

# FRAMING THE EMBODIED JOURNALIST

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In this article we question the 'authenticity strategy' of the comics journalist embedding themselves as a visible character in the narrative, and comics artists' attempts at visual realism to give off an essence of 'truthiness'. We have found few if any good reasons for the comics journalist to appear as a character in their own drawn reports.

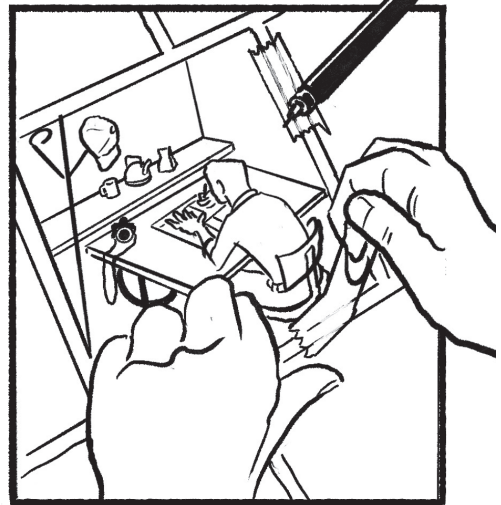
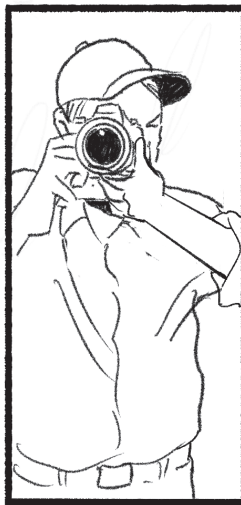
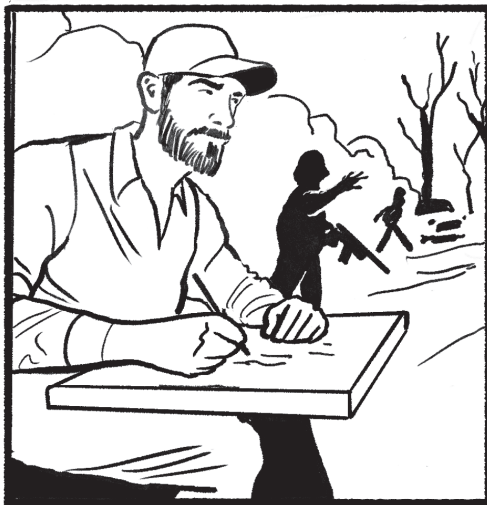
We suggest these strategies have more to do with expectations of telling compelling stories on the one hand, and visual rhetoric on the other.



In addition, we explore some comics journalists' work strategies which are less about placating industry and reader expectations, and more about showing the work done to make the drawings and exposing the constructed nature of reporting and publishing.

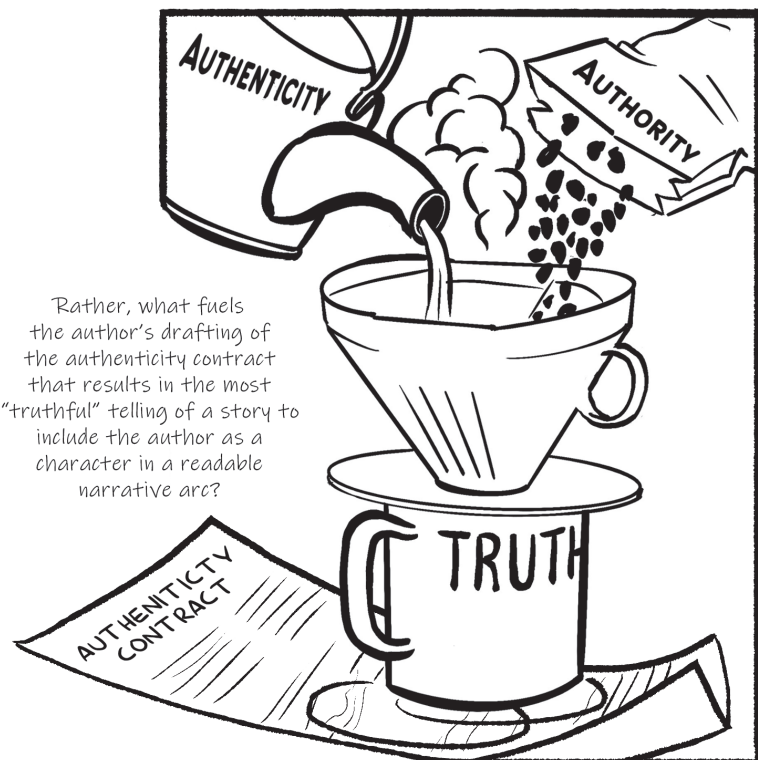
Theorists of Comics Journalism have focused on visual indicators of authenticity in a medium widely believed as telling frivolous fictions. This is in contrast to conventional journalism in conventional mediums. The paradox is “the media is always constructed, manipulated or even faked.”<sup>1</sup> Weber and Rall add “it is more appropriate to speak of authenticity or authenticity illusion.”<sup>2</sup>

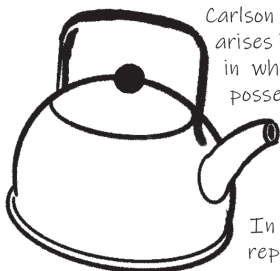
In this article we question the modalities of narrative processes in graphic reportage, particularly what comics theorists have claimed about these modalities. We’re interested in the comics journalist embedding themselves as a visible character in the narrative, and their attempts at visual realism as two key strategies to give off an essence of ‘truthiness’.



Enli labels the relationship of reader perception to media production, journalism etc., as the ‘authenticity contract’.<sup>3</sup> Is that in effect what we should be examining?

Rather, what fuels the author’s drafting of the authenticity contract that results in the most “truthful” telling of a story to include the author as a character in a readable narrative arc?





Carlson says journalistic authority arises in "a contingent relationship in which certain actors come to possess a right to create legitimate discursive knowledge about events in the world for others".<sup>4</sup>

In comics journalism, the reporter who creates the graphic narrative becomes the arbiter of legitimate discursive knowledge. The comics format actually allows the creator of a comic to exercise their authority on not just the textual plane, but also in the visual plane. The authority of the author is bolstered by authenticity, which also has a special role in the visual plane of graphic journalism.



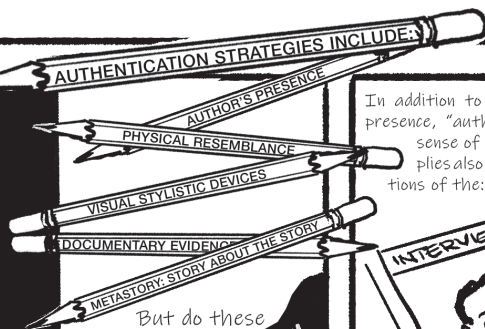
"Authenticity means not only being truthful and reporting facts accurately, but also reflecting the experience of discovery: background, context, different perspectives, tone, language and emotions of the public. [it] spans two antithetical poles: conveying facts accurately and conveying what people see, hear and experience in their communities."<sup>5</sup>



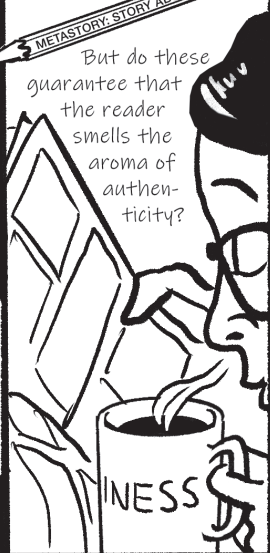
If journalists draw the news and use a medium for news coverage that is associated with fiction, how will readers know whether the comics journalists are telling the truth and whether their reports are not fictional?

