

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

Comics and Chaos

The representation of violence in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*
and Hamid Sulaiman's *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story*

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Master [120] en langues et lettres modernes, orientation germaniques, à finalité approfondie

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0. Introduction

The understanding of ‘violence’ comes with many challenges. As a matter of fact, violence appears in different forms, cripples the world in different ways. It can be physical, social, racial, psychological, or even invisibly rooted in the very basis of societies. Whether as actors, indirect spectators or forgotten victims, we are always connected to a form of violence in some way or another. It is no surprise, then, that violence is—and probably always will be studied through the lens of human experience. Accordingly, literature seems to be an adequate tool to do so. Words are paramount to express human distress and personal feelings, whereas images—and drawings can create a distressing whirlwind of emotions. I believe that the combination of the two, then, is extremely powerful.

For that matter, I decided to focus on the extremely diverse and open field of comics and selected two graphic novels¹ to analyse separately. The first one was written and illustrated by American journalist and comic book artist Joe Sacco, already well-known in the field study for his documentaries about remote people around the world. His body of work being quite consistent, I selected only one graphic novel, *Palestine*, originally published in 1993. The second graphic novel, entitled *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story* by Syrian-born author Hamid Sulaiman, is more recent and was published in 2016.

The choice of these two graphic novels is not neutral. Indeed, the two books share many similarities in terms of topic, style and narration. More specifically, the events that are portrayed in both of them unfold in very similar spaces and circumstances; *Freedom Hospital* is based on the author’s own experiences in Syria during the civil war that started in 2011, and *Palestine* is an illustration of the testimonies of the Israeli-Palestinian people collected by Sacco during his stay in the West Bank during the First Intifada in winter 1992-1993. Thus, it could be said that the stories of the two graphic novels take place in very similar contexts and, most importantly, are rhythmised by the ongoing violence and trauma resulting from it.

Therefore, this dissertation is divided into three parts. The first one investigates Sacco’s *Palestine* and how the graphic novel represents the stories of Palestinians, on the one hand, and the different forms of violence in the conflict, on the other. The same reasoning is applied in the second part, this time analysing *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story*. The third part is a comparative analysis of the two graphic novels and aims to highlight the similarities and differences and, consequently, to emphasise further elements related to the representation of violence. The first chapter of the dissertation can be seen as an introductory chapter. It considers the understanding of the term ‘violence’ and the evolution in the field of comics.

¹ Longer form of comics, generally dealing with more serious topics.

My research question thus arose from two main theoretical frameworks: comics and violence representation. It could be formulated as follows: how are issues such as violence and conflicts depicted in comic books, and how does it challenge the traditional view on violence often found in mainstream media? As a matter of fact, the comics medium is ever-expanding and, most importantly, relies on the personal interpretation of the author and the reader as well. For that matter, I think the medium is particularly fit to represent sensitive issues such as war and trauma, because it is a very open medium originally. Furthermore, it also challenges preconceived ideas about an issue, because comic books can present different perspectives on the same event. Thus, the main focus of this dissertation is the openness of the comics medium and how the latter is able to generate new interpretations on sensitive issues which, as it will be seen hereafter, were rarely found in comic books until recently.

Lastly, I would like to preface this dissertation with a disclaimer. The issues that are represented in the two graphic novels (i.e. the Syrian civil war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) are so complex, so difficult and heart wrenching to talk about that it is hard not to take a stand. Thus, I will not try to thoroughly explain the issues, because it is simply an impossible task. What will be done in this dissertation, however, is a presentation of the conflicts as they are depicted in the graphic novels, and a timeline of the events will be provided to try and comprehend them as much as needed. This dissertation should remain a personal interpretation of graphic novels, and not of the conflicts depicted in them.

1. The openness of comics to depict violence

The first chapter serves as a theoretical background for the forthcoming analysis of the graphic novels and investigates the two main theoretical frameworks of the dissertation, namely, violence and comic books. The first section covers the definition of violence and the challenges associated with it and relies on Rob Nixon's term to broaden the scope of interpretation. The second and last section focuses on two comic book artists who have revolutionized the field of nonfiction comics, Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi.

1.1. Forms of violence, representation and challenges

Mankind is and always will be plagued with the faculty and the urge of representation. This yearning is translated into every aspect of our everyday life. We humans strive for representation, for the acknowledgement of events that we sometimes cannot grasp. As said above, one could say that mankind is indeed accursed by the need to try and depict even the darkest sides of existence, violence being one of them. Indeed, the different aspects related to the extremely complex question of violence have been scrutinized for centuries in every type of human production. Whether in fiction, the visual arts, the news or testimonies, violence is everywhere to be seen and, ironically, has become quite popular. More recently, one form of violence is being favoured in the media, and that is the spectacular, visual violence. The aftermath is often overlooked, and the immediate and long-term sufferers of the said violence are simply evicted from the narrative altogether. This first issue with the exclusivity in terms of representation is what scholar and activist Rob Nixon argues against with his concept of "slow violence", explained in his own words as a "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight; a delayed destruction often dispersed across time and space" (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 2). In other words, the concept described by Nixon is to be contrasted with the instantaneous, destructive violence, whose effects are limited to an immediate range. On the contrary, Nixon's term encompasses the long-term effects of violence, both spatial and temporal. "Slow violence" is a form of violence that is "incremental and accretive" (ibid.), hence scrutinizing the unseen, entombed repercussions on people who are equally tucked away, expelled from the narrative of violence.

The above definition is thus very broad and, consequently, characterizes a general phenomenon that is rooted in every aspect of today's society. As already stated, violence appears in different forms and shapes one's reality differently. Nixon borrows the words of political scientist Johan Galtung who, he says, was equally concerned "with widening the field of what constitutes violence" (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 10).

Galtung coined the term “indirect or structural violence”, that, in a similar way to “slow violence”, changes and expands the scope of interpretation on violence. Galtung “sought to foreground the vast structures that can give rise to acts of personal violence and constitutes forms of violence in and of themselves” (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 10). This ‘structural violence’ could be seen as a scale, the instances of violence ranging from inequality, bad healthcare, the widening gap between rich and poor or racism, to only name a few (see Nixon 10). In that respect, this expanded interpretation of violence(s) will be essential in the following analysis of the graphic novels, because the two books investigate—and represent several forms of “imperceptible” (Nixon 10) violence and, most importantly, illustrate the everyday life of the people usually forgotten by the mainstream media.

In this dissertation, it is precisely the idea of the representation of the silent, hidden narratives of violence that has guided my research and made me re-think the portrayal of minorities overpowered by the current system in contemporary narratives. In the news, for instance, people living in war-torn countries are most often presented as casualties or nameless victims. As argued by Nixon, I believe it is pressing to re-think our world views and, accordingly, our way of narrating life stories, to go a step further and to analyse the subtle and pervasive consequences of violence and its different forms and the people living in the aftermath of war, for instance. Nixon summarizes this idea as follows:

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 3)

The questions raised by Nixon in this paragraph are essential and could be linked to a greater purpose: how can we dramatize subtle, non-spectacular acts of violence in order to raise enough awareness, to initiate intervention? Within the framework of this dissertation, I would like to add a further, more specific question, which is the following: how can the telling of personal, “micronarratives” help in the representation of a “macronarrative”, for instance in the case of people affected by war? The expressions “micro—macronarratives” are borrowed from the book *Graphic Women* (2010) by literary scholar Hillary Chute, in which she uses the terms to describe different levels of storytelling. “Micronarratives” could be understood as personal stories, whereas “micronarrative” are wide-reaching, more global.

As we will see in the two selected graphic novels, the framework is made of such ‘micro-narratives’, which themselves serve a greater purpose, that is, to try and represent the reality of

a whole country or people. Because the main focus of this dissertation is the representation of violence, we shall try and see how acts of violence are perpetuated within the different frames of the narrative and, most importantly, how they are represented—and sometimes only alluded to. For that matter, the choice of the case study moved towards the medium that uses both narrative and graphic elements, namely, comics.

1.2. Paving the path to new possibilities: the evolution of comics

As previously seen in the first section of this chapter, the thesis revolves around one main concept, which is violence representation in comic books. This concept has already been observed in literature as a whole for decades. Many authors have used the medium as a catharsis to try and express their feelings on sensitive issues such as war and conflict but also trauma, which often results from such experiences. What is revolutionary, however, is the increasing number of comics dealing with similar issues. The possibilities offered by the genre enable artists to express their traumatic experiences thanks to both graphic and literary techniques, and by doing so, broaden the scope of interpretation.

But comics has not always been granted the recognition it deserves. As a matter of fact, in a more traditional approach, comic books are often described as fictional pieces of work, usually short and dealing with fun, light-hearted topics. Strictly speaking, the genre is a very codified one as well. A comic book is made up of drawn sequences that are being read one after the other, hence mixing both literary notions with graphic ones. That is why linearity could be considered as one of the key elements of the genre, and this also highlights the fact that comics relies on its spatial syntax (its advantages and restrictions) to tell stories (see *Disaster Drawn* 3). American literary scholar Hillary Chute is a specialist in comics theory. More specifically, she investigates how the genre represents trauma and war, for instance. Thanks to their complex visual-verbal form, she believes that comic books are particularly fit to depict the above-cited issues. *Disaster Drawn* focuses mostly on nonfiction comics dealing with past trauma and conflicts, whereas one of her other books, *Graphic Women*, presents graphic novels written by women and dealing with womanhood, personal trauma and the body.

The above definition of comics is a very broad one and does not, in any case, represent the diversity of the genre. However, it is important to list the key notions that can be traced back in every iteration of the genre one way or another. Comics has a very special language of its own indeed, a “*machinery*”² (*Bande dessinée et narration* 10) that still influences the contemporary artists and their work.

² From French “*machinerie*”.

Thus, comics is originally very codified and relies on narrative techniques unique to the literary genre. However, this does not mean that comics have remained fixed throughout their course of history. On the contrary, comic books are diverse, original, and depend mostly on the artist's own vision and style. It is therefore only natural that comics have expanded their range and are now increasingly concerned with topics usually believed to be more serious, such as personal trauma and politics, for instance. It could be said, then, that comics have assimilated a more serious tone often associated to literature or documentary forms.

This switch in the field of comics can be traced back to the publication of the now famous *Maus* by American comic artist Art Spiegelman. First published as a short story in 1972's *Funny Animals* anthology then in the form of small clapbooks for *RAW* magazine (see Beaty & Woo 18), *Maus* tells the tragic life story of Spiegelman's own father during the Holocaust and explores the representation of traumatic memory and testimony. The two volumes (published in 1986 and 1991 respectively) were critically acclaimed both nationally and internationally, but 1992 was really the year that changed everything, when the graphic novel received a special citation from the Pulitzer Prize Committee, and, accordingly, gained international recognition (see Beaty & Woo 18). That was the first time that a comic book was acclaimed in such a way. With its allegorical use of animals and depiction of utter horror and trauma, *Maus* can be called ground-breaking in many ways. But as argued by Beaty & Woo, it is not unknown as to how Spiegelman managed to gain so much recognition with his graphic novel. As a matter of fact, the gravity of the topic portrayed in *Maus* is probably one of the reasons why the graphic novel managed to reach a wider public (see 19). However, the Holocaust was far from being an untouched subject at the time of its release. In other words, the choice of topic alone does not explain the enormous recognition Spiegelman's *Maus* brought onto the world of comics (see Beaty & Woo 19-20). What Spiegelman really managed to accomplish with his personal memoir, still according to Beaty & Woo, was to challenge the codes of the genre and explore its formal possibilities (see 23). It is Hillary Chute's argument as well, and she also points out the interesting opposition between pictures and drawings, stating that drawing is often associated with fiction works and is not fit to depict serious issues (see *Disaster Drawn* 2). Chute also believes that *Maus* was one of the first instances of drawn testimonies to challenge that idea. She says:

While *Maus*'s animal metaphor put the book's nontransparency on the surface [...] it only amplified what many took to be the subjective quality of drawing that ought to keep it out of nonfiction categories anyway. Comics narrative, however—which calls overt attention to the crafting of histories and historiographies—suggests that the accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention. (*Disaster Drawn* 2)

Thus, Chute supports the belief that creative innovation does not necessarily exclude accuracy at all. Comics challenges its own form and narrative and overtly questions the complexity of representation. “Through its spatial syntax”, she adds, “comics offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality—as well as on the idea that “history” can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one” (ibid. 3). Going a step further, it could be said, then, that comics as a genre challenges even the notion of history and dismisses the idea that there is only one accurate way to represent the latter.

Consequently, not only did Spiegelman “[cement] comics as a serious medium for engaging history” (*Disaster Drawn* 2), but he also cleared the way for many “underground” artists to express themselves on more serious topics:

“Maus” is the first iteration of Spiegelman’s (re)invention of comics non-fiction and the invention of American comics as an expression of witness. Comics established nonfiction as a primary concern during the underground comix revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s. The form explored antinarrative aesthetics, which produced a spatial ethic of articulation apposite to the work of historical documentation and the expression of trauma. (ibid. 157)

For a few decades, then, comics is now concerned with the affect of trauma as well as historical accuracy, whilst still challenging the mainstream way of representing them. One American cartoonist to follow the steps of Spiegelman is Joe Sacco, who translates documentary elements into comic books, as we shall see in the following chapters.

The influence of Spiegelman crosses borders and reaches comic book artists around the world. In the French-speaking world, ‘la bande dessinée’, albeit very traditional, is carried away by this wind of change as well. A prime example of this renewal would be Iranian-born artist Marjane Satrapi and her graphic novel *Persepolis* (2003), which is an autobiographical recollection of her childhood in Teheran during the revolution in the 1980s. Satrapi’s work and *Maus* “are remarkably similar”, note Beaty & Woo. “Both are lengthy black-and-white stories that parse significant world events (the Holocaust and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, respectively) through the lens of personal memoir” (109) (see fig. 1&2). The common factors to the two pieces of work are, thus, nonfiction and historical representation. A further similarity can be added, and that is, the representation of personal trauma and the one of different generations as well. Satrapi’s recollections of Iran are a collection of fond, personal memories intertwined with political and historical ones: “*Persepolis* is about the ethical visual and verbal practice of “not forgetting” and about the political confluence of the everyday and the historical” (*Graphic women* 136). Satrapi provides a space not only for her personal memories, but for the ones of an entire people and culture as well.

After studying the fine arts in Teheran, Satrapi went to France and got a degree in the Ecole Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Strasbourg. She has been living in France ever since.

Her experience as an Iranian exile in the Western world gives the cartoonist the opportunity to criticize the views of the latter on particular issues, and on the Eastern society (see *Graphic women* 137). She could be seen as a “translator of East to West” (ibid.), because one of her main objectives is to show the ordinary life in Iran to non-Iranian: “we in the West may find the Satrapi and their experiences extraordinary, but her aim is in part to reveal that her family's experiences and their left-wing outlook are more common than the average Western reader would presume” (ibid.). Thus, *Persepolis* could be seen as a cross-cultural bridge whose objective is to break down prejudices and clichés of one's culture by inviting the reader to glimpse into the personal, ordinary life of someone from a different cultural background. Not only that, but “the book, while shaped by Satrapi's voice, yet pushes outward to consistently visualize publics—collectivities of people—aside from herself and thus shifts the narrative attention to a broad public sphere” (ibid. 139). In other words, the reader reaches the macronarrative level of a story (the collective story of a people) by first going through a more personal micronarrative (the autobiographical rendition of Satrapi's childhood in Iran).

Therefore, another feature related to both Spiegelman's and Satrapi's drawn narratives could be highlighted here. The authors' primary concern is, in both cases, the representation of testimony and memory. Satrapi herself describes her work as a “text of witness” (*Graphic Women* 141). She is interested in telling a story that she has witnessed with her own eyes, rather than taking indirect information into account. With their complex visual form, graphic novels allow the reader to read the same story from different perspectives. Adding to that, Chute believes that “Comics offers an ‘architectonics’ that can bear witness forcefully in its ability to immerse readers within information in the space of the page. When testimony takes shape in drawing, it both expressed realities and ‘offers encapsulated sets of abstractions’—marks—‘that trigger a response’, as Spiegelman puts it” (*Disaster drawn* pp.179-181).

Thus, perspective is crucial, especially for depicting trauma. In the case of *Persepolis*, there is a number of violent scenes seen through the eyes of the main character and narrator, Marji, when she was just a child. As stated before, *Persepolis* is a personal memoir first and foremost, but trauma is casually represented in the life of the young child. Chute explains:

Through techniques such as combining on a page—with only apparent casualness—what constitutes the historical “routine” (execution) and the personal “routine” (sneaking cigarettes), and through subtle panel resemblances, Satrapi uses her understated graphic idiom to convey the horror of her “story of a childhood”. *Persepolis* shows trauma as ordinary, both in the text's form (...) and in style (...). (*Graphic Women* 155-156)

Trauma and the ordinary often clash in the graphic novel. This fact highlights the ambiguity but also the continuity of a traumatic experience, and how it confuses both present, past and

future. In his book *Projections*, professor Jared Gardner makes a similar observation about *Maus*:

Narrating life and its traumas makes the past continuous with the present, bleeding its wounds into our daily life. This is not the failure of a proper externalization or “working through” of the past, but is in fact the desired (the only desirable) goal of the blending of fact and fiction, image, and text, a blending that allows the past to be productively continuous with the present. (139)

Therefore, comics is able to carry the traumatic event into different temporalities, and to express the intricate relationship between past and present directly on the page.



Fig. 1: Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992. P.41.



Fig. 2: Extract from “le retour”. In: Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Vol. 4. Paris: L’association, 2017.

In sum, then, it could be said that *Maus* is one of the first drawn narratives to prove that it is possible to mix documentary form and comics, and that the form of comics does not, in any case, dismiss the accuracy of the history that is being told. Moreover, comic books provide a space for visual creativity, hence innovation in terms of narration. Comics can be texts of witness, as in Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (see fig.3), or documentaries, as in *Palestine*, humorous and

autobiographical, like Guy Delisle's works, as it will be seen in the next chapter. Trauma can also be romanced or nuanced, as it is the case in *Freedom Hospital*. The possibilities are endless, and the innovating nature of the field continues to inspire artists globally.



Fig. 3: Extract from "le Shabbat". In: *Persepolis*.

2. Documenting the Horrors

This second chapter aims to provide a theoretical overview of the literary genre created by Maltese-born author Joe Sacco (see Earle 117), namely, comics journalism. Following a quick introduction to the author and his life/career path, the techniques related to comics journalism will be enumerated and explained. The in-depth study of comics journalism will, in turn, help us understand the basis on which the graphic novel *Palestine* (2001) was imagined and created.

2.1. Joe Sacco: Inside and Out the Horrors

Originally from Malta, where he was born in 1960, Joe Sacco is a writer, cartoonist and journalist currently living in the United States. Before making a living as a comic book artist, Sacco graduated in journalism at the University of Oregon in 1981 (see *Fantagraphics.com*). Only a few years later did the young reporter start to dip into the world of comics as a co-publisher for the comics newspaper *Portland Permanent Press* (see *Fantagraphics.com*).

Fascinated by comics since childhood, the young artist starts producing his own whilst still travelling the globe, but his art goes almost unnoticed until 1993, the year of the publication of the first issue of *Palestine*. Interviewed in 2011 by the Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Sacco says that he did not believe he could make a living by writing cartoons at first, stating that he considered it more as a “hobby” from a young age. In the same interview, Sacco also admits that he could not find his way in journalism after graduation. Comics then became a “means of self-expression” (Sacco 2011) for the young artist. However, that does not mean that Sacco repressed the communicative skills he acquired when studying journalism. As a matter of fact, Joe Sacco still had “this sort of journalism running through [his] veins” and was “still very interested in politics and what was going on in the world, and particularly interested in what was going on in the Middle East [sic]” (ibid). Therefore, it is obvious that Sacco’s interest in issues such as conflicts in the Middle East will, somehow, be translated into comic books by means of journalistic techniques.

This revolutionary desire to represent difficult issues through cartoons is the genesis of one of his most important books, *Palestine*. Coming from a very traditional background in comics, hence autobiographical, Sacco knew from the start that he would be a character in his own comic books, and that he would be doing interviews (see Sacco 2011). He describes his project as a “travelogue” (ibid.), a travel diary packed with information and anecdotes collected during his stay in a target place. Travelling is essential for Sacco, because he insists on “seeing

for [himself]” (Sacco 2011) in order to produce comic books. This need could be said to be related to his journalistic nature and already marks the beginnings of documentary forms of comics, most commonly referred to as comics journalism.

2.2. Through the lens of documentary and comics: comics journalism

As already hinted above, “comics journalism” is a term first used to describe narratives similar to *Palestine*. As the name suggests, it “fuse[s] documentary and autobiographical methods, dramatizing the tensions between personal revelation and public political and social discourse” (Scherr, qtd. in Earle 117). Comics journalism is, thus, a mix between cartoon and journalistic—documentary forms of narratives.

As argued by Koçak in his article about comics journalism, the emergence of the genre goes back to the 1980s, which also marks the rising popularity of graphic novels (see 173). The first iteration of the term as we understand it today is said to be *Real War Stories* by American cartoonist Joyce Brabner, but it really was Sacco who popularized the genre only a decade later (see Koçak 173). The professor Harriet E.H. Earle supports this argument by saying that “Sacco has created a genre” (117) and underlines the innovative journalistic method of the artist: “Sacco works ethnographically, living within his subject area and interacting with the local people on a far deeper level than many other journalists would normally do” (ibid.). This affirmation goes back to and supports Sacco’s wish to “see for himself”, as seen in 2.1. Sacco aims to produce a graphic novel that is based on the testimonies of real people that he encounters. He prioritizes real life stories over the already existing violent and often one-sided depiction of a conflict:

What Sacco does in his story-telling is not present a grand, overarching view of the conflict in its entirety but instead considers the micronarratives of personal histories, examining how a national (or international) conflict is experienced at the level of the individual, paring these with macronarratives of national and ethnic identity and, finally, the collective identity of humankind. (Earle 117)

In other words, the aim of Sacco is to reach a wider audience by first collecting the narratives of people mostly ignored by the mainstream media. Similarly to mainstream journalism, the authors of comics journalism are interested in reporting and educating people on sensitive issues such as war, for instance. It is only natural, then, that comics journalists follow the strict ethical rules that also apply to journalism, notes Koçak. In other words, comics journalism should remain honest, impartial and treat the sources with much due respect (see Koçak 179).

Sacco sees himself as a “political creature” and is comfortable with reporting things he does not necessarily agree with, as he explains in the interview with GVSU in 2011. Speaking about putting himself as a character in his comic books, Sacco mentions that “they [the readers] are seeing things through your eyes. It is not an objective form of journalism”, and by doing so, questions the objectivity in most instances of comics journalism. This would mean, thus, that comics journalism both uses and challenges the rules of mainstream journalism.

What really stands out in the distinction between journalism and comics journalism is, obviously, the features of comics. In the same interview of Joe Sacco in 2011, he describes comics as an “easy entrée to a difficult subject” and believes that the medium can be filled with as much information as a documentary film and, even more so, be aesthetically appealing whilst still depicting distressing information. Adding to that, Earle believes that the form of comics opens for new possibilities in terms of the representation of trauma, a topic that is the focus of her book *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (see 117). Narratively speaking, comics also allows a place—or atmosphere to be represented on the page and, at the same time, provides information and new perspective on a specific situation.

Therefore, the aesthetics of comics provides an endless playground for the journalists to display the elements as they want it on the page. As already stated above, comics journalists do not shy away from sharing sensitive information and, even more so, seek to show even the smallest detail. Looking back at the fact that comics journalism is hardly neutral, partly due to “the subjective nature of the comics medium as it is created with one’s subjective drawings and narration” (Koçak 179-180), it could be argued, then, that the journalists filter the information they want displayed in their comic books. Koçak shares this view: “Comics journalists can be subjective and filter their observations according to their priorities” (180). However, this does not mean that the artists are necessarily biased or subversive. Comics journalists must try and comprehend a situation as a whole, as Koçak puts it (see 180), but they can choose which information to foreground. Sacco himself articulates this idea as follows: “I think, sometimes, one side needs more of a voice than the other side to balance it out” (2011). Selection and filter are essential in comics journalism. Joe Sacco’s graphic novels are all based on the voices of remote, forgotten people. As it will be seen throughout the analysis of *Palestine*, Sacco’s main objective is to mix with the inhabitants of the Gaza strip and to let them tell their own stories. Sacco’s character is only the receptacle, and the latter is the only way the readers can gain access to a whole different reality unknown to them.

The desire to “travel and see” calls back to the idea that comics journalists are reporters first and foremost. As Koçak writes,

They act as reporters in the first instance: they interview people, recording them on tape, taking notes or photographs or drawing rough sketches, before later giving full rein to their artistic skills when they are at their drawing board (...) Comics journalists are reporters first, then artists. (191-192)

It is interesting to point out that comics journalists’ first interest is to gather information and to report them. The artistic process is only secondary. In that way, this process does not influence the selection of information. On the contrary, it is rather the (often) traumatic experiences that will determine the narration and how the information will be displayed in the panels. Sacco’s art style will be thoroughly talked about in the following sections. What can already be said, however, is that the difficulty to represent every piece of information accurately is shown in his comic books. As Chute puts it,

On the one hand, in addition to the artifice innate to comics, his [Sacco’s] work is openly reflective about itself, actively acknowledging the instability of knowing —and the problem of transmitting knowledge. (...) On the other hand, the investigative drive for accuracy, the drive to create a record of unarchived voices, all in the service of compelling an acknowledgment of the specificity of the other, is paramount. (*Disaster Drawn* 198)

In other words, it could be said that comics journalists strive for accuracy, and yet acknowledge the fact that knowing is not linear and one-sided. Comics is one of the few media to be self-reflective and to admit its flaws in terms of representation. Unlike pictures, for instance, comics rely on very personal elements such as writing and drawings. Therefore, comics can never be a purely mimetic medium, as argued by Chute, among others. Despite the endless question of representation, comics also allows an array of perspectives that perfectly fit with the journalists’ wish to present multiple points of view:

The inclination of comics to document, to be journalistic, resides in part in the expansion of perspective enabled by drawing. Comics brings first- and third-person perspectives to the surface of the reported narrative simultaneously. (...) Comics journalism embodies that duality [of the figure of the journalist] by enabling the journalist both to inhabit a point of view and to show himself inhabiting it. (*Disaster Drawn* 208)

This quote really highlights the innate “duality” of the comics journalist. As a reporter, the artist can “inhabit a point of view”, live in a situation as an outsider and then report it. But as an artist, they can “show themselves inhabiting” a point of view and bring a new perspective forward. “With comics journalism, one can place oneself literarily in any position, inhabit any point of view. (...) Comics makes possible the simultaneity of view, of perspective” (*Disaster Drawn* 209). The possibility of portraying simultaneous views on a sensitive issue really broadens the scope of interpretation and shows the many facets of a conflict that are not usually put forward in the mainstream media.

