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"True Story": The Aesthetic Balancing Acts of Documentary Comics

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1. Introduction

1

Comics claim their stories are based on actuality rather than imagination and negotiate particular demands. They must inform but also engage their readers, balance emotional charge and documentary credibility. This article is not concerned with particular truth-claims made by non-fiction comics or their plausibility, but rather how genre expectations and codes inform aesthetic choices and tone in comics addressing actuality.

2

The first point of interest is the positioning of comics as vehicles of popular edification as well as diversion, which I hope to establish by an initial comparison of early and mid-20th century educational and "true crime" comics. It is important to note that the intention is not to construct a chronology. Nevertheless, historical context plays a role in this analysis, as it considers different operations of factual modes of address in comics, characterized by distinct sets of demands, constraints, and affordances.

3

The 1989-comic book Brought to Light is a particularly useful example in this regard. Attending to the contentious events of Reagan-era US foreign policy known as the Iran-Contra affair[1], this publication clearly aligns with the expository intentions associated with documentary far more convincingly than either true crime comics or the educational comics. It is, moreover, made up of two stories that despite being united in purpose, adhere to diametrically opposed genre conventions. One is demarcated as satire by its fictional elements and emotive hyperbole, the other adopts a low key and earnest register in keeping with documentary realism. The dual structure of Brought to Light, sets up a contrast between different approaches, each distinct in term of tone and visual character, and it thus invites attention to aesthetics.

4

The role of narrative in factual discourse has been subject to broad-ranging debates, from the argument that all knowledge of the past, including history as discipline, inevitably involves narrative construction (White), to journalism (Zelizer)[2] and more recent concerns captured by neologisms such as "fake news" (Ball; Levinson). Aesthetics, and more specifically visual aesthetics, is a less deliberated aspect of factual discourse. In the context of this piece, aesthetics refers to the means by which creators mobilize experiential aspects of subjectivity and tacit knowledge that is emotional and sensory, in other words, 'felt meaning' not always translatable in explicit and rational terms. It is precisely this meaning that tends to be viewed as incompatible with factual discourse, or at least as requiring careful policing. The analysis of Brought to Light will highlight dynamic relationships between aesthetics, credibility and affect that apply to documentary comics, and the formative role played by genre expectations.

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Witnessing and first-person accounts feature prominently in the current generation of non-fiction comics, and have generated substantive academic attention. The present discussion will not include any such examples, but the analysis of Brought to Light nevertheless prompts the question: is the split approach it represents ameliorated by the witnessing paradigm? The article therefore concludes by positioning the creator-character mechanism in a wider cultural setting and considering some of the affordances it makes available.

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But first, an examination of the ambitions and address of mid-20th-century non-fiction comic books serves to acknowledge that comics have engaged with factual discourse for a long time and in a number of different ways.

2. Edification versus Entertainment: A Misdirection?

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Educational and true crime comics boasted impressive print runs in the 1940s and 50s, making this era something of a hey-day for Anglophone factual comics. These comics still hold interest for fans and collectors, and many have been digitally re-mastered and circulated anew. "George J. Hecht published the first fact-centered, continuing comic book title on the newsstands, True Comics, in 1941 and "sparked a genre of comics based on real people and actual events, including Real Life Comics, Real Heroes, Picture News, and similar titles" (Rifas 162). Humorous trivia combined with longer fact-based narratives introducing historical characters and first-hand accounts by professionals (press photographers, security van drivers) and hobbyists appeal to young readers. The majority of the protagonists are male and conform to roles and attributes conventionally tagged as masculine, which gives an idea of the gendered address of these comics. Individual aspiration and initiative, bravery and honorable acts but also duty and responsibility for a greater good, all feature notably. Such themes readily cross over with other genres aimed at a similar demographic. Varied styles and lively artwork further bridge the distance between these true stories and their fictional action-adventure counterparts (fig. 1). That artists like George Papp worked across titles and genre boundaries would have been an additional advantage. DC artist Papp drew for Action Comics, was the creator of "Green Arrow", and later went on to draw "Super Boy." Meanwhile, the proud display of an editorial board sprinkled with academic and educationalist credentials (fig. 2) clearly aimed to reassure parents.