COMICS JOURNALISTS ADOPT AUTHENTICATION STRATEGIES 2

When will they talk about SACCO?!



But do these guarantee that the reader smells the aroma of authenticity?



In addition to the author's presence, "authentic" in the sense of "truthful" applies also to representations of the:

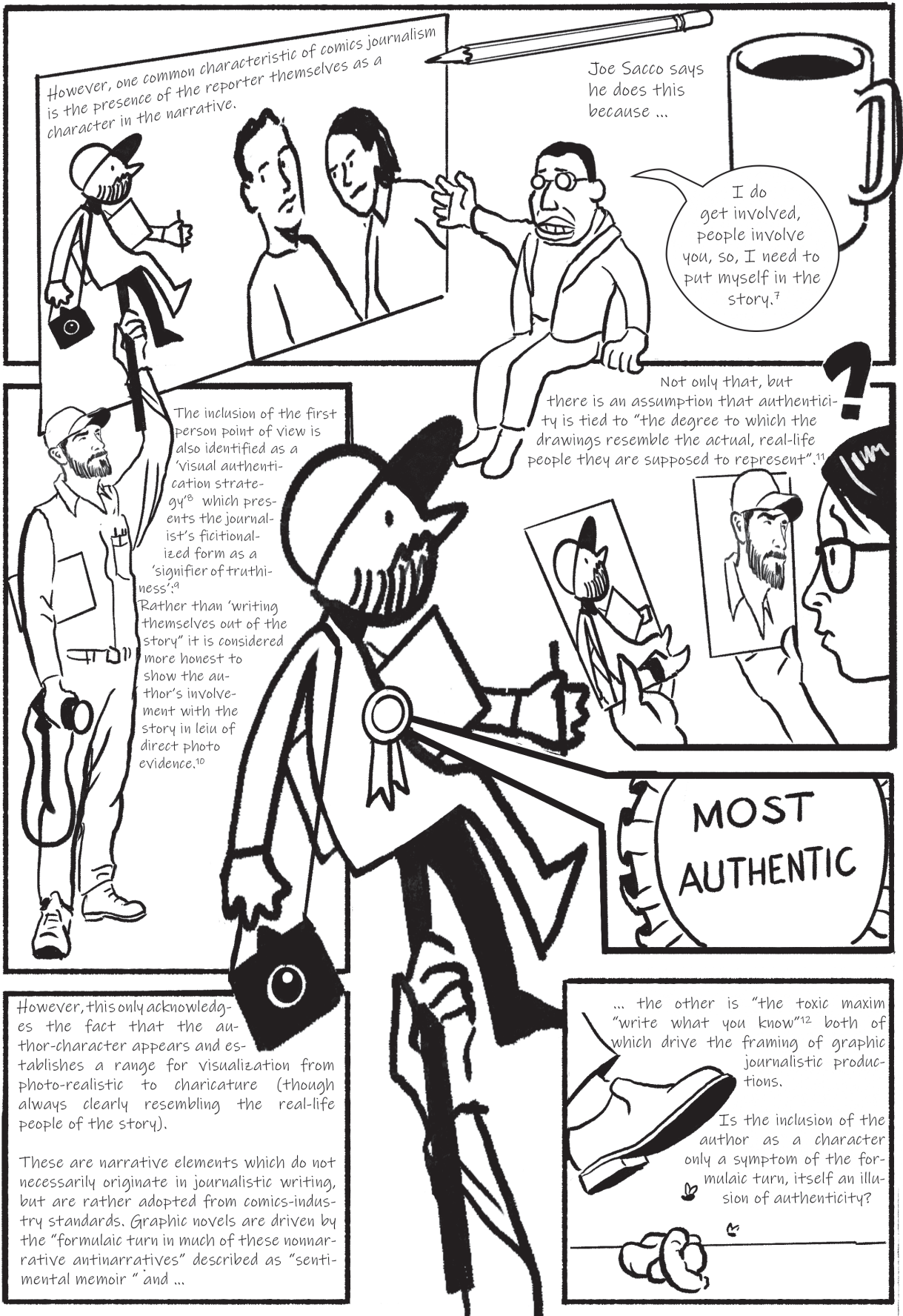
**MEANWHILE...**

Contradictions can be found in the literature as regards these strategies.

El Rafaie identifies overt caricature of the inserted author/narrator as an authentication strategy.<sup>6</sup> This is a property of the visual plane, so there are not clear rules on journalistic writing to address it.







However, one common characteristic of comics journalism is the presence of the reporter themselves as a character in the narrative.

Joe Sacco says he does this because ...

I do get involved, people involve you, so, I need to put myself in the story.<sup>7</sup>



The inclusion of the first person point of view is also identified as a 'visual authentication strategy'<sup>8</sup> which presents the journalist's fictionalized form as a 'signifier of truthiness'.<sup>9</sup> Rather than 'writing themselves out of the story' it is considered more honest to show the author's involvement with the story in lieu of direct photo evidence.<sup>10</sup>

Not only that, but there is an assumption that authenticity is tied to "the degree to which the drawings resemble the actual, real-life people they are supposed to represent".<sup>11</sup>



However, this only acknowledges the fact that the author-character appears and establishes a range for visualization from photo-realistic to caricature (though always clearly resembling the real-life people of the story).

