Regarding the Ruins: ruins and humanitarian witnessing in Satrapi and Sacco

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Abstract: This essay considers the significance of images of ruins in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Joe Sacco's works on Palestine. I discuss how these comics artists position the built environment in ruins as witnesses to human rights violations. I argue that Satrapi and Sacco use images of ruins to strategically document the extent of war's devastation, and simultaneously, to advance complex arguments about the nature of suffering and trauma. Their works engage with human rights discourse and forensic architecture towards the inclusion of objects and things (the ruins) as legitimate victims of war and atrocity.

Key words: Ruins—Human rights comics—forensic architecture—Marjane Satrapi—Joe Sacco

The 'speech' of ruins

Goya's famous etchings from his early 19th century anti-war series *The Disasters of War* illustrate, in as straightforward a manner as possible, that images of ruins have long been a crucial part in the visual representation of human rights violations. One etching in particular, *Ravages of War* (plate 30), is a stark and disturbing image of bodily and domestic ruin: it shows the bodies of a man, women and a child entangled amongst the ruined walls and furniture of a home [Figure 1]. In this print Goya chose an unusual perspective that eerily combines flatness and depth, where it is impossible to distinguish top from bottom; normative perspective is lost amongst the ruins. In this image, 'things'—the home itself as well as its furniture—and not just bodies, are framed as 'ravages of war.' The things and the bodies are drawn as completely entangled with each other. In effect, in Goya's print the built

environment in ruins becomes a crucial dimension of rendering visible the devastation and violence resulting from war.

Generally speaking, spectators responding to representations of suffering and war tend to focus their sense of empathy and judgment on the spectacle of human casualties. Yet as Goya seems to be asking in this print, what might it mean if we as spectators also begin to regard the ruins of the built environment as an integral part of the whole picture of witnessing the pain of others, and not just as background? How might representations of ruins inform and render more complex the acts of judgment as well as the affective responses that constitute this form of distant witnessing? This essay begins to address such questions with a focus on one particular form of drawing: comics.

In the last several years, comics and graphic narratives have come to play an important role in the larger dissemination of human rights discourses.¹ Some of the most widely celebrated and studied graphic narratives of our time are autobiographical or semi-autobiographical accounts of bearing witness to atrocity. These works follow in the footsteps of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which showed that it is possible to transform traumatic life experiences into comics form, making them more available and accessible to a large reading public. In fact, comics and graphic novels centered on experiences of war and conflict have come to dominate both the popular *and* critical reception of the medium, as evidenced by the continual increase in the amount of scholarly and popular attention paid to the works of the two artists who are the focus on this essay: Marjane Satrapi and Joe Sacco. Like with Goya, these artists' works address readers' sense of justice through eliciting the affect of suffering, and they use a variety of techniques particular to the medium of comics in order to engage their readers in acts of humanitarian witnessing. My contention here is that it is not only the spectacle of *human* suffering that these artists engage with. Like with Goya, in their strategic drawings of the ruins of the built environment, they open for a form of aesthetic engagement

that expands the notion of ‘the human’ in human rights to encompass home and environment within the field of humanitarian regard. In their work, the built environment in ruins plays a major role in enlarging who or, rather, *what* is a subject worthy of empathy and justice.

I opened this essay with an example from Goya’s *Disasters of War* not only to illustrate the importance of thinking about the intricacies of bodies and ruins in graphic representations of war and conflict. Goya’s work is also crucial as a foundation for the development of what scholars often call ‘humanitarian witnessing’, that is, how aesthetic interpretations of human rights wrongs ‘puts the viewer into the space of the witness’ by rendering the scenes of devastation immediate and vivid (Sliwinski 2011, 49). Goya was the first major artist to sketch the victims of war as seen right before his very own eyes. The immediacy and vividness of the famous etchings stem from Goya’s role as direct witness, in combination with the extremely tactile, textural line of the etchings themselves. He frames the spectator as a distant witness of *both* his interpretation of a given scene and of the victims of violence. As a result of being placed into this double witnessing role, spectators are activated by Goya’s drawings: ‘one is called into being as a witness who must also face and judge these atrocities. With Goya, the spectator herself is urged to proclaim: *Yo lo vi*’ (Sliwinski 2011, 54). Goya asks us to condemn war and atrocity in bearing witness to the pain of others; and this movement operates via our faculties of emotion in combination with that of judgment, body and intellect. This is precisely the tradition of distant, humanitarian witnessing that Satrapi and Sacco utilize in their graphic representations: and as I will discuss in this essay, they use images of ruins to help them ‘tell’ such stories of pain and atrocity, and to elicit specific affective responses from readers.

