to view these discourses. The paper will also explore the role of framing and defining categories such as the human, human rights, torture, victimhood, memory, history, and grief, in order to understand the scope for negotiation and recognition, and to arrive at a sustainable and diligent representation through graphic interventions such as *Goražde*. Lastly, the paper will review what role works like *Goražde* play in humanising their witness-narrators' lives and accounts within certain specific parameters of representation through investigating and simultaneously problematising discourses of human rights and nationalism, and accordingly help reverse the erasure of the humanness of the victims in geopolitical conflicts.

Graphic narratives are situated within a visual rhetoric, which not only documents history, but also provides an organic recounting of trauma through memory. Further, while dealing with historical trauma like genocide, graphic narratives also provide the visual immediacy of the viscosity of war. This does away with the need for the text to be descriptive as it essentially shows the characters being affected, which in turn is tied to the very context of the trauma. The absence or un-assimilability of traumatic memory to speech mandates an alternative and more estranging medium of narration and rhetoric, which is fulfilled by the graphic form. An alternative visual history of trauma is thus generated through the production and consumption of graphic narratives in this manner. The graphic narrative, then, not only visualises contemporary history, but also makes it “hypervisible” (Nayar, 2009, p. 62).

In *Goražde*, Sacco spatializes the verbal narrative of official Bosnian history to disrupt the hypervisible visual narrative of the victims of the Bosnian war. One such example is on pages 86-87 where one panel recounts the official version of the Serbian advance into the Bosnian hinterland, while the next shows Edin's house being set on fire by his Serb neighbours. Yet another panel on the same page is an interview of a few unnamed Bosniaks recounting how they lost their family members during the same Serbian advance. Both official history and memoir work together to relay a better, more comprehensive sense of events, and neither is left to speak for itself. Official histories are rejected out of hand by subjective memories of the same. Historical events like the Holocaust, the genocide in Sarajevo, or the Iranian revolution, then, can only be mediated for us through subjective and personal accounts (Malek, 2006, p. 360).



(Sacco, 2007, p. 110)

A Grievable Life

In *Goražde*, Sacco's depiction of maps, speeches by the Bosnian, Serbian, and American leaders, UN convoys symbolises a historiography that has marginalised the Bosnian Muslims to such a degree that they have been robbed of their basic human rights. In counterposing this historiography with portrayals of witnesses, their accounts of suffering, visceral images of torture and massacre, Sacco is not only trying to make visible these dispossessed subjects as human, but also questioning the dominant human rights discourses that refuse to acknowledge the very subjects whose interest they allegedly safeguard. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler asks when is a life grievable? She goes on to explain that a human life can only be apprehended as lost (and thus grievable) if it is apprehended as life first. The frames that organise our ontologies also depend on our epistemological capacities to understand what constitutes a human life. Thus if these frames (as provided by Sacco) allow us to view, and indeed, apprehend victims of human rights violations like the Bosniaks then, Butler says, we are faced with the ethical dilemma of acknowledging their human-ness as also their dehumanisation at the same time. The frames that allow us to apprehend lives constitute our individual socio-political mythologies. However, through this apprehension the subjects receive a reiteration of being, which then shifts the apprehender's mythology as well. In other words, our apprehension of subjects, according to Butler, changes our own epistemologies while also helping to reiterate their own subjective humanity. This apprehension in the framework of war and human rights violations is facilitated through grief. Grief delineates the parameters of human life for a particular society. Simultaneously, because of apprehension's ability to transform the viewing entity's own frames of subjectivity, it translates the precarity of the subject across cultures. Through texts like *Goražde*, then, Sacco furnishes an alternative mode of representation by dismantling state narratives and enabling a transcultural reading of the victims as human, grievable.

