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

In an interview with Hillary Chute, shortly after the publication of *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), Joe Sacco describes his impression of the insistence of the past on the present: “It’s almost as if history bleeds. In people’s minds, one bit of history bleeds into another bit of history. … And it gives you this idea … that history hasn’t really stopped.” His words here call to mind the work of another comics creator, Art Spiegelman, whose *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* volume I (1986) is subtitled “My Father Bleeds History.” The suggestion is that the process of drawing out the past is a bloodletting, but this choice of words also points to a quality particular to comics form, that of the potential for the immediacy of past, present and future in panel-based graphic representation. Comics are uniquely placed to play with representations of the passing of time, often engaging directly with issues of history, memory and trauma through their formal elements. *Maus I* and *II* (1991) and Sacco’s *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-95* (2000) are two works that represent a narrative based on second-hand memory, framing their narratives by the process involved in recording history. For Sacco and Spiegelman history is a fluid construct, leaking into and mixing with the present, and this is addressed consciously in their formal choices on the page. Though underrepresented in much critical work, comics form offers unique advantages by graphically representing the flexibility of temporal space, something used to great effect in *Maus* and *Safe Area Goražde*.

Scott McCloud, in his seminal *Understanding Comics* (1993), describes “closure,” the process of the human mind connecting two panels in comics through experience. Though comics panels create a fracturing of time and space, “closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). McCloud breaks down the different types of closure into six degrees of panel relatedness, from
“moment-to-moment” transitions at one end of the spectrum, to “non-sequitur” transitions at the other (70-2). The effect of closure is caused by the existence of the space between the panels, known as the “gutters.” With the interaction of panel transitions and the role of the gutter, comics define time over spatial parameters. As the majority of American and European comics tend to present time through closure types defined by McCloud as around the center of his transition scale, between “action-to-action” and “aspect-to-aspect” (McCloud 75-6), instances of closure at the extremes of the spectrum become all the more noticeable where they appear.

For instance, in one scene in Safe Area Goražde, Sacco shows the process of lighting a cigarette and taking a drag over four consecutive panels. The moment-to-moment transitions that occur between these four panels emphasize the process of smoking the cigarette, and the luxury afforded to Nudjejma by this process. Cigarettes are frequently presented in the book as objects coveted by the citizens, often used as a form of currency to barter for essentials. The action of smoking, therefore, a process that is highly significant to the character, is conveyed to the reader with a sense of the weight which it holds for her (54). There is a strong focus on these instances of the apparently mundane in Sacco’s book, and their appearance in such slowly transitional panel series emphasizes their capturing of still moments of time, particularly when contrasted with the stark transitions that function to depict the more violent instances of narrative.

As well as differences in panel transition, the time frame of comics narrative can be slowed down or increased by the size and shape of panels. A large panel, for instance, allows the reader an opportunity to pause on a particular image and appreciate its significance. Such large panels are used sparingly in Maus. In the first volume, the two largest images operate as a frame of Vladek and Anja’s experience living under Nazi rule, from the first moment they see the Nazi flag to the moment they arrive at Auschwitz. The
two pages are similarly constructed, with a page-spanning image at the top of the page showing a moving vehicle (in the first a passenger train, in the second the Nazi truck that delivers them to Auschwitz), a second tier that is split into two panels, and one large image taking up the bottom half of the page (32 and 157). The jarring use of these large panels disrupts the narrative time with a powerful image, that Spiegelman wishes the reader to spend more time viewing. The similarity between the construction of the pages in panel size and shape also indicates, if only on a subliminal level for the reader, the significant contrast in context, between the presence of Nazism while Anja and Vladek are still free, and the consequences of Nazism that results in their arrival at Auschwitz.

In Safe Area Gorazde, in contrast to Maus, Sacco frequently makes use of large panels, sometimes including images over two-page spreads (14-5, for example). He also frequently makes use of silent, or sparsely-captioned, panels, such as in a long series of panels depicting the gruelling march back from Grebak (139-42). The use of such techniques may be because Sacco wishes the narrative to spend more time in a suspended period of reflection, something he indicates in relation to his Footnotes in Gaza: he remarks that the Palestinians “never had the luxury of looking back and isolating things, and thinking about it and coming to terms with it. … I think it’s important to isolate things … you’ve got to stop it sometime and have a look [at] it” (“Interview with Joe Sacco”). The variation of transitions, panel size and shape, and the primacy of image over text, are some examples of formal elements that all work towards creating such a space for reflection in comics, and elements both Sacco and Spiegelman exploit to powerful effect in their work.