Ruins are powerful in part because they tell a story, or rather many stories. Many of these are stories of violence and human destruction, as in the ruins of war. Ruins also tell stories of the passing of time, of impermanence, transformation and mortality. They are

tantalizing and mesmerizing traces of the past, and although there is always a story lurking in the ruins, the ruin in itself stays, in a way, stubbornly silent. In the case of war ruins, this silence is also the silence of the dead. Our human need to create narrative is crucial when we talk about ruins: we take the ruin as a point of departure, although the ruin's story will almost always be incomplete, a guessing game. We depend on storytellers to attempt to reconstruct the ruin into something whole or recognizable again, and often that storyteller is an expert: archeologist, historian, architect, artist. Yet it seems that whether or not the stories told are academic or creative, authoritative or fantastical, the ruin is in itself deeply suggestive, holding in its very presence multiple affective charges. Ruins are also an extremely evocative object when it comes to drawing and line. Almost all drawings of ruins—within the comics medium and within other forms of drawing—implicitly call for a highly textured rendering. It is in the visual nature of the ruin itself, with its tumbling, jagged, torn pieces and shreds; such kinds of textural line are vividly felt by those who view images of ruins. These are some of the reasons why the ruin can play such an important role in representation: the ruin requires interpretation as much as it holds a quality of arresting affect in its visual and narratological forms. As I will discuss in my close readings of Satrapi and Sacco, both artists are able to draw out the fully evocative aspects of ruins in service to their overall aims in regards to humanitarian witnessing.

One of the most famous meditations on ruins is that of Walter Benjamin's allegorical reading of 'The Angel of History' in his essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History.' Not incidentally, he bases his thinking on a drawing: Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), a figure not unlike a cartoon creature. Looking at the figure in the drawing, Benjamin meditates on historical time in order to critique the notion of 'progress': 'Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.' The angel 'would like to make whole what has been smashed' but he is

propelled forward by a wind ('progress'), and so 'the pile of debris before him grows skyward' (1968, 257-8). Here, ruins stand as a metaphor for violence, war, the wreckage wrought by official and political history, and it is in this space where dehumanization is produced and reproduced. The Angel frozen in place embodies the role of those who are *forced to bear witness* to ruins, to the atrocities of the past masking themselves as the price of progress. Bearing witness is perhaps one of the most common tropes within contemporary human rights discourse, and here Benjamin presciently connects the act of bearing witness with the power of ruins as an image and metaphor able to communicate a whole range of political, historical and even legal complexities. After all, critics have argued that the contemporary human rights movement itself emerged from literal and metaphorical ruins, that is, from the violence, genocide and nuclear annihilation of WWII.

Today, ruins as fact or evidence have come to play a central role in the legal prosecution of human rights abuses and can now be considered an entity that actually bears witness to atrocity *in itself*. Eyal Weizman calls this field of study and inquiry where the ruin takes such a prominent role 'forensic architecture.' As Weizman points out and, as we shall see, Satrapi's use of ruins illustrates, the built environment is not only the location of violence and war, but it is also, quite often, 'the apparatus with which warfare is conducted' (2014, 16). To put it bluntly, humans are injured and die inside their homes and buildings; there are specific military maneuvers in which blasted and falling walls, ceilings, beams and furniture are a *part* of the killing and maiming strategy. The debris then becomes evidence of crimes.