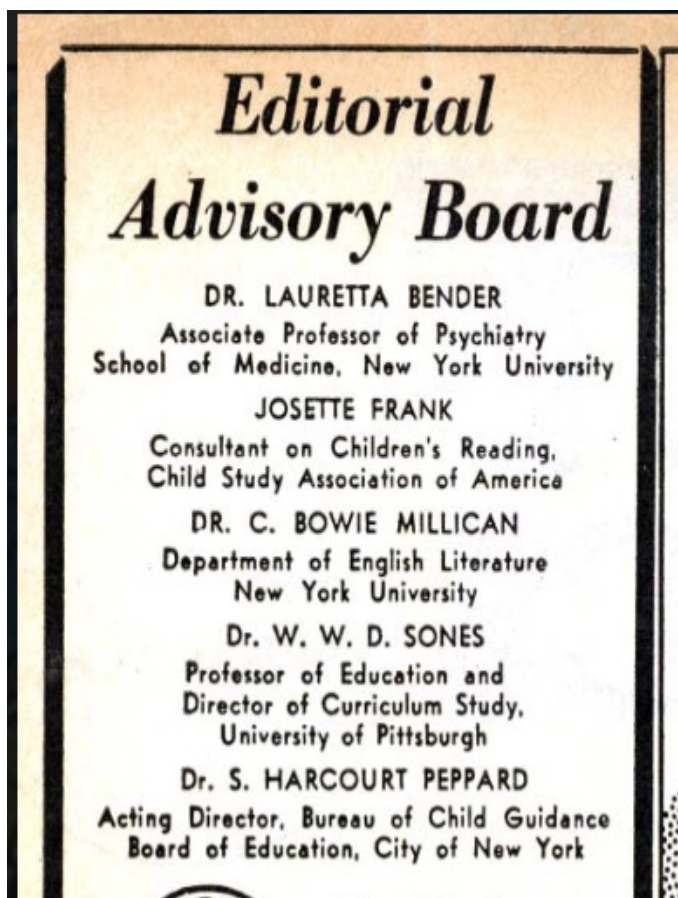Fig. 1: Real Fact Comics #17, 1948, penciled by George Papp.

Fig. 2: Detail, Inside Cover. Real Fact Comics #17, 1948.

8

This comic and many others like it presumably sought to capitalize on the popularity of the form, while countering growing unease around media consumption. Such anxieties connected young comics readers' evident appetite for vicarious thrill-seeking with anti-social tendencies and delinquency. Declaring educational (and thus civic-minded) intent moreover countered the perception of comics as an inferior cultural form that stunts 'real' reading skills and hampers the improvement of young minds. The historical approach evident in Real Fact Comics gave rise to specific titles; the Gilberton title The World Around Us offered content ranging from pre-historic life to the French revolution and biographies of great scientists (Jones 265), also adopting a resolutely earnest and didactic approach. The Gilberton Classics Illustrated approach to history tends toward literary adaptation, their re-working of canonical fictional works double up as history lessons. In so doing, they point toward the role of fiction in shaping cultural imaginaries and historical knowledge (Polak).

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These different approaches and engagements with historical narratives and actuality all involve a drive for respectability for comics. Certain expectations associated with the documentary genre, namely that its engagement with the actual world "should operate in some measure as a vehicle of cultural and educational enlightenment" (Kilborn and Izod 6) has assured its standing. This description neatly serves to describe claims staked by non-fiction comics and their publishers (then[3] and now).

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Competing motivations likewise factored into the treatments of actual events and real people in true crime comics of this period; comics purporting to base their stories on actual police and court records. Following the formula of a relatively short-lived comic strip War on Crime (1936), instigated by J. Edgar Hoover to promote the work of the FBI, came a plethora of others, among them the anthology comic books Crime Does Not Pay (Lev Gleason 1942-55), True Crime Comics (Magazine Village 1947), Crimes by Women (published by Fox Features Syndicate 1948-51), Justice Traps the Guilty (Prize Comics 1947-58) and E.C. Comics' War Against Crime! (1948-50)[4]. Their "adapted from real life" assertions—combining dramatic re-staging of heinous criminality and the inevitable restitution of law and order, "because crime never pays," made for a

popular recipe (Lovell 338-341). Following Martin Barker's seminal analysis in Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics, we can understand how these law and order narratives and dramatic depictions offer a paradoxical synergy of authoritarian moralism and its antithesis, key to the format and its appeal. Whether enjoyment is found in the frisson of transgression or the certainty that order will be restored, or any combination of the two, the "true story" quality is a vital ingredient of their appeal. This format shows no signs of fading, although latterly this kind of popular justice genre has migrated to television and YouTube. The independent publisher Eclipse Comics brought out a line of trading cards based on true crime stories in 1992 generating strong sales figures and controversy in equal measure (New York Times December 6, 1992). This was followed by a couple of issues of their True Crime Comics title in 1993, but the attempt to relaunch the genre proved short-lived.

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True crime comics unabashedly presented actual events—however troubling—as entertainment, and their entertainment value was enhanced by presumed real life underpinnings. Yet, a clear-cut binary between these comics (as entertainment) and the Gilberton comics and their kind (as educational) is undercut by aesthetic accord. The visual styles intersect both with one another and, as noted earlier, with fictional genres. While dramatic tension is achieved through alternating viewpoints and angles, sometimes page layouts, protocols of pictorial realism is upheld by the consistent depiction of characters, settings, and attention to detail.