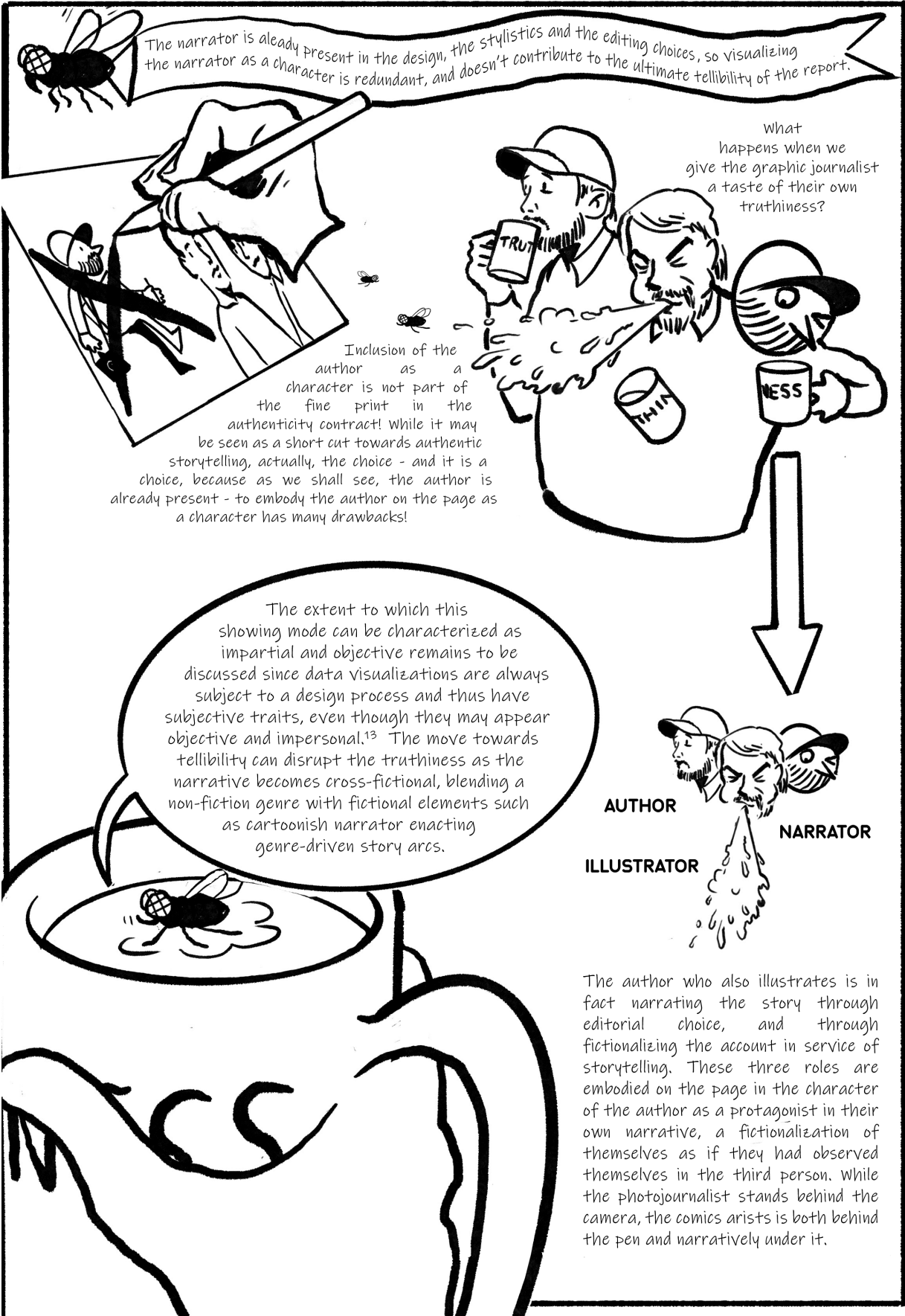
These are narrative elements which do not necessarily originate in journalistic writing, but are rather adopted from comics-industry standards. Graphic novels are driven by the "formulaic turn in much of these nonnarrative antinarratives" described as "sentimental memoir" and ...

... the other is "the toxic maxim 'write what you know'<sup>12</sup> both of which drive the framing of graphic journalistic productions.

Is the inclusion of the author as a character only a symptom of the formulaic turn, itself an illusion of authenticity?







The narrator is already present in the design, the stylistics and the editing choices, so visualizing the narrator as a character is redundant, and doesn't contribute to the ultimate tellibility of the report.

What happens when we give the graphic journalist a taste of their own truthiness?

Inclusion of the author as a character is not part of the fine print in the authenticity contract! While it may be seen as a short cut towards authentic storytelling, actually, the choice - and it is a choice, because as we shall see, the author is already present - to embody the author on the page as a character has many drawbacks!

The extent to which this showing mode can be characterized as impartial and objective remains to be discussed since data visualizations are always subject to a design process and thus have subjective traits, even though they may appear objective and impersonal.<sup>13</sup> The move towards tellibility can disrupt the truthiness as the narrative becomes cross-fictional, blending a non-fiction genre with fictional elements such as cartoonish narrator enacting genre-driven story arcs.

**AUTHOR** **NARRATOR**

**ILLUSTRATOR**

The author who also illustrates is in fact narrating the story through editorial choice, and through fictionalizing the account in service of storytelling. These three roles are embodied on the page in the character of the author as a protagonist in their own narrative, a fictionalization of themselves as if they had observed themselves in the third person. While the photojournalist stands behind the camera, the comics artist is both behind the pen and narratively under it.

Illustrating the narrator can "re-inforce the impression that readers are immediately present and have direct access to interviewees' voices, to create the illusion of eavesdropping".<sup>14</sup>



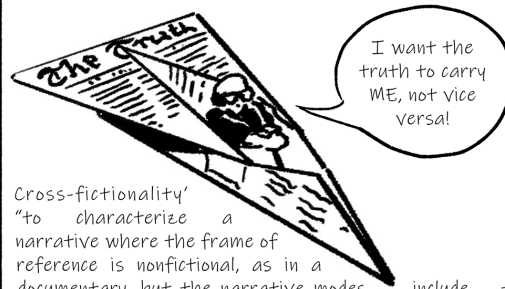
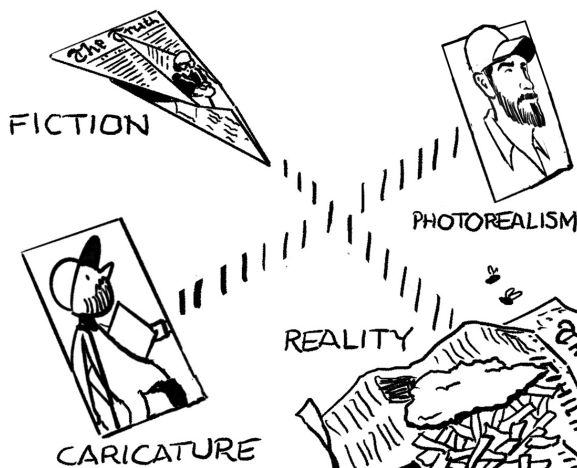
This sounds like a good thing, but is it really serving a purpose...

and did the author-illustrator choose it, or just do it to 'comicize' the text?

Inserting the narrator is partly the result of commercial pressure to produce "tellability".<sup>15</sup> However, The factors which generate tellability have nothing to do with objective fact-telling, and are matters of subjective framing by the author.



Just as graphic journalism blends photo-realism with caricature in the pictures, it blends fiction with non-fiction. In the text through the inclusion of an embodied narrator.



Cross-fictionality' "to characterize a narrative where the frame of reference is nonfictional, as in a documentary, but the narrative modes include those that are conventionally regarded as fictional,"<sup>16</sup> as in framing the facts around the arc of a love story. If we link this to Weber's point that the editorializing and visual packaging itself is a narrator's expression of storytelling, then all presentations of characters in the graphic plane are basically just the narrator expressing 'vicarious storytelling'<sup>17</sup> anyway.

Some argue that...

[W]e want to present the "characters" in our stories in a particular light while at the same time positioning ourselves vis-à-vis those people but also vis-à-vis our interlocutors in the current conversational situation...



Even though such strategies may compromise our credibility as storytellers when looked at more critically they are part and parcel of what it means to tell stories as a form of human interaction".<sup>18</sup>

But this again ignores the effect that fictionalization, even more so, cross-fictionalization, blurs the lines of truthiness ...