War crimes tribunals now routinely call upon architects as expert witnesses who can 'read the ruins' in the aftermath of conflict and war. In many of his essays, Weizman discusses the larger social and political significance of this move away from first-person testimony as a privileged form of witnessing in human rights trials, into forensics, a seemingly more scientific form of witnessing. He writes, 'the present forensic sensibility

seeks to bypass human testimony, especially that of the victims of violence, precisely because the memory of violent events, often complicated by trauma, is seen to be marked by the very irrationality, sometimes madness, of the perpetrator, and thus, to a certain extent, to mirror it' (2014, 10). The most important figure in this 'rationally' based approach is 'the expert'—usually an architect—who functions as an 'advocate' for the ruins of the built environment. More specifically, the expert speaks *for* the ruins because they cannot speak for themselves: 'From the perspective of forensics, the ruin has an 'architecture' in which controversial events and political processes are reflected and from which they might be reconstructed and analysed' (Weizman 2011, 111). This is, of course, where the act of narration becomes an extremely important as well as fraught dimension in this particular act of witnessing.

Weizman points out that in this scenario, the division between so-called irrational narratives (testimony) and rational narratives (forensics) is actually a construct, and upon closer inspection, the lines are in fact blurred. The expert, after all, must use language and interpretation to speak for the ruins; and scientific language is full of ambiguities, contradictions and silences, just like testimony. Importantly, in using the expert to speak for the ruin, the 'non-human' (or 'the object') is given the status of a witness, albeit one who needs an interpreter, and thus ruins are legally acknowledged as being 'capable of some 'speech'' (Weizman et al. 2010, 62). In effect, the distinction between subject and object begins to break down. Weizman writes: 'If the forums of international law are now also opening up to the 'speech of things', this shift in epistemological emphasis would also designate a cultural and *ethical* transformation' (Weizman et al. 2010, 61). In my view, this ethical transformation points directly to the notion of humans as existing relationally not just to other humans, but also in relation to the material of their environment. The forensic focus on 'the speech of things' seems to demand that we rethink the category of human in human rights work to include the non-human as a crucial aspect of human rights discourse. As Martin

Coward suggests, by treating the destruction of the built environment as a *constitutive* form of political violence and not just as ‘the backdrop against which political community is enacted,’ what becomes apparent is in fact a fuller understanding of the threats and ‘insecurities felt by members of political communities’ (2006, 423). Weizman’s and Coward’s works suggest that in listening carefully to ‘the speech of things’, an ever larger ethical context emerges in which we can regard human suffering. This is precisely what Satrapi’s and Sacco’s work with ruins illustrate via the comics medium.

Satrapi and Sacco are not, of course, forensic experts in any way. However, I think that their sophisticated depictions of ruins constitute a kind of speech act, where they imbue the image of the ruin with agency, and therefore their works resonate powerfully with the aims of forensic architecture. They use the image of ruins strategically to document the extent of war’s devastation and, simultaneously, to advance complex arguments about the nature of human suffering and trauma. Since images of ruins hold such evocative power in and of themselves, these artists’ images of the built environment and its destruction contain a multitude of possibilities that are drawn out to elicit readers’ physical senses as well as affective responses. Satrapi and Sacco do so in ways that, to my mind, call for an extended exploration into the ways that images of ruins pull readers into a sphere of humanitarian witnessing that, by including the non-human element of devastation in works focusing on human suffering, expand the boundaries of what constitutes human life and victimhood. Like the forensic architect, they stand in as the ‘friend of interpretable objects’ (Keenan and Weizman 2012, 26). Some of the specific techniques of comics, including the juxtaposition of text and image; the use of framing and sequentiality; and the resonant affect of the drawn line, are these artists’ tools for engaging in the kinds of visual/verbal speech acts that imbue the image of ruins with ethical significance. The remainder of this essay focuses on how the two accomplish this.