12

In terms of content, topicality and responding to current events was not unheard of (Davidson 30) either in educational or true crime comics. But the idea that comics might critique or counter the narratives offered by official or mainstream media narratives was not a defining feature of non-fiction discourse in comics at this time. In fact, such an agenda seems far removed from the publishers' intentions. These comics were the products of a comics industry affected by and responding to particular pressures, rather than prompted by the events that they depicted. The voice of explicitly critical engagement, however, is a defining characteristic of the 1989 comic book Brought to Light. This publication draws on longstanding traditions of political satire and at the same time anticipates contemporary graphic reportage, such as Joe Sacco's.

3. Brought to Light: **Background**

13

Brought to Light offers two stories relating to the American government's contentious foreign involvements during the 1980s and in his introduction to one of them, "Flashpoint", Jonathan Marshall's words succinctly indicate its relevance here: "The work traces its roots to such diverse sources as the educational comics of the 1940s and '50s and the politically oriented underground comics of the 1960s, with the superior production values of the graphic novels of the 1980s" (n. pag.). The project was a collaboration between the aforementioned comics publisher Eclipse (1977-1993) and the Christic Institute, a public interest law firm or, in their own words, "interfaith centre for law and public policy" (Bole 1989). Both stories in Brought to Light address a public domain and discourse, distinguishable from fiction's contributions to a more diffuse notion of cultural imaginaries. Cultural imaginaries can be understood as spaces of collective imaginings, within and through which it is possible to negotiate (produce and contest) shared values and conceptualize notions and considerations. But "a public emerges and is sustained through discourse over a controversy" (Glynn et al, 13). In other words, a public—as in 'public opinion' or 'the public interest'– is an issue-based entity. This is the principle around which the distinct treatments in Brought to Light come together; these two stories have a shared agenda. Yet they exemplify contrasting approaches and methods for addressing factual and politically 'hot' content. This duality is emphasized by the publication's design; its two stories each with an external cover are presented back to back. It is up to the reader to choose which story to read first, after which s/he will need to flip the book to start its counter-part. Representing a distinct set of genre conventions, each story is the outcome of a collaboration between two different author and artist pairs, namely Alan Moore and Bill Sienkiewicz, and Joyce Brabner and Thomas Yates. Brabner is credited as the editor for the overall publication.

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Moore, now a canonical name in comics and lauded as "one of the transformative figures of the graphic novel" (britishcouncil.org) might not need an introduction here. Suffice to say that Brought to Light came out three years after Watchmen (1986) and in the same year as From Hell (1989). Moore already had prior involvement with Eclipse. Having been tasked with reviving the lesser known British superhero Marvelman for the black-and-white anthology Warrior in 1982, his stories "continued to appear [there] until 1985 when they were renamed Miracleman (due to threatened lawsuits from Marvel), colorized, and reprinted in the traditional comic-book format by Eclipse Comics" (Larance 118). With a considerable oeuvre spanning numerous genres, Moore adopts fiction as a tool for engaging with topical issues and exploring and passing comments on actual and lived realities.

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In contrast, Brabner has always been more closely (if not exclusively) aligned with factual modes of story-telling. She, too, had worked with Eclipse prior to Brought to Light, as an editor of the comic book Real War Stories. This collaboration with the non-profit GI/veteran's organization Citizen Soldier sought to counter the glamorized images of soldiering touted by the U.S. army recruitment drives, and achieved a circulation of 65,000 (Steinhauer n. pag.). Brabner's activist background thus provided a good fit with the political advocacy ethos of the Christic Institute, a law firm that initially came to public attention when representing the family of Karen Silkwood[5] (Bole n. pag.).

16

The two artists of Brought to Light likewise represent distinct and contrasting approaches. Bill Sienkiewicz was a high-profile comics artist following his collaborations with Frank Miller: the graphic novel Daredevil: Love and War and prize-winning mini-series Elektra: Assassin for the Marvel imprint Epic. His distinctively expressionist style and mixed-media approach, suggestive of a fine arts background, set him apart in a comics context and Sienkiewicz's subsequent career has incorporated gallery contexts internationally as well as book illustration, album covers, advertising and concept art for films and games.

17

Thomas Yeates, on the other hand, hailed from underground comix beginnings and had in 1978 been one of the first graduates from the Joe Kubert School[6]. His drawing has the realist aesthetic of swashbuckling adventure comics. Yeates had developed his style by drawing sword and sorcery fantasy comics during his early career at DC, where he also created the artwork for the second series of DC's Swamp Thing from 1982. He has since gone on to draw Tarzan comics in the 1990s, and in 2011 he took over drawing the Prince Valiant strip, a title unrivaled in terms of continuous longevity (Gross n. pag.).

18

United by intent and purpose, the two stories that make up Brought to Light are adamant about their factuality and credentials: "Both sections include bibliographies to cite their sources" (Sonneveld n. pag.) as they take the American government to task over their involvement with the Contras in Central America. The investigation by the Christic Institute on which the stories are based, resulted in litigation against the US Government in 1986. However, "the $24 million federal lawsuit […] was ruled by a federal judge in Florida to be frivolous and politically motivated, and it's [sic]claims unproven" (Sonneveld n. pag.). For the purposes here, the vivid contrast in terms of visual strategies between Brabner and Yeates' "Flashpoint: The La Penca Bombing" and Moore and Sienkiewicz's "Shadowplay: The Secret Team" highlights the role of genre conventions.