As McCloud explains, however, there is more to the process of comics time than merely the individual panels themselves—the juxtaposition of panels representing different moments in time over the space of a page also has implications for the structure
of the narrative. The presence on a single page of panels representing the past, present and future of the narrative opens unique possibilities for the comics artist. Whereas in other media, such as literature or film, narrative is locked in a temporal linearity, in comics, past, present, and future are all visible on the page simultaneously—in a temporal simultaneity, if you will. Wherever the reader’s eyes are focused on the page is “now,” but at the same time one’s eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future (104). Rather than the pages of comic books simply holding the text of a story, therefore, each is carefully crafted to juxtapose each panel against each other, so that a moment of time in comics narrative is not represented just by a single panel, but also over the course of a complete page, and by the contrast established across each double-page spread. For instance, Sacco often presents scenes from various instances of time juxtaposed on a single page. One page features a full-page picture of the “Blue Road” that operates as a background to a map, a panel featuring three characters with speech balloons, and captions that further the present day narrative retelling of the Blue Road’s history (57). Each of these elements is grounded in a particular time, whether in the time they represent or the time the information is conveyed to the reader. The effect of the juxtaposition of these elements is the situation in time of the various page elements against each other, which become defined by their temporal contrast.

A section towards the end of the first volume of *Maus* provides a similar example in its use of layering different moments in time. At the top of one page, Vladek sits on his Exercycle, relating his story to Art. Beneath this in the second tier is the moment in 1941 he is describing, and features an extreme close-up of a Nazi poster. In the third tier the narrative skips ahead, and in the final tier and over the page the narrative slows to action-to-action transitions, showing a conversation occurring later in 1941. Behind this conversation, however, is a large image depicting a history told within that history—a
layering of flashback-upon-flashback (82-3). The transition allows the reader to dip
deeper and deeper into the history of the narrative, visually representing the layers of time
and how they are uncovered through story-telling. In contrast to this, the use of simple,
same-sized panels allows the passage of time to move unhindered. Much of the present in
*Maus* is depicted in this way, for instance in the scene where Art and Françoise are
awoken by Vladek calling their bedroom telephone, in which all the panels are uniformly
sized and spaced (96-7). This technique allows the narrative to be quickly furthered. The
unobtrusive quality of such sections allows the action of present day to remain as a frame
to the focus of the story. Where past and present meet in the text, however, these two
techniques are shown in contrast. As Vladek explains the layout of the Auschwitz camps
to Art, for instance, the regular structure of the present-day panels is disrupted by Art’s
imagining of an aerial-view image, creating a jarring contrast between past and present
(*Maus II* 51). Such instances occur frequently, as Spiegelman strives to keep his father’s
dialogue in the foreground of his narrative, whilst simultaneously playing with
distinctions of time.

The passage of time, in light of such techniques as these, is further complicated by
the route the reader’s eye can take through the page. As opposed to other mediums, such
as film or theater, comics does not insist on the primacy of a single image at any one
moment. Furthermore, whereas other mediums strap the audience to a chair and hurl
them through time, dramatic elements in a comic can be stopped with the blink of an eye.
The reader of comics is afforded a freedom not available to the audience of other
mediums—their eye can follow the progression of panels in whichever manner they
choose, revisiting the past and skipping ahead to the future if they so wish. This constant
availability of past, present and future means that time in comics need not be restricted to
a linear progression, but can be experienced with an immediacy unique to its form.
In *Maus*, the presence of the past is also presented literally in certain panels, by having images from the past infiltrate the space of the present. In one panel, for instance, Art is pictured at his desk atop a pile of emaciated corpses, as he explains his reservations and depression about finishing his Holocaust narrative (41). As Art leaves his studio to visit his psychiatrist, the corpses are even seen strewn in the street (43). The frame-breaking insistence of the past upon the present in *Maus* presents a visual metaphor for the insistence of traumatic events upon the conscious mind in the present. Sigmund Freud describes such a repetition of trauma as a manifestation of “imprisoned” pathogenic situations, which are “preserved as a lasting charge and a source of constant disturbance in physical life” (188). It is precisely this latent charge that disrupts the narrative chronology in *Maus*. The past is an inescapable presence for Spiegelman, bleeding inexorably into the panels of the present.