Ruins in Satrapi and Sacco

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is one of the most well-known graphic novels that, from a first-person perspective, documents the artist's experience of war and conflict, in this particular case, the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The style of this work has been much commented upon, and is strikingly consistent throughout the two volumes. The color scheme is simple black and white, with little background detail, and the overall graphic style can be described as purposefully and deceptively naive, a stylistic choice that reinforces the child-like perspective of Satrapi's young avatar.

Only two panels in the whole of *Persepolis* deviate from this 'flat' black and white color scheme. These two panels depict ruins and are directly sequential. In the chapter titled 'The Shabbat,' a teenage Marji runs home from a shopping excursion after hearing that her neighborhood has been bombed. Upon arriving, she realizes the bomb hit her very street, and her fear for her family is palpable. Her mother finds her in the chaos, and though Marji is relieved to see her alive, it turns out their next-door neighbors' home—the Baba Levys'—has been destroyed. As Marji looks over her shoulder at the rubble of what was once the Baba-Levys' home, she notices her friend's bracelet among the ruins: 'The bracelet was still attached to...I don't know what' (2006, 142). [Figure 2]

What is significant here is that the drawings of the rubble stand out powerfully in their visual contrast to the rest of the graphic novel. Where the whole of *Persepolis* is colored in simple black and white, as mentioned, this is the only page in which Satrapi employs gradations of shading. In her reading of the same sequence, Hillary Chute notes this stylistic break, but glosses over it with a single comment in parenthesis: '(...the style in which Satrapi draws the rubble, which employs textured shading, is distinct from the rest of the book,

marking the event's frame-breaking significance),’ and Chute does not elaborate on this significance (Chute 2010, 157). I think the ‘frame-breaking significance’ of this moment is not simply a result of Satrapi’s use of shading and texture in clear distinction to the rest of the book. A singular focus on shading overlooks the importance of what object merits such differential treatment: ruins.² Why ruins? And why *these* ruins? For there are other moments in *Persepolis* that depict death and destruction yet maintain the stylistic continuity Satrapi is so well known for.

I think that these particular ruins are drawn differently in the graphic novel because this is a catastrophe to which Satrapi was a *direct witness*. She even sees the severed, mangled hand of her friend in the rubble: the ruins of a body. At several other moments throughout the text, Satrapi imagines bodily trauma and devastation based on stories and rumors she hears from others, as well as information she was able to gather years later. Most of these moments are filtered through her naïve, child-like lens; a good example of this is the chapter ‘The Heroes’ (2006, 47-53). Here, however, we have a representation of Satrapi’s very own traumatic memory of violence and death, one of the only moments in all of *Persepolis* where this is the case. This is a Goya-esque moment when Satrapi is interpreting and transforming her personal eye-witness for a larger audience, and it seems the image of ruins can powerfully move the reader viscerally; their unusual rendering gets the reader to feel something physically, a pale echo of Satrapi’s own unimaginable shock at that very moment. The drawing techniques stand out because they create a deeper textural resonance than the flat black and white, so that these images of ruins generate a kind of physical and palpable presence on the page. This tactile line-style works viscerally on the eye and resonates in the body of the reader. The image ‘touches’ us, so to speak, and in this way Satrapi seems to combine the already-evocative power of ruins in combination with a tactile, visceral style to communicate her own trauma in a wordless manner.

This very personal traumatic moment is also drawn attention to by another artistic choice that stands out in comparison to the rest of *Persepolis* and serves to underscore trauma's inability to be expressed in words: the way that Satrapi represents her reaction to the event. In the third panel of this sequence, Marji covers her mouth; then in the next panel, her eyes; and then in the final frame of the chapter, a fully black panel effectively 'slams' the reader with a blackout, blocking the outwardly directed sense of sight that can witness. For in the first two frames of this sequence, we watch Marji's reaction: but in the third panel, through visual tropes and sequencing, it is as if we are thrown inside Marji's body and consciousness. In this way, she makes her trauma become ours. We are catapulted out of our relatively safe position of witnessing the witness into 'becoming' the witness.