4. 'Flashpoint: La Penca': An Earnest Tale

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Brabner and Yeates' "Flashpoint" is the story of a bomb explosion that killed three reporters and injured scores of others in La Penca, near the Nicaraguan border with Costa Rica in May 1984. Their expedition had traveled to a counter-revolutionary guerrilla camp to interview the renegade Sandinista turned Contra leader

Eden Pastora, but he escaped unharmed the blast allegedly meant to assassinate him. In his introduction to "Flashpoint", the journalist and publisher Jonathan Marshall explains the significance of these events thus:

> "[This event] did not by itself change history. But the investigation of it by Costa Rican-based journalists Martha Honey and Tony Avirgan opened up a window on CIA intrigues, Cuban exile politics, drugs-and-arms running and White House conspiracies long before the average American would ever hear of the Iran-Contra scandal. (Marshall, n. pag.)

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Based on the accounts of two journalists (Honey and Avirgan) and researchers at the Christic Institute, "Flashpoint" tells the story and gives an account of the subsequent (failed) lawsuit brought against the US Government. Yeates' artwork fastidiously adheres to realist conventions, characterized by carefully proportioned character depictions, neat layouts extending an orderly narrative progression and careful avoidance of anything that might come across as subjective or unnecessarily dramatic. The treatment extends considerable attention to detail when portraying vehicles and equipment and uses a predominantly restrained color palette. The visual exposition is dominated by panel compositions equivalent of medium shots and close-ups and an eye-level viewpoint throughout, and this consistency is an important contributing factor to the overall tone[7]. But, it is perhaps the characterization of people that most markedly sets Yeates' depiction apart from contemporary counterparts. There is little indication of subjective aspects, such as character traits, moods, or feelings. Presumably, the outcome of carefully avoiding both exaggeration or speculation, the depictions of individuals become almost generic. In perfect correlation, the verbal presentation in text insets and third person explanations is instructive and authoritative. Commenting on Flashpoint, for Stephen Sonnevald "'[s]traightforward' is not a bad thing when all these stunning facts can speak for themselves. The script and the art deliver those facts and bring home the emotion." (n. pag.) Others have found this approach counter-productive, as is evident from this assessment: "The main problem with the directly narrative 'Flashpoint – the La Penca Bombing' by Joyce Brabner is that the pictures don't really add anything to the script. They illustrate what the words—and there are an awful lot of those—are saying.' Jerome also writes: 'Brabner is careful not to overdramatise, to include all the pertinent information, and between wanting to set everything down and being scrupulously reasonable about it all, all the life is sucked out of the story." (Jerome, n. pag.)

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The unembellished approach is, however, interrupted on a couple of occasions. A splash page (10) showing the advancement of a tank and armed soldiers towards unarmed civilians grouped at the bottom of the page with their backs facing the reader (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Page 10 of "Flashpoint", Thomas Yeates and Joyce Brabner.

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The background of the image consists of a legal document headed by the declaration "We, the People of the United States…," and three inserts in the top half of the page show Christic Institute researchers engaged in various tasks: searching through paper archives, tapping on a computer keyboard, engaged in a phone conversation. The edges of the image are adorned by the repeated silhouette of a machine gun. This page thus involves a conceptual, rather than simply straight-forward observation-style graphic representation. It condenses complex information about political policy, consequences on the ground, the research methods on which the account is based, and involves an uncharacteristic decorative flourish. Yeates also employs the device of re-created children's drawings. By effectively offering two visual renderings of, first a jeep, and secondly the expedition setting off travelling down-river in two boats (fig. 4), he draws attention to mediation itself and intriguingly foreshadows a kind of self-reflexive meta-commentary that has become increasingly familiar and something of a hallmark of contemporary nonfiction comics: re-drawn photographs, maps or documents, or asides that break the illusion of immediacy.

Fig. 4: "Flashpoint", page 13, panels 3-6. Thomas Yeates and Joyce Brabner.

23

With journalists as the main protagonists in "Flashpoint," the story has processes of mediation at its core, a theme recurring in more recent work by Joe Sacco and Sarah Glidden. In this case, however, the creators of the comic are not the journalists in question, but Brabner and Yeates in collaboration with the researchers at the Christic Institute. In terms of narrative production, this constitutes a further fold and remove, which is acknowledged in a scene towards the end of the story.

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Introduced as a "graphic docu-drama" and "a television documentary you can carry in your pocket—and without the usual network censorship" (Marshall, n. pag.) "Flashpoint" applies aesthetic strategies to strengthen the authority of the exposition. Yeates' pictorial realism and Brabner's narrative approach and tone, measured and conscientious throughout, adhere to a conventional documentary style work in tandem with other mechanisms such as the deliberate inclusion of verifiable details, references to sources and scenes that indicate transparency of process. The impetus to carefully observe such conventions of factual discourse is presumably reinforced by perceived prejudice against the form and its capacity to venture beyond jokey, fantastical and/or exaggerated modes.