In Sacco's graphic novels, one element that translates the duality of the figure of the journalist is his own character—or avatar. As already said above, Sacco appears in his own comic books as a cartoonish figure with exaggerated features and big glasses (see fig. 4), quite opposed to his rather realistic portrayal of the people he meets. One element that stands out from this character are his glasses. Big and blank, the reader never sees the eyes behind them. But it is deliberate and there are many theories around Sacco's spectacles: whether it is to represent the alienation the character feels in new surroundings, or to indicate the character's status as an avatar (see Earle 118), the caricatured character really reminds the reader to focus on the stories being told rather than on the person telling them. Sacco explains his choice as follows:

Also, back then, I really was more like a tourist than a reporter and I suppose the way I drew myself reflected that. But some people have told me that hiding my eyes makes it easier for them to put themselves in my shoes, so I [have] kind of stuck with it. (...) The thing is: I don't want to emote too much when I draw myself. The stories are about other people, not me. (Sacco, qtd. in Earle 118)

Sacco's choice to relegate himself as a side character echoes his reflexes as a reporter, and that is, to propel other people's stories into the limelight. His character functions as a bridge between the story and the reader, on the one hand, but also as a comic relief and someone the reader can relate to, on the other. As explained by Sacco above, he came to new territories almost as a "tourist" at first, lost in the agitation of his surroundings. Accordingly, the reader is able to discover the story at the narrator's pace, because the latter is adapting to new situations on foreign territories as well. Being (most often) the only Western character in the stories, Sacco does not present himself as all-knowing. Rather, he "emphasizes his lostness, a feature that cuts against the traditional image of the journalist", as Chute puts it (*Disaster Drawn* 228). Adding to that, Earle believes that "Sacco becomes a stand-in for the Western reader; our reactions to what the book presents are measured against Sacco's reactions and emotions. (...) Sacco can simultaneously keep his distance from the events of the narrative and also draw the reader in" (Earle 119). These affirmations can be understood as another main feature of comics journalism. Unlike the figure of the journalist, that is completely absent from the narrative, comics journalists highlight their presence in it. However, the latter should not dismiss the voices of the people in the story and should only remain a familiar element for the reader, which is indeed the case for Joe Sacco and other authors, as it will be seen in 2.4.



Fig. 4: Extract from Sacco, Joe. *Palestine*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001. P.38.

Looking back at the different roles endorsed by the narrator in Sacco's case, the other functionality of his avatar is that of a comic relief. *Palestine* is a testimony of trauma and violence. Sacco shows wounds and torn bodies repeatedly (see Earle 119). Apart from that, Sacco also draws himself being startled, surprised, or even embarrassed; he becomes someone the reader can laugh with—or at. Therefore, these short moments lighten the mood of the book and enable the reader to digest the overwhelming information on the page.

In sum, it can be said that comics journalism benefits from the seriousness of the issues mostly treated in journalism and the narrative and graphic possibilities of the comics medium as well. As said above, comics journalists are reporters first and foremost; they gather information and write on them. What people like Sacco manage to achieve with their comic books is to live *within* the structure of the narrative and thereby bring the reader with them. This feature is related to the form of comics that calls for different perspectives, hence in and out the narrative at the same time. Chute writes:

Activating this tension, switching back and forth, comics enables artists to step outside of what they see in front of them to also picture themselves, reminding us that all journalism is limited (literally about perspective), but also reminding us of the limits of one visual form, photojournalism, in contradistinction to a form that allows one to be simultaneously visually working in the register of the first and third person, the filter and the subject. (*Disaster Drawn* 210)

Chute believes that 'photojournalism' is very limited and fixed in time, as opposed to comics, which "has the ability to show the powerful interpenetration of private and public histories through the spatial juxtaposition of the frames on which its grammar is built" (ibid. 213). Therefore, the openness of comics is, once again, emphasized. This openness allows comics

journalism to depart from established forms of journalism. The combination of documentary and visual elements creates a comprehensive investigation on a specific issue whilst still being visually appealing for the reader. It should once again be stressed that comics journalists strive to represent situations not often depicted in mainstream media and, consequently, it could also be said that they exceed the role of the reporter.

2.3. A note on slowness: slow journalism and slow violence

In light of the methods used by journalists such as Sacco and the issues studied in comics journalism, an interesting link can be established between the concept of slow violence and a rather new term in the field of journalistic studies, “slow journalism”. I believe these two concepts can, in turn, be a relevant approach to the production of comics as well.

As already seen in the introduction, ‘slow violence’ is a term that is used to refer to a whole range of violent situations that are not spectacular per se. Rob Nixon describes it as a violence that occurs out of sight, without immediate notice (see *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 2). The concept encompasses a number of occurrences that range from climate change, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, to racism, for instance. To be more specific, slow violence focuses on the delayed effects of violence and how they affect people in the aftermath and across time more generally. But this concept comes with representation difficulties, as Nixon argues. If we decide to engage with a new kind of violence, “we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence” (ibid.). Consequently, the invisible results of slow violence come with very little representation in all types of media. Even more so, the immediate sufferers (or victims) are simply forgotten. Adding to that, Nixon thinks that “The long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war’s toxic aftermaths or climate change—are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory” (ibid. 2-3). Thus, it is pressing to examine the narratives and the representation strategies.

Taking a look at the graphic novels studied within the framework of this thesis, one might not directly think of slow violence while flipping through the pages of *Palestine* and *Freedom Hospital*. As a matter of fact, the two graphic novels show war-torn towns, dead bodies, terror attacks, and so on, which fall within the category of spectacular violence indeed. But as it will be seen in the present study, the two books share an interest in the bigger picture, and that is, to represent the long-time effects of violence and the trauma of the sufferers. They

also depict the unknown processes that lead to violence and the long, creeping shadow of war slowing overcoming populations.

Accordingly, artists like Joe Sacco are interested in both the investigation and the representation of violence. In other words, they uncover the different strata of a system and, ultimately, the various roots of violence. The in-depth work of the comics journalist could be, in a way, understood as “slow journalism”. Dr. Megan Le Masurier specializes in media and communication and explains the term as follows: in its temporal sense, “slow journalism” refers to a way of reporting that allows journalists to take time and reflect on their research (see 141). Researcher Susan Greenberg was the first to coin the term and believes that it gives “an alternative to conventional reporting, perceived as leaving a gap in our understanding of the world at a time when the need to make sense of it is greater than ever” (Greenberg, qtd. in Le Masurier 142). In other words, ‘slow journalism’ foregrounds the quality of the research. ‘Slow journalists’ do not favour quickness in order to report on events. Rather, they want to investigate the issues to provide comprehensive studies on the latter. Therefore, quality prevails over immediacy. Moreover, Greenberg also argues that transparency should guide the research; the source of the information and how it was gathered should be acknowledged (see *ibid.*). This argument falls in line with Sacco’s method. As already seen previously, he works directly on the ground, mixes with the people and, most importantly, represents the latter as characters and narrators of their own stories. Not only are the sources acknowledged but represented as well.

Le Masurier adds another key characteristic of ‘slow journalism’: it “avoids sensationalism and herd reporting. It is ethical in treatment of subjects and of producers. (...) The work is relevant to a particular community, with a tendency to focus on local stories. Slow journalism is not scoop driven” (143). ‘Slow journalism’ is, thus, small-scale and relies on the telling of personal stories to describe the experiences of a people as a whole, rather than looking at the spectacular. It is precisely what Sacco is trying to do in his graphic novels: to create a place for the ignored people to express themselves and illustrate their small realities.

To conclude, it can be said that both ‘slow journalism’ and ‘slow violence’ rely on new narrative techniques and are interested in uncovering the unseen processes behind violence, rather than depicting violence itself. “In an age that venerates instant spectacle”, writes Nixon, “slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie seats and flat-screen TVs with the pyrotechnics of Shock and Awe” (“Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque” 445). Therefore, representing ‘slow violence’ is challenging, notes Nixon. Even though representing the invisible might be seen as an impossible task, artists like Joe Sacco manage to make it visually appealing, moving and informative.

2.4. Different approaches: Sacco and Delisle

Before turning to the in-depth analysis of *Palestine*, an interesting comparison can be made between the works of Joe Sacco and fellow comics journalist and cartoonist Guy Delisle. As argued in 2.2, comics journalists use the medium of comics to show details that are not usually foregrounded in mainstream journalism. For that matter, I believe that each comics journalist has a different approach to a specific issue. The latter is directly influenced by their background and their narrative and visual style. Therefore, I think it is appropriate to introduce Guy Delisle's *Chroniques de Jérusalem (Jerusalem Chronicles)*, published in 2011, and to compare the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as opposed to Sacco's in *Palestine*; both of them travel across the world to collect stories and Delisle stayed in Israel for a year as well.

Born in Québec in 1966, Guy Delisle started his career as an animator in Toronto, before flying to Europe, where he wrote and directed a few animated short-movies (see Delcourt). Delisle also has a passion for travelling and is lucky to go around the globe for his job as an animator. During his stay in North-Korea, Delisle starts to take notes and illustrate them; his comic book *Pyongyang* was published in 2002 and is a humorous recollection of his journey in the most enclosed country of the world (see *ibid.*).

In terms of topics, Delisle's books are quite similar to the ones of Joe Sacco. As a matter of fact, Guy Delisle is considered by many as a representative of comics journalism: he is a comic book artist who travels a lot (in sensitive areas such as North Korea or Israel) and tells his personal journey in his drawn narratives. Delisle's graphic novels are all autobiographical and based on his and his family's experiences on the ground. Unlike Sacco, who travels in order to collect information about a conflict and illustrate them, one might say that Delisle writes and draws after witnessing events he did not specifically intend to investigate at first. The main difference between the two authors is the fact that Delisle has no journalistic background; he mostly travels for his job as an animator or to follow his wife who works for Médecins Sans Frontières, as noted by Koçak (see 183).

Delisle stayed with his family in Israel for one year. His stay in the Middle East is the genesis of his comic book *Jerusalem Chronicles* which is, as already said, autobiographical. *Jerusalem Chronicles* is a collection of everyday life events in a foreign country seen through the eyes of an outsider and, in this case, through the lens of a Western mindset. Not only that, but Delisle also addresses the extremely difficult Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although it was not his main intention. The way of addressing the conflict is, once again, very different from Sacco's. Delisle is more of an indirect witness of the conflict; he does not try to investigate it directly: "Delisle does not directly write about the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis,

he just shows it by drawing armed soldiers, firing guns, shouting people and chaotic streets” (Koçak 178). In *Jerusalem Chronicles*, Delisle draws himself discovering the routine of the Israeli people and the everlasting consequences of the conflict in their lives.

Sacco’s intent is quite similar, to the extent that he also illustrates the everyday life of the Palestinians amid the conflict. However, Sacco really tries to mix with the people as much as possible, and he also travels on both sides of the conflict. This is where they most differ. Delisle stays an indirect witness throughout the story and does not try to connect with the people as much. Therefore, Delisle’s approach is less immersive and didactic, but rather, more humorous, almost naïve. The difference can be seen in the art styles as well. Where Sacco’s black-and-white drawings are harsh and full of details, Delisle uses soft colours and “prefers simple lines”, notes Koçak (179). Sacco aims for the most accurate recreation of the environment, whereas Delisle’s backgrounds are almost plain (see fig 5 & 6). The scenes depicted in the two pages are quite similar. It shows, among others, Israeli soldiers relaxing and accepting pictures from tourists. In fig.5, the page is full of captions and thoughts of Sacco. The expressions are vivid, very expressive. In fig.6, however, the panels are simpler, plainer. The expressions of the characters are not really readable. Consequently, the style can greatly influence the interpretation of a topic: Delisle’s style could be considered less graphic and aggressive, and, therefore, more accessible.

While the approach to the conflict is radically different in the two instances, it does not mean that one is less relevant than the other. Sacco strives for accuracy and details, a fact that can be seen in his style as well. As it will be seen, *Palestine* is a book about movement: Sacco crosses borders to meet people from different backgrounds. Therefore, the graphic novel *Palestine* is a comprehensive representation of an entire country and provides different perspectives, whereas *Jerusalem Chronicles* depicts the first layer of the conflict but does not try to investigate the roots of it. It can be said, then, that *Palestine* is more complex and maybe less accessible than Guy Delisle’s work. As a matter of fact, *Palestine* shows violence and human distress, which might be disturbing for some. However, violence is part of the reality of the Palestinian people and must be acknowledged as well.

In sum, comics journalism challenges the mainstream ways of tackling an issue. Most importantly, it does not limit itself to a defined set of rules. Comic books that fall within the definition of comics journalism are personal because they rely on the journalist’s (or artist’s) own vision and style. But the common goal to all comics journalists is to report, inform and to bring light on difficult issues that are not easily accessible in the mainstream media. Whether it is through testimony or humour, comics journalism is informative, appealing and groundbreaking.



Fig.5: Palestine, p.17.

IL Y A AUSSI TOUTE UNE BRO-
CHETTE DE JOURNALISTES QUI
PASSENT D'UN CÔTÉ COMME DE
L'AUTRE DE LA FRONTIÈRE SANS
ÊTRE ENNUYÉS.



AL JAZEERA EST LÀ, D'AUTRES
TÉLÉS LOCALES AUSSI.



DES PHOTOGRAPHES
PROFESSIONNELS...



DES AMATEURS...



UN AVEC UN CASQUE
EN KEVLAR...



ET DEUX JEUNES ET JOLIES FILLES
QUI ONT L'AIR TOUT DROIT SORTIES
DE LEUR ÉCOLE DE JOURNALISME.



TOUT LE MONDE PHOTOGRAPHE
TOUT LE MONDE.



MÊME LES SOLDATS ONT LEURS
APPAREILS ET PRENNENT
LA POSE.



ON SE CROIRAIT À LA TOUR
EIFFEL OU DEVANT LES
GRANDES PYRAMIDES.



Fig. 6: Delisle, Guy. *Chroniques de Jérusalem*. Delcourt: 2011. P.38.

3. The body in the conflict: *Palestine* by Joe Sacco

This chapter provides an in-depth and critical analysis of the graphic novel *Palestine*. The analysis covers aspects such as trauma and violence, and how they are represented in terms of art style and narration. Most specifically, I argue that Joe Sacco uses the body to represent the affect of the conflict on people, and that he illustrates several forms of violence as well, sometimes imperceptible at first.

3.1. A Web of Stories: *Palestine* (2001)

The first issue of *Palestine* originally came out in 1993, and that is, one year after Sacco's stay in occupied territories of Palestine and Cisjordania. The cartoonist stayed there during the winter of 1991-1992 and met countless of people in both Palestine and Israel. As seen in the previous chapter, Sacco is originally a journalist. When he first arrived in Palestine, he started drawing, recording scenes and writing testimonies in his notebook. His intention was clear: by interviewing people in the Occupied Territories, he wanted to provide a new vision of Palestinians (and Muslim communities more generally) to the Western media. Sacco himself admits that he grew up believing the Palestinians were terrorists; he was living in the US and was there when the 9/11 attacks happened and experienced the trauma and paranoia following the attacks (see Brister 105). Therefore, Sacco's experience in Palestine is a personal challenge first and foremost that attempts to question his own beliefs and prejudices (see *ibid.*).

The story starts with the arrival of Sacco in Cairo in 1991, where he is to stay whilst waiting for a visa to Israel. Three weeks later, he finally reaches his destination. The reader thus follows his journey through the busy streets of Jerusalem, in the mythical valley of Kidron, in Hebron, in households and even to the prison Ansar III, only to name a few. To summarize each and every small chapter of his journey in the Middle East would be time-consuming. What should be stressed, however, is the fact that Sacco does not limit himself to tourist attractions. He interviews isolated people in desolated places and, most importantly, goes on both sides of the conflict. The testimonies are filled with traumatic experiences, daily humiliations and struggles that the Palestinians have to bear. The stories are stories of loss, grief, torture and extreme violence. He interviews some Israelis in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv as well, but the book is mostly about the Palestinian side. In the last chapter, Joe Sacco enjoys some sun in Tel Aviv and is struck by how different the city is compared to the places he went to before, in terms of wealth and town planning, for instance. A few months after his arrival, the bus carrying him out of the country is seemingly lost between two paths, the one leaving Israel and the one

entering occupied territories. This last scene could be seen as a beautiful metaphor for Sacco's overwhelmed state of mind after being the witness of many moving stories.

3.2. Context: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Conflicts are complex and multi-sided, so it is hard to give a clear explanation on what has been going on in the Middle East and since when. Since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been going on for so long and is at the heart of many discussions, this section does not claim to be an accurate and historical depiction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor does it aim to give a personal opinion on the latter. Rather, this section will provide more clarity on the events and the political context in 1991-1992 in order to comprehend the events and overall tension represented in *Palestine*.

1992 is the five-year mark of the beginning of the first Intifada. The Arabic term *Intifada* can be translated as “uprising”. It is used to describe the uprising of young Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel on December 9th, 1987. In her article for *Le Figaro*, journalist Laroche-Signorile states that this date marks the beginning of a long and bloody conflict. After years of oppression, unemployment and misery, the Palestinian people stood up against the Israeli forces by throwing stones at them. This is why the first Intifada is also commonly referred to as the “war of stones”.

During the following days, demonstrations against the Israeli forces started to break out everywhere in the occupied territories and Israel. Young Palestinians were particularly involved in the demonstrations (see Laroche-Signorile 2017). But the response from the Israeli side was even more violent: “The army defined such acts as “rioting” and retaliated to suppress the protests by firing rubber bullets, live ammunition and tear gas canisters into the crowds. The protests grew larger, involving tens of thousands of people, including women and children” (Hasan 2017). The protestations did not show any sign of stopping and the Israeli government tried to dissuade more people from joining the movement by arresting innocent people, closing schools and universities in the West Bank, imposing curfews, razing Palestinian farms, etc. Israeli colonists constantly attacked Palestinians who did not have any weapons to strike back. “In the first year alone,” writes Hasan, “300 Palestinians were killed, 20,000 had been injured and some 5,500 were detained by Israel, according to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)”. Measures were taken by leaders on both sides to try and

control the situation. However, in 1989, violence escalated quickly, and the conflict took a new turn:

Hamás [Islamic Resistance Movement] called on the Palestinians to abide by the basic goals of their national struggle, above all else the liberation of Palestine. The movement encouraged resistance fighters to carry out attacks in Israel; it was something that Tel Aviv would use to justify further persecution of Palestinians for decades to come. (...) It was not until 1991, when the US convened the Madrid Conference and recognised the PLO to be the “sole legitimate representative” of the Palestinian people that Israel was pushed to the negotiating table. (Hasan 2017)

Only on September 13th, 1993 did the first Intifada end with the signature of the Oslo Accords. However, the violence did not slow down, and casualties are still to be deplored today. Terror attacks happened and still happen today on both sides; the Israeli state introduced terror to try and dissuade the Palestinian side to riot. In response, the Palestinians resisted, and resistance almost automatically involves violence, terrorism and danger. The domination of the Israeli state is a form of terrorism as well. And the struggles against an authoritarian state always implies a form of terrorism.

The occupation of the Palestinian territories implies control over their lifestyle as well, and the complete erasure of their national narrative and identity. In her article about the representation of the physicality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in *Palestine*, Brister quotes American-Palestinian literary critic Edward Said, who asserts that “foreclosing narrative approximates foreclosing existence” (Said, qtd. in Brister 104). In other words, the Palestinians are silenced, secluded. Their narrative is breaking down and that process is weakening their national identity. In Said’s own words, “Israel’s war was designed to reduce Palestinian existence as much as possible” (ibid.). Furthermore, Brister asserts that Sacco is aware of the fracture in the Palestinian narrative and his narration mirrors the physicality of the occupation: “While he understands Israel’s physical occupation of the Palestinian territories as underwritten by a suppressed or fractured Palestinian narrative, the comics journalist Joe Sacco writes the spaces and sounds of the occupation into the national narrative as a presence rather than an absence or gap” (ibid.). Therefore, Sacco’s challenge rests on the fact that he wants to represent the noises and the spaces of the occupation to contribute to Palestine’s narrative, rather than suppressing them. The voices and absence thereof, for instance, are part of the reality of the violence during the conflict indeed, as it will be discussed hereafter. Sacco believes that comics is the appropriate medium to illustrate the complex social-spatial relations that come with occupation (see Brister 105). Adding to that, Brister argues that Sacco “inscribes the material reality of settler colonial occupation into the Palestinian national narrative through Palestine’s graphic rendering of the management of space and sound” (ibid.). Thus, Sacco thinks that in

order to illustrate the present reality of the Palestinian people, an accurate depiction of the enclosed spaces and the sounds of the conflict is vital.

3.3. Analysis

Sacco's art style and narration are greatly influenced by the latter's wish to render different aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For that matter, I use Rose Brister's main argument that the complexity of the conflict is rendered through spatial and sonic elements in *Palestine*. Furthermore, I believe that the body itself plays a crucial role in representing violence. While section 3.3.1 focuses on style strictly speaking, the following sections cover the depiction of violence and how the representation of space and sound impacts the reading of *Palestine*, and how the body mirrors the violence and oppression during the conflict.

3.3.1. The style

The opening page of *Palestine* could exemplify Sacco's style by itself alone (see fig. 7). The first half of the panel is already filled with many details: people are pushing to get out of a crowded bus, a fancy dressed couple are stepping out of a taxi, veiled women are casually walking in the middle of the road, a policeman is whistling, etc. The overwhelming amount of information is translated into text as well. The captions are short and all over the place, forming a "Z" form across the page. The text conveys Sacco's first thoughts as he arrives in Cairo, and the journalist is seemingly shocked by the agitation: "Crazeeee! (...) I'm spinning! (...) Get me outta here!" (*Palestine* 1)³. The second half depicts Sacco drinking and hanging out with the hotel receptionists. Here, the faces are very realistic, albeit exaggerated. The attention to detail, from the teeth to the inscriptions on the sheet of paper, is paramount. Chute describes Sacco's style as follows: "Sacco's style, on the other hand, is dense, virtuosic, and often photorealistic, an ethical attempt to represent intimately those ignored in the world arena" (*Disaster Drawn* 201).

Realism and accuracy are features that are particularly common to comics journalism, as seen in the previous chapter. Koçak writes that "His [Sacco's] drawing and narrative style is quasi-documentary, although it never abandons its cartoonish quality" (177); Sacco also thinks that comics journalists should try and draw "in a realistic, down-to-earth fashion" (Koçak 179). Thus, Sacco's characters are a strange mix of photorealism with very cartoonish features and exaggerated expressions. On page 2, for instance, a man is slamming his fist on the table; the

³ Henceforth, the references to *Palestine*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001 by Joe Sacco will be shortened to "P – page number".

size of the fist is exaggerated, and the mouth is open-wide, almost too big for the man's face. The exaggeration of the man's features translates his obvious anger. The cartoonish features are used to create tension, whereas the very photorealistic rendition of the person's face is a reminder of Sacco's wish to accurately depict the people he meets.

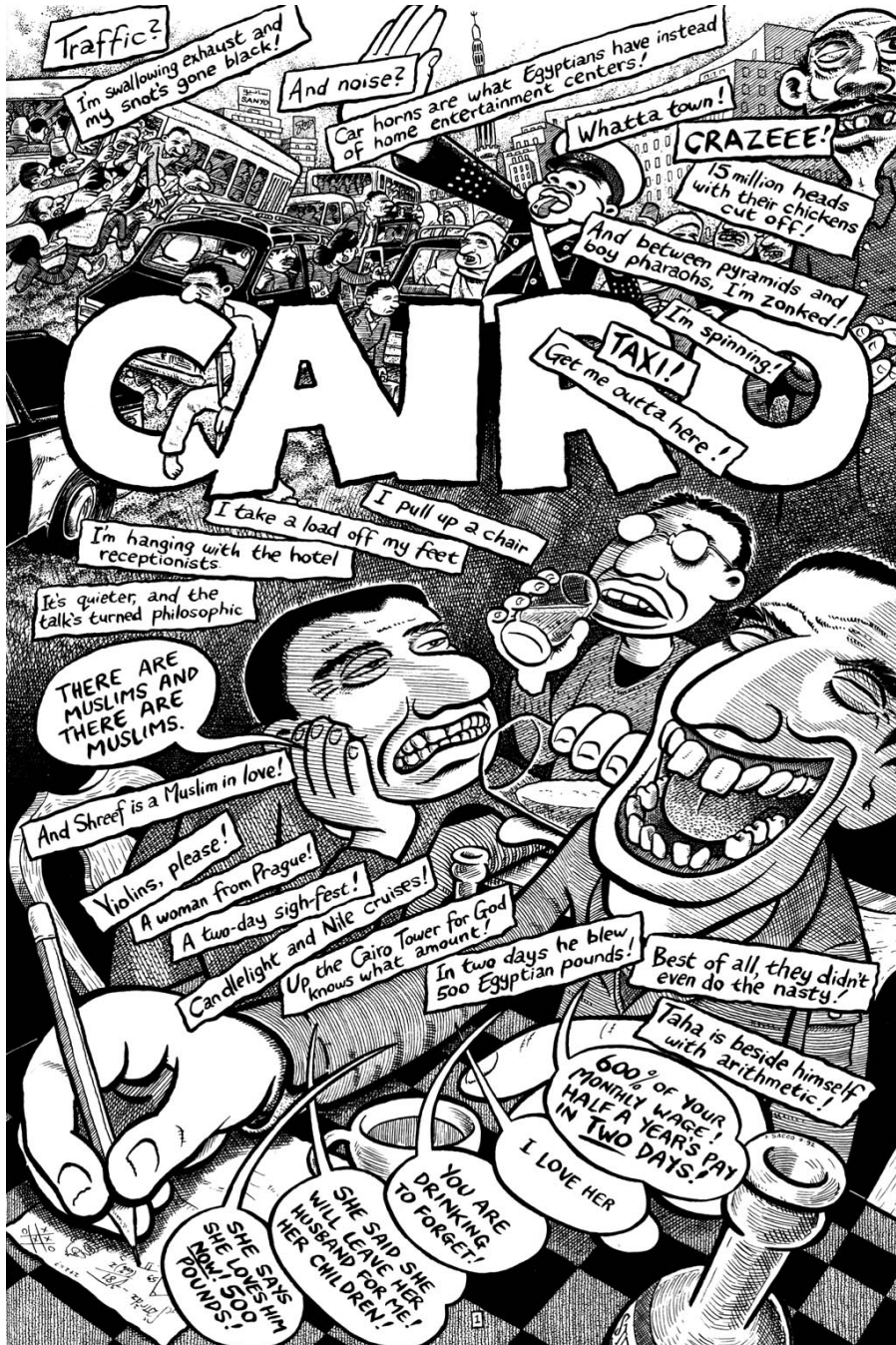


Fig. 7: Sacco, Joe. *Palestine*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001. P.01.