... and reduces the story-telling potential of the visual plane to a simplified graphic record of the text, like a strange narrative doppleganger.

# The VISUAL TURN

## & NARRATIVE TURN

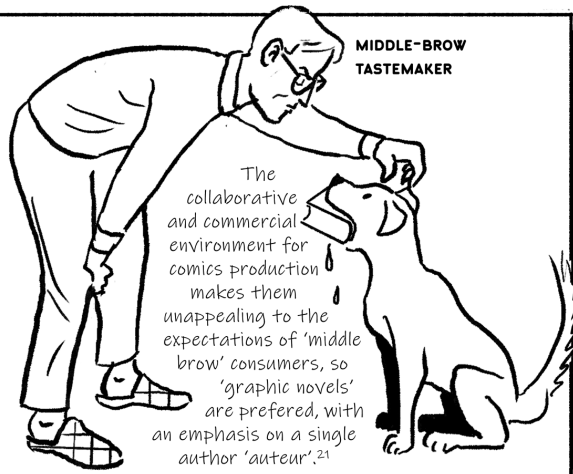
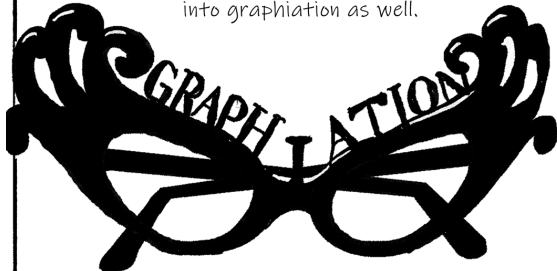
Many fields struggle with finding solutions to the visual presentations of facts or data. The visualization of data is messy, because data doesn't come housetrained.



It's still very appealing to weave data into a narrative!



The growth in comics journalism may simply be another harbinger of, on the one hand, what WJT Mitchell and Barbara Stafford among others have called the Visual Turn (a general shift in the way society makes and communicates knowledge<sup>19</sup>) that this is trending clearly towards the visual, and on the other hand what's been described as the narrative turn. Clive Baldwin claims "narrative has found a place in the sciences, social sciences, in the professions as well as academia, and in the popular mind. There really does seem to be no area into which narrative has not reached."<sup>20</sup> This means that tellibility in journalism is now pressured into graphiation as well.



MIDDLE-BROW TASTEMAKER

Claims that this is driven by an overall trend in memoir style graphic novels, pushed also by changes in the trade industry and consumer tastes, wants to position this within 'cultural narratology' in the sense that the phenomenon is driven by larger commercial trends rather than by artistic ingenuity. This lines up with how Mari Hatavara and Jarmila Mildorf note that these narratives get forced into 'generic fictional' structures.<sup>22</sup>



Bernière envisages the future in the following way: "Either comic book writers turn into information (data) professionals, which we can doubt, or they continue to share their observations with us as authors, which they undoubtedly are."<sup>23</sup>



If the journalistic comic 'auteur' is more of a writer of fiction, burdened by commercial pressures and a larger trend towards graphiation, then perhaps holding on to the narrative norms of memoir and biographic graphic novels which filled the market is unnecessary to achieve tellibility of a non-fiction, journalistic report. If we can unravel the simplified practices of graphiation from the storytelling aims of the narrative, the visual plane can freely move beyond a redundant avatar of the journalist.

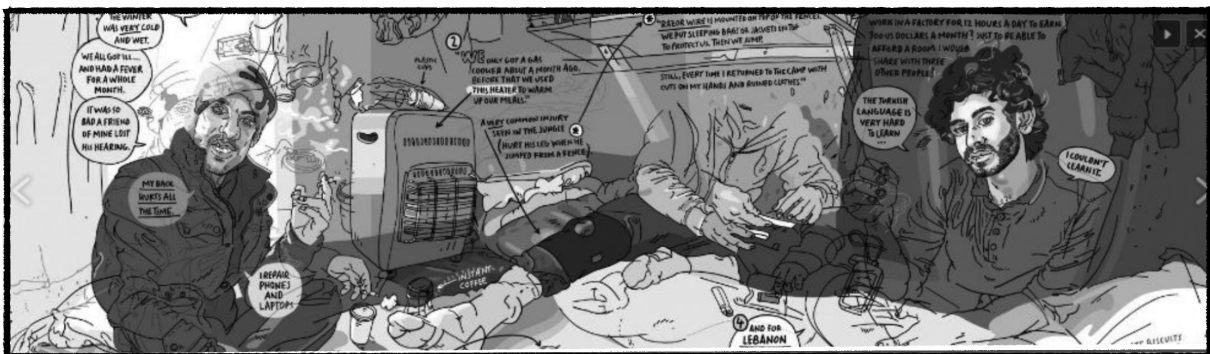
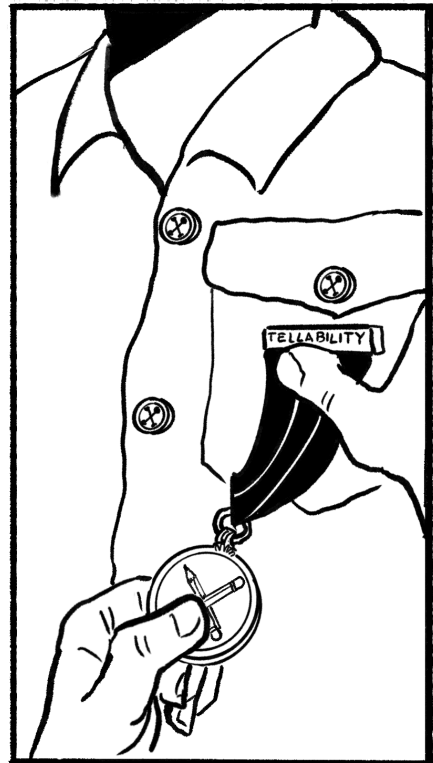
There are many other tools in the author/illustrator/narrator's storytelling toolkit! If journalists are willing to borrow industry standards, why not pick ones which serve the purpose?



There is nothing wrong with designing a graphic novel with a high degree of tellability, but the narrative standards which are currently popular create many difficult questions while being undefendable as truly 'necessary' to the storytelling process.