5. "Shadowplay": An Impassioned Gesture

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Turning the pamphlet around and flipping it presents a complete contrast in terms of tone and visual register. The pages in "Shadowplay: The Secret Team" are visually demanding, as bright colors compete for attention and imagery and dense text are tightly packed, not always leading the reader's attention from one element to the next with ease, and the overarching impression is arguably one of visceral onslaught and excess. A narrator in the shape of an alcohol guzzling eagle instantly sets this account apart from the earnest tenor and strait-laced conventions of factual discourse. He is—we are invited to believe, a cynical and battle-scarred CIA operative. This anthropomorphized character and obvious reference to the national emblem addresses the reader directly as if we had just encountered him in a bar (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: "Shadowplay" page 6, Bill Sienkiewicz and Alan Moore.

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His confessional and increasingly garrulous diatribe recounts underhand dealings, murder, and corruption. The artwork is expressive and unfettered by conventions of realism, instead allowing Sienkiewicz artistic license to interpret ideas and evoke a nightmarish visual cacophony. There is a correspondence between the complexity of the information involved and the densely packed pages, but also a sense of urgency. The strength of feeling relayed in the gestural artwork and heightened use of color would be as antithetical to most forms of factual discourse as an anthropomorphic animal character. Yet, both sit comfortably within the tradition of satirical cartooning. As Dieter Declerq argues, satire's genre conventions offer latitude for exaggeration, interpretation, playful distortion and make no demands in terms of realist depiction (see his contribution to this issue). Using parody to make its points, satire offers a means to critically address and challenge political abuses of power. "Parodic techniques involve various combinations of imitation and alteration: direct quotation, alternation of words, textual rearrangement, substitution of subjects or characters,

shifts in diction, shifts in class, shifts in magnitude, etc." (Hariman 250)[8]. While conceptual and graphic representations such as maps and info-graphics are accepted as supports in a documentary address, visual metaphor and parody can form the pivotal strategy in satire.

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In "Shadowplay," Sienkiewicz interweaves caricature depictions of well-known politicians with visual puns and drawing as ideational representation (fig. 6).
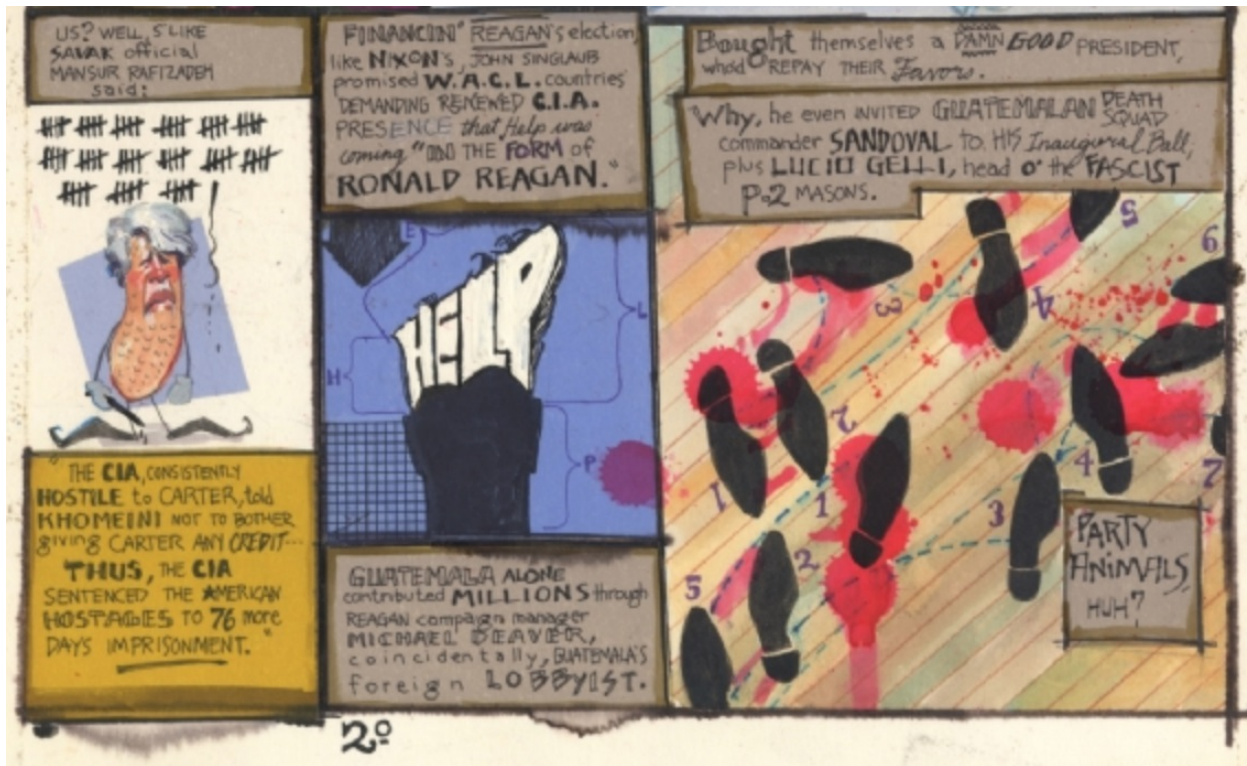

Fig. 6: "Shadowplay", page 20, panels 4-6. Bill Sienkiewicz and Alan Moore.