The panels of *Palestine* are packed with information and details. Sacco's art style expresses the buzzing feeling of a city; it reinforces the feeling of being trapped, caged, and watched all the time. The reader is directly immersed in the story, walking through the streets of a refugee camp or in the middle of a demonstration (see P 53). People are all over the place, speech bubbles do not follow any specific scheme and are fragmented, dark hues strengthen the

impression of harshness and violence, etc. The decision to do an all-black-and white book is probably deliberate, possibly to highlight the harsh reality of the Palestinian people. In his article “From Black & White to Color and Back: What Does It Mean (not) to Use Color?”, professor Jan Baetens asserts that many factors might influence artists in their choice (not) to use colours. Whether it is because of financial or ideological reasons⁴, the deliberate artistic choice to use only black and white should not be undermined (see 112). Therefore, I believe the dark tones of *Palestine* play a crucial role in the interpretation of the stories and the representation of violence. The shadows and dark hues really strengthen the feeling of oppression. Sacco manages to play with textures and shadows using only dark shades and strong black-and-white lines. The use of soft colours, for instance, would have created a completely different understanding of the issue.

In sum, it could be said that the art style of Joe Sacco is particularly fit to depict the tension he felt amid the conflict. In the words of Chute, “Sacco’s style, the force of his realism and detail, works in another specific register, one that makes up an enormous aspect of his journalism: picturing atrocity” (*Disaster Drawn* 220). *Palestine* is undoubtedly a story of violence and trauma. Picturing reality accurately also means picturing the horrors; Sacco insists on drawing every single detail, even the most gruesome ones. For instance, torture is often shown in the graphic novel, as on page 98, where a woman is held captive and tortured for hours: “they made her sit up straight with a metal bar pressing down the center of her back, she says, they hit her when she leaned against the wall...” (P 98). But the process of representing torn bodies is not for shock value. Earle believes that “The vivid depictions of wounds do not aim to shock or to titillate but to bring attention to the physicality of conflict—the viciously torn bodies that make up so much of the corporeal reality so often ignored or marginalized by the press” (120). In Sacco’s own words in *Palestine*, “but still I’m fascinated, still I want itsy-bitsy details, description of the crunching sounds...’cause I was raised a suburban schoolboy...horror was at the movies” (P 94; emphasis in the original). The quote shows that horror is still believed to be part of the unordinary, albeit being the reality of many people in war-torn countries. Thus, Sacco wants to illustrate the different aspects related to the horrors of the conflict, even “the crunching sounds”. Again, the physicality of the conflict is emphasized and clearly guides the narrative process of *Palestine*. The conflict is represented in all its aspects; spatial, sonic, and physical, directly onto the body.

⁴ The use of colours is often associated with “traditional” comic books, whereas black-and-white is believed to be the feature of the more “distinguished” graphic novels (see Baetens 112).

3.3.2. Representing the Unspeakable: trauma, violence and terrorism

In *Palestine*, Sacco wants to give a voice to and represent the harsh reality of the marginalized people of Palestine. Accordingly, he also illustrates the violence they have to deal with on the daily. The process of representing such horrors comes with many challenges. As a matter of fact, violence and terror are most often at the roots of deep trauma that affect both individuals and groups of people. Thus, the following challenge arises: how can the collective trauma of a group of people be represented in a comic book? And, furthermore, how does the audience receive it? As stated by Earle, “his [Sacco’s] narratives are not didactic; they provide an outlet for unheard testimony and open a dialogue between witness of event and reader” (120). As a matter of fact, Sacco never expresses his own feelings regarding the traumatic testimonies. Adding to that, Earle writes: “At no point does he wish to suggest that he has been traumatized by his experiences, nor does he attempt to appropriate the traumatic experiences of others” (119). However, I believe that Sacco does express his own distress, but that he does it subconsciously. As a matter of fact, humour is very important in *Palestine*, and the character of Sacco can be seen as a comic relief. Therefore, I think that humour enables Sacco to take a step back and reflect on what he has witnessed without expressing his own views on a traumatic event directly. This information should be stressed and used as a reminder that *Palestine* is indeed a text about trauma, but the trauma of a collectivity, and not of the journalist. Although Sacco is present in his text, and that he makes the reader aware of it, his character is only the bridge between the upsetting testimonies of the Palestinians and the reader. This idea is supported by Earle who states that “For Sacco, comics is a form that not only gives voice to the marginalized but also allows witness and reader to come together in the space of a page to consider the nature of identity in the shadow of tremendous violence and how we position ourselves in position to it” (120). Therefore, comic books allow for the very idea of trauma to be seen and discussed on the page, and for the reader to position themselves in relation to the narrator or victim.

The relation between the victim and the listener (in this case, Sacco) is a key element in the representation of trauma. Psychiatrist Dori Laub argues that “The listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma, faces a unique situation” (57). Indeed, the listener and the victim both face something non-existent, something that is yet to be acknowledged. As explained by Laub, the mechanisms of memory and realization are temporally knocked out during a traumatic experience. Therefore, the trauma “as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock” (Laub 57) is actually showing itself in the narrative; the act of telling is where the acknowledgment of the traumatic event takes place (see *ibid.*). In

other words, both the listener and speaker—survivor of trauma uncover the traumatic experience in the narrative; the survivor does it by speaking, and the listener by collecting their testimony.

A careful rendering of trauma is at the heart of Sacco's approach, in both the choice of words and the depiction of bodies. However, it is often disputed whether trauma can ever be truthfully depicted or not. Different ways can be explored to render (or at least, try to) a traumatic experience as rightly as possible. But in fact, it is the inadequacy to represent trauma accurately that should be stressed when trying to represent the latter. Chute quotes W.J.T. Mitchell's "trauma theory's cult of the unrepresentable" and believes that comics is a medium that is, in fact, fit to depict trauma: "They [comic books] engage the difficulty of spectacle instead of turning away from it. They risk representation" (*Disaster Drawn* 17). Even though comics acknowledges its own failure in accurately depicting trauma and uses techniques to highlight the estranged feeling of doing it (see *ibid.* 152), texts like Sacco's "do not conceal or cloak trauma, but rather puts its elements on view: graphic narratives make the roiling lines of history readable" (*ibid.* 233). Illustrating a traumatic experience and bearing witness is, in a way, an accurate depiction of trauma, to the extent that trauma is so personal and so hard to unfurl, because based on one's experiences and perceptions, that there is not one specific way to represent it.

In *Palestine*, Sacco chooses to show both the witness and their testimony, but also the act of listening to the traumatic event: "Sacco's interlocutory role, which produces the scene of testimony, opens out into the material act of visually incarnating the oral testimonies of witnesses of trauma. (...) It is an act of inhabiting their memories and pasts in order to acknowledge and particularize them." (*Disaster Drawn* 206) Thus, the memories are presented as such on the page. The witness becomes the narrator and the reader follows the testimony from an external, yet intimate point of view, and is immersed in the traumatic event as recollected by the victim. If we take page 84 (fig. 8) as an example, the reader follows the story of Yusef's arrest in 1988 (see P 83). The use of quotation marks indicates that Yusef's own words are represented in the speech bubbles. The first three panels show a group of men imprisoned in a tiny room ("which I [Yusef] considered a sort of hell" (P 84)). The men are all gasping for air and are clearly distressed. The feeling of being trapped, enclosed is realized by means of the focalization. In the first panel, the reader is facing the men. There is a feeling of proximity as if the reader is being imprisoned with them. The focalization in the second panel is slightly different: there is a low-angle shot that creates the impression that the reader is seated against the wall and watching the men flapping the blanket up and down. The third panel offers a close-up on Yusef's desperate face. The last one shows the men being taken away by soldiers,

and the reader watches the scene, helpless. The use of different focalizations provides an in-depth representation of one's memories, and the reader follows them as the victim reminisces about them. However, the presence of the listener of the testimony (here, Sacco) is always acknowledged; the author adds factual information in the caption in the last panel. Therefore, the reader navigates between the present storyline (i.e. the telling of the traumatic event and the listener collecting it) and the representation of memory.

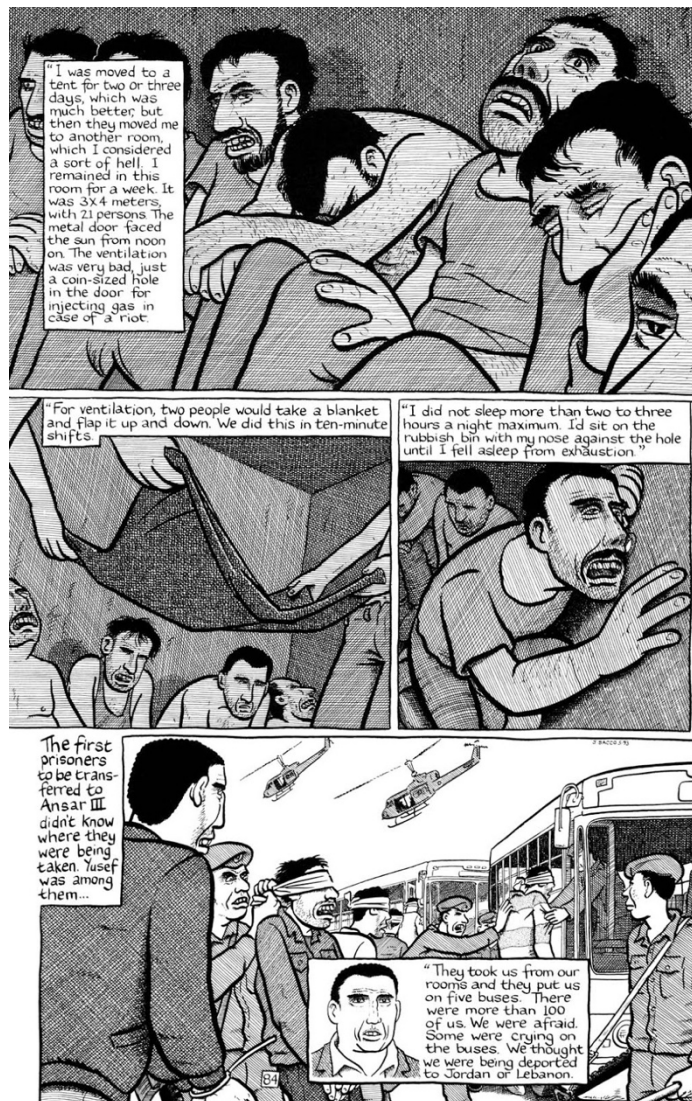


Fig. 8: *Palestine*, p.84.

As seen above in Sacco's panels, comics bring new techniques forward to represent trauma. "In comics of conflict and trauma", writes Earle, "the affects of traumatic experience are created in the formal techniques of the comic." (46) Therefore, trauma can be translated in every aspect of the comic book; in the speech bubbles, across the gutter and, most importantly, in the panels themselves (see Earle 46). As argued by Earle, the most important aspect of the comics form is, indeed, the gutter (see 47). The term gutter refers to the blank space between each panel. Although it might not seem significant at first sight, this is where the magic of the

imagination happens in comics. It is where, according to American cartoonist Scott McCloud, “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66). Therefore, it is the active role of the reader that is emphasized here. As it happens, comics is a form that is fundamentally fragmented; the perception of reality is based on fragments. You have to rely on faith to understand that what you cannot see is still there. This phenomenon is called “closure”, which is, as described by McCloud, “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). In order to understand and to imagine what is happening in a panel, you have to acknowledge the fact that what you cannot see is still part of the story. Closure is, then, what is happening in the gutter between each panel. The process of closure is innate for most readers who construct the narrative without even realizing it, notes Earle (47). However, I think it is important to stress that closure can happen in different instances of the comic book and not just the gutter, as argued by Kai Mikkonen. In his book *The Narratology of Comic Art*, Mikkonen supports Baetens and Frey’s belief of the “inflated” value of the gutter concept. Adding to that, he states that

we must recognise the importance of the panel *relation*, not the space in between. Second, in their critique of the closure theory, Baetens and Frey point out that panels in comics, at least in longer works such as the graphic novel, are structured on various levels simultaneously, including the strip tier, which can be organised horizontally, vertically, or as a combination of both; the page, which can have a wide variety of sizes and formats; and the book, where the size and format can also diverge widely. (40; emphasis in the original)

Therefore, comics and more specifically graphic novels are able to create tension in different places, from the strip tier to the book in its entirety. The cartoonist can choose to use different transitions across panels and, because trauma is disruptive by nature “and resists representation” (Earle 47), it might influence the use of transitions and, accordingly, disrupt the reading altogether.

In *Palestine*, a number of transitions are used by Sacco to create different atmospheres. Whether it is to highlight the buzzing feeling of a crowd or the slowness of torture, the reading process is influenced by the layout⁵ on the page. Page 123 (fig. 9) is a perfect illustration of how a specific transition can mirror the feeling of speed and agitation. The scene shows young demonstrators ready to throw stones at the Israeli authorities. The first panel takes the first half of the page and depicts men waiting before the uprising (“they’re miling about, waiting...” (P 123)). Then, suddenly and without any warning from the narrator, the demonstrators start to run and to throw stones at the soldiers. The panels are superimposed and do not follow a specific scheme. The text is fragmented and scattered in different places. At the top of the page, the sentences are fully grammatical. Then, from top to bottom, the text becomes shorter. There are

⁵ How the panels are arranged on the page.

only phrases, then single words and onomatopoeia (e.g. “rat-tat-tat-tat”). It creates a buzzing feeling and expresses the quickness of the action; the panels are framed but in movement. In a matter of seconds, people are throwing stones and then running away. The thin grey lines are used to express speed movements and reinforce the buzzing experience. In sum, Sacco manages to mirror the speed of the action by using a quick transition between the panels, even superimposing them. The reader understands that the event happens suddenly and only for a few seconds. It emphasizes the brutality of the scene and, most importantly, the suddenness of violence that can happen anywhere and at any time in the streets of Israel and Palestine.

Indeed, Sacco’s *Palestine* depicts violence and movement resulting from it. It also shows wounded bodies and brutality. As already argued in the previous chapters, different forms of violence can be represented, and, to that extent, Sacco uses different techniques to render them in the form of comics. Looking back at 3.2., it is obvious that the situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories is particularly tense at the time of Sacco’s stay. Accordingly, it is important to stress that acts of violence happened and still happen today. Terrorism, for instance, is unfortunately part of the everyday life of people on both sides. The question of responsibility is a tricky one, and the motivations of the offenders depend on a number of convictions and prejudices. As stated in 3.1., Sacco wanted to challenge his own ideas and stereotypes about the Middle East. Interestingly enough, not only does Sacco manage to do so in *Palestine*, but he also tests the perceived idea of victims as passive bystanders and terrorists as evil. Thus, by breaking down the stereotypes, a renewed vision of the conflict can emerge in the comic book, as opposed to mainstream media that relay the same kind of images.



Fig. 9: Palestine, p.123.

When speaking about terrorism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is necessary to rethink one's own ideas and preconceptions about terrorism itself. As a matter of fact, the latter does not limit itself to terror attacks, for instance: the definition should be more exhaustive, especially in the case of the conflict being studied here. Therefore, a distinction could be made between terrorism as "individual acts of despair" (Grinberg 2) (for instance, suicide bombs) and the more complex form of state terrorism, described by Grinberg as a set of "cold and 'rational' decisions of a State and a military apparatus of occupation, well equipped, financed and backed by the only superpower in the world" (ibid.). Thus, different forms of terrorism exist and, according to Grinberg, one form is most often legitimized as "self-defence" and, consequently, the other relegates a whole group of people to the term "terrorist".

Even though *Palestine* shows a number of gruesome scenes, terror attacks are never actually shown or foregrounded. Bombings, for instance, are only alluded to and rarely depicted in the graphic novel, as on page 117. Sacco is in a car in Ramallah when, suddenly, "explosions! Palestinians moving, shuttering their shops, BLAM!" (P 117). The panels focus on the reaction of the people (some look worried and start running or closing down their shops) rather than the act of violence itself. The reader is made aware of the explosion in the captions only. Thus, the reader always witnesses what comes before and what comes after. In many drawn scenes, the agitation and the tension can be seen and almost felt. On page 119, for instance, the soldiers illustrated here are looking stiff and serious. The moment is so intense and so intelligently illustrated that it almost looks like the soldiers are running directly out of the book. The speech bubbles are all over the place. There is a fragmentation of the text. Like the people on the streets, the reader is lost, agitated and does not know where to look. But the acts of violence (i.e. bombings) are never shown. Terrorism is not always visible. It is the chaos in the streets and the ever-present fear of it happening again. It is the continuous feeling of being watched and controlled all the time: plenty of soldiers are present in the streets as a reminder. What Sacco illustrates in *Palestine* are the different processes of fear and what results from it. The fear is stronger when not immediate. It exceeds the present and controls the future. The omnipresent control of the Israeli State reminds the people of what happened and what could happen again. Thus, they maintain their authority through the fear of something nonexistent in the present.

The scene on pages 127-128 is a good instance of how violence and racism are so intrinsically part of the everyday life of the people of Israel and Palestine. Two armed soldiers are guarding the street leading to the centre of Hebron, which is closed that day. On the left, three Palestinian women are clearly angry and demand the right to go through, but one of the

two men refuses: “This one in particular, she’s insistent... she must get across, understand?” (P 127; emphasis in the original) On the right, Sacco is talking to the other man who agrees to let him go through. Surprised, Sacco asks why the other pedestrians are not allowed in: “But these people can’t get through? I’d feel strange if they can’t...” (ibid.) The question visibly puts the man on edge. Meanwhile, the dark-haired soldier starts threatening the women with his rifle: “He’s about to blow his top! His M-16’s in the air! He’s waving it around! And you don’t need to know Hebrew, Arabic or Swahili to catch his drift...” (ibid.). Again, the short captions and the use of exclamation mark mirror the temper of the man and the tension between the characters. The first panel of the following page (fig. 10) shows the same man brandishing his rifle above his head. The details of his face are very realistic: wide mouth, gritting teeth and deep, dark eyes. The panel inspires anger and fear. The picture of the man brandishing a rifle to scare off harmless bystanders really summarizes the politics of fear conducted by the Israeli State.



Fig. 10: Extract from *Palestine*, p.128.

Another detail that deserves to be pointed out in this particular scene is the obvious racism towards Palestinians. Sacco is the only one who can get through if he wants to: “If you [Sacco] want to go through, you can go through.” (P 127; emphasis in the original) Adding to that, the narrator writes “which goes to show you the pull of a true-blue American accent sometimes...” (ibid.), which really underlines the fact that foreigners are even more welcomed than Palestinians, who happen to live there. This idea is marked by the emphasis on the “you”.

A chapter prior to the scene described above also illustrates both the subtle racism towards Palestinians and a form of state terrorism as well. In the chapter “the bucket” (pp. 59-

72), Sacco is travelling to a new Jewish settlement in the hope to meet Palestinians: “But we want faces, we want pain, we want to rub up against people who’s had the shit kicked out of them...” (P 59). Again, Sacco’s aim is clear; he wants to meet the people of Palestine to illustrate their misery amidst the Occupation. On the way to the next village, Sacco is shocked to see that a number of olive trees have been destroyed. He is welcomed by a Palestinian family and hears the story of the trees: the soldiers came at night and imposed a curfew on the area, then, the following day, they came back and cut down all the olive trees of the neighbourhood and along the streets (see P 60). Even though no violence is used against the Palestinian family in this instance, it is, however, an example of ‘slow violence’, the term firstly coined by Rob Nixon introduced earlier. As reminded here, ‘slow violence’ encompasses different forms of violence that are unseen and not instantaneous. By cutting the olive trees, the Israeli state is controlling the Palestinians in their own homes and prevents them from growing their own food: “The olive tree is our main source of living”, explains the patriarch. “Here we have nothing else but the trees... The Israelis don’t give people from our village permits to work in Israel...” (P 61). Therefore, the Occupation is an invasion of the Palestinian territories, on the one hand, and an enclosure for the Palestinians, on the other. Every part of their life is regulated by the State.

Accordingly, violence is part of the everyday and is almost normalized. The mother tells Sacco that a few days before the olive trees incident, her own son was brutalized by Israeli soldiers after a settler⁶ accused him of throwing stones at his car (see P 61). The soldiers beat the young boy in his own living room in front of his distraught mother. A few interesting details portrayed on this page should be underlined. First, the obvious fact that soldiers use violence to terrorize the Palestinian people in their own house. Second, violence against the Palestinians is normalized, even by people with no military authority; in the second panel, the settler is carrying a gun. Settlers are presumably allowed to carry guns to defend themselves against the Palestinians. This detail reinforces the idea that all Palestinians are portrayed as ruthless terrorists, to the extent that even children are considered as a threat. These insidious acts of violence could be said to be part of a larger system and stretch across time and borders. Therefore, because some of these acts are almost unseen and anchored in the mindset of an entire country, the term ‘slow violence’ can be used to describe what is still going on in Israel and the West Bank today.

⁶Inhabitant of Israeli settlements, almost exclusively of Jewish ethnicities. These settlements still exist in Palestinian territory (see Wikipedia).

3.3.3. The body in the conflict: mapping the spaces and voices of Palestine

As argued in 3.2., Sacco is mostly interested in representing the physicality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Physicality has different layers; it encompasses spatial and sonic notions, for instance. Moreover, the body could be seen as an object of study as well; Sacco himself clearly expresses his desire to depict the torn bodies of the conflict (see P 59). Because the conflict is so difficult to comprehend, Sacco uses the many opportunities of the comics medium to illustrate the different layers of the latter, for instance through the use of different focalizations—and focalizers. This section will uncover the representation of spaces and sounds but also the body in the conflict, and why Sacco puts so much emphasis on the body and facial expressions, among others.

The first step to understand a conflict is to acknowledge its complexity. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the borders (or “limits”) of the conflict are always changing and expanding, as noted by Brister: “These borders [of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula], while ostensibly stable politically, are over-written and re-written by new Jewish settlements within the territories and by the state’s mobile walls, enclosures, and ‘flying checkpoints’ ” (106). Therefore, the mobility and shape-shifting feature of the conflict makes the telling of a national narrative extremely difficult. Sacco’s first step is, then, to try and map the different places of the conflict (see *ibid.*). He uses different techniques to do so. The most obvious one is maybe the fact that he illustrates many different places in *Palestine*. As argued by Brister, illustrating different situations (whether it is to drink with locals in one place or to have heated political discussions in another) shows that the journalist has no issue moving throughout the region (see 107). As a matter of fact, the act of moving is always shown in *Palestine*. The journalist is always drawing himself walking (see fig.11), or in a car. The journey is illustrated as much as the destination; consequently, the mobility of the conflict is also rendered in the graphic novel.



Fig. 11: Extract from *Palestine*, p.151.

Sacco's attention to detail also applies to the places he travels to. A good example of mapping the reality of the conflict can be found in the chapter "refugeeland", in which Sacco goes on a tour in a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. The double page 146-147 is a picture-like illustration of the camp filled with a great amount of details. The wide-angle of the drawing offers a bird's eye view on the place and its inhabitants, and shows scenes of the everyday life in every corner of the page: children in uniform going to school (in the middle), goats eating the trash from a container (bottom left), people trying to walk on the muddy sidewalk (top left), rubbles used to maintain metal sheets on the roof, etc. Therefore, Sacco manages to picture different aspects of a same place thanks to the specific dynamics of comics: the reader can look across the page and discover different aspects of the reality of the refugees, all of which are happening at the same time in the same place.