Marji's inability to speak and make sense of anything in the face of such trauma connects the irrevocability of everything being ruined to Marji's literal disorientation. Here Satrapi represents, through visual means, a moment when Marji's understanding and ability to provide verbal testimony is shattered, as evidenced by the narration here: 'The bracelet was attached to...I don't know what' and 'No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger,' as well as the blackout in the final panel (2006, 142). Here a forensic approach of representing ruins becomes a kind of testimonial; 'the speech' of the ruins ('the speech of things') is, paradoxically, rendered a visceral—not verbal—speech act. The reader is pulled close to the text when we feel the deeply textured image of ruins in our bodies. This 'pulling close' continues when the artist interpellates us behind her hands, into her consciousness, so that the overall effect of sequencing here makes witnessing not just an effect of documenting the horrors of warfare, but it also draws out the *affect* of witnessing via our encounter with drawings of the suffering of others. The ruin can 'speak' on many levels, both as itself and in its artistic rendering. It is able to do a lot of emotional and instructional work in little more than a glance. What Satrapi's very brief example shows us is the power of

line-drawing to bring forth the resonant dimension of seeing and understanding, and how powerful that affect can be when woven into the context of humanitarian witnessing, as its effect is to activate readers towards moral judgment and a denouncement of war and violence. In being more resonant than verbal, this representation of ruins is able to communicate, like Benjamin's allegorical use of ruins, a whole complexity of literal and metaphorical information and feeling in a short, compressed moment. The technique of tactile line-drawing, in combination with the author's desire to document her own and others' sufferings, brings forth the viscosity of the witness role. It pulls what is seemingly distant—someone else's pain—into the reader's very intimate field of judgment. Satrapi's use of a forensic approach to drawing here is not necessarily to reconstruct particular political processes (Weizman), but instead to bring forth and reconstruct for readers the emotional process of traumatic witnessing.³ In this moment, the 'frame-breaking' image of the ruin is the prism through which such complicated and layered work happens.

In *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt's historical analysis shows that granting human dignity and equal rights to all has never been a given. Through the circulation of images in the form of prints and photographs, ideas and even fictional literature, spectators have actually learned, over time, to judge others (especially in regards to class, gender and racial differences) on whether they are worthy of human dignity (Hunt 2007). As Sliwinski puts it, there is labor involved for 'spectators who are in a position to judge and observe the plight of others' (2011, 48). This labor is the act of judgment. In the context of human rights, 'it is the action of judgment that galvanizes a polity and enables a recognition of those who have been expelled from the human community' (Sliwinski 2009, 37). Comics journalist Joe Sacco's larger Palestinian project, encompassing the two books *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*, can be seen precisely in this context. Sacco uses the comics medium to compel (mostly

Western) readers, many who do not see Palestinians as legitimate victims of human rights abuses, to shift their judgment towards a new recognition. He does this mainly through depicting Palestinians in the occupied territories by using visual and verbal tropes commonly associated with human rights discourses,⁴ with a main emphasis on rendering their stories as testimonials and featuring highly detailed drawings of their faces (Scherr 2016).

What is so significant in Sacco's Palestinian comics is that he also brings the land and the built environment squarely into his field of judgment.⁵ After all, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself is inextricably tied to land claims, and a major feature of the occupation is the purposeful destruction of Palestinian homes and other buildings by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) bulldozers. In fact, Sacco foregrounds the built environment—not only in ruins—in a vast number of panels throughout the two books, as if to communicate that these stories are as much about physical place and space as they are about people and survival. Jeffrey Mather writes about the importance of Gaza as image and space in Sacco's work, also drawing on the ideas of forensic architecture to demonstrate how Sacco pays close, critical attention to the 'architectural realities' that 'impinge upon, delineate and constrain life in Gaza' (2016, 185). I agree with Mather that Sacco depicts urban space in *Footnotes*, in part, to really show readers the landscapes of constraint that contextualize Palestinians' experiences of occupation, in Mather's words: 'emphasizing the relationship between visual modalities and structures of power and control' (2016, 179). I wish to take a slightly different approach than Mather in my forensic analysis of Sacco's Palestinian works, focusing instead on how Sacco's works on Palestine and its people ask: what it might mean to grant the recognition of victimhood to land, to buildings and the larger context of the lived environment? How do the comics probe the relationship between this recognition and the recognition of Palestinian people as subject to human rights violations?

