

A Novel Pedagogy: Recounting Childhood Experience of War and Social Crisis through Comics and Graphic Novels

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Background

Extended documentary comics (or graphic novel) have become popular and mainstream in the latter stages of the twentieth century. Many author/artists have used the medium to recount their experiences of social crisis and trauma, such as revolution, war, military occupation, racism and homophobia. Some, like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, have dwelt on the experience of childhoods spent in such crises. This has been accompanied by a pedagogic impulse, a desire to recount and relay traumatic incidents from the past for a contemporary audience. In this way the novels can be thought of as constituting a visual pedagogy, a means by which the contemporary audience may come to know, or to vicariously experience, past events by means of narratives that are generated by the juxtaposition of image with text.

The case study graphic novels referred to in this paper are Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. Each of these favours the autobiographic narrative approach, and each examines, wholly or in part, the conditions of displaced, dispossessed and traumatised children. They offer dramatic accounts of the survival of children in the face of overwhelming adversity. Through these seminal works theoretical issues, such as the retention of traumatic memory, are discussed in the context of the image text medium.

The graphic novel, as a medium for recounting societal or collective memory (as defined by the widespread acquisition of knowledge of social events), appears to facilitate the ways of experiencing and knowing traumatic history. Evidence for this can be found in each of these cases, where the social crisis is of such magnitude that it can be thought of as beyond representation, or 'unutterable'. It is significant that these authors have nonetheless attempted to document these events, and have chosen the graphic novel medium to do so.

Research Questions

To investigate:

- the possibilities for a pedagogy derived from the image-text medium of the graphic novel;
- the historical, social and political reasons for artist/ author interest in the comic/graphic novel medium for the purposes of documenting social crisis;
- the theoretical and conceptual problems that arise from recounting and documenting traumatic memories from childhood;
- the technical possibilities and limitations of the medium when deployed in this way;

Methods

Three case studies comprising detailed historical, contextual and visual analyses of three contemporary graphic novels; these are selected for their autobiographical documentary narrative approach, commonalities of subject matter, and prominence in terms of critical acclaim.

Frame

Specificity and autobiography: some of the key factors that unite these artist-authors are their highly specific, biographical or autobiographical graphic novels, which document moments of extreme social crisis. They also critique the very genres – biography, documentary – that they appear to simulate.

Memory and history: Paul Ricoeur's theoretical work is applied, to questioning concepts such as remembering, recalling and imagining. His discussion of testimony explores the idea of the 'autobiographical certification of a narrative', relevant to the modes of documentary that these artist-authors favour.

Authenticity: one of the chief problems that affects the recounting and retelling of experience, especially that of trauma and crisis, is that of authenticity. David Cooper's (1983) theories of authenticity and its relation to learning and memory utilises Nietzsche to explain the concept of authenticity in terms of the narrator's values being in accordance with the knowledge content of the material described.

The pedagogical imperative that resides in documentary projects manifests itself most commonly in a form of didacticism through idiosyncratic narrative; the recipient/reader/learner actively constructs and reconstructs ideas presented by the image/text; the cultural exchange is framed in judgements of value and is therefore located within the political sphere.

Research findings

These graphic novels represent an emerging way of representing social chaos and trauma, and do so in a number of innovative ways. They employ the means of popular and commodity culture, and yet seem to remain resistant to it; they adopt the visual detritus of that culture, assembling images and photographs that have in themselves little value, and yet produce effects of considerable profundity. The image texts are often ambiguous in their sequence and juxtaposition of image with narrative, but manage to reference moments of great importance and gravity, and authenticity is achieved by seemingly inauthentic means. If this is all in the context of the 21st century cultural desire for memory (Huyssen, 2003), these graphic novels may represent a significant development towards a visually orientated pedagogy of the 'unutterable', predicated on authenticity and truthfulness.

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