28

Here Jimmy Carter (whose US presidency ran 1977-1981 and included a prolonged hostage crisis at the US embassy in Teheran following the 1979 Revolution) is depicted as a peanut, a commonplace reference to his family's background as peanut farmers. More original perhaps is the portrayal of the behind-the-scenes dealings between the CIA and other vested interests as a blood-splattered sequence of dance-steps in panel 6. The intricate patterns of the silhouetted shoes recall a step diagram, and the red smears against the floorboards juxtaposed with the comment "Party Animals-HUH?" evokes and critiques political bartering and its attendant disregard of human suffering. The overtly hand-inked and variably small, spiky, scratchy lettering contributes a nervous energy underscoring the conspiracy-themed exposition.

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Entertainment and critical commentary combine in satirical cartooning. This contributory to the genealogy of comics reaching back centuries, was probably never more expressly revived and elaborated than in American underground comix. They produced satire not just through cartooning, profane social observations and merciless lampooning, but in their ironic re-workings of the cultural form and format itself (Hatfield 6-20). The continuous presence of satirical drawing, whether in dedicated magazine form, as editorial cartoons in mainstream newspapers or online, also speaks to its importance as an instrument of public discourse and for the "agonistic field of proliferating voices" (Hariman 253) crucial to any democratic project. In fact, satire falls squarely into what cultural critic Henry Giroux has called critical pedagogies, or "pedagogies that encourage reflection, the development of democratic sensibilities, and social commitment" (McClennen 3). Satire thus aligns with the civic role and concern with topical issues that documentary and investigative reportage share, but approaches topics with fundamentally different aesthetic conventions, affordances, and scope.

6. Documentary Aesthetics and Affect: A Fraught Affair

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Factual discourse often cloaks its strategies of persuasion, establishing authority by instilling a tone of detachment, equilibrium, and restraint. Visual aesthetics not conforming to such muted tones are easily perceived as undermining the credibility of a factual account. They run the risk of coming across as excessively emotive or manipulative, and are thus categorized as propagandistic.

31

According to John Grierson (1898-1972), early theorist and proponent of documentary, the difference between non-fiction actuality and "documentary" lies precisely in the latter's explicit agenda and creative treatment, a crafting of a narrative about persons and events in and of the real world. Despite embracing a partisan approach, Grierson does not suggest playing fast and loose with the facts. For him, "creative treatment" refers to the employment of aesthetic strategies to direct and support intended audience responses (Hardy). The documentaries that came out of Grierson's school favored images of collective endeavor and social and industrial aspiration. Footage was often accompanied by a disembodied voice-over, but also a rousing and highly emotive orchestral score. Since these early days of documentary, using non-diegetic sound, imagery, and editing in order to communicate non-verbally are not exceptions but rather the norm. At the same time understandings of documentary have tended to either underplay or construct these aspects as problematic. As Anne Rutherford notes, "[the] sense of conflict between the journalistic and the aesthetic impulses recurs constantly in the theorization of documentary, and is linked to a privileging of language that subordinates the experiential properties of image and sound." (128) To overtly provoke or elicit emotional responses by aesthetic means has tended to be viewed as running counter to the credibility of factual modes and genres such as documentary. This is signified by the matter-of-factness that characterizes such discourse, and ensured through certain sets of conventions. John Corner has called this "[a]n apparent absence of style." (52) Here, the qualification is crucial, because this expression in fact describes a stylistic (and thus aesthetic) strategy intended to assert a low-key and measured tone to bolster the authority of an account.[9]

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The dual approach in Brought to Light thus responds to issues that contemporary nonfiction comics still grapple with: how to negotiate conventions; how to instill credibility; how to engage readers with potentially difficult and unpleasant topics; how to avoid serving up spectacular or gratuitous representations of violence; how to make readers care. Because, even as documentary's conventions strategically appeal to our rationality, its objective is not just to impart information. The ability to elicit a response that operates at a different level than mere cognition is a vital part of its project.