Many panels consist of full-page or double-page spreads that simply display the built environment, with little to no words to accompany these images. Instead, the great amount of detail and incredibly dense drawing style that goes into these panels ask readers to take the time to look, to actually dwell on the intricacies of Palestinian space, the crowded and crumbling cities and towns, the dirt as well as the vivid life of the streets. Almost as much as readers encounter the faces of Palestinians in Sacco's comics, we encounter the built environment, often in ruins. In Sacco, the built environment functions almost as a persona, or rather, in the language of both journalism and human rights prosecutions, as an informant.

While the detailed, textural and very tactile style of Sacco's drawings certainly resonate with the two panels of ruins in *Persepolis*, Sacco's focus on ruins is much more sustained and all-encompassing than Satrapi's. Sacco engages with ruins by drawing on—literally and figuratively—a visual and political discourse of 'archeology' and forensics within these graphic narratives as a way to bring the built environment within the reader's field of humanitarian judgment. In *Footnotes in Gaza* particularly, Sacco's drawings and narrative function as an archeology of both the past and the present. Sacco depicts his journalistic quest to dig up and reconstruct two massacres of Palestinians that occurred in 1956 that had been buried in the footnotes of historical accounts of the period; and simultaneously, he draws over and over again a present landscape of Palestinian settlements in ruins, where homes and other buildings are being destroyed by the IDF.

Israel-Palestine is, of course, a land containing numerous ancient structures and ruins, an archeological dreamscape. The Israeli state archeological apparatus, however, politicizes archeological finds, especially underground ruins, to claim the land as 'in fact Jewish at source' and thereby 'appropriated and altered by the latecomer Palestinians' (Weizman 2007, 39). Government agencies, in other words, use archeology to 'prove' a pre-existing Jewish sovereignty. As Weizman puts it, the quest for Zionism literally goes underground: 'The

existing landscapes of Palestine were seen as a contemporary veil under which historic biblical landscapes, battlegrounds, Israelite settlements and sites of worship could be revealed by digging' (2007, 39). Thus the archeological impulse in Sacco's comics points to a fraught political framework where the meaning of ruins and of the land more generally becomes a highly contested field; the results of this contestation manifest into the human rights abuses and long drawn-out suffering of Palestinian people.

In the chapter 'Mud, tents, bricks' in *Footnotes*, Sacco clearly displays this archeological impulse. He uses informants and the historical archive to help him trace the history of the building of the Gaza refugee camp from its origin as a sparsely populated piece of desert in 1948 into its present incarnation. His careful drawings begin with showing the refugees living in blanket-covered holes in the ground, and then moves into showing the first construction of tents as shelters. From there, he shows the 2 kilometer trip the women had to walk in order to get water, then he shows the early construction of tiny clay houses; and eventually the demolition of the clay houses to the construction of more solid brick houses. The last three panels of the chapter pan out into a wider lens. The first of these, a full-page bleed, is a drawing of Gaza from above, dated in the mid-1950s. While this panel depicts people moving around in their daily lives, the bird's eye perspective and use of scale clearly foreground the built environment as the center of attention (2009, 27). The final spread of the chapter, covering two full pages, repeats this use of perspective and scale to display a section of the full-fledged city as it appears in our time, with satellite dishes and tin roofs weighed down with tires and bricks, electricity poles, now with taller buildings (2009, 28-9). In this chapter, human testimony aids Sacco in digging up the past of this place, as Sacco relies on survivors' memories in structuring his images.