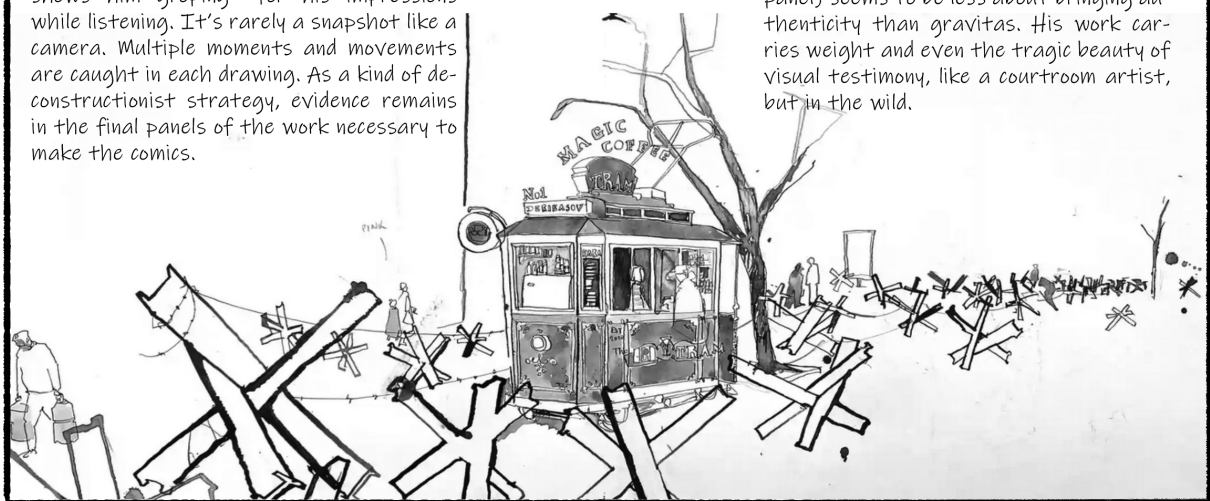
Perhaps it seems too weird a conceit, based on comics conventions for the "I" to remain invisible? (as it is also weird in film), and who would begrudge the auteur, Hitchcock (or his audience), his cameos? But, as in conventional TV news reporting, is more than a cameo, book-ending the report, necessary in comics journalism?

Olivier Kugler and George Butler are two examples of contemporary comics journalists who eschew placing their avatars into their visual narratives. While they both adopt another strategy typical of comics journalism, high visual realism, in their hands this approach yields valuable rewards for the reader.



Olivier Kugler's realism (panel above), shows him groping<sup>24</sup> for his impressions while listening. It's rarely a snapshot like a camera. Multiple moments and movements are caught in each drawing. As a kind of deconstructionist strategy, evidence remains in the final panels of the work necessary to make the comics.

Meanwhile, George Butler's realism (this panel) seems to be less about bringing authenticity than gravitas. His work carries weight and even the tragic beauty of visual testimony, like a courtroom artist, but in the wild.





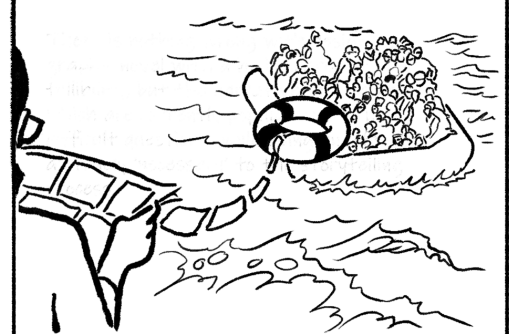
The depiction of others is complex as well: "the management of such scenes of witness involves a series of remediations that frame the story, the subject of rights, and the scenario of rescue. Representative women witness to their experiences in prostitution; their narrated lives are then remediated to become as-told-to life writing that is then visualized in a "third-person" hand of the graphic artist."<sup>25</sup>

These aspects of the incorporation of personal stories in comic books for rights activism derive from this management of suffering and social justice and thus raise important questions about the relationship of boxes of witnessing to the commodification of contemporary life writing.<sup>26</sup>

The version of the interaction that has become "tellable" through graphiation and fitting a narrative into an acceptable format can erase the heteroglossic work that goes into creating the final visualization of the report. This is particularly delicate in journalistic comics: "what is at stake are fundamental questions about the interpretation of visual images and about their power to relay affect and invoke a moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewer regarding the suffering of others."<sup>27</sup>



"[Some] crisis comics address a cosmopolitan readership in developed countries. These readers are addressed as privileged, safe subjects to be enlightened about conditions elsewhere, and their reading rehearses a form of rescue of the other through the invitation to empathetic identification and outrage."<sup>28</sup>

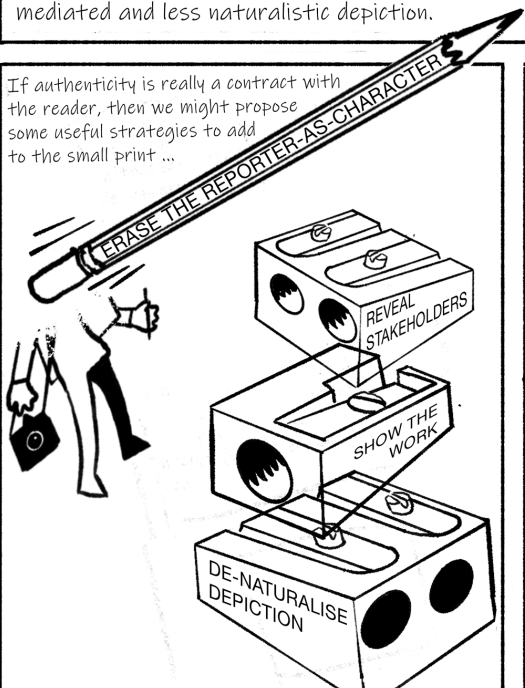




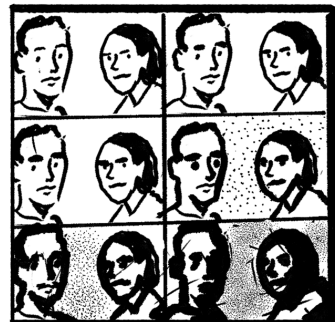


As the conventions begin to congeal for comics journalism, the question is not to naively put faith in the photographic (or photo-adjacent realism) as a revealer of Truth. Yet most author reporters adopt it, along with a standard depictive space.<sup>29</sup> Kugler and Butler, among others, are beginning to offer a disturbed, clearly mediated and less naturalistic depiction.

If authenticity is really a contract with the reader, then we might propose some useful strategies to add to the small print ...



Dabitch says "What is at stake in the question of the report is a reduction of reality by standardizing representations and therefore a loss of reality."<sup>30</sup>



If we're already being subjective in showing the visible, why not subjectively show the invisible in a way that serves the narrative?



Even in the 'best case scenario' the most realistic visual presentation is still an abstraction, and the insertion of the author as a protagonist is a narrative fiction itself.



If achieving realism is a lost cause, why not use the full range of visual expression comics have to offer?

Memoir and biography comics are read as non-fiction, and they include the author as narrator and protagonist, and employ more realistic art.



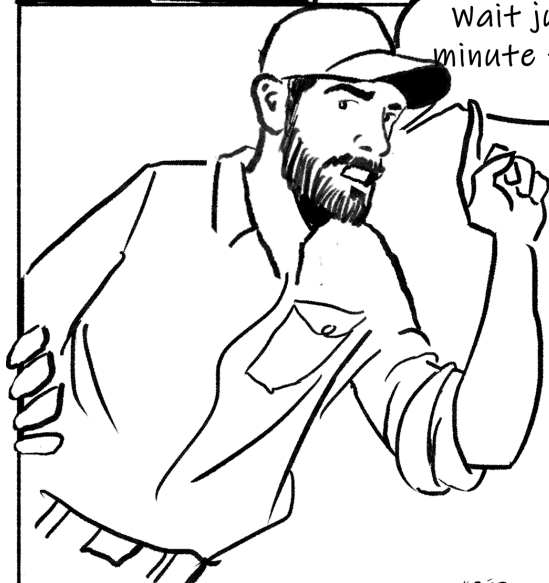
However, other artists fulfill the same objective without being tied to realistic representations, and instead exploit the full flexibility of comic art to make the invisible visible.