According to the guidelines mandated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in a report for a "Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment," the special rapporteur's composition and working methods must include country visits undertaken on the basis of an invitation from the country concerned, as well as unofficial information and complaints about alleged violations of the right to be free from torture. The guidelines further ask the rapporteur to corroborate the personal interviews of these individual complaints through fact-checks, and special attention to the information provided by the country of origin. Additionally, *The Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status* issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

mentions the phrase “well rounded fear of being persecuted” as key in determining victims of human rights violation. Paragraph 42 of the report states that a witness’ statements cannot be considered in an abstract vacuum, and although the prevailing situation in the country of origin should not cloud the rapporteur’s judgement, “a knowledge of conditions in the applicant’s country of origin – while not a primary objective – is an important element in assessing the applicant’s credibility” (2011, p. 12).

Following these conventions outlined in the “Special Rapporteur on Torture” report by the OHCHR and the UNHCR Handbook, *Goražde* combines official narratives with personal testimonials by juxtaposing factual evidence alongside the affective memories of individual victims. The graphic narrative begins on the day the Dayton Accords are signed, then flits back to earlier in the year, a little after the Srebrenica genocide, goes back even further through the various interviews and historical interjections before circling back to the day of the Dayton Accords. The epilogue has Sacco visiting Goražde and Sarajevo a year later and documenting the attempts of the Bosnian citizens at a normal life. By disrupting the chronology of the narrative, Sacco then creates an epistemological space for witness narratives within the larger frameworks of human rights and state history (Salmi, 2016, p. 416). Sacco’s real focus, then, is the accentuation of the systematic discursive, and physical erasure of the humanity of the Bosniaks, and their relegation into an ahistorical realm. Sacco’s writing is a pertinent example of what Salmi terms as graphic human rights writing. Since *Goražde* offers the reader a history from below, i.e., from the base, one could also align Sacco with the school of subalternity.

Israeli visual theorist, Ariella Azoulay suggests that Sacco’s bottom-up approach towards historiography facilitates alternative avenues of understanding, and indeed of recognition, of subcultures terrorised by human rights violations. She calls this process “potentializing history.” Interventions like Sacco’s help potentialise the marginalised narratives not only by carving out a permanent space for them, but also by understanding the entire corpus of history as a dynamic force and as a violent reminder available to future generations as means of protest and political subversion (2013, p. 565-566).

The Power to Detain

The graphic narrative through its visual nature has the ability to bring to our consciousness the different situations and locations of trauma from around the world. *Goražde* shifts extreme historical trauma from being invisible to being hypervisible by representing it in a form that is familiar, mainstream, and popular. Hypervisible history is the serious transmission of extreme historical trauma from under the weight of censorship, official documentation and unverifiable sources to the public gaze through an apparently frivolous and ‘comic’ medium (Nayar, 2009, p. 62). Edward Said in the Introduction to *Palestine* writes that Sacco has the power to detain the reader by furnishing suffering and injustice that has received too little humanitarian and political attention (2001, p. v). In *Goražde*, this detention takes place through weaving a graphic narrative of historical horror and witnessing. The witnessing within the narrative is indicated through the narrator’s horrified, shocked, saddened, or angry facial expressions and body language. Thus, historical trauma is performed through the body of the witnesses and Sacco. This is important because, as Salmi puts it, this self-reference not only lends a certain level of political gravity to his work, but also allows Sacco to insert himself within the narrative space of the graphic narrative in the role of an objective observer (2016, p 418). However, excessive emphasis on Sacco as the objective observer may result in the reader overlooking his political and epistemological engagements with the events transpiring in Goražde. Kozol, on the other hand, argues that

Sacco manipulates the text in order to prevent this from happening by refusing to provide a single unified voice of Goražde; his ethnographic frame comprises of all kinds of Goraždans, different experiences, and voices especially characters that would be deemed as unlikeable and petty so as to prevent the homogenisation of victimhood so prevalent in most western documentary traditions. Kozol points out that individuals are usually interviewed in collective settings of cafes and tea circles perhaps indicative of the scale of the struggle and trauma (2012, p 171). Sacco, as if compiling a UN human rights report, uses mug shots of interviewees who then give first-hand accounts of their victimisation throughout *Goražde*. As these narratives unfold through the text, the reader sees these testimonies and their narrator-witnesses as representatives of the Bosniak community. They *become* Goražde, and so find a place in the larger frameworks of state history and human rights. Furthermore, sharing narrative authority through retelling multiple stories told from different viewpoints enables Sacco to undercut occidentalist notions and helps accentuate the horror of their struggles.