Another method used by Sacco is the focalization, as seen in the previous sections. More specifically, Sacco plays with different focalizations within the same page in order to illustrate a scene from different angles. "His sophisticated used of graphic focalization", writes Brister, "obliges the reader to inhabit a variety of spaces within the narrative. He does so in order to demonstrate the Israel-Palestine's spatial complexity and to engender a visceral unease for his largely Western readership" (107). Sacco thus wants to challenge the reader's comfortable way of apprehending an issue by portraying the uneasiness that results from violence. The scene in the prison analysed in 3.3.2. is a good instance of the use of focalization. The reader is enclosed with the characters and stands uncomfortably close to the latter. The different focalizations, such as internal (through the eyes of a character in the cell) or external, mirror the feeling of imprisonment and unbearable proximity in the room. On page 200 (fig. 12), for instance, a wounded boy is thrown to the ground by soldiers. The fall is represented in the first three panels,

giving the impression that the action is happening in slow-motion. The grids⁷ in the middle and the bottom of the page also give the same impression of “slowness” of the action. The reader is witnessing the act of violence from the perspective of an outsider and a feeling of powerlessness emerges. The action is happening so slowly, yet there is nothing that can be done to help the boy. The reader is bound to watch the lingering scene. In her analysis of the same scene, Brister notes that the position of the reader changes throughout the panels. First as a soldier, then moving away around and from the beating, the reader is contemplating the scene from all angles, creating “spatial anxiety” (107).

The form of comics is particularly able to create this anxiety and to challenge the notion of time. As argued by Chute in “Comics Form and Narrating Lives”, “Comics is a word-and-image form in which words and images create unsynthesized narrative tracks (...) It is also a form that fundamentally relies on space to represent time, carving punctual moments out of the space of the page” (108). Adding to that, Brister notes that “the comics artist can make time stand still, overlap multiple temporalities, and productively confuse time and timing” (109). Therefore, the cartoonist can rely on the panels to illustrate different spaces and moments and create a disruptive narration to mirror the upsetting representation of violence. On page 200 of *Palestine* especially, time seems to linger on the page. The panels are all the same size which, according to Brister, is deliberately done and expresses “Sacco’s refusal to direct readerly information, thereby fostering a productive spatial anxiety through the form” (ibid.). In other words, the reader does not identify with one but all the characters consecutively: “It [the spatial anxiety] signals the proximity of bodies in conflict *and* Sacco’s (and the reader’s) ability to escape that conflict.” (ibid.; emphasis in the original) It could be said, then, that the reader is able to live at the heart of the conflict within the pages of the graphic novel, but also to step away from it and to reflect on what they have witnessed.

A further element should be stressed when looking at pages such as fig. 12, for instance. As argued previously, Sacco uses the body in pain to mirror the terror of the conflict. In her article entitled “The Living Body and the Corpse— Israeli Documentary Cinema and the Intifadah”, Israeli professor Raya Morag argues that conflicts such as the one in *Palestine* fall within the category of “new war” (4), and states that terror plays a big part in the latter. “In the reality of terror,” she writes, “it is no longer a matter of territorial borders in which the army of one state fights the army of another, or of the Baudrillard-type virtual battlefield. In the new war, the body is the battlefield” (5). Therefore, the body becomes the main target of the attacks.

⁷ A layout of regular same-size panels across the page.

As explained by Morag, one of the main changes in the concept of contemporary war is the fact that the targets are mostly noncombatants (see 5). In other words, the civilians are caught in a war between two parties and, therefore, the body almost becomes a symbol of terror. It is why, then, there are so many distorted, wounded and torn bodies illustrated in *Palestine*. The body of the boy is literally deformed and stretched out between people; he is treated almost like a corpse.



Fig. 12: *Palestine*, p.200.

To represent various perspectives allows readers to understand a conflict and the different parties. In the chapter "the boys (part 1)", Sacco is walking with two young Palestinians in the Jabalia refugee camp, "where the uprising began" (P 191) after four Palestinian workers were (accidentally?) killed by an Israeli driver on their way back from work. After the tragedy, angry Palestinians started marching and throwing stones at the Israeli authorities (see P 192). The chapter is a literal walk down memory lane; Sacco and his companions are walking along the muddy paths of Jabalia whilst the two Palestinians reminisce about the uprising. On page 192, the top-left panel portrays the present timeline with Sacco. On

the right, the panel shows a crowd marching in the same street a few years before. The following page (fig. 13) uses a similar technique. Images of the present are entangled with memories. At the top of the page, the reader is situated behind the Palestinians throwing stones. In the last panel, the reader is behind the soldiers when the stones are thrown at them. Therefore, the page shows different perspectives of the same event, and, accordingly, broadens the scope of interpretation. Most importantly, it emphasizes the ability of comics to show different temporalities on the same page. Similarly, comics also allows for both the memory and the act of telling it to be represented.

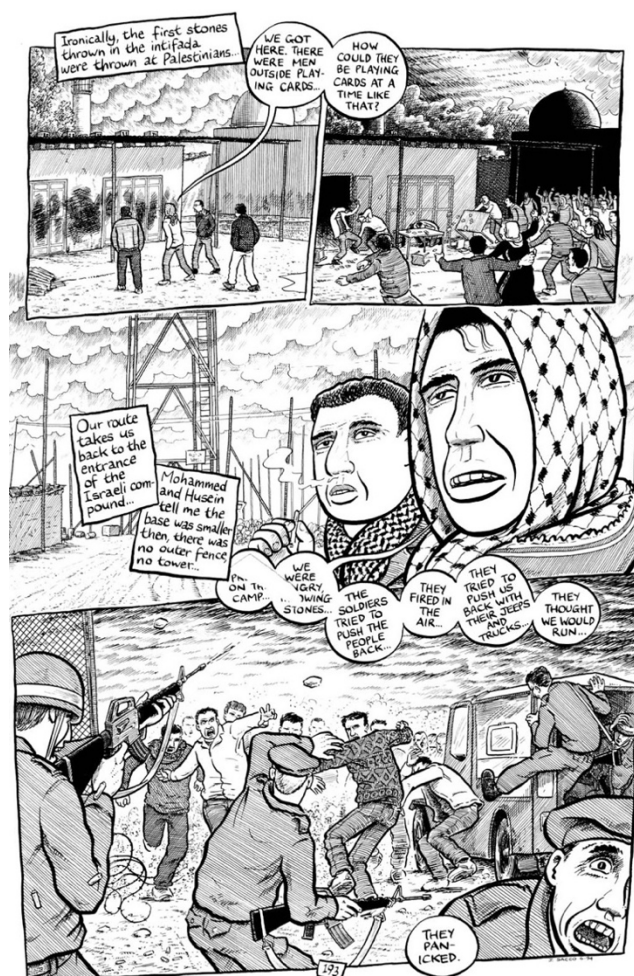


Fig. 13: *Palestine*, p.193.

It should be once again noted that *Palestine* is a graphic novel about people and their stories. Because Palestinians are silenced in the Occupation, Sacco wants to illustrate their life and, most importantly, give them a place where they can express themselves. Therefore, *Palestine* is a book that interweaves voices and sounds; the voices of the Palestinians and the sounds of the conflict. In Brister's opinion, the sonic features of the conflict and the Occupation are represented in the graphic novel as well as the spatial ones. Looking back at fig.9, the disposition of the panels itself creates a sense of sound chaos. "The series of panels depicts both spatial and sonic confusions", notes Brister (114). Sacco also uses onomatopoeia, also called

“acoustigrams” (Warner, qtd. in Brister 114) and the use of “many sharp, cross-hatched black lines in the gutter space” (ibid.) instead of the traditional white background also suggests agitation, both spatial and sonic.

A further stylistic detail also suggests the wish to represent the Palestinians’ voices. As already said, Sacco draws people realistically, but he exaggerates some features. The mouths in particular are relatively big with the teeth showing (see fig. 14). This exaggeration of the mouth might result from the fact that Palestinians have been silenced for so long and can now express themselves freely in Sacco’s graphic novel. As already argued, the layout of the panels and the speech bubbles also mirror the desperate need of the Palestinians to express themselves. Many scenes show the characters packed on the page, their mouth wide-open and screaming at each other (see fig. 15). Page 56 reflects the feeling of being jammed, and the crowd is trying to push forward. The scene reminds of the people of Palestine now ready to fight their way out of oppression and let their voices be heard after being secluded for so long.



Fig. 14: Extract from *Palestine*, p.53.

To conclude the analysis of *Palestine* and more specifically the representation of violence, this chapter has shown that the book is stylistically violent. As a matter of fact, it does not avoid the representation of violence per se but does it in many subtle ways. Whether it is through drawings or words, Sacco portrays the life amid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By showing different aspects of the reality of the Palestinians, not just the most violent ones, it reminds the reader of the constant tension and fear of crossing a street and being shot, of being arrested in the middle of the night by the army, of staying in prison for a long time without a valid reason. In *Palestine*, Sacco manages to challenge the received idea of violence as a sudden, spectacular event. Rather, it proves that violence is complex and cripples in different ways. Moreover, I believe that the representation of the characters mirrors the very intricacy and brutality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the body becomes a symbol of oppression altogether.



Fig. 15: *Palestine*, p.56.

4. Illustrating Memories and Hope: *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story*

In the second part of the dissertation, chapter four is set to provide an exhaustive analysis and summary of the graphic novel that is also the main corpus of the study, namely *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story* by Hamid Sulaiman. The book was first published in France in 2016 before gaining international recognition and winning the English Pen Award among other prizes. For that matter, I am only working with the first American edition published in 2018 by Interlink Books. In this chapter, the page references to this particular edition of the graphic novel will be put between brackets.

4.1. Hamid Sulaiman's genesis of the graphic novel

Born in 1986 in Damascus, more specifically in the peaceful area of Zabadani (see syriauntold), Hamid Sulaiman is a Syrian comic book artist, painter and author. He completed his degree in arts and architecture at the University of Damascus in 2009, right before the revolution. Sulaiman himself got caught early in the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime and attended a number of peaceful demonstrations (see Rotivel 2016) like many other young Syrians at the time, until 2011, when the young artist was forced to leave his homeland after being arrested at a protest, then released. Upon his military duty, the Syrian author decided to illegally cross the border to Jordan to escape the violence in his country (see "Postscript").

The rest of his journey is explained by Sulaiman himself in his postscript at the very end of his first graphic novel, *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story*, published in 2016. After illegally leaving Syria in August 2011,

my [Sulaiman's] first destination was Egypt. A few months in, I was in a taxi and the driver started asking me questions about Syria. He didn't understand the first thing about what was happening, and he even asked me if Bashar al-Assad was on the side of the Free Syrian Army... I realised that the absence of a free press in Syria had led to a massive lack of understanding (...) When I arrived in France in 2012, I saw that people's confusion about the situation in Syria was even greater. ("Postscript")

In this passage, Sulaiman is giving out hints about his life but also his motives. After spending a few months in Cairo, where he was still able to share and exhibit his art, the situation aggravated, and Sulaiman decided to resume his journey to get to Europe, more specifically, France (see Rotivel 2016), which he saw as "the country of comics" (Harau 2016). He has been living there as a political refugee ever since (see Broué 2016). Since then, the young artist saw his art exhibited in the galleries of European capitals such as Paris, Berlin and Vienna (see syriauntold).

Looking back to the quote above, Sulaiman also lists the premises of his idea for *Freedom Hospital*. As a matter of fact, he was distraught to see the lack of information about the situation in Syria, even in the neighbouring countries. The lack of, or even “absence of a free press in Syria” (“Postscript”) has left the country isolated and helpless. The only type of information carried across by the media in Syria was propaganda on both sides of the revolution. This is one of the many reasons why Sulaiman decided to tell the story in his own way, via his own literary medium, namely, comics. On explaining the situation in Syria, Sulaiman specifies that “I [Sulaiman] don’t think anyone can capture exactly what is happening in Syria, even those on the ground right now.” (ibid.) Thus, his aim is not historical and factual accuracy, but rather, the author sees his graphic novel as a subjective (he did not try to be neutral, as explained in his postscript as well) depiction of the state of affairs in his country. Most importantly, it could be said that *Freedom Hospital* functions as a personal catharsis for Sulaiman as well, who “needed to give voice to everything that had been stuck in my [Sulaiman’s] throat since the beginning of the revolution” (ibid.).

In other words, Sulaiman’s project is a personal and a collective one. His first aim was to carry his feelings, views and positions into the graphic novel. The second, perhaps most important one, was to finally try and depict the dire situation in Syria in one way or another, from the point of view of an exiled civilian who had to escape from the extreme violence of the Syrian civil war. The project has taken most of Sulaiman’s life as an exile, as it took nearly four years to complete, from 2012 to 2016 (see “Postscript”).

4.2. *Freedom Hospital*: the openness of comics to illustrate life and hope during the conflict

It is explicitly stated that *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story* has a fictional setup. The events unfold in a fictional Syrian town called Houria, which, in Sulaiman’s words, “is an amalgam of many towns in the north of Syria” (“Postscript”). The story begins in spring 2012; thus, the temporal template is clear. The fact that a fictionalized version of an actual city is paired up with a clear temporal milestone already marks the interesting interplay between reality and fiction. As a matter of fact, the author himself claims that the book deals with fictional characters and places but is directly inspired by true, personal events. This fact will be thoroughly analysed later in the dissertation but will remain a relevant information throughout the study, hence the necessity to state that fact from the start.

As already stated, the story happens in 2012, mostly in the fictional Syrian town Houria. The book is divided into five parts or chapters, each one corresponding to a season. The first

chapter is titled “Spring” and begins with a temporal note: “March 2012”. A young French reporter, Sophie, is meeting with Yasmin (a Syrian pharmacist) at the Syrian and Turkish border. Yasmin could be seen as the main protagonist and the story mainly follows her actions. Yasmin gives a warm welcome to the visitor and proceeds to explain the plan to cross the border and to reach the Syrian town. In order to do so, they will be helped by armed rebels, whom Yasmin already knows personally. They eventually reach Houria where Yasmin has set up an underground, illegal hospital, where rebels of the Syrian revolution are taken care of free of charge. The makeshift hospital is called “Freedom Hospital”.

The hospital is at the centre of Yasmin’s occupations. As a matter of fact, the building once belonged to her parents, and the young woman made an oath to turn the building into something useful (see 46-47). The city is on fire and wrecked by the armed conflicts that oppose peaceful demonstrators to the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian army, leaving thousands of casualties behind. Yasmin works hand in hand with the rebels but struggles to keep her head above water; the hospital has no money and Yasmin does not always manage to find sufficient medical supplies to take care of the wounded. Moreover, Yasmin must go to the United States in a few months for a PhD application but does not want to leave her hospital behind.

Sophie follows Yasmin’s every step and tries to record the everyday life in the hospital. She is of Syrian origin herself and is willing to document the life during the revolution and hopefully capture the uprising and feeling of change, starting by dictator Assad's fall. As she begins to be acquainted with the inpatients of the hospital, the reader discovers them at the same time. Most of them are rebels, such as Haval. Yasmin can count on Doctor Yazan’s help to care for the wounded. Recently, they saved Salem’s life. The young man suffers from memory loss after a bullet wound almost took his life, and he is trying to recover his memory. He has been badly traumatized by the near-death experience and seems to slowly remember he was a soldier.

As already stated, demonstrators regularly march down the streets to oppose the dictatorship and support the rebels (see fig. 16). Yasmin, Sophie and some of the inpatients are marching together one day and Sophie is recording the event. This image of the journalist will be particularly significant in the development of the question of the representation of violence, as it is a clear reminder of the impact of the mainstream media on the depiction of conflicts and warfare in general. Most interesting is the use of a reporter character in the graphic novel, which itself works as a new medium for the depiction of the issues listed above. What can already be said here, however, is the importance of the demonstration attended by Yasmin and others and its symbolic impact on the story and the characters. They witness the killing of a young protestor

who was marching peacefully. Later in the day, the news announces the death of a “young terrorist” (64-65) by the hands of a sniper of the Syrian army. This tragic event is the first of a long list, as the end of the chapter illustrates the hometown of Yasmin being raided by the Syrian army looking for rebels. Fearing for their life, the inpatients of Freedom Hospital must hide in a bunker. Fortunately, they are saved by one of the leaders of the revolution, the same person who helped Yasmin and Sophie cross the border, Abu Taysir.



Fig. 16: Sulaiman, Hamid. *Freedom Hospital, A Syrian Story*. Northampton: Interlink Books, 2018, p.55.

The second chapter begins in summer of the same year and depicts the life at Freedom Hospital after the raids. The rebels, led by Abu Taysir, managed to push the army back, whilst the casualties are welcomed at Freedom Hospital. Salem slowly remembers some facts about his former life and also one face that strikes him as familiar: it is Elias who, like him, has been living at the hospital ever since he was wounded. He was imprisoned and had to lie in order to avoid torture. In other words, he had to swear allegiance and expressly support the regime on camera. Salem supposedly saw the tape while he was still a member of the rebel army. Back to the main storyline, the regime relentlessly carries on raids and massacres, for instance in the small city of Homs, killing thousands of innocents, including children (see 108) (fig. 17).

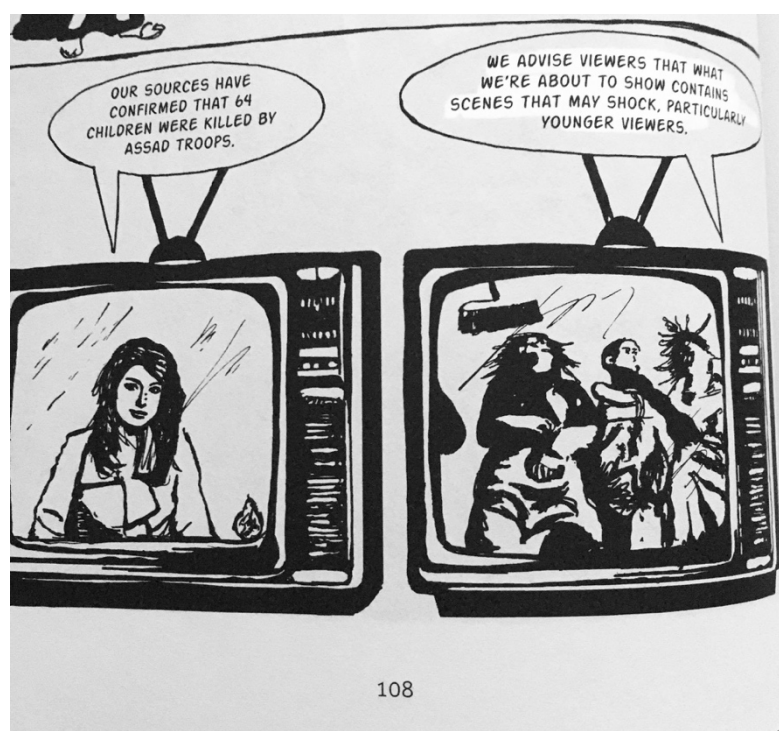


Fig. 17: Extract from *Freedom Hospital*, p.108.

On a more positive note, Yasmin and Fawaz fall for each other. She shares her doubts with her new lover about Salem, who, she fears, might be hiding something from them. After a new bombing raid a few days later, Abu Taysir seeks revenge and decides to attack the regime at the front. He asks for Yasmin's assistance. She reluctantly accepts, and they go together with Sophie to support Abu Taysir and the rebels, leaving the hospital behind during these difficult times. Abu Taysir is planning to attack the airport where Assad's troops are staying (see 143). The leader of the rebels gives an ultimatum to the general of the Syrian army, but he defiantly rejects the latter. Abu Taysir thus carries out his plan.

Meanwhile, the hospital is under attack after Assad's troops have been alarmed that there might be rebels hiding among patients. Yasmin and her companions discover the horror

in Syria through videos uploaded on YouTube (see 153-155). She rushes back to the hospital to sadly witness the dead bodies of Dr Yazan and Elias, who both perished during the attacks.

The third chapter is entitled “Autumn” and opens up on the ruins of Freedom Hospital after the latest attacks on Houria a few weeks prior. Salem helps and works at the hospital permanently now: the establishment is still open, thanks to the solidarity of the inhabitants. Yasmin and Sophie spend their evenings talking and drinking with others. One evening, they advise Haval and Zahabiah, a young couple in love, on their future life. They have the possibility to get a visa and escape to Switzerland. Yasmin and Sophie, however, do not consider leaving.

After another time-jump, a noticeable change happens in Syria and in Houria more specifically. As a matter of fact, Islamic movements are on the rise (fig. 18) and add up to the number of demonstrations already happening in the wrecked city. Salem is considering joining one of them, because he sees this as an opportunity to escape the surrounding misery. Freedom Hospital, however, is back on its feet again. Sophie reflects on the everlasting process of rebuilding the hospital, and Yasmin states that they “will rebuild it every time”, because “dreams come at a price” (203) and she is never willing to give it up to Assad’s regime.

The third chapter thus ends on an optimistic note, which is to be radically contrasted with the opening scene of “Winter”, the penultimate chapter of the graphic novel. The opening scene shows a rally of the newly risen Islamic State in the streets of Houria. Sophie and Yasmin are horrified to hear the demonstrators, including young children, chanting phrases such as “our guide Bin Laden terrorized the United States”, “we will kill them all” (208-209). Salem asks the two friends to leave the demonstration. The former inpatient has now joined the ranks of the soon to be self-proclaimed Islamic State. Following the order, Yasmin makes fun of him and starts to insult him and his leader, irritating Salem, who threatens his former friends with an assault rifle. Terrified, Yasmin and Sophie leave the street and go back to the hospital.

The evening following the altercation, Yasmin reflects on the day and thinks it would be safer for Sophie to go back to Paris. She is starting to think that the end of the regime might never come, surprising Fawaz, who states that she “[was] always so positive” (213). Yasmin is simply stating the truth, and fears that she will never see her hometown again (see 214).

The following pages show extracts from propaganda videos of Daesh on YouTube. Yasmin then closes her computer and meets Sophie and others to party. The group reflects on the dire situation in Syria, more particularly on the fate of children, who are being used by

extremists on both sides (see 224). The conversation then goes on and turns to the Shiites and Sunnis conflict, a “stupid quarrel” (231) that, to this day, still costs innocent people’s lives.



Fig. 18: *Freedom Hospital*, p.208.

The morning after, Abu Qatada, a former taxi driver and inpatient at Freedom Hospital (see 37), now proclaiming himself a “prince”, makes a speech for his followers and the entire city altogether, and by doing so, is proclaiming himself the leader of the “Great Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (234) and listing the rules of his regime. Ensuing that, Abu Taysir stands up and openly disagrees with Abu Qatada, who then gives the leader of the rebel army one

week to recognize him as his prince (see 235). The next few pages depicts a call between Abu Taysir and Fawaz on the behalf of Yasmin. Yasmin is accusing Abu Taysir of killing civilians caught in their armed conflict. Fawaz states that Abu Taysir's actions are surely "unintended", but, at the same time, he is "starting to act like a war lord" (238). Abu Taysir pledges to do something against Abu Qatada's regime and ends the call. He is later arrested by Abu Qatada's men.

A few days later, the crew of Freedom Hospital is sitting together for a meal. Sophie has finished her film and is ready to go back home and show the world what has been going on in Syria (see 241). Haval and Zahabiah are set to be leaving to Europe soon as well. The following pages, without any dialogs, show the beheading of Abu Taysir and the bombings of northern Syria by foreign forces. Fawaz is badly wounded during the attacks. Meanwhile, Sophie is back in Paris and is projecting her film in front of an audience but leaves early, visibly distressed. On her way home in the streets of the French capital, she meets Taysir, Abu Taysir's son, unaware of his father's fate.

Back in Houria, Yasmin is scavenging for food in the ruins of the city. She goes back to a wounded Fawaz and they both realize they are the only survivors left (see 262). Yasmin then meets with Salem, who confesses his fake memory loss (see 263), which Yasmin "knew you [Salem] were faking it" (ibid.) all along. Salem is sent by Abu Qatada to arrest them, and claims he is their "last chance of getting out here alive" (ibid.). Salem takes them both to the border. On their way there, Salem reflects on his life as a former infiltrate for the Syrian Intelligence Agency. Salem was to spy on the opposition, before joining the forces of Abu Qatada (see 268-269). He even arrested Yasmin on the behalf of the regime once. In his own words, he has "lived and worked alongside so many different people (...) None of you were right, none of you were wrong. (...) They all had dreams, all those people, but yours [Yasmin's] was the most beautiful" (270). Yasmin and Fawaz leave a grateful Salem on the other side of the border. The latter is planning to go back to the Agency, quit it for good and then go home (see 271). In the following pages, Salem is shown back at the Mukhabarat⁸ and explains his deeds to the Colonel. The last two pages depict the murder of Salem by the Colonel himself, who is, since the beginning, the person who tried to shoot Salem once and whose face he could never remember.

The very last chapter is a short one and is titled "Spring, again". The actions take place three months later and happen in a refugee camp at the Syrian-Turkish border. Fawaz is placing the "Freedom Hospital" sign on a new building at the camp. Sophie is there as well and

⁸ Arabic for Syrian Intelligence Agency.

comments on the reopening of the hospital at the border, and how “it felt more urgent in Syria” (282). Yasmin answers that the wounded of the civil war will be carried directly at the camp by the White Helmets. The last double page displays the picture of the crew, posing in front of the hospital, smiling. The book ends on an enigmatic phrase: “The spring goes on...” (285) (fig. 19).



Fig. 19: Ibid., pp.284-285.

4.3. Entangled Fate: presentation of the characters

Following the exhaustive summary of the graphic novel's plot and the outlining of the different characters, I choose to direct my attention on those who, I believe, are the central characters of the graphic novel. Each one of them plays a symbolic role that will be explained hereafter.

4.3.1. Yasmin: the beacon of hope

Yasmin could be seen as the main protagonist of *Freedom Hospital*. As a matter of fact, the story begins and ends with her dream, namely, to set up an underground hospital in her hometown to help the wounded of the Syrian revolution. In the opening pages of the graphic novel, Yasmin is described by the author as follows: she was born in Damascus in 1984 and lived in the United Arab Emirates for ten years, before going back to Syria to finish her study in pharmacy and complete her Master's degree in Damascus. She is personally involved in the revolution, like many other young people of Syria.

Throughout the book, Yasmin is portrayed as a strong, fearless young woman. The most conclusive example is the fact that she has set up an underground hospital all by herself. As already stated, she is very active during the revolution, seeking the help of international agencies and supporting the Free Syrian Army, for instance. She does not hesitate to stand her ground, usually coming up with witty replies when someone tries to disrespect her or her project.