Even when attempting to be 'realistic,' Marion and other critics question how much the cartoon as a type of image is or is not linked to the real world.



Wait just a minute there!



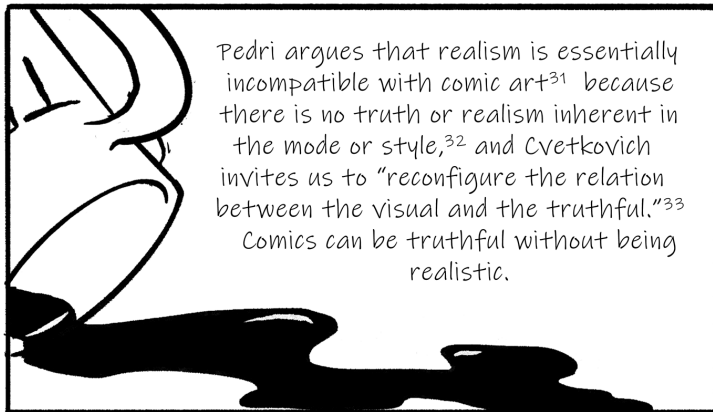
We all know that technical, realistic drawing is not only more skillful but is more neutral! We're presenting a 'real' story so we need realistic art!



The implication being, if realism is real, then abstraction is fake



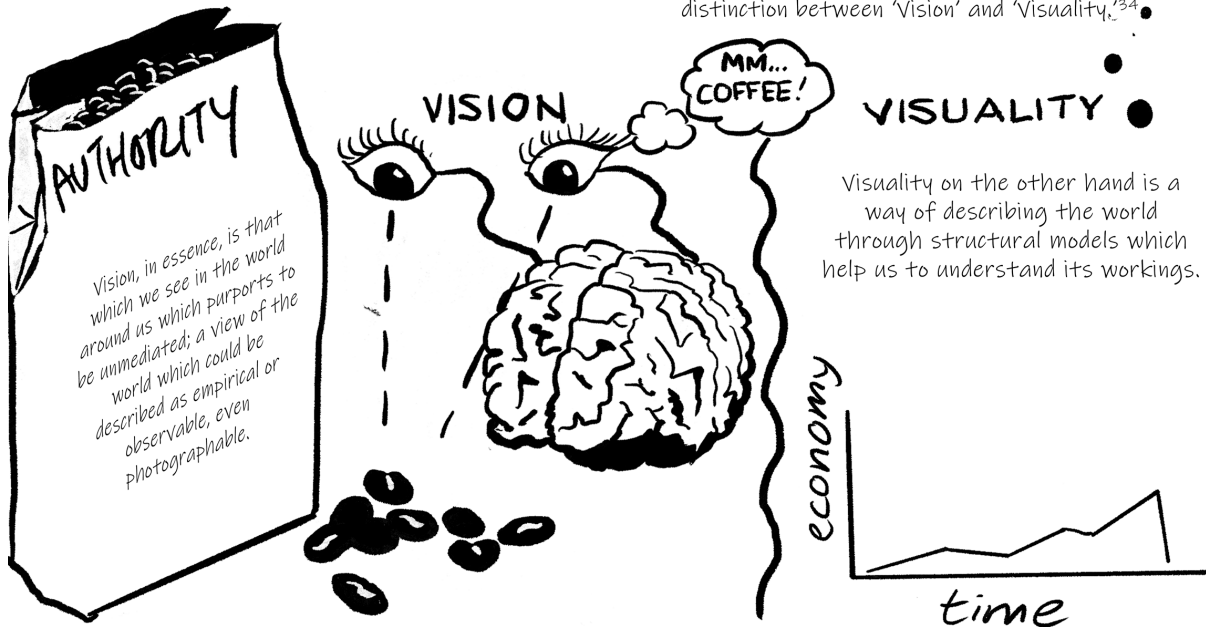
"Well why do we equate realism with truth?"



Pedri argues that realism is essentially incompatible with comic art<sup>31</sup> because there is no truth or realism inherent in the mode or style,<sup>32</sup> and Cvetkovich invites us to "reconfigure the relation between the visual and the truthful."<sup>33</sup> Comics can be truthful without being realistic.

Journalistic comics may try to express authority by building a strong graphic resemblance to real world referents....

However, the error is to assume that the visual world is the world in its entirety. Abstract art is not the only place for abstract imagery. Woodiwiss makes a distinction between 'Vision' and 'Visuality'.<sup>34</sup>

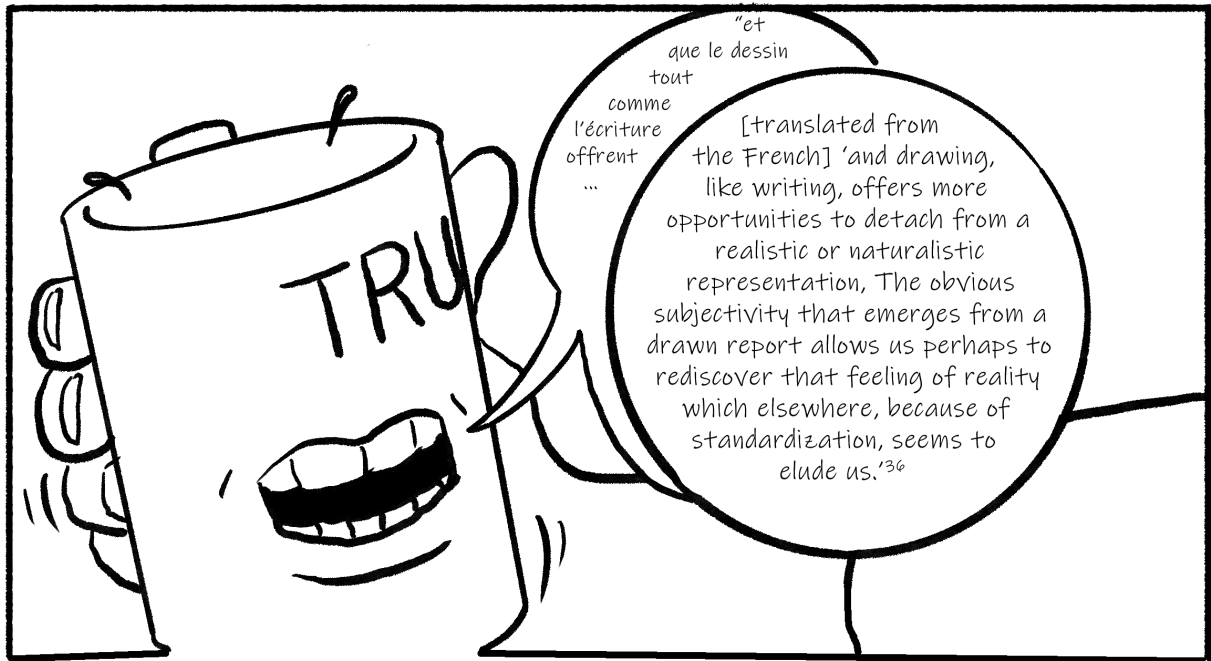


Visuality on the other hand is a way of describing the world through structural models which help us to understand its workings.