The “graphic” in the graphic narrative when used in its common form is indicative of a certain degree of realism in representation (graphic horror, graphic violence, etc.). It thus follows that the “graphic” narrative is an appropriate medium for the subject matter that Sacco and other graphic journalists deal with since it works well with the underlying reality or hypostasis as a mode of representation. The underlying reality of Sacco’s narratives however is itself symbolic for it is an attempt to give a body to something unspeakable. This foundational essence works along with traumatic realism in *Goražde*. History, in Sacco, assumes corporeality through the visual representation of the trauma. In other words, trauma is given a body (Nayar, 2009, p. 67).

I remember one girl, she was hit by an anti-aircraft cannon... She was two years old or a little older. There was no anesthetic. She had prolapsed intestines – they were spilling out. She’d just learned toilet training. She was in shock, asking for a pan to go to the toilet in during the operation. She died one hour later (Sacco, 2007, p. 122).

As mentioned previously *Goražde* combines historical explanations and political advances along with testimonies of the witness-narrators. This constant and somewhat disjointed back-and-forth helps slow down the pace of the narrative and the reader who is then forced to take in the entire diegesis at Sacco’s and other witnesses’ pace. This too is contributive to Sacco’s “power to detain” and facilitates a nuanced depiction of the people in Goražde. (Kozol, 2012, p 171). Inversely, this power to detain could also risk a state of stagnation in the reader’s understanding. By limiting the reader to certain narrative paths, the account risks freezing the subjects in their position of a victim in perpetuity without affording them any scope for change in their status as a human. Historical and temporal incongruity thus becomes the very marker that legitimises the subjects’ dynamic humanity. This is how Sacco calls into question his own role in sustaining different forms of violence and silencing (Salmi, 2016, p. 420). Azoulay becomes relevant once again here because in narratives like *Goražde* readers share the responsibility of signification with the author, the hegemony, and the subjects. As such their incongruity then represents a potentiality of choice — one that can halt the process of co-option and erasure.

Framing the Frame

Butler complicates the idea of apprehension further by bringing in the Hegelian notion of recognisability, which she claims is determined by the universal potential of personhood, and is essential in understanding the legitimacy of the human subject in frames of war and violence. Different from recognition, recognisability delineates a more general framework within which one

can prepare a subject for recognition — "general terms, conventions, and norms "act" in their own way, crafting a living being into a recognizable subject, though not without errancy or, indeed, unanticipated results" (Butler, 2009, p. 5). It is thus a more generic notion than apprehension, in the sense that what we apprehend is facilitated by norms of recognisability, but does not require full cognition. However because of its amorphous structure, one can also apprehend something beyond recognition or something not yet recognised by the preexisting norms of recognition. Apprehension thus isn't limited by recognisability, but at the same time isn't as strong as the latter either precisely because of this fluid nature. When attempting to understand the recognisability and intelligibility of the subject as human, Butler uses the category of the frame as a performative device. By framing the subject within a certain landscape, the author (and the reader) delimits the subject's movement. The frame seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen. However when these frames are reproduced for mass consumption, they do so in new, varied contexts. The frame constantly bleeds, and in doing so, is suspended in a kind of perpetual breakage. As such, this self-breaking and denial of an internal temporal logic become a part of the definition of a frame. Butler then links this constant shifting in the definition of the frame to the possibility and trajectory of its affective subject as well (2009, p 10-11). Butler elucidates this in the context of the leaking out of the torture photos from Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo arguing that even though the shock, revulsion, and outrage upon the discovery of the photos does not result in freeing of the prisoners, it does provide an opportunity to subvert the hegemonic justification of war and demand justice and an end to violence. Interestingly, Butler also uses the term "framing" in the sense of being the subject of a con or robbed of one's truth. Taken in this sense, the framing of the witness narratives in a certain manner in official histories could also be indicative of a systematic orchestration of their delegitimation (2009, p. 11).