In *Safe Area Goražde*, Sacco generally presents the presence of the past through another technique of graphic juxtaposition. Sacco shows past and present images as invariably separate from each other by means of at least panel borders, and more commonly by separating the accounts of interviewees onto pages with black, rather than white, backgrounds. The closest that images of the past physically come to the present is where Sacco shows them in large “bleeds,” or frameless pictures. Sacco uses these bleeds frequently, often depicting the most harrowing details of each page in a bleed that serves almost as a background to the other panels. The effect is that traumatic events of the past are depicted as being figuratively, and literally on the page, behind the present at all times, a kind of constant background presence to Goražde and its citizens in the present day. The effect a borderless panel can have on the reader, aids these graphic representations in depicting past trauma as present. While bordered panels hurry along the narrative using bleeds slows that narrative down, focusing the attention of the reader on
the image of the bleed, which declares its presence with a frame-breaking insistence. With Sacco’s two-page bleeds this is especially the case. The large size of these pictures, along with their lack of a border, suspends these moments in time, and creates highly memorable images. Juxtaposing bleeds alongside panels also aids in this process, especially when using particularly large bleeds that can border multiple panels. On one page, when hearing the account of a deserter from the Yugoslav People’s Army, the account frames a large bleed of a war-torn street in Goražde, the deserter’s hometown. In the center of the street is a dismembered citizen. The graphic implication, by having the focus of the page on this centrally positioned bleed, is that what this image represents is central to his testimony—his witnessing of the destruction of Goražde and similar towns is crucial to understanding his reasons for desertion (Sacco 126).

If we are to see these graphic depictions as a means of attempting to represent the effects of past trauma on the present, then the works themselves could be seen as a means of working through this trauma, a graphic version of the therapeutic method of the “talking cure” pioneered by Freud and Joseph Breuer. The graphic narratives themselves are showing the protagonists’ attempts at ordering the information they have received about the past, through interpretation of the interviews into the language of comics. Several critics have made the assertion that Spiegelman produces *Maus* out of an attempt to bring order to the past, as Chute points out: “[Spiegelman] reconstructs history in his own language—comics—in frames and gutters, interpreting and interrupting as he rebuilds. Comics frames provide psychic order” (“The Shadow of a Past Time” 203). The psychic order for Art, however, is notably different to the psychic order sought by his father, Vladek. Whereas Art is constructing a narrative, and literally giving a form to his father’s story, Vladek’s ordering involves a destruction of texts, as we see with Vladek’s confession of the burning of Anja’s notebooks. Art’s anger at his father’s actions here is
particularly telling of the very different means the two characters have of establishing their own psychic order.

It is interesting to note that the form that this ordering takes for Spiegelman is one framed by a narrative of its own construction. The use of this narrative frame is not something unique to comics (Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* is a prominent example of this technique in written form), but there are methods employed in producing this frame that utilize the formal advantages of comics. The use of the frame of process allows Spiegelman to present the information as he receives it, self-reflexively preempting any dispute over narrative authority—the information is displayed as Art receives it, providing the reader with an equal access to the original source information and preventing the story from being warped too significantly by the process of being transformed into a narrative. Art serves as the connection between past and present in *Maus*, visually cued in scenes such as a panel at the start of chapter three, where Art lies on the floor making notes as his father tells him of his experience at the front line in 1939. Art’s legs visually span past and present here, connecting a panel depicting the young Vladek at the front line, and a panel showing the present day in Rego Park (*Maus* I 45). Instances such as this graphically depict the process of producing the narrative, bleeding past and present together and consciously representing the act of mediating information second-hand.

*Safe Area Goražde* similarly frames its narrative by process, showing Joe Sacco’s character in the act of interviewing eyewitnesses of the effects of war in Goražde. This narrative frame when representing the stories of war has further implications, as Aryn Bartley writes: writers who frame their narrative with their own process “attempt to accept a preexisting responsibility for the other by discursively substituting the stories of those they cover for their own. In doing so, [they] attempt to rehumanize those who are
dehumanized and violated by their experiences in war” (Bartley 51). This idea has relevance both to Sacco’s narrative and to Spiegelman’s, in the dehumanization of the Muslim community of Goražde, and the Jews during the Second World War. As in the case of *Maus, Safe Area Goražde* also presents the protagonist in a manner preempting the question of narrative authority. From his earliest arrival into Goražde, Sacco shows the remove his privileged status gave him from the experiences of those living in the town. This is instantly apparent from the chapter title, “Red Carpet,” as well as their distorted tour of the area. The difficulty for Sacco and Spiegelman is in accessing a moment in time far removed (though noticeably more recent in Sacco’s case) from their own, something self-consciously evident in their decision to frame the narrative in the process of its own construction.

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


Tucker, Ken. “Cats, Mice and History: The Avant-Garde of the Comic Strip.”