The panels build upon each other as Sacco shows us the building of the camp, so that the chapter reads like a layer-by-layer unearthing of the physicality of Gaza as a living space.

Sacco stands in as a kind of forensic expert, relying on testimony, history, archival materials and the present moment to re-construct for us the troubled layers that have gone into shaping this physical environment. These are in fact some of the very same tools of archeology, though in this case, Sacco provides an archeology of relatively recent times. It is as if we witness Gaza growing from infancy into adulthood. This is an ‘adulthood’ that is suffused with the displaced history of a population who should have been in other places, now living lives that should have unfolded elsewhere. In doing this, Sacco reveals that places can be viewed as ‘sensate’ to a certain extent. His comics do not treat the built environment as an inert, passive space; he shows how a particular place responds to both the actual and political landscape. Thus in this framing of the built environment, the city does not simply contain human action: it interacts with and shapes both people and the land, as much as it is shaped by historical and practical circumstances (Weizman 2014, 16). It is as if the built environment is an entity that lives and breathes in its intimate relation to the people who inhabit it. In a way, Gaza city is framed as a ruin that registers the history of displacement and of prolonged suffering.

Sacco makes a strategic move in placing ‘Mud, tents, bricks’ towards the very beginning of this lengthy graphic narrative: he establishes the built environment as sensate and thereby allows it to come into being as a kind of character in its own right. Therefore when we encounter the built environment in ruins later in the text, that is, the purposeful destruction of homes by the IDF, we encounter the ruins as the aftermath of physical harm. In the chapter ‘Rafah’s curse,’ Sacco again pays great attention to the buildings and landscape; and he focuses his artist’s eye on the widespread destruction that marks the area. In a panel that depicts an IDF bulldozer crushing a house, he introduces the subject of deliberate destruction: ‘Any home hiding a tunnel or used to resist the Israeli incursions is destroyed [...] The demolition of houses is an almost daily occurrence’ (2009, 162). Following this

panel, Sacco's cartoon avatar follows some of his informants to a site where such demolition is underway, and a woman beckons them into her home, a house that will soon be destroyed.

In representing this woman's story, Sacco makes a strategic framing choice. In one of the larger panels of this sequence, Sacco again moves into a bird's eye perspective, displaying the bulldozer as it is plowing down the neighborhood. [Figure 3] In this panel we know that Sacco's group is inside the woman's house, but we cannot see them. Instead, Sacco draws the exterior of the house nestled in its neighborhood as it is being bulldozed, and he points us to the house in question through speech bubbles rising up from the chimney. We as readers can only see the outside, and it looks like the house itself—on the very verge of annihilation—is speaking. Here Sacco uses a word-image combination to play with the idea of physical space as sensate, as possessing some qualities of a 'subject', to use Weizman's terminology. Sacco blurs the lines between 'human' and 'home', and through this ambiguity, positioning the built environment as a sensate victim of Israeli aggression. This moves objects or 'things' into our field of judgment as victims of war and conflict. Thus we 'read' the house as about to experience great pain, even a kind of death.

This slippage between representations of human pain and that of the built environment is reinforced in 'The Will of God,' a later chapter, when Sacco covers two pages with an enormous rendering of a destroyed apartment building in Rafah, drawn in such a way that the ruins appear piled high, absolutely dwarfing the people who walk past it. The utter ruination, including the visible traces of the human within it (satellite dish, water tanks) position this enormous wreckage as a murder victim. In a following panel, Sacco surveys a giant hole in an area he was once familiar with, but is now totally destroyed: 'Israeli bulldozers have scooped it out as if it were ice cream' (2009, 256). Despite the irony here, there is no question that this enormous hole is, for the land itself, a deep, painful wound.