After all, high visual realism is often a chosen register for sci-fi and fantasy artists, especially in fiction comics (Moebius, Darrow, Schuiten) Perhaps because it has the 'essence of truthiness'; a persuasive visual rhetoric to help one 'suspend disbelief'. So, could increased abstraction in non-fiction comics have its own visual rhetoric? The difference between what we see with our eyes, and what we can make visual in our minds, has a political dimension, which can be explored to increase the richness of the graphic journalistic text.<sup>35</sup>

I'm not real, Silly!  
I just look realistic!



Of course, comics journalists can use text as well as traditional journalists do.<sup>37</sup> This is the approach of CREADOC, the documentary school at Angoulême, France. Their verbal/audio track adheres to typical vérité principles, while the visual track is given over to students from the local animation school to interpret in ways that accentuate the affect of the situations described in the audio.

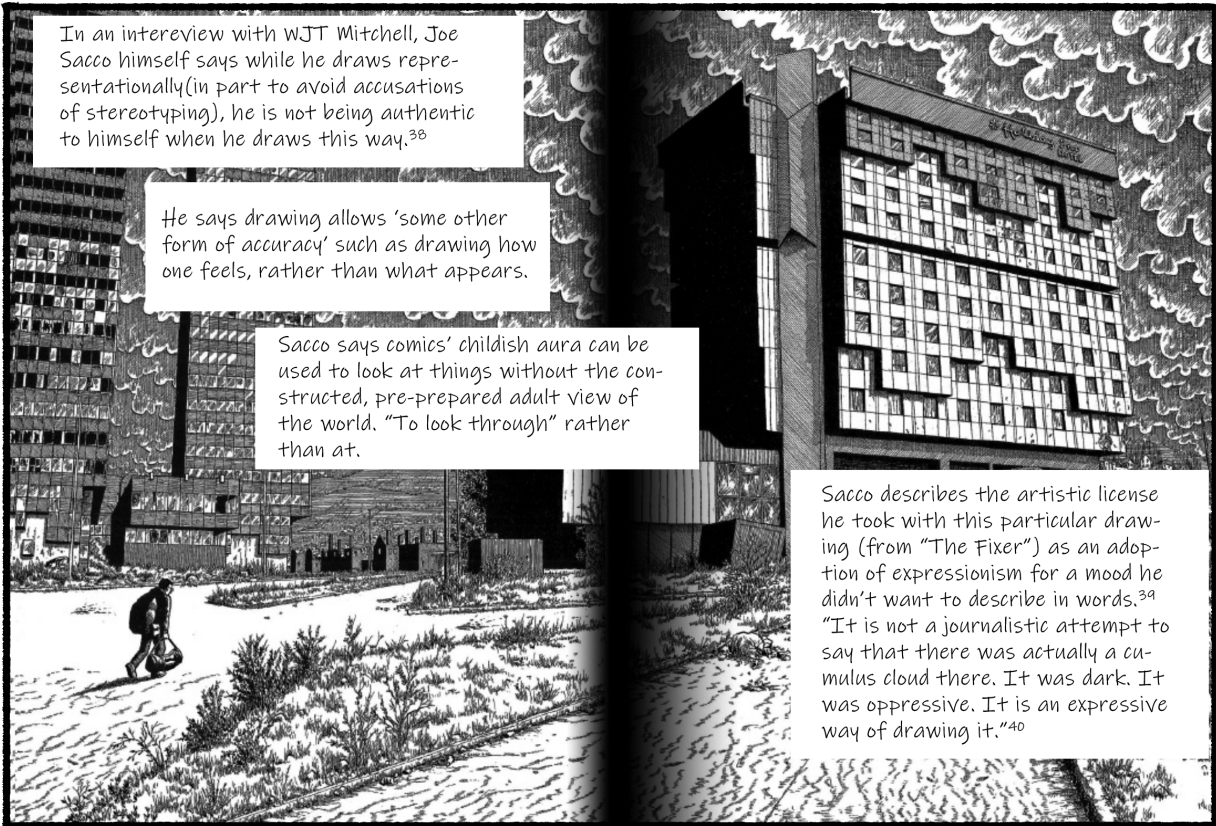
Comics journalists do not need to redraw themselves into the comic to supply a narrator or protagonist, creating an illusion of the structure of a non-fiction memoir narrative.



Frame from: ASE, qu'as-tu fait à tes enfants ? de Amélie Abraham, Manon Tacconi, Lola Degove, Boris Zanni, Elodie Sanchez