33

Yet, aesthetic strategies are inescapably engaged to both assert credibility and to elicit more profound responses. Work towards a clearer understanding of what the latter entails raises the contested notion of affect. According to the neuro-biological conceptions that popularized the oft-connected terms affect and embodiment in the 1990s, affect occurs pre-consciousness and must not be confused with either identification or emotion. I want to acknowledge this, as my use of the term here is based, emphatically and conversely, on the understanding that "human affect is inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic (broadly defined) and the discursive" (Wetherell 20). Contradictory and nebulous, the notion of affect nevertheless retains some traction when faced with the task of explaining how and to what use aesthetics are employed in 'factual' accounts. In its focus on a felt response—rather than cognitive reference points—affect appears to capture something of importance in relation to aesthetic means and intent. The ambition to engender a response—whether in order to encourage civic participation a la Grierson or a more neo-liberal conception of individual conscience—seems characteristic of twenty-first-century non-fiction comics, especially comics journalism and comics engaging in advocacy; comics in which witnessing has become a prominent characteristic. I am proposing that the emphasis on subjectivity and situated knowledge that has emerged to feature strongly in non-fiction approaches in comics has involved a resolution of the aesthetic polarity that is evident in Brought to Light.

7. Witnessing and the Creator-Character

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Witnessing—as in seeing a situation—of course, does not in itself guarantee a particular response. But many documentary comics (including "Flashpoint") share, to varying degrees of success and sophistication, the attempt to represent and facilitate critical witnessing, or that which "challenges us to question the construction of ethical and political relations and imaginaries through testimonial practices" (Zembylas 319). Again, such questioning and the invitation to engage with it corresponds to the aims and ambitions of a notion of critical pedagogies, and in non-fiction comics it has been accompanied by a turn toward testimony. The turn toward testimony and first-person accounts in non-fiction comics can, of course, be situated in the tradition of autobiographical comics, and the influence of Art Spiegelman's Maus. But clearly not all non-fiction comics are narrated by their creators, and looking beyond the specific contexts of comics is also rewarding.

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On a historicized and methodological level, these latter-day "true story" comics focusing on actual events through the real experiences of specific narrators exemplify a broader turn to witnessing as a source of knowledge. Journalism scholar Alfredo Cramerotti has examined the drive to develop new platforms for work that deals with topical issues and information. Arguing that moving beyond conventional contexts and strategies can allow for more questioning, differently framed and "open" engagements, he identifies the centrality of witnessing thus: "The fundamental difference between a journalistic work that 'reports' and one that 'witnesses', is in the approach of the producer to a mode of revelation that exposes and represents facts without anesthetizing [sic] them" (Cramerotti 104). He expands on this distinction by the assertion that witnessing "implies a plurality of points of view, and the passage of time, which is not permissible in the current news media environment" (ibid).

36

Transposing this argument to non-fiction comics that address topical issues is in many cases fairly effortless, and invites consideration of how such comics can be positioned in relation to other forms and contexts of mediation, especially current affairs. The frequency and plurality of news information privileges a form that disavows or severely understates emotion, in turn impacting the recipient experience.

37

Audiences are on a daily basis confronted with distant events that are either framed into recognizable and familiar patterns, thus denied their specificity and "otherness," or deprived of an explanatory framework and therefore exaggerated in their difference and stereotyped as incomprehensible and foreign (Silverstone 48). In this context, distance also becomes a moral category, defining the limits and ways of the viewer's relationship with the distant other (Kyriakidou 218).

38

In a move highly pertinent to the types of comics I am thinking about here, media scholar Maria Kyriakidou identifies two particular components that stimulate "emotional imaginations" and facilitate "affective witnessing" (220). The first is the power of visual representation, and the second concerns "singularisation and personalisation of suffering" (ibid), both of which she argues decrease the distance reproduced by news media encounters.

39

Testimony in factual comics, as in other forms of contemporary media (Dovey; Ellis 122-128) is, of course, mediated and re-mediated through complex processes. The "as told to" device used in "Flashpoint" is common, even in approaches which also include the relatively more "direct" translation of a creator's own experiences. The creator-character has indeed emerged as a prominent device since Brought to Light. As performed authorial selves, creator-characters fulfill multiple functions in this context. They are evidently a

key inscription of the bearing witness mechanism at play, and furnish an account with the subjective focalization and personalization that aid "emotional imaginations" (Kyriakidou 220). In addition, they can be used for indicating transparency of process. The creator-character's "ironical authentication" (Hatfield 131) and capacity for further self-reflexive asides is now also commonplace in moving image documentary—all of which actually works to underline rather than undermine the authority of the account. To overtly acknowledge that perspectives are situated and knowledge is partial works to qualify and at the same time support validity[10], and speaks to a conception of reality as heteroglossic and always already mediated (Kunert-Graf). As an aesthetic device, the creator/character thus corresponds to a contemporary valorization of lived experience as a guarantor of knowledge. Moreover, and significantly, the creator-character has the capacity to infuse a telling with emotional registers, both visually and verbally, without endangering plausibility or expectations associated with factual accuracy. S/he can offer an explicitly subjective voice and view-point, and at the same time perform as a holding device for emotional intensity and excess. This way the account can, visually as well as both verbally, incorporate emotional inflections while maintaining and safe-guarding components that satisfy evidential and factual aspects of the telling/showing. In other words, the creator-character allows, personifies, and contains subjective responses, yet guards against the destabilizing of the factual address overall.