It is universally human to seek shelter and safety within the lived environment. Structures like buildings, homes and the landscape itself are generally perceived as more permanent than our bodies, built to outlast a single human lifespan. Representations of them in ruins therefore communicate impermanence and precariousness, literally and figuratively, on a structural level. Sacco encourages readers to feel the sense of loss of home and safety by layering two acts of witnessing into these comics. One of the layers is human testimony, the continuous narration of the dire situation and its basis in denying basic human rights to Palestinian people. The other layer is the positioning of the built environment as a witness, as an entity that at once contains the history of displacement and collective suffering while registering and telling the story of the pain of collective destruction. As such, the built environment in ruins becomes an ‘other’ worthy of humanitarian judgment, expanding the readers’ understanding of who and what can ‘speak’ for atrocity.

Satrapi and Sacco, like Goya, function as ‘forensic’ artists who show that it is impossible to untangle humans and ruins when it comes to the imperative of drawing human rights abuses. The special properties attached to the ruin on both literal and metaphorical levels allow this particular icon to perform, for the artist and the reader, a kind of witnessing event that brings attention to these intricate connections between trauma, bodies and the deliberate destruction of place and space. This interconnected form of witnessing widens the lens, so to speak, to ask us to consider the depths of loss and injustice when it comes to life in all its lived totality—not just the loss of life per se, but also the loss of home and living environment. Expanding the ideas of who or what can be considered a legitimate victim of human rights abuses will also, eventually, bring about other forms of justice that include the non-human, particularly the environment, within its purview. I think that comics artists like Satrapi and Sacco, with their ability to reach large reading publics, can contribute to the building of such awareness.

¹ Scholarship on the connections between human rights and comics include the following: Rose Brister and Belinda Walzer, 'Kairos and Comics: Reading Human Rights in Joe Sacco's Graphic Narratives' in *College Literature* 40.3 (2013): 138-155; Thomas Giddens (ed.), *Graphic Justice*, London: Routledge, 2015; Christine Hong, 'The World-Form of Human Rights Comics,' in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (eds. Sophia McClennen and Alexandra Schulthies Moore), London: Routledge, 2016; Rebecca Scherr, 'Framing Human Rights: comics form and the politics of recognition in Joe Sacco's Footnotes in Gaza' (see citation in references); Sidonie Smith, 'Human Rights and comics' in *Graphic Subjects*, (Michael Chaney, ed.), Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.

² Anecdotally, when I have presented this part of my research at conferences, I have often been told by someone in the audience that when they teach *Persepolis*, the students notice this change and ask why it is there.

³ Gillian Whitlock takes a related approach to *Persepolis*, examining the links between trauma and ethics in the graphic novel, but focuses much more on how Satrapi uses trauma to create cross-cultural connections and empathy across the so-called East/West divide. In 'Autographics: The Seeing "I" of Comics,' in *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006): 965-979.

⁴ The trope of comics witnessing is a common theme that many scholars who write about Sacco focus on, although to my knowledge nothing has been written about the link between comics witnessing and the built environment in Sacco's work. See for example Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016; for witnessing in relation to Sacco's work on Bosnia, see Lan Dong, 'Inside and Outside the Frame: Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde*,' in *The Comics of Joe Sacco* (ed. Daniel Warden), Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2015: 39-53; Wendy Kozol, 'Complicities of witnessing in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*,' in *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights Literature* (eds. Swanson, Goldberg and Schultheis Moore), London: Routledge, 2012: 165-79; and Rebecca Scherr, 'Shaking Hands with Other People's Pain: Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and the Ethics of Representation,' in *Mosaic* 46.1 (March 2013): 19-36.

⁵ It is worth noting that Edward C. Holland has written about that ways that Sacco engages with geopolitics through various comics-narrative techniques; one of these techniques is the use of maps in the graphic novels. This is somewhat related to the built environment. See 'Mapping Bosnia: Cartographic Representation in Joe Sacco's Graphic Narratives,' in *The Comics of Joe Sacco* (ed. Daniel Warden,) Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2015:85-100.

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