Her commitment to the revolution started years ago, when her father and his brothers turned an old restaurant into an undercover hospital (see 45). Yasmin herself gives sparse hints about her actions since the beginning of the Syrian revolution. Thus, the reader learns that she went to prison at some point in her life, and that she decided to honour her father's dream when she got out (see 46). Later on, it is stated that Salem once arrested her whilst working for the regime (see 269). She usually goes to demonstrations in the streets to support the end of the regime (e.g. 48). Moreover, when asked why she decided to stay in Syria, Yasmin is not afraid to state that her dream would be to witness the regime of Bashar al-Assad fall ("I wouldn't miss it for the world" (12)). Therefore, her implication, values and ideals are constant throughout the book, hence making her one of the most reliable characters in the story.

Although being presented as a bubbly, optimistic character, Yasmin is also beset with nostalgia and pessimism. This could be explained by the fact that, on her duty as a doctor, she is on the front line to witness the horrors and trauma resulting from the armed conflicts in the city and the entire country. However, Yasmin is most than often portrayed as the optimistic force of the group. This optimism is fuelled by anger and resentment; in chapter 1 during the march, for instance, Yasmin and her crew witness the death of a thirteen-year old (55-56). The evening after the tragedy, the young woman is clearly distressed (see 65) (fig.20), but her anger outdoes her sadness ("He was only thirteen for [f*ck's] sake" (ibid.)). Her wish to see the fall of the regime is what keeps her going. Her relentless optimism is

translated in the everlasting process of rebuilding Freedom Hospital, on which she comments: “we will just build it again, even bigger.” (203)

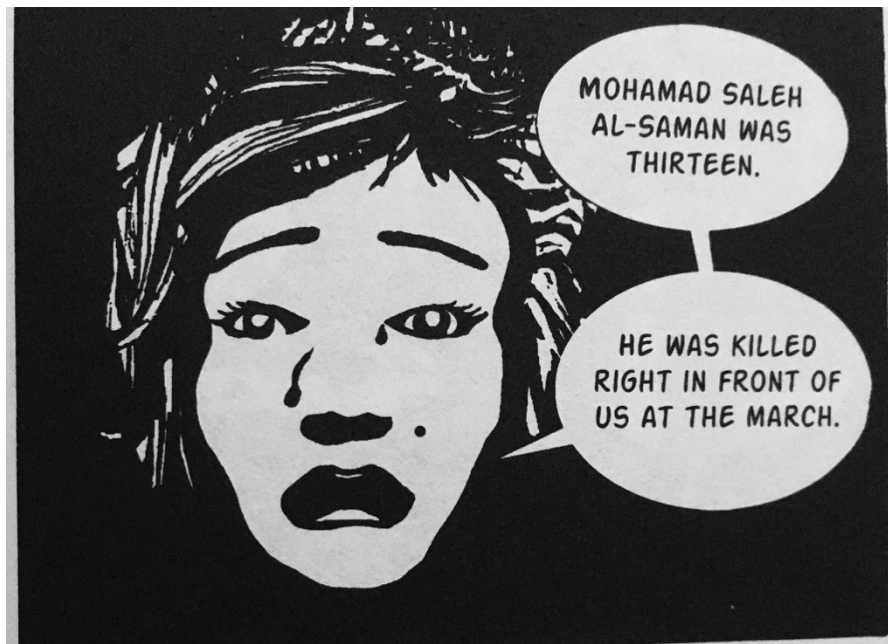


Fig. 20: Extract from *Freedom Hospital*, p.65.

As already stated, her optimism is plagued with doubt, trauma and, consequently, pessimism. Yasmin is confronted with violence every day, either in the hospital or outside in the streets. The underground, hence illegal hospital has to deal with the ongoing threat of being destroyed by raids (e.g. 83), or see its inpatients taken away and tortured for being rebels (see 89). Yasmin, however, never loses hope and, most importantly, represses her own feelings to carry on working and saving lives (e.g. 126-127). Despite her relentlessness, trauma is starting to creep back in as the seasons go on. Yasmin is more than often confronted with death in and out of the hospital. As seen in the penultimate chapter, Yasmin is clearly disillusioned after the rise of the Islamic State in her hometown. Talking about the fall of Assad, she admits, defeated, that “no one will see that day” (213).

To conclude, it is safe to say that, despite being surrounded by horrors, Yasmin remains the optimistic force of the graphic novel. Moreover, she is depicted as a strong-minded female character, dealing with whatever issue is being thrown at her. She is unconventional, sometimes rude, and she does not hesitate to speak her mind. In that way, Yasmin could be said to mirror the spirit of the revolution in Syria; an educated youth with a powerful, relentless mind, yearning for reform, rights and most importantly, freedom.

4.3.2. Sophie: the journalist

After leaving her homeland at eight years old with her family to go to France, where she graduated in journalistic studies at Science Po, Sophie is back in Syria to make a documentary about Freedom Hospital and the ongoing Syrian revolution. As explained in the introduction pages of *Freedom Hospital*, Sophie had to smuggle herself illegally in the country, because only the pro-Assad journalists were allowed on the Syrian ground at the time. She then meets her childhood friend Yasmin who will help her in the making of the documentary.

Unlike her friend, Sophie is rather quiet and reserved. However, she is very curious about the revolution and is interested in every detail. Her camera is always ready, and she does not move away from violent situations, but she is rather interested in filming the people and the peaceful demonstrations. In the first chapter, she is excited about the prospect of filming the march in Houria (“It’ll be my first march since I got here” (48)) and is happy to give the people a place to express themselves in front of her camera (see 54). Most of the time, Sophie and the reader discover the situation in Syria through the lens of her camera.

Most importantly, Yasmin gives Sophie the opportunity to discuss with different people from all sides of the revolution, and different backgrounds. As she becomes acquainted with the inpatients of Freedom Hospital, Sophie is sometimes appalled by the divergent ideas that she hears there. Nonetheless, she is trying to include as many people as possible in her documentary, as shown on page 143 where, for instance, she is recording the speech of the leader of the rebel army (fig. 21), Abu Taysir. On her journey with the rebel army, Sophie is moved to record even during the most dangerous situations (e.g. whilst being threatened by a sniper (see 167),) and, consequently, extremely bloody scenes are being recorded (e.g. 169).

Sophie and her camera are the direct witnesses of the changes in the revolution. In the fourth chapter, the young reporter and Yasmin come across a rally celebrating Abu Qatada and his radical views. The two friends are asked to leave, hence forbidding Sophie to film the demonstration (see 210-211). This example is one of the many addressing the problem of freedom of speech and repression during—and since the Syrian civil war.

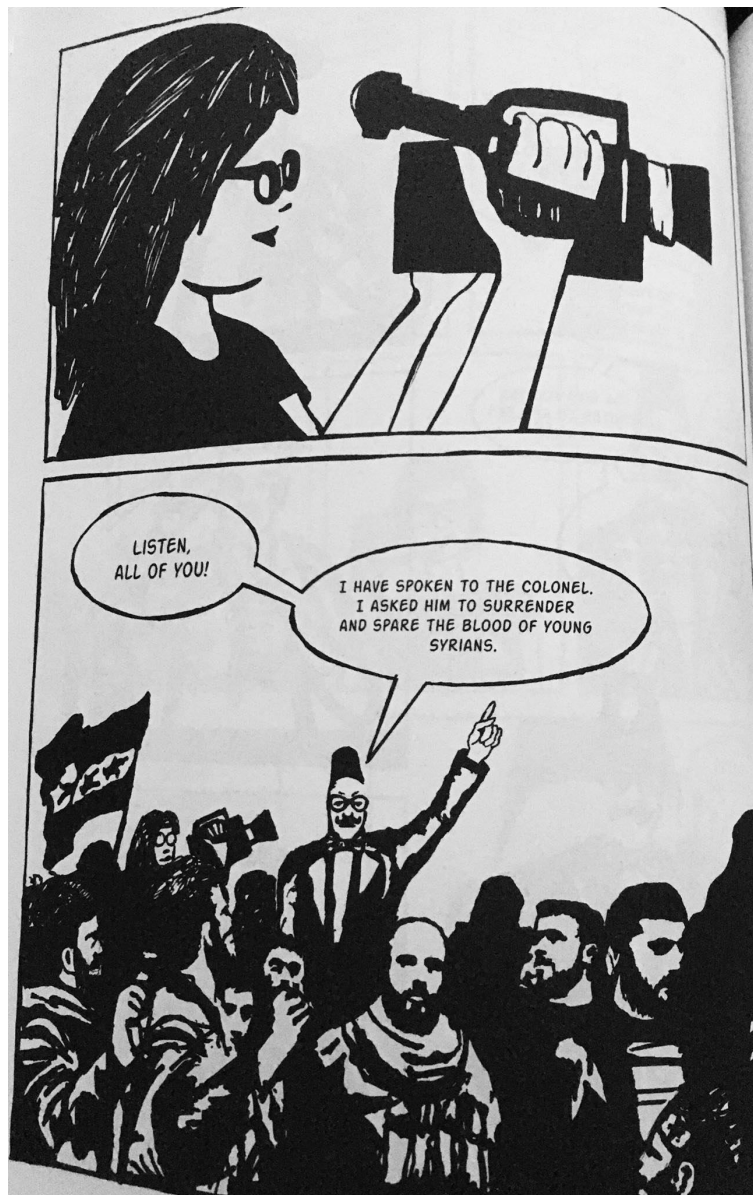


Fig. 21: *Freedom Hospital*, p.142.

As the situation in Syria aggravates, Sophie is sent back to Paris where she can safely finish the making of her documentary. The journalist even gets the opportunity to show her film in front of an audience. Sophie, however, seems anxious and distressed. It is thus clear that the events she so desperately wanted to show to the Western world have impacted her as well. During the making of this documentary, Sophie had to empathize with the people of Syria on another level. Being of Syrian origin as well, the young woman is clearly distraught over the horrors happening there. But, unlike Yasmin and the inpatients, Sophie can reflect on the situation through the lens of her camera and her knowledge as a trained journalist, on the one hand, and back home in Europe, on the other.

In a similar fashion to Yasmin, who can be compared to the revolutionary force that carries the youth of Syria, the character of Sophie can be seen as the bridge between Syria and the outside world. Most importantly, Sophie embodies the figure of the journalist as well and brings up, in a specific manner, the question of representation and the media. Using a journalist character and portraying some shots through the lens of the camera is very relevant in the representation of war and conflicts for instance, because it foregrounds another medium *within* comics and highlights the different ways of representing the above-cited issues respectively. Again, the role of journalism and comics in violence representation will be discussed in the dedicated section.

4.3.3. Salem: the ambiguous victim

Salem is first introduced in chapter one, “Spring”, waking up in the hospital (see 28). Haval and Elijah, both inpatients at Freedom Hospital, are standing up at the foot of the bed and welcome the young man. Salem, noticeably confused and startled, gets off the bed, pushes off the two men and tries to escape, before being stopped by Dr Yazan (see 32). This confused state of mind summarizes the character of Salem at the beginning. As explained in the introduction pages at the beginning of the graphic novel, “No one knows his [Salem’s] background.” As a matter of fact, Salem himself does not know who he is at first, because he suffers from memory loss. On page 35 for instance, Salem does not recognize his face in the mirror, hence the reaction of fellow inpatient Haval: “Don’t tell me you don’t recognise your own face... [Sh*t], that bullet really messed you up!”

The bullet wound that Salem is being treated for at the undercover hospital is seemingly the reason for his memory loss. The barrel of the gun and the shadow of a person holding it is the last thing he can remember before blacking out. At first sight, Salem is portrayed as a distressed young man, suffering from traumatic flashbacks and unable to take care of himself. It is precisely the reason why this character is used: Salem is set to embody the traumatized Syrian civilian, who cannot recall his life before all this violence, and who is scarred permanently.

As the events unfold, however, Salem is starting to get some of his memories back. He also clearly states that he does not want to stay at the hospital forever (“I have to get out of this shithole” (97)). During a discussion with Elias, whose real name he changed after being arrested for helping the rebels in his village (see 104-105), Salem clearly remembers the latter’s face during a pro-regime speech on TV. It is the only thing Salem remembers from his past life (see 107) (fig.22). The clues on the young man’s background are thus scattered

throughout the chapters, and the reader can only make assumptions about Salem's life and true intentions. Questions such as "who is he really? Was he at a rally, a demonstration? Whose side is he on?" may arise during the reading, hence reinforcing the mysterious nature of the character of Salem.



Fig. 22: *Freedom Hospital*, p.107.

At first side, this enigmatic nature could be seen as the reflection of the trauma plaguing the young man since his arrival in Freedom Hospital. In fact, Salem is constantly battling his inner demons and his memory loss, has trouble trusting others, and is questioning his side in the revolution. In other words, Salem cannot remember his ideals and dreams before the incident. He is estranged from his own nature, which could be seen as a result of a traumatic experience. This assumption will be explored more thoroughly in sections dedicated to trauma representation.

In the latest chapters of the graphic novel, however, the reader discovers the true nature of Salem step by step. At the end of chapter 3, Salem is seen at a rally hosted by Abu Qatada, a fellow former inpatient, openly Salafist and ex-member of Al-Qaeda (see 196-197),

inviting young people of Syria to fight for his cause. Salem is considering joining the forces of the Islamic army to, as expressed in thought bubbles, “save the money to escape” (199). It is one of the few occurrences where the reader is able to decipher the true intentions of the character. At the beginning of the following chapter, the reliability of the character is once again challenged. Salem threatens Sophie and Yasmin with his gun, and the reader never actually gets to know whether the action is intentional, viz. as part of his plan to get out of the country after joining the forces of Abu Qatada, or not.

It is only in the penultimate chapter that the reader discovers Salem’s true identity and history. A complete explanation of his actions and origins was already given in section 4.2. Thus, what could be underlined is, again, the complexity and ambiguity of the character. But there is more to Salem than complexity in character. As a matter of fact, it is never expressively stated that Salem actually suffers from trauma, and the reader could question his actions and feelings from the beginning. However, it is clear that despite lying about his memory loss and former activities, the attempt on his life has impacted him deeply, even rendering him paranoid and unable to take care of himself. Salem, thus, shows clear signs of trauma. The complexity of the character mirrors the difficulty of rendering and expressing traumatic experiences and, most importantly, shows that there is not one single way of processing trauma.

To conclude on Salem’s character, it could be said that the young man portrays the complexity of the conflict he is currently living in, both figuratively and literally. The character shows that a person stuck in a dire situation can go through personal changes in a short time, with only one’s own survival in mind. Salem also reminds the reader of the ambiguity of the opposite sides at war— it is not a clear-cut separation between the good and the bad, it is much more nuanced and intricate. In the end, Salem’s only wish was to find a way out of this nightmare, one way or another. On his way to redemption, Salem is faced with only one solution, death.

4.4. A note on the representation of places and time in *Freedom Hospital*

After a careful analysis of the graphic novel’s story line and main characters, it is necessary to keep in mind that *Freedom Hospital* is a fiction that is yet based on real events and testimonies. That ambiguity between fiction and reality will be analysed further along, but it is interesting to already point out some facts about temporality in the book, and to decipher some of the hints regarding actual events and people depicted in the graphic novel. In this section, then, I will focus on the temporal and spatial hints scattered through all five chapters, and list a few of the

historical figures and events that will, in turn, guide us through a more historical approach of the conflict depicted in *Freedom Hospital*.

The first step was to turn to Sulaiman's explanations of the book's layout, as written in his postscript. He was inspired by his own memories of Syria to imagine the version presented in the graphic novel. Sulaiman explains that he voluntarily invented "a small rural town, Houria, which is an amalgam of many town in the north of Syria".

The graphic novel is, thus, a mix between personal, fictional and actual, viz. historical facts. Even though Sulaiman wanted to avoid explaining and justifying facts, the story begins with two captions giving temporal and spatial information, namely: "Turkey, near the Syrian border. March 2012: 40,000 killed since the revolution began." (9) Interestingly enough, similar captions rhythm the story and guide the reader through the temporal aspects of the revolution. Most importantly, it functions as a reminder of the ongoing and never-stopping violence in Syria as well. Every few pages, a caption such as "A few days later: Another 150 killed" (34) indicates new casualties, sometimes a tremendous number for a short period of time. What is not expressively notified, however, is whether the facts and numbers given on the page are accurate or estimated, or whether they represent only the fictional town of Houria, or Syria in its entirety. As stated by Sulaiman and explained above, his aim was not to depict the conflict accurately, but rather, to depict it as he witnessed and experienced it. The numbers, thus, could be considered as an overview of the whole of the situation in Syria in 2012, but most importantly, they recall the horrific condition of innocent people losing their lives every day in the conflict. Moreover, the captions also signify the important number of time-jumps throughout the graphic novel.

Therefore, it could be said that Sulaiman's storytelling is fictional, and yet depicts actual events and real persons. *Freedom Hospital* follows the premises of the civil war from 2012 onwards. Milestones of the revolution are presented in the graphic novel, such as the attack on Abu al-Duhur airbase by the Free Syrian Army on September 2012 (see 144-145), or the peaceful demonstrations during the spring of 2012 (see 54-55). To be reminded here, the characters are all strictly fictional and the names of the places in Syria are rarely expressively told, but the temporal template of the story hints at real events that could be traced back in time. This issue will be mostly discussed in the section dedicated to the historical approach to the conflict represented in the graphic novel, namely the uprising and the Syrian civil war.

As stated above, most of the characters of the graphic novel are fictional, but some are, on the contrary, based on real persons. The most notorious example is Walid Abu Qatada, presented in the first pages of the graphic novel as follows: "A former taxi driver, he stays out of the early peaceful demonstrations. (...) Seriously injured in combat, he has been an inpatient

at the hospital for some time. (...) His true beliefs are in fact closer to the Salafist jihadi.” The character could be seen as directly inspired by religious figure and notorious Salafist Abu Qatada al-Filistini, often linked to Al-Qaeda, who invited the Islamic State of Syria and the Al-Nusra to join forces (see chapter 2). The (unnamed) colonel in *Freedom Hospital* may be inspired by former Minister of Defense of Syria, Fahd Jassem al-Frej, who was in office during the civil war, and so on.

In terms of space, the events unfold mainly in the Syrian town of Houria, which was invented specifically to encompass all the towns and villages of northern Syria (see above). Some places are, however, alluded to more specifically. As already stated, the story begins at the border separating Turkey and Syria (see 9). Towards the end of the graphic novel, glimpses of Europe can be seen as well; on page 264, for instance, Haval is portrayed in his new apartment in Zurich. On the previous page, the action follows the discussion between Yasmin and Salem back in Syria. The change of space is expressively indicated by the caption on page 264: “Meanwhile, in Zurich”. On page 266, however, the reader is back in Syria without explicit notice: the story is back to Yasmin and Fawaz’s ride with Salem. A similar scene can be seen on page 252, when the action follows Sophie in Paris for a few pages, before returning to the events unfolding at the hospital in Syria. This ability to portray different events happening in different places at the same time is one that can be traced back to the medium of comics in general. As stated by literary scholar Hilary Chute, “Comics is a form that fundamentally relies on space—the space of the page—to represent the movement of time; it represents a temporal map, juxtaposing frames on the page.” (*Disaster Drawn* 77) Across pages, and sometimes across panels, the reader is carried through time and is thus able to navigate in different narratives and follow the characters in different places. This ability will be discussed more in the section providing a theoretical approach of comics.

To conclude, it could be said that this section’s aim was to show that even though the background of *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story* is mostly fictional, it is also strictly based on real places, events and also people. This interplay between fictionality and reality factors will be studied throughout the dissertation, as stated above, but it was necessary to already foreground this information in the sections dedicated to the story itself in order to understand the method used by the author to tell his personal—and his people’s story, and to grasp the narratology of the graphic novel more accurately.

4.5. Context: the Syrian civil war

In the same way as 3.2., the conflict that is represented in *Freedom Hospital* will be presented in a way that provides a first approach and basic understanding of what is going on in Syria. Again, it is the time span of the events portrayed in the graphic novel that will be investigated hereafter. Although it is based on real events, the story and characters in *Freedom Hospital* are fictional. Therefore, only the key historical events will be alluded to.

Freedom Hospital begins in March 2012 which, coincidentally, evokes the political situation of the time, namely, the Arab Spring. The term is used to refer to a “series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s” (Wikipedia). The movement started in Tunisia but quickly spread to all the Arab world, including Syria. “At its core,” write Jacqueline & Shereen Ismael, “the Arab Spring is a popular rejection of the ‘uncivil’ Arab state, which represents the historically-discontinuous and colonially-imposed oppressive state apparatus on the Arab world.” (229) Thus, the Arab Spring movement is an opposition to what J&S Ismael call “uncivil state”, on the one hand, and “an attempt to construct an indigenous—authentic—new politics that represents the popular will” (230) on the other. In the case of Syria, the Arab Spring is a massive opposition to Bashar-al-Assad’s dictatorship and the violent repression that results from it. It is also a call from the youth of Syria who demand change.

The tangible tension between the regime and the people lead to “a brutal civil war” (Ismael 229) that opposes the regime of Assad and its army to “a disparate ‘Free Syrian Army’” (ibid.) lead by rebels and civilians. The two parties are represented in *Freedom Hospital* as such. Yasmin, for instance, is openly against Assad’s regime. The book also shows demonstrations against the dictator (see 51). The Free Syrian Army is represented by Abu Taysir, an ambiguous character leading the local branch of the coalition and who directs operations against the regime, for instance the attack at the airport where Assad’s troops are located. This fictional event might be inspired by the real battle for the Abu al-Duhur Military Airbase in September 2012.

The Colonel and Salem, as learned later in the book, are both part of the regime of Assad; Salem was a former infiltrate for the Syrian Intelligence Agency, and the Colonel is the direct opponent of the leader of the Free Syrian Army. As explained at the beginning of the graphic novel, the Colonel was “one of the first officials to authorise the use of firearms against civilians at peaceful demonstrations”. Therefore, this character encompasses all the high authorities of the regime and their repressive actions against civilians.

A third party can be said to be involved in the Syrian civil war. The continuous instability in the country gives rise to extremism on both parts. More specifically, 2012 marks the rise of Islamic groups in every part of the country and the Arab world more generally. This rise is also illustrated in *Freedom Hospital* through the rallies of notorious Salafist Abu Qatada and provides a glimpse of the violence that will soon devastate Syria and the rest of the world.

Lastly, it should be stressed that the graphic novel revolves around the lives of Syrian civilians living at the heart of the conflict. They are doctors (Yasmin), foreign reporters (Sophie), former rebels or soldiers from both sides, inpatients, families, children. In other words, *Freedom Hospital* depicts the intertwined fate of people who, regardless of their background, have to come together and help each other out.

Freedom Hospital begins in Spring 2012 and ends a year later. In one year, violence has escalated quickly, making countless of casualties and forcing millions of civilians to flee their homes. On the current situation in Syria, as of 2015, Uludag writes: “When the civil war first erupted in Syria, eliminating Bashar al Assad and his regime was the top priority for most Western powers including the U.S. (...) However, at present, the main threat is seen to be ISIS and JN⁹ as both groups have been responsible for many atrocities.” (5) Adding to a brutal civil war, Syria now has to face violence from Islamic groups such as ISIS and the attacks from foreign forces as well. Moreover, Uludag believes that “the fight in Syria is expected to continue for years. The fall of Assad continues to be illusive.” (7) As of 2020, the situation in Syria is still terrible. Now, the country adds another problem to its long list of disasters, this time in the form of a pandemic.

4.6. Analysis

The following sections will investigate how the violent reality of Syria is represented in *Freedom Hospital* and how Sulaiman uses the advantages of the comics medium to do so, but also the question of (not) representing traumatic memory and how it influences the narrative.

4.6.1. Style & narration

Freedom Hospital is a story of war and resilience. Therefore, the style is supposedly fit to depict the atrocities and also mirrors the ongoing tension of the conflict. The art style of Hamid Sulaiman is relatively simple, to the extent that he uses simple lines and no colours; the graphic

⁹ Jahbat al Nusra, Al Qaeda affiliate.

novel is all black-and-white. However, it is precisely the deep black strokes that make the book so intense and original.

When asked why he only used black and white in his graphic novel, which, symbolically, carries the distinction of good and evil, Sulaiman explains that he did not want to take a stand and to depict one side as better than the other one. What he wanted to do was simply to raise questions about the conflict, not to give answers (see Sulaiman 2017). Therefore, it can be argued that the use of black and white is not symbolical but is rather a deliberate artistic choice. As a matter of fact, Sulaiman uses black to create a strong contrast with the background and on the faces of his characters as well. The faces, however, are not very detailed; Sulaiman is originally an architect and is more comfortable drawing objects such as buildings and cars (see *ibid.*). If we consider fig. 23 & 24, the street and the cars in fig. 23 look very realistic. The page almost looks like a picture in black-and-white, whereas the face of the woman in fig.24 lacks details, but not emotions. The woman looks ghostly, and the darkness of her eyes and mouth expresses the weight of her distress after the loss of her young daughter.



Fig. 23: *Freedom Hospital*, p.19.



Fig. 24: Extract from *Freedom Hospital*, p.153.

There are many instances in *Freedom Hospital* where the panels look very realistic. As a matter of fact, Sulaiman says that he was inspired by the pictures of the revolution and decided to redraw them to include them in his graphic novel (see Sulaiman 2017). More specifically, he directed his interest towards the pictures of the demonstrations which, he says, were broadcasted by the media in every corner of the world. According to him, those scenes are the only ones used to describe what is going on in Syria. But the audience never gets to know what is really going on for the people as individuals. The media show faces, but never the stories behind them. Thus, Sulaiman wanted to give these unknown faces a story to tell. That is why, he says, he included his own characters in the photos of the demonstration, so that he could represent the people and their stories (see *ibid.*). Examples of this are the fig. 25&26, which show the picture of a peaceful demonstration and the re-drawing of the latter respectively.