8. Conclusion

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Any documentary comic that aims not only to relay information—but to make an impact through mobilizing a moral or ethical response—must operate beyond a strictly cognitive level. This inevitably involves the balancing of information, interpretation and persuasion, and bringing together rational argument and aesthetic means.

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1940s and 1950s non-fiction comics did not accentuate their distinction from fictional genres stylistically, as they were hoping to entice readers of the latter while introducing a more edifying role for comics. The intention was to curry favor with the establishment rather than to offer critical comment. By the late 1980s, an oppositional stance (indicative of the legacy of underground comics) is evident in Brought to Light. In order to extend its critique of US foreign politicking, this comic book employed the aesthetic conventions of expositional documentary and satire, respectively. While anti-authoritarianism was given full reign in the satirical half of the publication, a sober and measured tone compatible with authoritative exponents of fact was carefully maintained in its counterpart. Overt emotional expression remains firmly confined to the more permissive space of satire. Clearly, these two parts are intended to work in combination. But they also come to give an impression of two sides of a coin. The upshot is the implicit construction of factual discourse and emotional registers as somehow irreconcilable.

42

This seems incongruent with contemporary approaches; in twenty-first-century documentary comics the bringing together of real events and issues with an appeal to emotions has emerged as a strength and a necessity. A more personalized and subjective mode of factual discourse is evident in sub-genres from graphic medicine and auto/biography to reportage and advocacy. Here, the aesthetic balancing act plays out within the internal system of texts. I have proposed that the creator-character offers a particularly effective mechanism for extending emotional timbre, while simultaneously functioning to contain such aspects, not to compromise (aesthetic and narrative) protocols that support factual credentials. However, while subjectivity may be heightened where narrator and protagonist converge, its presence is not limited to such instances. Extending a plausible account of actual persons and historical events by strict adherence to genre codes has given way to greater latitude since Brought to Light. Aesthetic codes such as pictorial realism, or avoiding overt interpretation may still hold some sway, but have seemingly loosened even where the story is told and visualized on behalf of someone else. This opens up new and interesting avenues for inquiry. But, from comics reportage to biography and other non-fiction comics, the shift toward greater confidence in relation to subjective and expressive qualities since Brought to Light has been palpable.

Notes

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[1] In the 1980s, the tail end of the Cold War competition for global dominance saw the Reagan administration actively back paramilitaries (the Contras) attempting to overthrow the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. It also brokered arms deals as part of hostage release negotiations with Iran. These activities eventually resulted in criminal charges brought against both key government agencies and departments, and individuals.

44

[2] Journalism and reportage, while identifying professional protocols and identities in their own right also overlap with the historically more visually oriented category of documentary, as in Bill Nichols' category of "expository documentary" (105-09).

45

[3] Although, the factuality touted in their titles and slogans was not always as securely ensconced as one might have expected. As Sol Davidson reveals, the declaration that "Truth is stranger and 1000 times more thrilling than Fiction!" notwithstanding, "in each issue [of True Comics], the story of a fictional Hoover G-man, Steve Saunders, grew in size (about a page per issue), which meant the true stories were declining by that amount."

46

[4] War Against Crime gradually became less attached to actual cases, and was eventually re-named and re-styled as a horror comic (York 91).

47

[5] Karen Silkwood was an Oklahoma plutonium-plant worker and union representative who was killed in a car crash in 1974, not long after testifying to the Atomic Energy Commission about violations of health and safety violations at the plant where she worked.

48

[6] Kubert himself went on to write and draw about actual events in the war-torn Balkans in Fax from Sarajevo (1996), but had introduced the character of the Unknown Soldier in Star Spangled War Stories #151 in July 1970. [T]he Unknown Soldier was an American operative whose early adventures directly related to specific historical events (Castro and Decker 173).

49

[7] This is an aesthetic approach that also informs Brabner's more recent collaboration with Mark Zingarelli, the graphic novel Second Avenue Caper: When Goodfellas, Divas, and Dealers Plotted Against the Plague.

50

[8] These techniques are recognisable in the underground comics such as Robert Crumb's Zap, but also later examples such as Titans of Finance: True Tales of Money and Business by R. Walker and Josh Neufeld (Alternative Comics 2001).

51

[9] This is a familiar device for anyone used to academic writing. As countless mock-documentaries and fiction films such as The Blair Witch Project (Sanchez and Myrick) have made abundantly clear, a documentary aesthetic is not necessarily synonymous with factual content.

[10] However, it should be noted that the extent to which such mechanisms have become rote in anthropological and documentary film was the subject of severe criticism (Trinh). This is also applicable to comics, in so far as that including a creator-character and making allusions to processes of production do not automatically equate with self-reflective practice. To claim the latter, it is necessary to engage in more searching questioning of the practices of representation at stake. Importantly, Trinh was not arguing for standards of accountability, and has in her own documentary film practice been committed to exploring overt aesthetic means for the purposes of making meaningful interventions.

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