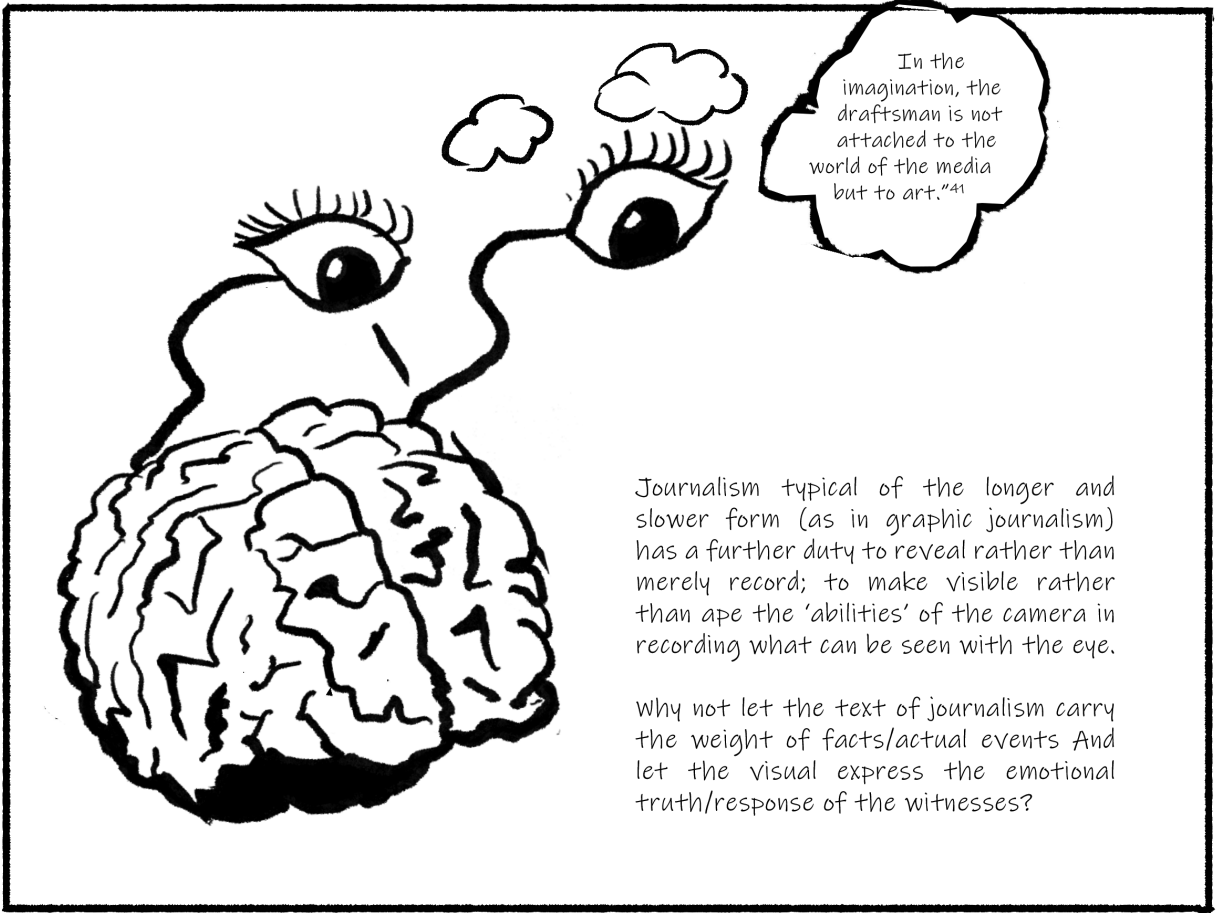


In an interview with WJT Mitchell, Joe Sacco himself says while he draws representationally (in part to avoid accusations of stereotyping), he is not being authentic to himself when he draws this way.<sup>38</sup>

He says drawing allows 'some other form of accuracy' such as drawing how one feels, rather than what appears.

Sacco says comics' childish aura can be used to look at things without the constructed, pre-prepared adult view of the world. "To look through" rather than at.

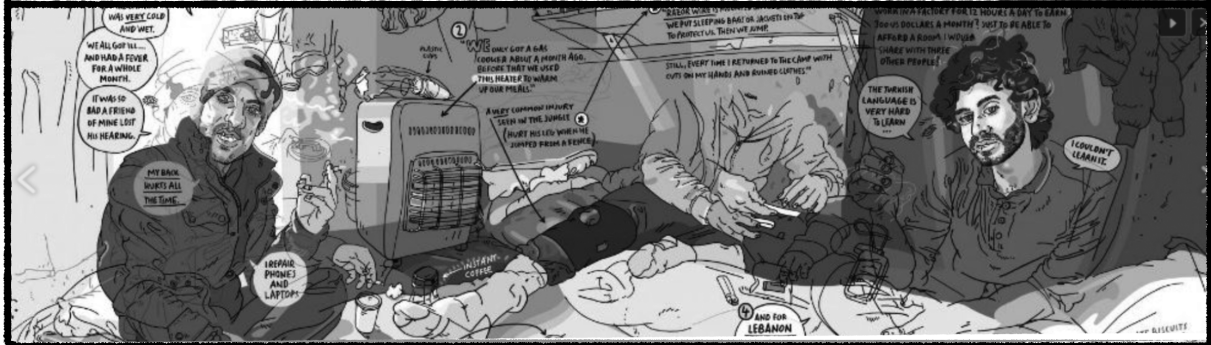
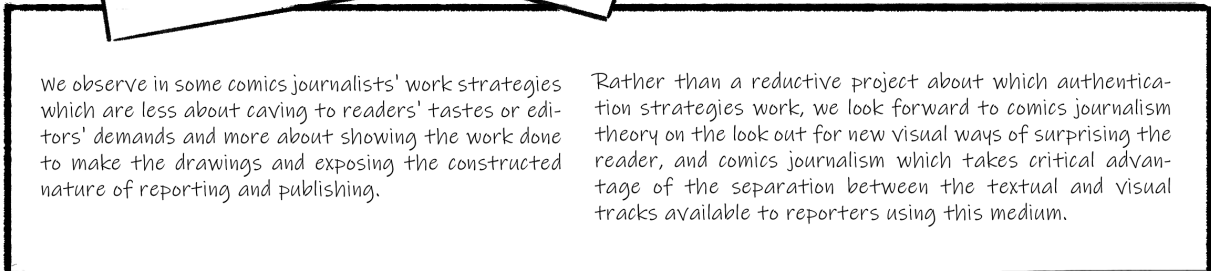
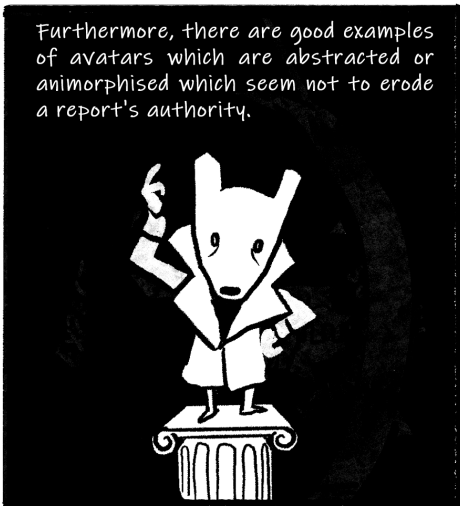
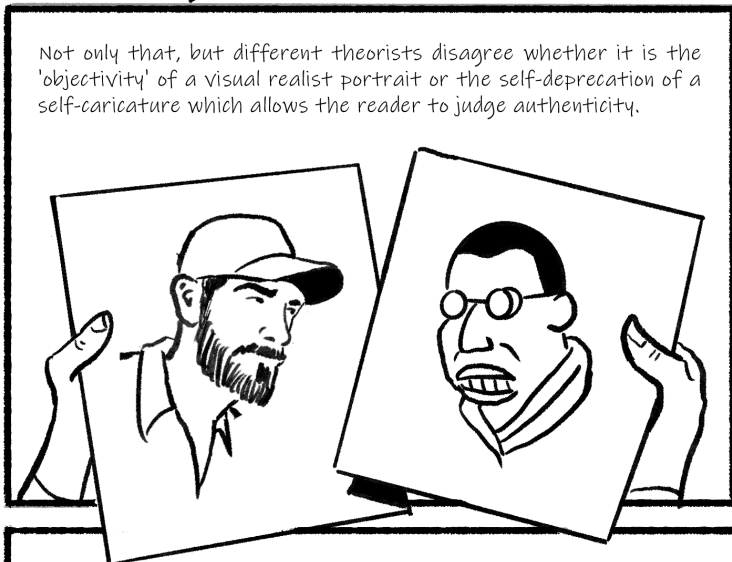
Sacco describes the artistic license he took with this particular drawing (from "The Fixer") as an adoption of expressionism for a mood he didn't want to describe in words.<sup>39</sup> "It is not a journalistic attempt to say that there was actually a cumulus cloud there. It was dark. It was oppressive. It is an expressive way of drawing it."<sup>40</sup>



In the imagination, the draftsman is not attached to the world of the media but to art."<sup>41</sup>

Journalism typical of the longer and slower form (as in graphic journalism) has a further duty to reveal rather than merely record; to make visible rather than ape the 'abilities' of the camera in recording what can be seen with the eye.

Why not let the text of journalism carry the weight of facts/actual events And let the visual express the emotional truth/response of the witnesses?



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