Sulaiman wants to show the many faces of the revolution and the people getting together to march and chant in the streets. As it already been said, demonstrations are illustrated many times in the graphic novel. On pages 52-53, a particular scene is striking by its symbolism (see fig. 27). The double-page panel shows strange human-like figures holding hands and dancing in circle. The whole form overhangs a dense crowd. This scene is directly inspired by the famous painting “Danse (II)” by French painter Henri Matisse. Sulaiman explains that he wanted to represent the braveness of the people who take the streets to demonstrate against the regime. He adds that these demonstrations are always rhythmmed by dances and songs, hence the 1910-painting by Henri Matisse (see Sulaiman 2017). However, the moments of joy are short-lived and always interrupted by violence, like on page 56.

In terms of narration, the graphic novel does not have a known narrator. The narration is rather external and does not focus on one character’s point of view, although it presents the story mostly from Yasmin’s perspective. The story is told chronologically, and the timespan is one year, from Spring 2012 to the beginning of the next year. The only information given by the “narrator” are put in the captions. As seen in 4.4., the captions are mostly the number of casualties or indicate the origin of the weapons illustrated in the story. Even though showing the numbers might seem as an odd choice in a graphic novel, for Sulaiman, it carries a whole different meaning. The cartoonist was still in Syria at the beginning of the revolution, and he explains that the number of casualties was given from the start, to the point that it became a sort of “calendar” to follow the revolution (see Sulaiman 2017). After fleeing his country and, consequently, adopting an outsider’s view on the conflict, Sulaiman still wanted to know the numbers to try and follow what was going on in his homeland. Therefore, it was important for him to translate this habit into his graphic novel as well (see *ibid.*).

Therefore, the ambiguity between fiction and reality is highlighted in both the style and the narration; Sulaiman uses real pictures that he redraws after, but the events in *Freedom Hospital* are told through the perspective of “a gallery of characters who represent [the] diversity [of Syria].” (Sulaiman 2017) The characters are, of course, fictional. Because Sulaiman wanted to provide as many points of view as possible on the conflict, he also had to illustrate the ongoing violence that can appear at any time and any place, as it will be seen in the following section.



Fig. 25: Picture of a peaceful demonstration in Syria, 2012. (blogpost.com)

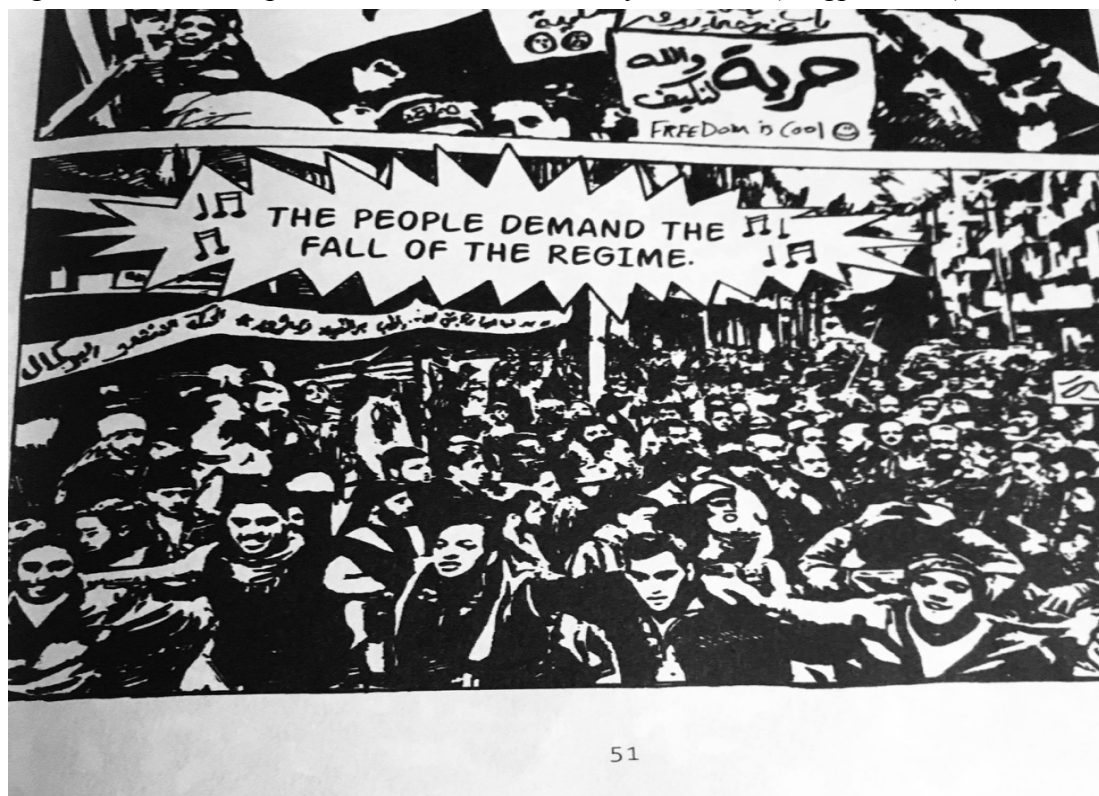


Fig. 26: A similar scene in Sulaiman, Hamid. *Freedom Hospital*. P.51.



Fig. 27: *Freedom Hospital*, pp.52-53.

4.6.2. Representation of violence and terrorism

The reviews on the back cover of *Freedom Hospital* describe the story of the graphic novel as follows: “gut-wrenching”, “explosive” and “descent into cataclysm”, to only name a few. Thus, the reader knows before reading the first pages that *Freedom Hospital* will show the revolution and its darkest sides and will not try to embellish the situation in Syria. Consequently, *Freedom Hospital* can be described as a story of violence as well.

As already seen in the previous section, the stark black and white style already marks the tone of the story. Moreover, black is predominant in the book, and is used to depict various emotions and situations. Surprisingly enough, blood is usually represented by white strokes in most instances in the graphic novel. Usually considered as less striking than black, white used against a complete dark background does not lessen the shock and gruesome aspect of blood and wounded bodies. On pages 174-175 (fig.28), a severed leg is illustrated against a dark background, giving the impression of it almost floating on the page. Blood is gushing profusely from the amputated member and is represented by a white spatter with paint-like splashes. Although the blood is not represented by a deep red, the reader understands directly what the scene is about and is equally struck by the horror. Moreover, the fact that the scene is presented as a whole picture fixed in time and spread out on two pages reinforces the feeling of shock on

the reader's part. As argued by Earle in *Comics, Trauma, and the New art of War*, "The absence of frames on the page edges removes any sense of constriction or confinement—the image has total control on the page" (49). A page filled with one single image and no gutter is called a "bleed" (see *ibid.*). Adding to that, Earle writes that "Bleeds are, by their nature, violent. The image's domination of the page is striking and demands the reader's complete attention" (*ibid.*). In other words, the reader cannot escape the violent image presented on the page. The temporality usually expressed in the gutters is absent, forcing the reader to focus their attention on the brutal drawing alone. In the case of the example used above, the time spent to contemplate the horror of a severed leg is doubled, because the image takes two pages.



Fig. 28: *Freedom Hospital*, pp.174-175.

A similar technique is used to depict the inhuman murder of a child during a demonstration in chapter one, pages 56-57 (fig.29). The boy shot by the sniper is illustrated on the left, on page 56. The impact nor the expression of the boy can be deciphered, but the reader senses the violence of the shot by looking at the stark white strokes coming out of the boy, which express the blood gushing out of his body after a bullet goes right through it. Page 57 is

entirely black with fine white spots and lines. The disposition of the double-page mirrors the impression of a static, fixed moment. It almost looks like a contrasted picture has been taken. It should also be stressed that the body and the blood are the only visible elements of the scene. The marching crowd and the signs (visible on the previous page) are all evicted from the bleed. Thus, the reader can only focus on the body being shot. It is almost like trauma has been captured on the page. As argued by Chute in “Comics Form and Narrating Lives”,

The ability to use the space of the page to interlace or overlay different temporalities, to place pressure on linearity and conventional notions of sequence, causality, and progression, is a reason comics can address itself powerfully to historical and life narrative. And if comics is about mapping, it is also about bodies—about locating them in space and time. It has a multivalent and complex relation to embodiment. Embodiment in comics may be read as a kind of compensation for lost bodies, for lost histories. (112)

The wounded body in this scene might be the embodiment of all the bodies whose stories are lost in the tragic war narrative of Syria. No recognisable feature can be seen on the boy. Therefore, it is the body itself that is at the centre of the reader’s attention. More specifically, it is the wounded body that is emphasized on the page; temporal and spatial elements are invisible in the sequence. The body seems to fly away in the void. There is nothing left on the page but a body giving away to violence.



Fig. 29: *Freedom Hospital*, pp.56-57.

Many scenes of disturbing violence are portrayed in the graphic novel. It seems that the more violent a scene is, the less the reader is able to look away from the page. This process is realized through techniques such as the one seen above, but also through the use of focalization, as seen in 3.3.2. Page 127 (fig.30) displays a terrible scene after a bombing near Freedom Hospital. A very young child is severely wounded and lies in complete shock while a man is injecting some morphine into her arm. Blood is dripping from her face; here, the blood is black can be confused with the child's hair. Therefore, the reader can only imagine the severity of the head wound. The page is made of three panels of the same size. The panel above offers an overview of the man attending to the child. Then, as the reader looks down, the following panels show a close-up on the child's face. Because the scene is so disturbing and heart-wrenching to watch, one's first reflex is to look away. But because of the sequence of panels and the layout of the page, the reader has no other choice but to contemplate the dire scene and see the face of the child becoming more detailed. The reader cannot turn away from the horrors. A further detail should be highlighted, and that is the words—or screams of the child. Traditionally, the speech and thoughts of the characters are presented in speech or thought bubble. Here, the words of the child are written in a different font and there is no speech bubble. This might indicate that the child is, in fact, screaming: "please, no, no injections" (127). Therefore, the horrors are illustrated in both the graphic and sonic dimension of the page.



Fig. 30: *Freedom Hospital*, p.127.

Violence as such is represented throughout the graphic novel as well. The reader witnesses the before, *during* and after the act of violence. Some instances have already been explained above (see fig. 29), but there are many drawn sequences that do not involve wounded bodies directly. In chapter 2, the pages 150-151 show a helicopter dropping bombs on the city (fig. 31). The above panels of page 150 depict the helicopter passing the city and then slowly moving away. The last panel shows barrel-like bombs falling from the sky. The fall is portrayed on the following page, and it looks endless: the use of same-size panels and empty background suggests the painfully long fall in the sky above the city. Sulaiman wanted to express the feeling of dread whilst watching the bombs falling from the sky. He explains that these explosive devices are often used in the war and are extremely dangerous; they are dropped randomly, to the extent that one can never know where they will land exactly (see Sulaiman 2017). These events happened—and still happen daily, forcing the civilians to be on the lookout constantly.

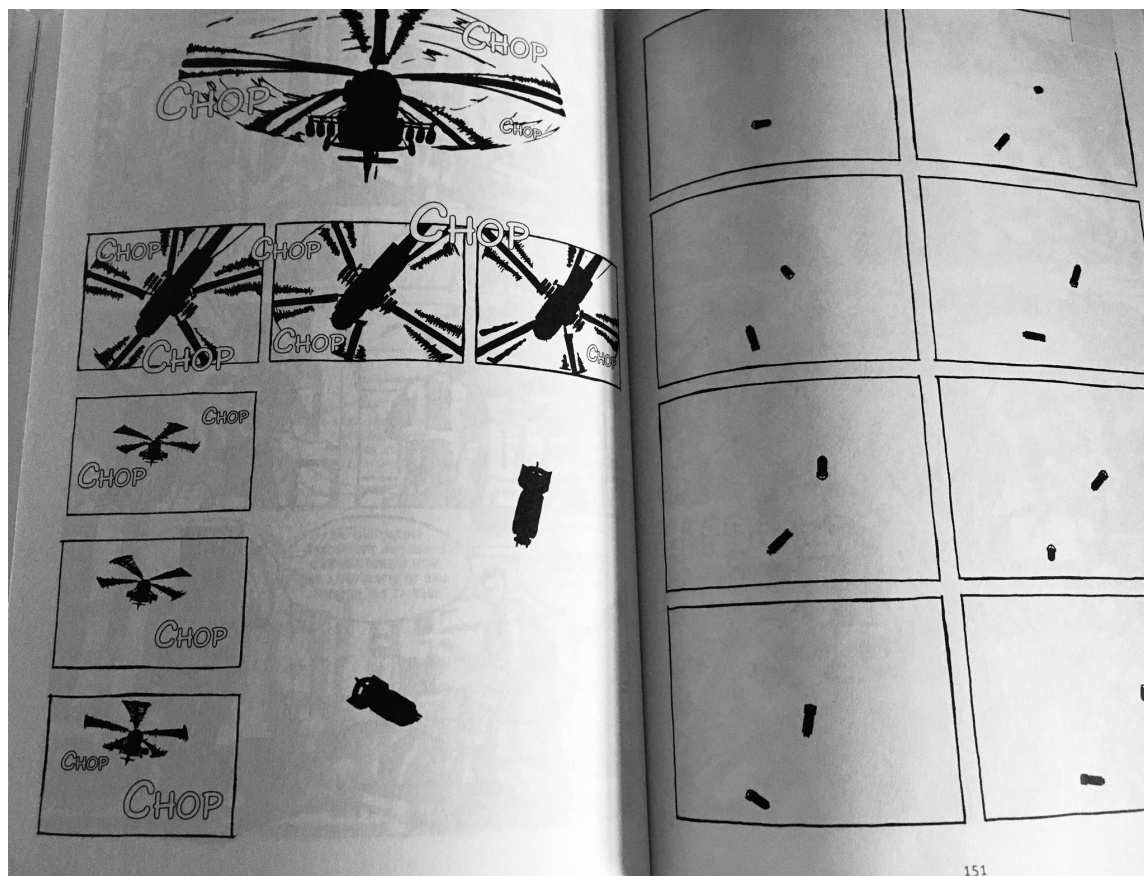


Fig. 31: *Freedom Hospital*, pp.150-151.

The endless wait portrayed in the scene above shows the before of the attack. The attacks themselves are, as already said, illustrated as well. These are most often bombings or air strikes. Fig. 32 and 33 show the explosion of the barrels and a missile striking an area near Freedom Hospital respectively. Fig. 32 portrays the bombing in the second half of the bleed. The

explosion is drawn against a white background with straight black strokes, creating an oval-like form. Thus, it is the extremely brief moment when the barrel touches the building that is illustrated here. The use of the onomatopoeia (“Whaam!”) suggests the intensity of the explosion, and the overall white background mirrors the blinding instant when a bomb explodes. Here, the bleed reverses the temporary feature of the moment and enables the reader to really examine the violence of the explosion. It fixes the moment in time for the reader to focus on the details of the explosion itself (its impact, the fragments flying, etc.). In the above part of the bleed, a second barrel is falling from the sky and will likely create a similar scenario. Fig. 33 displays a similar scene but uses a different method to portray it. The page is not a bleed but is made of four distinct panels showing different stages of the explosion. The first panel illustrates the violence of the impact and the instantaneous explosion; a huge dark cloud seems to levitate well above the buildings. The second one shows a mushroom cloud growing up in the sky, and the last two portray the remnants of the explosion and the smoke slowly spreading and dispersing. Unlike fig.32, black lines and dark hues are used in fig.33 to represent the explosion, hence the suggestion of very dark smoke resulting from it. There is no onomatopoeia as well; the page is completely silent. Thus, it might suggest that the scene is witnessed from far away, and the reader is left to imagine the violence and impact of the explosion in the city. There is no caption nor indication of time, but the gutters might indicate that the panels display the long minutes after the explosion. The following page is also silent and shows people bustling about the wounded, probably minutes or hours after the explosion.



Fig. 32. *Freedom Hospital*, p.182.



Fig. 33: *Freedom Hospital*, p.123.

The Syrian government is usually behind the bombings and attacks on the civilians, which can be considered as a form of state terrorism. As argued in previous sections, terrorism is rather subjective and depends on a number of criteria, especially in the case of conflicts such as the one in Syria. The actions of the rebel army can also be considered as a form of terrorism for some, while they are seen as necessary for others. Again, the aim of this dissertation is not to take a stand and to categorize the actions of the several parties involved in the conflict. In terms of representation, *Freedom Hospital* shows attacks from the two main sides involved in the civil war (Assad's government and the Free Syrian Army), and the attacks are not legitimized in any way. It should again be stressed that Sulaiman's wish with his graphic novel is to present the reality of Syrians during the civil war, not to seek the truth which is, according to him, "relative" (Sulaiman 2017). The infamous Islamist group Daesh is alluded to in the graphic novel as well, although their actions are not the focus of the story. Only the emergence of the terrorist organization is portrayed in *Freedom Hospital*, but the attacks themselves are never shown. To illustrate the rise of Daesh, the author only shows their actions through videos watched by his characters. In this way, Sulaiman takes a step back from the issue by presenting it as something emerging, distant. It also mirrors the intense use of social media by the

organization. Page 218 (fig.34) and the following show snapshots from a YouTube video that Yasmin is watching. Training, shooting, hand-to-hand combat, the video is a propaganda for Daesh and even shows children training to become soldiers. Yasmin is clearly disgusted by “how the extremists on both sides are using children” (224). The graphic novel only hints at the future attacks carried out by the organization and relies on the reader’s knowledge to imagine what is to come only a few months after the events in the story.

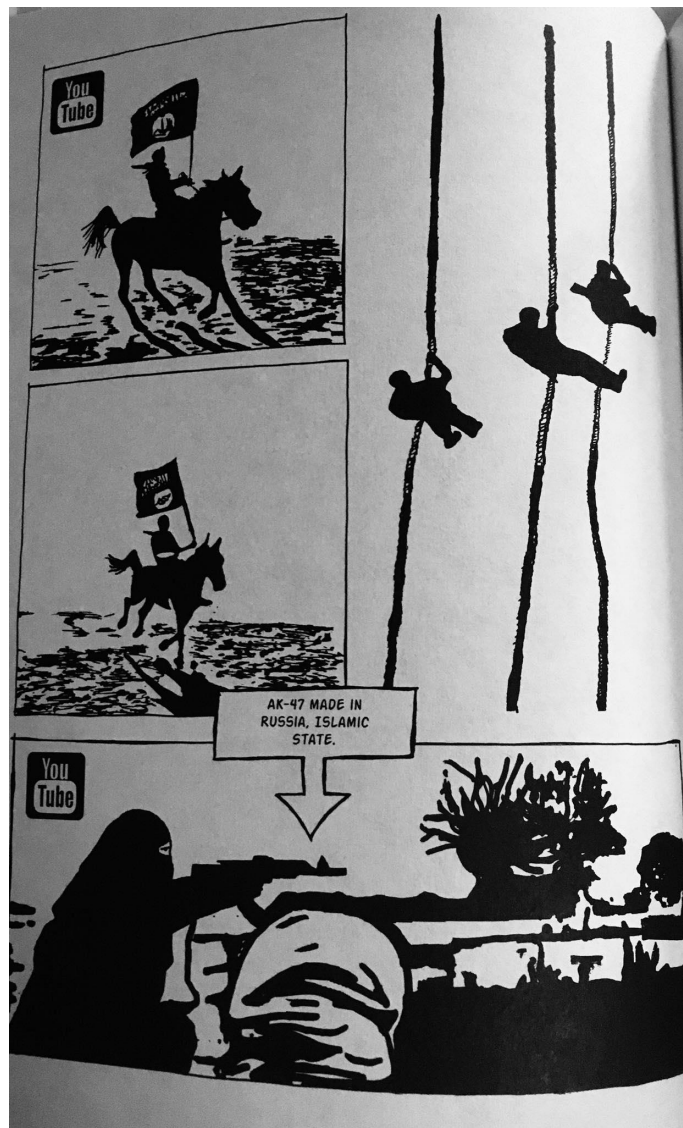


Fig. 34: *Freedom Hospital*, p.218.

The analysis of the panels above suggests that *Freedom Hospital* places a great emphasis on violence and how it affects the body; whether it is a severed limb (fig. 28), a gunshot (fig. 29) or a wounded child in the rumble after an explosion (fig.30), the graphic novel illustrates an array of wounds and torn bodies during the civil war. Furthermore, *Freedom Hospital* even shows dead bodies and the rituals around them. The bodies of Dr Yazan and

Elias (pp. 178 and 179 respectively), who both perished in the bombing of the hospital, are buried according to the Islamic traditions (fig.35). The following pages show a large number of people gathering at the cemetery to celebrate their fallen comrades. The event, which might be seen as risky considering the tension in the country, is still a part of the Syrians' life during the revolution, explains Sulaiman. As hinted above, the civilians who demonstrate in the streets, sing and dance together know that those moments of joy are almost automatically followed by violence and death. The next gathering, says Sulaiman, is in the cemetery to bury the dead of the revolution. Then, the next day, the demonstrations resume. It is the endless cycle of violence during the civil war (see Sulaiman 2017). Moreover, Earle believes that the depiction of mourning and rituals is, in a way, part of the grieving process but also the representation of trauma. Talking more specifically about 9/11 texts, she writes:

The depiction of mourning ritual and shrines has much precedent in the literature of conflicts, as already seen in *The Iliad*, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and *Beowulf*. In these texts, the result of conflict is death and destruction and, as such, the depictions of mourning are outpourings of grief and anguish (...) The 9/11 charity comics do not handle mourning in this fashion. For them, it is not the end of the story, but rather another period within it. (...) This gives the texts an aura of hope that is missing in many other conflict comics, in which the overwhelming horror of the traumatic experience keeps the text and its characters locked in traumatic limbo. (69)

This could be applied to *Freedom Hospital* as well. As explained by Sulaiman himself, the cycle of violence is punctuated by hopeful gatherings of the civilians. These events are vital for the people who desperately need to remain hopeful in order to survive. On page 182, the man's speech is hopeful and presents a good after-life for the fallen: "the angels have pronounced: 'you acted well'. So dry your tears. The martyrs are not dead, they live on in paradise, Insha'Allah." By presenting the dead as martyrs, it could be said that it temporarily lightens the horrors and the shock of the population. Moreover, the martyrs become figures of hope themselves. They remind everyone that the fight for freedom is not useless, and that life still goes on despite the horrors.

Therefore, it can be said that the reality of the Syrian people is represented in all aspects, from the most hopeful to the most tragic ones. Violence has a predominant role in the graphic novel, but the reality is much more complex. As a matter of fact, life goes on between the acts of violence and the death of the civilians. The resilience of the latter at the heart of the conflict is illustrated and emphasized in the graphic novel.



Fig. 35: *Freedom Hospital*, p.181.

4.6.3. Trauma and the individual

As seen in the above section, *Freedom Hospital* is undoubtedly a story of violence. While section 4.6.2. focuses mainly on the acts of violence, this next section aims to see how the latter influences the characters in the story, and how the medium of comics is apt for representing the psychological distress following a traumatic event.

It could be argued that trauma is embodied by one main character in the story, and that is, Salem. But as already stated in 4.3.3., the young man is a very ambiguous character, hence unreliable. As a matter of fact, Salem is presented as visibly distressed after a bullet wound that caused him to lose his memory. He does not remember anything from his life safe his name. His life story has been thoroughly explained in the dedicated section, but several elements indicate that Salem really is traumatized by his own past, despite lying about it. Indeed, the

graphic novel offers several instances where the reader can get a look inside Salem's head and realize that he is, in fact, telling the truth most of the time. After being asked about Salem being his real name, the latter responds "I don't know. The last thing I remember is looking down the barrel of the gun" (43). The first panel on the page is followed by one showing a shadow-like figure pointing a gun directly at the reader (see fig. 36).



Fig.36: Extract from *Freedom Hospital*, p.43.

The disposition of the panels suggests that the one on the right is the recollection of Salem. Thus, the reader gets to witness Salem describing his own memory, and the very memory conjointly. Comics is an art of tensions and is able to present different temporalities at the same time and challenge the reader's interpretation, as it has been argued throughout the dissertation. Professor Maheen Ahmed believes that "Comics depend on visual and verbal elements involved in varying degrees of symbiosis. Each panel, with its combination of words and images, is embedded in a network of relationships with other panels and media within and beyond the comic book" (4). Thus, the reading and interpretation of the story are directly influenced by the combination of words and images but also the "network of relationships" between the panels across the comic book. Therefore, Ahmed shares the belief that comics is a very open medium. Adding to that, she mentions Umberto Eco who "describes openness as a feature by which the reader—or listener or viewer, as the case may be—is offered several possibilities of interpretation that are ensconced in a cohesive narrative and aesthetic structure" (3). Not only is the role of the reader emphasized again, but also the fact that most comic books are open for multiple interpretations. In the case of Salem in *Freedom Hospital*, the notion of openness is called for towards the end of the graphic novel, when the reader acknowledges Salem's true motives. The previous information about the character must be re-evaluated. The revelation

calls for a second reading, during which the reader might understand the words of Salem differently.

The very idea of ambiguity is, in fact, at the centre of trauma representation. Several authors such as Chute argue that the very essence of trauma is its alienating nature and, therefore, the inadequacy in representing the latter accurately (see *Graphic women* 152). The representation of a traumatic event relies mostly on the victim's memory and perception of it. Psychiatrist Dori Laub ponders on the accuracy of a survivor's testimony (in this case, of the Holocaust) with fallible memory. In his opinion, listening to the patient only is a form of accurate testimony: "Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right" (62). In other words, explaining the traumatic event with one's perceptions, even with a fallible memory, is an accurate form of testimony, although not factual or historical. Memory is, in fact, an important trope in *Freedom Hospital*, especially for Salem. The character is visibly upset, lost and tries to reconcile with his own identity throughout the chapters. Although he personally admits to lying about his memory loss in the final chapter, the reader is left to wonder if that statement is entirely true or not. As a matter of fact, on page 69, a scene portrays a psychiatrist trying to help Salem regain his memory by showing him pictures of people and places that might be familiar. Salem does not recognize anything ("we should call him mr 'I-dunno' ") and the psychiatrist is struck by his ignorance. The question is, then, whether Salem really manages to fake his memory loss in front of a professional. The other possibility is that Salem's memory loss is genuine, but only partial. As already seen above, the reader follows the young man's journey to build his new life in the midst of the revolution. But the reader, like Salem, does not know the identity of the person who tried to kill him until the very end of the story. Therefore, all these elements make it difficult to decipher Salem's emotions and to foresee his actions.