(Sacco, 2007, p. 181)

Kelly Oliver opines that being subjected to extreme experiences of oppression imposes a paradox upon the victim's personhood. This she explicates by noting that oppression and human rights violations are methods of dehumanising and objectifying a victim. Consequently, this objectification will come in conflict with personal, individual, subjective witness narrations because the subject is simultaneously the witness and the sufferer of oppression and subordination. Rendered an object, the victim is also rendered speechless — objects are not subjects or agents of their own lives (Oliver, 2001, p 95). Oliver also observes that if witness narratives are presented within that same cultural milieu from whence the oppression occurred then the dominant hegemony will swiftly co-opt their credibility (2001, p 99). Sacco's position as a frame of narration then becomes more important because it represents an external acknowledgement of this oppression and trauma, which in turn is impervious to local co-option. Following Kozol, Oliver then asserts that recognition of these experiences is not much different from apprehension, and is especially important in legitimising their agential humanity. Acknowledgement will affirm a global response-ability even if it is beyond one's ambit of comprehension and recognition.

Bearing witness, and bearing witness to that witness (as Sacco does) then becomes essential in understanding a democratic public space in the face of a "lying world order," argues Peg Birmingham (2008, p 198).

As mentioned previously, McCloud suggests that closure in comics wraps up the exercise of meaning-making within a panel, and amongst panels within a page. The manner in which this is achieved is through the underlying effusion of the narrative outside the frames and into the gutters. The interaction between the frames, the gutters, the readers' active participation in the narrative, and the author's narrative itself is what constitutes the circuitous coherence of the text. This framing is what assists Sacco in his task of constructing a diligent history of the subaltern.

Framing himself as a device within the text allows him to put forth the claims of the witnesses and victims in *Goražde* as politically valid, recognisable, and legitimate. Works like *Goražde* can thus be viewed as sites where human rights discourses and graphic narratives enmesh to create and put forth alternative frames of recognition. Rebecca Scherr suggests that these two aspects of Sacco's texts work together to interrogate the hegemonic frames imposed by the state vis-à-vis the human rights discourse. The communicative power of the image-texts in *Goražde* depends on the invocation of the hypervisible history to legitimise the humanity of the subjects. It allows for the functioning of the fundamental task of democracy, which according to Birmingham, is bearing witness to factual reality and claiming a politics (2008, p 211-214). However, Scherr argues, that the same image-texts can also help reveal the mechanisms through which the human rights discourse maintain its own hegemonic power by constructing reified categories of personhood and nationhood (2015, p. 113). Since the structure of the graphic narrative is based on the interaction between the frame and the gutter, it can aptly display how framing works as containment and how the breakage, which occurs in the gutters, can work as fissures of resistance. One could thus argue that narratives like *Goražde* try and negotiate a sustainable way to humanise their subjects within a particular context of representation by a simultaneous interrogation and critiquing of national as well as human rights discourses through this interplay.

In undertaking this deconstruction of the narratives of statehood, Sacco through texts like *Goražde* aims to reverse the erasure of humans as faceless targets in geopolitical conflicts not only by an aggressive rhetoric of nationalism, but also by the representation of these conflicts, and the consequent erasure, at an international level. Sacco's ability to enable the reader to flit within and

outside the frames of the text facilitates for the reader the recognition of the parameters of political commentary. This in turn allows more nuanced and politically dynamic ways of conceiving the parameters of the category of the human, the human rights discourse, as well as an exploration of the possibilities of dissent in the face of their violations. Since the graphic narrative frame is in a state of perpetual breakage, it becomes a space where the precarity of humanness is constantly alive and evolving, and in dialogue with and against other possible forms of expression and oppression.

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