A further possibility is that Salem's traumatic experiences have completely altered his perception of reality and self-awareness. As argued by Earle, "When this environment [in which a character exists] is shaken by conflict and traumatic experiences, our sense of self is likely to be shaken, too. (...) Thus, the relationship between a traumatized individual and those around him will be changed—if not damaged by the traumatic event" (97-98). After ending up in the hospital, Salem has to deal with his own inner demons but also the dire situation around him. The young man awakes in the middle of a bloody conflict, loses newly made friends, and has trouble deciding which side he is on. He betrays Yasmin before helping her as well. In sum, it can be said that the ambiguity of the character is directly influenced by the trauma he experienced. Moreover, the situation in which Salem ends up is in no way fit to deal with his past stress. On the contrary, it only adds to the already existing trauma. As it is already hinted

at in 4.3.3., the character of Salem can be seen as an embodiment of the national trauma that plagues the individual in different ways and makes it difficult for the latter to heal from their psychological wounds.

Freedom Hospital does indeed portray the national trauma of Syria in different instances, and not only through the main characters. In the middle of loss and extreme violence, several unnamed civilians are addressing the camera to disclose their distress. If we look back at fig. 24, which shows a woman desperately looking for her daughter who most probably perished in the explosion, the following panels portray the woman directly speaking to the camera. She says: “keep filming, the world needs to see what Bashar is doing to us. (...) These children are innocent. Why are they being killed? Oh god, oh god, my Ghalia” (153). The sequence of three panels illustrates different emotions, from determination (“keep filming”), anger (“where is the Arab league?”) to utter despair respectively. The following pages show a similar scene. This time, a man in underwear stands in the middle of the ruins of his home. “Look at this building, film it. **Film it**. This was my home. I was taking a shower, now look at me on the street and I can’t find my children” (154; emphasis in the original), he shouts to the camera. On the next page (fig. 37), the man addresses Bashar through the camera directly: “are you the son of the devil? Go [f*ck] yourself, Bashar!!! What do you want?” (155). The disposition of the panels on the page also suggests a mix of emotions felt by the character. The first two panels depict the man being visibly furious (“are you the son of the devil?”). In the last ones at the bottom of the page, it is a cry for help and peace that comes out of the man’s mouth: “look at these people dying. Let us live in peace. Leave!” However, in the middle of the page, one panel is visibly bigger than the others. The use of a larger panel instead of two might suggest that the moment is lingering. The expression of the man is not really readable, but his white eyes express helplessness. In the middle of a passionate speech, it looks like the man pauses and tries to comprehend what just happened. He is in utter disbelief when he asks: “what do you want from us?”.



Fig. 37: *Freedom Hospital*, p.155.

The use of anonymous characters whose features are not recognizable falls in line with Sulaiman's wish to give a voice to the unknown victims of the revolution. Moreover, the extracts analysed above mirror YouTube videos. As explained by the author himself, countless of videos about the conflict can be found on the Internet, but they are always the same; they show mostly the attacks and the immediate damages (see Sulaiman 2017). The graphic novel thus imitates a different medium but brings another dimension to it. The characters in the scenes illustrated above are anonymous as well as in the videos, but the different dimensions of comics provide a space where the reader can direct their attention to the range of emotions felt by the characters on the page. Each panel illustrates a feeling, and the gutters mark a pause to reflect on the latter while looking at the bigger picture. In a way, the reader is able to take time and to connect with the unnamed characters in the middle of a traumatic event.

The portrayal of different emotions simultaneously is made possible by the medium of comics and its rather open structure. On page 89 (fig. 38), for instance, the inpatients of Freedom Hospital are hiding in an underground shelter after soldiers of Assad's army are raiding the area to find rebels. Page 89 is made up of one large panel showing the soldiers marching on the city: "I've heard these [assh*les] set up a hospital for the rebel traitors. Find it!". The second half of the page is a grid of six identical panels, each one showing a different character. The composition of the page is very interesting because it manages to picture the

same moment through various perspectives. The top of the page illustrates the street, while the bottom shows the underground. Thus, the reader is able to witness what is happening on and under the ground simultaneously and see the reactions of the characters as well. The six panels are all black; the features of the characters are drawn with white lines. The use of black suggests the complete darkness in which they hide, and the white is used to underline the shock on their faces. The tension is unbearable, and the reader can really imagine the dread felt by the characters.

While fig.38 does not depict trauma directly, it is still a good example to show that different perspectives and tension are crucial for representing trauma. *Freedom Hospital* is mainly a story about violence and war and is, accordingly, a story of national distress as well. As seen in the previous sections, it is the conflict and how it affects a country that is the main subject of the graphic novel. Through fictional characters from different backgrounds, it is the whole identity of Syria that is represented and, more generally, the national trauma.

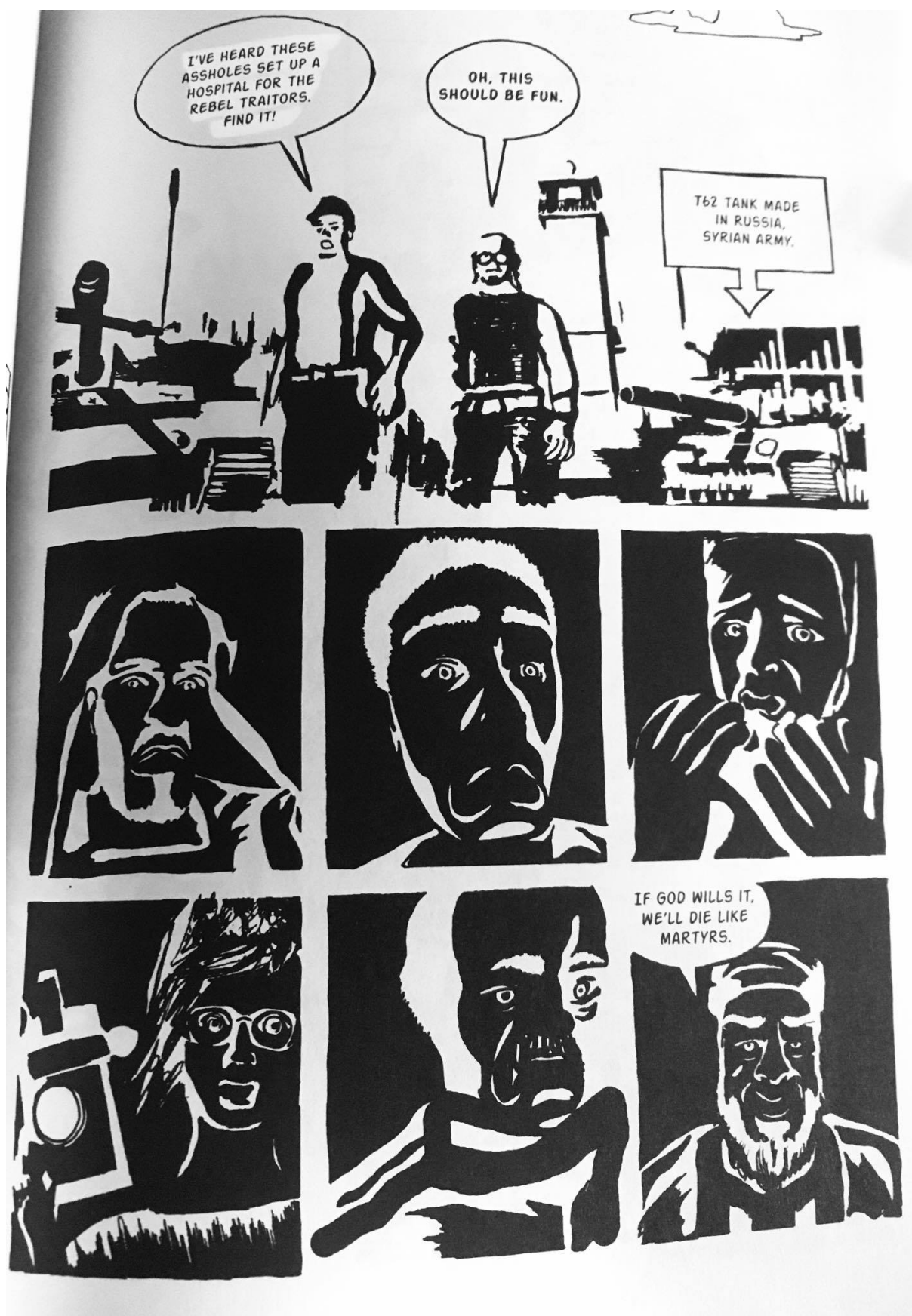


Fig. 38: *Freedom Hospital*, p.89.

5. Comparative analysis: different approaches to violence

In the last chapter of the dissertation, the differences between *Palestine* and *Freedom Hospital* will be highlighted as well as the similarities between the two works. In order to do so, the comparison between the graphic novels is based on several topics and criteria directly linked to the subject of the dissertation. Thus, the following sections do not claim to put one graphic novel above the other. The aim of this last chapter is simply to compare how violence and conflicts are represented in the two graphic novels and, accordingly, to reach a conclusion on how comics revolutionize the field.

5.1. When fiction meets reality

It seems relevant to start the comparison by looking at the events themselves. As a matter of fact, *Palestine* and *Freedom Hospital* deal with very similar subjects, namely, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian civil war respectively. Furthermore, the locations are very close; the events in the two graphic novels happen to unfold in the Middle East, in neighbouring countries. The temporal reference is, however, rather different. Sacco went to Israel and the Occupied Territories in the 1990s, whereas the story in *Freedom Hospital* happens in 2012. However, because the conflict in Israel and Palestine is still an ongoing issue, *Palestine* is far from being outdated.

Therefore, it can be said that the two graphic novels share many similarities in terms of story: they both deal with ongoing conflicts and represent the life of the people on the ground. What is radically different, however, is the fiction/nonfiction factor. *Palestine* is presented as a drawn documentary, whereas *Freedom Hospital* is openly fictional. Accordingly, this factor influences the first approach to the graphic novel. In the case of *Palestine*, the reader knows from the start that Joe Sacco is materialized in his graphic novel and acts like a familiar instance for the reader to follow. In the introduction of the book written by Edward Said and entitled “Homage to Joe Sacco”, the American-Palestinian literary critic depicts Joe Sacco and his work as follows: “With the exception of one or two novelists and poets, no one has ever rendered this terrible state of affairs better than Joe Sacco (...) Joe is a listening, watchful presence, sometimes skeptical, sometimes fed up, but mostly sympathetic and funny (...) Joe is there to find out why things are the way they are and why there seems to have been an impasse for so long” (iii-iv). The presence of Joe Sacco in his own book highlights the nonfiction factor and the fact that the author’s aim is to carefully render the lives of the people he meets on his journey. Adding to that, Said goes on by saying that “what finally makes Sacco so unusual a portrayer of life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is that his true concern is finally

history's victims" (v). The quote indicates the historical feature of the graphic novel as well as the desire to go beyond the limits of the usual depiction of history, and to present characters that are, in Said's words, "history's losers" and "their mostly unspoken will to go on, and their willingness to cling to their story, to retell it" (ibid.). *Palestine's* main focus is, thus, to tell the story of real people whom Sacco has met in the fringe of disaster.

Freedom Hospital works slightly differently and relies on fiction to depict events and places that actually exist. As already stated in the previous chapters, the characters in the graphic novel are all fictional, and so are the places. The latter are inspired by typical Syrian towns. There are many diverse characters, but very little is known about them. The story does not focus on one specific character but tries to tell each and every one's background at some point in the graphic novel. The reader only acknowledges the author's motives and ideas at the very end of the book, in the postscript. In the short abstract, Sulaiman explains that he is from Syria himself and that he fled the revolution in its early days in 2011. Nonetheless, the cartoonist followed the revolution from afar and was determined to give his own vision of the latter, as he explains in many interviews. *Freedom Hospital* is based on his memories of Syria and the ones of the people he walked alongside during the demonstrations.

The deliberate choice to use only nonfiction or a mix of fictional and real elements can be traced back to the authors' background. As a matter of fact, Sacco is originally a journalist, as seen in chapter 2. His method is quite similar to the one of a journalist, even more so of a reporter, which is to provide a deep analysis of a situation on the ground. Sacco goes a step further by spending all his time with the people usually ignored by the media such as mainstream journalism. Sacco's motives are summarized by literary scholar Hillary Chute in this manner: "Among cartoonists, even those working in nonfiction, Sacco's style is distinct in its quality of realism. Sacco's images are shaped by what we might think of as an ethnographic aesthetics of precision and accuracy" (*Disaster Drawn* 216). Again, it is the strive for accuracy and realism that is highlighted when describing Sacco's style. Moreover, one could even speak of historical accuracy, because the history of the people of Palestine have been erased for so long. Edward Said supports Sacco's work for that matter, because he himself was "concerned with refuting the misrepresentations and dehumanizations of our history, trying at the same time to give the Palestinian narrative (...) a presence and a human shape" (iii). Along these lines, Chute believes that "Sacco's work is not about advocacy; it is about history" (*Disaster Drawn* 224). I would like to add that not only is historical representation at the centre of Sacco's concern, but most importantly, the embodiment of historical repression of a whole community. In other words, Sacco focuses on the physicality of the conflict and on the almost bodily effects

it has on people. That is why the comics journalist presents a myriad of people, each yearning to tell their story, hence the emphasis on features such as the mouth, as seen in chapter 3.

On the contrary, Sulaiman expresses his motives in the following quote: “I chose to blend fiction and fact to avoid having to explain what was true or false. I’m interested in showing how events unfolded in a personal way” (“Postscript”). This affirmation comes up often when the cartoonist is asked about the blueprint of his graphic novel. Interviewed by Taz Studio in Leipzig, Sulaiman states that his graphic novel enables him to imagine the continuity of his life in Syria, since he does not live there anymore. He does not focus on historical truth nor display his own opinions about the conflict. The reality of the revolution “depends who you are asking [sic]”, Sulaiman says in the same interview, making it difficult to pin point every aspect of the conflict. Accordingly, the host of characters in *Freedom Hospital* are set to mirror the diversity of Syria and are inspired by himself and people he knows, Sulaiman adds. Thus, the graphic novel depicts the “cross-road of lives” during the revolution, albeit fictional. Nonetheless, Sulaiman manages to capture the essence of his homeland thanks to his own memories and testimonies of people on the ground. Rather than illustrating the stories of dozens of real people and families, the characters in the graphic novel are instances for people to relate to, because they generically embody the different classes of Syria. However, the characters are far from bland; they are complex, multi-sided and endearing. Therefore, the people who have experienced (or are still experiencing) the revolution can relate to them, on the one hand, but so can the readers who are not acquainted with it, on the other. This idea is similar to Sulaiman’s wish to present the diversity of his country to the whole world and to step away from the prejudices often displayed in mainstream media, such as in the news or on the Internet (see Sulaiman 2017). In other words, *Freedom Hospital* could be seen as a tribute to Syria by one of its inhabitants as well as a cross-cultural bridge between the Middle East and the Western world. It should be once again noted that Sulaiman has travelled a lot after leaving Syria, and that he has been living in France for a few years.

A further element should be highlighted in the distinction between the two artists’ background, and that is, the outsider/insider factor. As already explained, Joe Sacco was born in Malta but has been living in the United States most of his life. He travels a lot, but his stays are always motivated, whether it is for work or personal reasons. He has no connexion nor grand knowledge of the places he visits, except what he has learned in the media or what people teach him on the ground. In the case of *Palestine*, he admits that he grew up believing all Palestinians were terrorists, as seen in 3.1. Moreover, the outsider feature of the author is highlighted many times in his graphic novels, *Palestine* included. To quote Hillary Chute again, “Sacco emphasizes his lostness” (*Disaster Drawn* 228), as seen thoroughly in 2.2. For instance,

his avatar is always confused by the agitation around him, something his western mind is not used to. To give a more humorous example, he becomes fed up with tea by the end of his stay. These amusing details work as reminders that the character of Sacco is, like most readers, an outsider in the conflict and that the events around him are sometimes too difficult to cope with. Again, it shows that the use of an outsider character enables the reader to imagine the events depicted in the graphic novel more easily, because they discover them at the same time as the narrator. The easiness to picture the atmosphere of Israel and Palestinian territories is related to Sacco's style as well. As already said, his drawings are always full of details and very realistic. The strive for accuracy might be related to a further aspect, as explained by Said:

He is drawn to the place [Palestine] partly because (we learn from an exceptionally weird earlier comic *War Junkie*) of his Maltese family background during World War Two, partly because the post-modern world is so accessible to the young and curious American, partly because like Joseph Conrad's Marlow he is tugged at by the forgotten places and people of the world, those who don't make it to our television screens, or if they do, who are regularly portrayed as marginal (...) (iv)

Here, the personal motivations of Sacco are mentioned. His familial background and his inner curiosity have paved the way for his future graphic novels about people "who don't make it to our television screens". Therefore, we can assume that the historical accuracy in Sacco's works is directly linked to the fact that he is an outsider, and that he acknowledges it. Out of respect for the people he meets, sometimes in very violent situations, the graphic novels that Sacco produces describe a conflict as realistically as possible to honour the lives of the people usually invisible in most narratives. And because Sacco can always step away from the conflict eventually, he stands in a position to reflect on his own experiences and emotions and decide on the best way to tell stories that are not his.

The case of Hamid Sulaiman is rather different. Born in Syria, the cartoonist lived there until 2011, when he decided to flee the revolution after being arrested and released. A year later, Sulaiman ended up in France and started to reflect on the situation in his homeland. In his own words, he deplores the lack of information about the revolution as follows:

I realised that the absence of a free press in Syria had led to a massive lack of understanding, and while official Syrian media outfits were transmitting nothing but pro-Assad propaganda, pro-rebel media were no less guilty of churning out propaganda of their own. When I arrived in France in 2012, I saw that people's confusion about the situation in Syria was even greater. ("Postscript")

In short, the information about the revolution is biased, especially in Syria. Propaganda leaves no room for freedom of speech and of press. Caught in the unfurling wave of the revolution, Sulaiman did not realize that the situation of his country was misrepresented in the media around the world. In other words, in a position of insider *within* the conflict, Sulaiman did not have the opportunity to reflect on the latter. It is only after he managed to leave the conflict and travel to different countries (both neighbouring and distant) that the artist acknowledged the

“massive lack of understanding” of both Syrians and foreigners. Therefore, one could believe that Sulaiman’s aim is to educate people on the Syrian conflict. However, as already stated, the artist is not seeking to represent the truth—which is, he believes, biased as well. Rather, he simply wants to give his vision of the conflict, one that diverges from the usual depiction of Syria in the mainstream media. Consequently, the use of both real and fictional elements enables him to talk about the actual situation in Syria, on the one hand, but to maintain a certain distance and not expose his own opinions, on the other. In a way, *Freedom Hospital* can be seen as an educational tool that, thanks to fiction, offers a personal vision of the Syrian revolution and, accordingly, enables the reader to be moved by the story of a conflict that they might not be familiar with.

Adding to that, I also believe that *Freedom Hospital* can be understood as a catharsis for the author. Away from his homeland, Sulaiman wanted to imagine the life during the revolution. Therefore, the events and characters imagined by Sulaiman (and inspired by true events and people) might be a way to cope with his physical absence during the revolution. By leaving his country, the Syrian cartoonist automatically takes the position of an outsider. However, his choice to leave was probably motivated by the hazardous situation, hence not deliberate. Therefore, with *Freedom Hospital*, Sulaiman can maintain his position of insider while still being out of Syria and, accordingly, adopt a broader (or an outsider’s) view on the conflict. The graphic novel is a beautiful homage to his homeland and the people still on the ground, but also his way to take part in the revolution.

5.2. Style & representation

As seen in the previous section, the two graphic novels already share many similarities in terms of issues, the main one being the representation of a conflict of our time. The latter has been thoroughly explored in the previous chapters, two of which are dedicated to one graphic novel specifically. In this section, however, the methods used by the two comic book artists will be enumerated again and compared. Subsequently, this process will highlight the effects the different art styles produce in the narrative, and how it influences the interpretation of the reader.

5.2.1. The style

The main similarity in terms of style lies in the use of only black and white; *Palestine* and *Freedom Hospital* are totally devoid of colours. What is strikingly different, however, is the use of blank spaces and empty backgrounds. In *Freedom Hospital*, Sulaiman often uses stark contrasts between white and black to mark the presence of his characters in a given space. Fig.39, for instance, portrays Salem getting out of bed in the hospital. The character is represented by a white figure with no recognisable feature. The background is almost completely black; there is only one white window outlining the human figure, the bed sheets and the intravenous drip. The page is made of four panels and is completely silent; there is no speech-thought bubble nor caption. On the contrary, fig. 40 uses every space available on the page to add detail to the scene, which also takes place in a hospital. The narrator is visiting young children who were wounded during the Intifada. Each panel is filled with characters and small details, such as the doll on the nightstand, the patterns on the girl's pyjamas, or the shadow at the foot of her bed. Thus, there is not one panel on the page that is bland or empty. Even more so, elements of one panel cross over another (e.g. the hand of Sacco in the top panel). Moreover, the scene is far from being silent. The reader follows Sacco's impressions and thoughts as he takes pictures of the children. In sum, the distinction between the two pages highlights one of the main differences between the two art-styles, which is, realism.

Here, the term 'realism' should be understood as opposed to the cartoonish or simplistic aspect often associated with the representation of characters in mainstream comics. I use the term and more specifically the adjective 'realistic' to describe drawings that are detailed and try to render facial expressions as accurately as possible, for instance. In the case of *Palestine*, the amount of details on the characters' faces and bodies is impressive, as in fig.41. The eyebrows, the creases, the missing tooth and the chipped nails are details that give the old man an eerily realistic look; it is almost like looking at a picture.



Fig. 41: Extract from *Palestine*, p.40.



Fig. 39: *Freedom Hospital*, p.30.



Fig. 40: *Palestine*, p.33.

However, *Palestine* maintains his cartoonish features in different instances, the most convincing one being the avatar of Sacco and his goofy appearance, as seen previously. Furthermore, as Chute puts it, comics is always a self-reflective medium and can never be purely mimetic:

The medium of comics is always already self-conscious as an interpretative, and never purely mimetic, medium. (...) Taking for granted that “pure” historical representation is never possible, comics calls into question the status of any “objective” or “realistic” account, including historiographies—especially those that bank on the seeming transparency of words. (*Disaster Drawn* 198-199)

While this quote is mostly about the representation of history in nonfiction comic books, I believe it can also be applied to style more generally. As a matter of fact, the representation of characters and events relies mostly on the author’s—or narrator’s own perspective, and what they decide to show the reader. As seen in the previous chapters, Sacco’s main focus is the representation of the physicality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the body of the people itself. This fact alone might explain why Sacco puts such a great emphasis on the face, the mouth more specifically, and why the pages of *Palestine* are always buzzing with noises and agitation. As seen previously, Palestinians have been silenced for so long and precluded from telling their stories, a fact that Sacco bemoans in his graphic novel as well.

Even though it is less detailed than *Palestine*, *Freedom Hospital* does not lack of realism nonetheless. On the one hand, the representation of the characters is rather simplistic. The hair styles and clothes are basic, for instance, and each character has a recognisable feature (Salem’s scar, Yasmin’s hairstyle or Sophie’s glasses), making them look rather cartoonish. On the other, the lack of details on a character’s face does not lessen the emotions. Looking back at fig. 22, for instance, the contrast between black and white on Salem’s face really highlights the sadness in his eyes. Thus, Sulaiman manages to portray emotions without drawing too many details on the face of his characters and uses rather the strong contrast between black and white to do so.

The backgrounds in *Freedom Hospital* are usually empty, either all black or white, and with very little decor. However, there are a few scenes that are packed with people and details. As seen previously, demonstrations are often illustrated in the graphic novel. These particular scenes are directly inspired by pictures or videos of the Syrian revolution, and Sulaiman explains that he simply re-drew them to include them in his graphic novel. Therefore, the panels featuring a marching crowd look very realistic and are filled with different faces and signs, for instance. These scenes are often represented in bleeds, as seen in fig.27.

In sum, it can be said that even though the two graphic novels are illustrated in black and white, the artists use the two colours rather differently. Sacco plays with darker hues and grey lines to create patterns and imitate a feeling of speed, for instance, whereas Sulaiman uses strong black and white strokes to delineate the features of his characters. As already stated,

Sacco puts a great emphasis on realism, whether it is on the characters or the places he visits. However, *Palestine* is not picture-like and maintain its cartoonish features in different ways, such as over-packed panels, different focalizations and transitions. On the contrary, *Freedom Hospital* can be seen as more traditional, to the extent that it displays layouts that are more commonly used in mainstream comics, except for the bleeds. This difference between the two graphic novels is directly related to the representation of violence, as seen hereafter.

5.2.2. Representation of violence and terrorism

Although violence plays a crucial role in both *Palestine* and *Freedom Hospital*, it is portrayed in drastically different ways. This section outlines the different methods used in the two works, both stylistic and narrative, to represent the violence of a conflict. Most importantly, it highlights the different forms of violence that can be found in the two very similar issues, and the ones that are usually foregrounded.

Looking back at the conclusion of the previous section, one of the main differences in terms of narration between *Freedom Hospital* and *Palestine* is the use of the panels. As already explained, Sulaiman often displays a traditional layout in his graphic novel, such as three-panels grids, for instance. The narration is, thus, relatively easy to follow and the rhythm is regular. Moreover, the panels are rarely packed with information, nor do they cross over one another. On the contrary, the panels in *Palestine* are completely different; we could even say that sometimes, they are not delimited at all and merge together. Fig. 42 is a perfect example to illustrate the previous idea. The page is separated in three distinct parts, but there is no panel nor gutter. The action happens in three steps. First, at the top of the page, Israeli policemen try to calm down Palestinian protestors and move them away from the street. They quickly come to violence and begin to strike them with a club. The page should be read following a 'Z' form; from left to right, then from right to left diagonally, and, at the bottom, from left to right horizontally. The lack of gutters and panels might be confusing at first, but the reader manages to understand the course of the action by looking at the elements on the page. Therefore, the reader can draw a conclusion simply by following the characters across the page: policemen brutalize Palestinians, who then move away, and begin to throw stones at the authorities. In the meantime, the other policemen catch a man and pounce on him. The page shows different actions happening at the same time or very close. The lack of panel challenges the perspective on the action and mirrors the confused state of mind and rush of adrenaline felt during a stampede. Everything is happening quickly and at the same time. Talking about time in comics, professor Kai Mikkonen explains that "It has been common, for instance, to privilege particular

elements of the composition, such as the space between the panels or the panel as unit of time, to illustrate how comics prompt readers to make inferences about temporal progression” (33). In the case of fig.42, then, this traditional notion is completely challenged. Moreover, as already stated previously, Mikkonen shares the view of Jan Baetens on the “inflated” value of the gutter concept and believe that “we must recognise the importance of the panel *relation*, not the space in between” (40; emphasis in the original). This recognition of the importance of panels relation is even more emphasised in the case of fig.42, where ‘panels’ merge as one image but manage to depict different temporalities nonetheless.



Fig. 42: *Palestine*, p.55.

Agitation is far less represented in *Freedom Hospital*. Fig.43 portrays a crowd marching and chanting, but it looks very peaceful and calm. The page is made of three horizontal panels. The latter are not overpacked with details and are well defined. The only elements indicating

the noises of the demonstration can be found in the speech bubbles; it is the only detail on the page that crosses panels. Furthermore, the speech bubbles are discrete, not over-sized. Thus, the sounds and the noises are not foregrounded in this instance, as opposed to Sacco's depiction of crowds that are always extremely noisy and vivid.



Fig. 43: *Freedom Hospital*, p.50.

When it comes to the representation of violence, however, *Freedom Hospital* often breaks free from the conventions of the medium of comics. As seen in chapter 4, extremely violent and bloody scenes are usually depicted in the form of a bleed. The insert of a bleed cuts down the usually well-rhythmed layout of the previous pages and creates a feeling of shock and unexpectedness. As a reminder, Earle explains that “its presence breaks the flow of visual uniformity and shakes the reader’s sense of security” (49). Some examples of this were already analysed previously and are fig.28&29. However, the bleed is not the only way to mirror the brutality of the Syrian revolution. There are many instances where violence is embedded *within* the rhythm of the narrative as well. The first panel of fig.44 shows a line of protesters being held at gunpoint by soldiers of the Syrian army. Then, without any warning, the next panel

portrays a man being shot in the head. The page is completely silent: there is no speech/thought bubble nor onomatopoeia mimicking the sound of a gun. Besides, there are no screams. Because of the absence of sounds, it feels like looking at the scene from very far away, and yet being extremely close. The reader is looking down at the men and then only sees the back of the man being shot. The fact that there is no sound represented in the panels might indicate that the senses of the reader have been shut down due to the violence of the scene. We can only contemplate the horrible scene of a man dying, and the huge splash of blood against a white background might indicate that the man was kneeling in front of a wall. It should also be noted that the edges of the panels are invisible. Like in a bleed, it thus creates a feeling of shock, unexpectedness and helplessness. Moreover, this panel is the last of page 87, hence at the page turn. Earle believes that

it is in this movement from page to page that the biggest and most difficult leap of closure occurs. Put crudely, in this context the page turn creates the “punch line.” While transitions exist between all contiguous panels in comics, as well as between the pages, the necessity of the page turn—and the fact that the next part of the narrative is hidden until this point—intensifies the transition between pages. (48)

Therefore, the reader is struck by the horror of the panel, on the one hand, but is also anxious about the following pages, on the other. Thus, without using bleeds to cut down the narrative rhythm completely, *Freedom hospital* manages to create anxiousness within the sequence of panels—and between the pages as well.

Similarly, *Palestine* does not shy away from portraying violence. More specifically, it depicts the body in pain during the conflict. The graphic novel displays different techniques to do so. In terms of narration, it rarely—if not never—uses bleed. The pages are always divided into different panels or ‘sections’, and there is rarely one single image taking up the space of the page. Fig.45 portrays a young man bleeding on the ground after being shot by soldiers. The sequence of three panels shows the different stages of the event. First, the young man is seen crawling on the ground in pain. In the second, the men who shot him drag him by the legs. The boy is now on his back and grips his bleeding stomach. The last panel of the sequence shows the men debating whether they should leave him die here or not, and the boy still in pain. As opposed to *Freedom Hospital* which mostly highlights the suddenness of violence, here, the moment is lingering. The reader witnesses the boy being dragged on several meters (the streak of blood indicates that); the moment could last a few seconds or minutes, but the reader really feels the endless suffering of the boy waiting to be rescued (in the following panel). Kai Mikkonen suggests that “Repetition of the same character in a sequence of panels can suggest narrative continuity when the sense of action and event is weak or the images depict no action” (96). In the case of fig.45, it is true that nothing is happening except for the fact that the boy is in intense pain. But, as it is so often the case in *Palestine*, the focus of the sequence is the body

itself and how pain affects it. The reader sees the body from different angles: first lying on the stomach, then being dragged and bleeding profusely, and lastly on the back. Therefore, it is not the violence of the event that is foregrounded but the body and the pain themselves. The previous page shows the boy being shot indeed, but the violence of the action is not emphasised. A further example of repetitions can be found in fig.12.

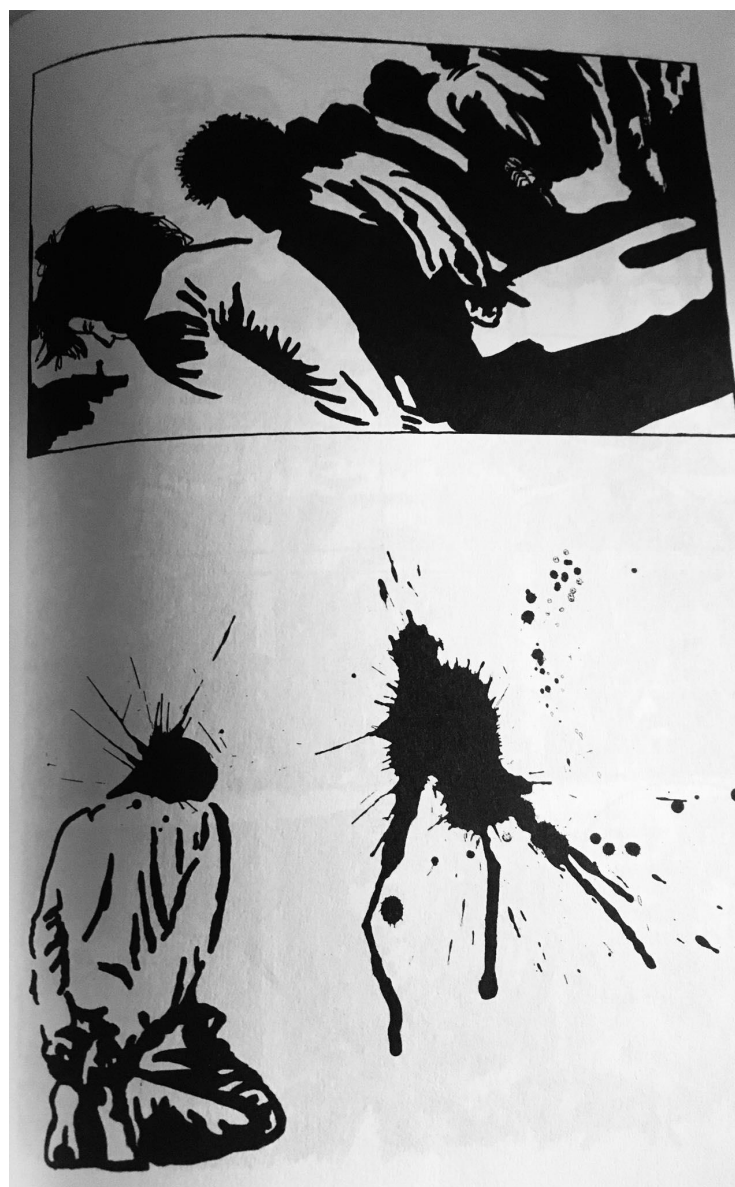


Fig.44: *Freedom Hospital*, p.87.



Fig. 45: Extract from *Palestine*, p.203.

Thus, *Freedom Hospital* and *Palestine* emphasise different forms of violence. *Palestine* focuses on the torn bodies, whereas *Freedom Hospital* shows the acts of violence themselves. As a matter of fact, *Palestine* rarely shows the latter, as already explained in chapter 3. It portrays the before and the after, and the continuous tension in the streets. *Freedom Hospital*, however, displays a number of explosions, as seen in fig.32&33 for instance, and shows the ruins and human casualties as well. What is commonly illustrated in the two graphic novels, however, is the same form of terrorism, namely, state terrorism.

As seen in the sections dedicated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian revolution respectively, the situation is extremely complex in both instances. What can be said about the two graphic novels, however, is that they foreground the people caught in the unfurling wave of violence in the conflict. That is, *Palestine* and *Freedom Hospital* focus on the harmless civilians who have to deal with violence on the daily. In the case of the former, the graphic novel follows mostly the stories of Palestinians facing different forms of violence, as seen thoroughly in chapter 3. Whether it is racism, daily humiliations, imprisonments, or the lack of basic human rights altogether, the people of Palestine suffer mostly through the hands of the Israeli State. The latter does not acknowledge their existence and, therefore, tries to silence them in every possible way. Moreover, there is an imbalance between the status of victim and perpetrator, as the State clearly depicts all Palestinians as terrorists, whereas the latter justify their actions by describing it as self-defence against a terrorist state.

The characters in *Freedom Hospital* polarize in three different directions. They are either rebels, civilians or pledge allegiance to Assad's dictatorship. However, the story foregrounds mostly Yasmin and the hospital crew, and the latter are clearly caught between two fires: they have to deal with the state's attacks on peaceful civilians, on the one hand, and the

violent response from the Free Syrian Army, on the other. Therefore, it can be said that the characters are involved in two forms of terrorism; an authoritarian—terrorist state using lethal weapons against civilians, and a rebel army carrying out terror attacks to counter the latter. Moreover, the division in the country enables extremist groups to rise up, and, consequently, allows the cycle of violence to go on.

In sum, it can be said that although *Freedom Hospital* and *Palestine* focus on different aspects of violence, their aim remains the same: to represent the reality of a people caught up in a conflict, and how it affects their lives directly. Moreover, it should be stressed that the characters in the two graphic novels are not only portrayed as victims. By giving them a backstory and focusing on their own personal narratives, it broadens the scope of interpretation of the characters. In the case of *Palestine*, each person has a story to tell, memories and hopes for the future. They are not introduced as ‘victims of the conflict’ only. Rather, they are individuals caught up in the conflict and trying to live on. *Freedom Hospital* represents many fictional characters to illustrate the diversity and resilience of Syria; they strive to survive, to help each other out, and most importantly, to be free.

5.3. Comics and other media: freedom of press and speech

To conclude the comparison between *Freedom Hospital* and *Palestine*, a further element deserves to be highlighted, and that is, journalism. While this topic is an integral part of *Palestine* (Sacco being a comics journalist himself), journalism is alluded to more subtly in *Freedom Hospital*. More specifically, the two graphic novels present the more general issue of freedom of press—and of speech in war-torn countries.

As already stated, journalism plays an important role in the story of *Palestine*. The character of Sacco is illustrated recording people, taking notes and photographs. More specifically, Sacco is interested in capturing the violence of the conflict. On page 59, he clearly states that “we [Sacco and his journalist friend] want pain, we want to rub up against people who’ve had the shit kicked out of them...”. Page 57 is particularly interesting and provides further information about journalism during the Intifada. Sacco is talking to a fellow Palestinian journalist, Saleh, who asks him “you get pictures? People getting hit?”. When Sacco answers yes, the Palestinian wants to present his photographs to his boss. On the way there, Saleh explains to Sacco that “he’s bored with the uprising... there’s no good pictures anymore... same old demonstrations, he says, same people throwing stones, same soldiers...”. At the office, Sacco is greeted by the boss who describes him as “you the guy with the pictures of the ‘violence’?”. Therefore, it seems that violence is specifically wanted in the field. The obvious reason would be for shock-value: images of violence are known to be commonly used in the

mainstream media. However, there might be another explanation. As expressed on page 57, the pictures of the revolution are always the same. They show demonstrations and people throwing stones at the authorities. Thus, two poles are depicted: the Palestinians against the authorities. And yet, the reality is quite different. As a matter of fact, the authorities are often the first to brutalize peaceful demonstrators. By only picturing people throwing stones in the press, it supports the stigma of Palestinians as violent and dangerous. However, violence happens on both sides and, most of the time, the demonstrators are harmless civilians against heavily-armed vigilante. Thus, it might explain why pictures such as the one of “police dragging a woman”, for instance, are particularly wanted in the news.

In *Freedom Hospital*, journalism is embodied by one character, Sophie. As seen in 4.3.2, Sophie is a Syrian-French reporter who follows Yasmin to document the Syrian revolution. She is always portrayed with her camera and ready to shoot. Whether it is the speech of the rebel army or a man losing his leg after being shot by a sniper, Sophie documents every aspect of the revolution, even the most brutal ones. After months in Syria, Sophie gets back to France to show her documentary to the Western world. She is visibly upset by her experiences but is glad to see how deeply it resonates with the audience (see fig.46). Therefore, the work of Sophie is that of a reporter, but is also influenced by her own experiences and feelings.

A further element related to the journalistic world is embedded in the graphic novel as well, on page 70. In the fourth panel, the picture of a lady with a patch is displayed. This is Marie Colvin, “an American journalist killed in Homs”. Again, this extract is a good example of how real elements directly clash with fictional ones in *Freedom Hospital*. Marie Colvin was an American reporter who perished in Homs in 2012 indeed, after an artillery strike destroyed the makeshift press centre where she worked together with other Western journalists (see Pellegrini-Bettoli 2018). In *Freedom Hospital*, she is described as follows: “she risked her life for us, to reveal our suffering to the outside world” (71). Therefore, the graphic novel pays tribute to a journalist who risked her life to depict the reality of an oppressed people, and by doing so, highlights the importance of freedom of press, even in war-torn countries.

Freedom of press and of speech more globally is an issue close to Sulaiman’s heart. As seen previously, the artist expresses his concerns about disinformation in his country and abroad. The news in Syria is filled with propaganda (e.g. fig. 47), and the media around the world only show the same aspects of the revolution. Sulaiman’s concerns extend to the suppression of “symbols of pacifism” by the state; intellectuals, artists and pacifists are more easily arrested than extremists in Syria (Sulaiman 2017). Therefore, Sulaiman’s graphic novel can be seen as a call for hope. The most important thing to him, he says, is freedom, whether it

is of press, of speech, or simply to exist. Coincidentally, freedom is present in the very title of his first graphic novel.

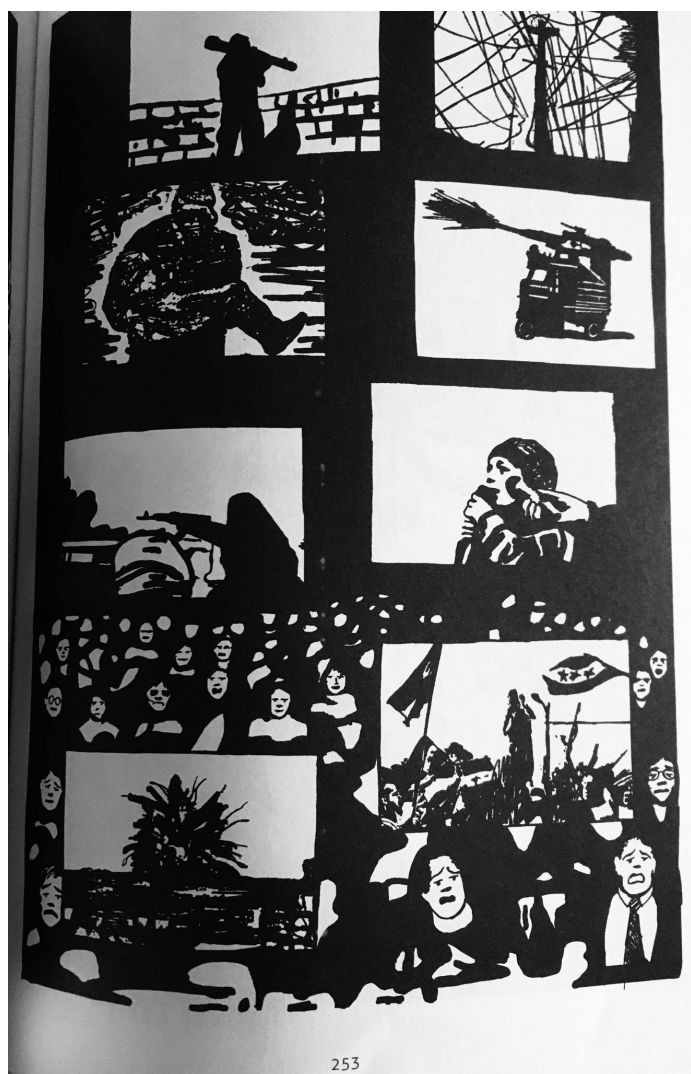


Fig.46: *Freedom Hospital*, p.253.



Fig.47: Extract from *Freedom Hospital*, p.64.

6. Conclusion

What this present study has shown is that comics is able to depict violence, trauma and all related issues indeed, whilst still maintaining a certain distance and a self-reflexive attitude. As Hillary Chute puts it, comics is not and will never be a purely mimetic medium. On the contrary, comic books question their very own authenticity and, most importantly, challenge the understanding of history altogether. Chute explains that her growing interest for comic books “began with realizing how comics as a medium places pressure on classifiability and provokes questions about the boundaries of received categories of narrative” (*Disaster Drawn* 1). Thus, the very core of the medium of comics is to challenge, to create new ranges of possibilities. The latter is particularly crucial to comprehend sensitive issues such as the situation in war-torn countries, as seen previously. The history of a people and a country can never be represented as unilateral. Rather, I share Chute’s belief that history should be understood as something multi-layered and with different temporalities. Therefore, I also think that “graphic narratives make the roiling lines of history readable” (*Disaster Drawn* 233).

Accordingly, the representation of personal stories can help in the depiction of a more general, even national narrative, as seen in chapter 1. Looking back at the section on Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, which she herself describes as a “text of witness” (*Graphic Women* 141), the story (or multiple stories) in graphic novels such as *Palestine* can be the basis for a bigger story, which is, in the case of Sacco’s work, the story of the people of Palestine. As it has been argued in chapter 1, the micro-narratives bring attention to a broader sphere of public discourse. Thus, the narrative of a whole people is made of smaller personal narratives and, accordingly, the latter represent the complex and multi-layered history of Palestine.

Because the events in *Freedom Hospital* are fictional and openly inspired by what is really going on in Syria, the graphic novel challenges history continuously. Historical facts, including real people and places, are embedded within the fictional narrative. The dictator Bashar-al-Assad is alluded to directly in many instances, and the late reporter Marie Colvin is mentioned as well, as seen in chapter 5. Some Syrian places are also referred to or portrayed in the news, such as Homs. More generally, pictures and videos of the revolution are included in the graphic novel, as seen previously. Therefore, the interplay between fiction and reality enables different perspectives. On the one hand, the mention of real events and people emphasises the historical aspect of the graphic novel. However, the chronology and accuracy of the Syrian conflict are not the focus of *Freedom Hospital*. On the other hand, then, the use of fictional characters and places can maintain a safe distance with the conflict and the political aspect often associated with it. Therefore, the graphic novel does not depict one reality nor one

political opinion, but rather, it presents the complex situation of Syria through a range of characters from different backgrounds. In a way, *Freedom Hospital* can be seen as neutral and didactic, because it enables readers who are not familiar with the conflict to discover the latter without being influenced by strong opinions or prejudices. Comic books specialist Thierry Groensteen shares the belief that the medium of comics is not only entertaining, but a great pedagogical tool as well, as comic book artists depart more and more from the conventions of the genre to illustrate the “roughness”¹⁰ of the world (see *La bande dessinée: mode d’emploi* 187).

Nonetheless, it can be argued that comics is a very personal medium, hence subjective. As a matter of fact, comics rely on two crucial components, that is, words and drawings. The two are directly influenced by the comic book artist, even subconsciously. The art style is very personal obviously. It can be cartoonish or more realistic but reflects the artist’s vision in both cases. In *Palestine*, it is the body of the characters that is emphasised; some features, such as the mouth, are exaggerated, and reflect the forced silence of Palestinians and their impossibility to tell their stories. Furthermore, in traditional comics, the artist writes down the words in the speech bubbles themselves. Thus, the very presence of the artist can be found in both the drawings and the handwriting.

Comics is fundamentally an art of tensions. For instance, the artist can choose to depict the tension between the words and the images and create ambiguity between what is shown and what is said. Authors such as McCloud and Chute believe that tension happens more generally in the blank space between each panel, the gutter, “where a reader, conventionally, projects causality, and where the division of time in comics is marked, providing a constant source of tension, a constant proffering of the unmarked in spaces that are carefully bounded and marked out” (*Disaster Drawn* 35). While I believe this statement is accurate, I also support Mikkonen’s belief that the importance of the relation in and between panels should be highlighted more (see 40), but also, that tension happens throughout the comic book, between each page. *Palestine* often displays pages without any gutter but manages to create temporal tension, for instance. *Freedom Hospital* relies on the page-turn to mirror a feeling of tension and anxiety. Therefore, the medium of comics and especially the more ‘serious’ graphic novels rely on tension to tell a story.

As expressed in the above quote from *Disaster Drawn*, the reader plays a fundamental role in interpreting a story. In one of her books about graphic novels, Chute describes the reader more as a “generative ‘guest’ (to borrow Mulvey’s term), constructing meaning over and

¹⁰ From french “aspérités”.

through the space of the gutter” (*Graphic Women* 9). Here, the importance of the gutter is once again emphasized. Chute adds a further interesting detail about the relationship between reader and author on the page:

Comics conveys several productive tensions in its basic structure. The words and images entwine, but never synthesize. The frames—which we may understand as boxes of time—present a narrative, but that narrative is threaded through with absence, with the rich white spaces of what is called the gutter. Comics shapes stories into a series of framed moments, and this manifest contouring creates a striking aesthetic distance. (5-6)

In other words, comics is marked by a duality between distance and proximity. The latter is the direct interaction between author and reader and can be seen in the text. Distance and absence, however, are marked in the gutter between each panel. What happens between two panels is left for the reader to imagine. The artist displays panels as they wish and, accordingly, the reader brings their own interpretation to the story. I believe the ambiguity between distance and presence is particularly interesting for the representation of violence and trauma in comic books. As a matter of fact, violence is a very intricate matter to deal with and requires distance. In *Freedom Hospital*, violence is usually portrayed as sudden, unexpected. The traumatic scenes are often illustrated in bleeds with no speech bubble. Thus, violence marks a breach in the narrative and the reader is left to contemplate the horrors. However, the fact that the story is expressively fictional might help the reader to take a step back and reflect on the brutal scenes. Similarly, in *Palestine*, the reader discovers the tragic testimonies of Palestinians through the eyes of Sacco himself. The traumatic memories are presented as such, but it is always known that the character of Sacco is the receptacle and the bridge between the story and the reader. Therefore, it puts a safe distance between the reader and the tragic testimonies if needed. Moreover, it enables the reader to put themselves in the narrator’s shoes as well and, consequently, it creates a proximity with the victims.

The possibilities offered by the medium are endless, and comics is finally gaining the academic recognition it deserves. The issues addressed in graphic novels are diverse and reflects today’s concerns. Whether it is personal trauma or war, comic books are fantastic tools to illustrate more serious issues. They come with a serious advantage as well: they combine words and images, and, sometimes, the combination of drawings alone is stronger than a thousand words. Comics offers a space for testimonies to be written, for voices to be heard, for distress to be illustrated. The two graphic novels analysed in this dissertation are, I believe, beautiful works of art, on the one hand, and an endearing tribute to the people of Palestine and Syria, on the other. Graphic novels can be documentaries in their own right, but the individual touch of the artist makes them something even greater, something so personal and yet global. “The power of *drawing to tell*”, in Chute’s own words, has gained a renewed interest since the

works of artists like Joe Sacco, especially in the Middle East (see *Disaster Drawn* 252-254; emphasis in the original). Thierry Groensteen has made the same observation and states that comic books nowadays embody a feeling of resistance to oppression in war-torn countries (see *La bande dessinée: mode d'emploi* 182). Therefore, it shows that the need for self-expression and freedom of speech is paramount, and that comics is the perfect tool to convey that. For instance, the lack of freedom of press can be illustrated in the graphic novel, such as in *Freedom Hospital*. Therefore, the comic book points out an issue directly related to another medium. Adding to that, Chute believes that “The comics medium has evolved as an instrument for commenting on and re-visioning experience and history. Drawing today still enters the public sphere as a form of witness that takes shape as marks and lines because no other technology could record what it depicts” (*Disaster Drawn* 265). Drawn narratives are now asserting their engaging way of portraying issues such as violence and show that art does not necessarily exclude historical accuracy. The growing academic interest towards comics as a genre fit to deal with serious issues is encouraging, and I hope this dissertation makes one small contribution to the promising field of comics.

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