Portraits of Violence. Critical Reflections on the Graphic Novel

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Abstract

This essay provides a critical reflection on the graphic novel. Addressing the pedagogical importance of the genre and it's wider cultural influences, it also attends to the lessons learned from the production of the *Portraits of Violence* book. In doing so, it seeks to provide an introduction to the ways graphic novels can enhance critical understanding, especially when dealing with difficult problems such as violence.

Keywords: Violence; Graphic Novel; War; Critical Pedagogy; Portraits.

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1   Introduction

Back in the summer of 2014, I engaged in a series of conversations with the Japan based graphic novelist Sean Michael Wilson.[1] What began as a virtual discussion concerning the need to re-think about how we educate broader publics on the question of violence, eventually turned into the co-production of a volume called *Portraits of Violence: An Illustrated History of Radical Thinking* that would later be published by New Internationalist in 2016 (Evans & Wilson, 2016). The book featured ten distinct chapters focusing on the work of canonical thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Paolo Freire and Susan Sontag, amongst others. While I had expected to the book to meet its sales expectations, I was nevertheless very surprised by the international interest in its publication, leading to a number of translations, including German, Korean, Spanish and Turkish. It also went on to receive a prestigious Independent Publishers Award in the graphic novel category. More of a surprise and revealing of my own initial naivety and full lack of appreciation of the genre (including its wide ranging productions from the original to the adaptive), were the positive responses I received about our adaptation from both younger and older adult readership, along my student cohort who continue to draw upon the book even though it's not required reading.

Before turning to the details of this particular book and to offer some critical reflections, I do think it is important to deal further with some of my own initial misgivings and hesitations, as I believe these are also culturally important and instructive in the project's development. Could a graphic novel after-all do real justice to any political problem, especially violence? Was there not a danger that in turning it into such an accessible style, the project would end up banalising and making light of deeply important issues? Worse still, could not the comic style actually be complicit in the objectification and insensitivity of victims? Prior to the project I had only a very limited understanding of the genre. It did therefore take me about two months before fully committing to the project. Having spent this time exploring more the history of the graphic novel (see below), what I also learned was how the very presence of the artform has been quite evident, though underappreciated, in more established aesthetic practices. There is in fact a highly agreeable understanding in critical philosophy, which has for some time fully appreciated the power of comedy (the artistic practice through which "the comic" emerges).[2] Such insight leads one to appreciate how the very role of the comic and its "characterisations" have been integral to how we have narrated history, broken apart crude essentialisations about human life, while being the vehicle that has allowed us to deal with the mire of existence. Whilst mindful of this, I simply hadn't made the connection between the philosophy of comedy and the graphic novel. Furthermore, not unrelated, those working in the genre might also stress how the very words *comic* and *comedy* are etymologically related to the Greek *komos*, which associated with the "revels", designated a time of humour, satyr and subversive transgression. Such festivals reinforced the importance of the *komoedia* — those literary and theatrical out-puts so central to Greek poetics.[3]

Nevertheless, there was a question that continued to linger when dealing with the interplay between the discursive and the pictorial in the graphic novel style. This concerned whether the format detracted from seriousness of the text and offered a simplified or even superficial mediation of the prose. Could an illustrated version of *Othello*, for example, really capture the drama

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1.   On Wilsons work, see https://seanmichaelwilson.weebly.com/

2.   On this see especially Critchley, 2002.

3.   See Critchley, 2019; Revermann, 2014; and Shaw, 2014.

and intensity a more literal reading of Shakespeare might offer as the reader is sat alone with its words? Do we not in fact impose a certain image or dictate an impression in the minds of readership when providing artwork, instead of letting the words inspire their own "images of thought"? When growing up, it was almost a truism that the more mature one's studies, the less images appear in the text. "There are no pictures in this book", was often used to insist that things in the order of study were now getting serious, hence more attention demanded. While there is admittedly a notable distinction between books that feature artworks in comparison to the illustrated storylines of the graphic novel, even the simplest critical glance shows there's no neat teleology between childhood books that feature artwork and their gradual disappearance into adulthood. While the very first book I was given was a beautifully produced illustrated version of the tales of Hans Christian Andersen, its prose was hardly lacking in intellectual depth. Indeed, as I went through the period into young adulthood, as Stephen King offered a truly powerful way to stimulate the imagination (in terms of representation how many times would the saying "the film is not as good as the book" be repeated), I still found something truly engaging in books featuring illustrations, especially the interactive "Fighting Fantasy" novels such as *Warlock of Firetop Mountain* and *City of Thieves* that featured dark and sinister monochromatic engravings. Later in life, I would return to older classics that still gave so much inspiration, from the tales of Sherlock Holmes such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which were accompanied by the dramatic artwork of Sidney Paget (originally published in *The Strand* in 1902), along with what I maintain to be the best book of political theory every written, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, enhanced by John Tenniel's vivid and captivating imagery. Carroll, for his part, was all too aware of the tensions here: "What is the use of a book", thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"

How much the omission of images from books over time is less about intellectual value and more about economising on production costs for artwork and printing is certainly open to question? What we do know is history is replete and shaped by examples, where the power of the word has been truly enhanced by the power of the image. From the still remarkably vibrant pigmentations of the *Codex Amiatinus* Bible that is housed in the Laurentian library in Florence, which is widely acknowledged as the oldest surviving bible written in the English language, onto the version of Dante Alighieri's own komoedia — *The Divine Comedy*, brought alive by interpretative illustrations of both Sandro Botticelli and later Gustave Doré, so the serious has always been associated with the aesthetic. Indeed, in each of these cases, the image didn't simply provide artistic re-presentation. They would prove their own original and novel interpretations, which in the case of the Dante, proved just as important in terms of how we learned to imagine hell. We would also see a further brilliant example of this with Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, which was accompanied by the outrageously captivating artworks of Aubrey Beardsley.[4] Not only was the art in this collaboration equally as important as Wilde's prose, it would be integral to the subversion of representations concerning gendered norms and, in the process, dramatically altered the direction of the graphic arts. Striking out in a way that is reminiscent to what Frederick Douglass called an "aesthetic force,"[5] Aubrey's revolutionary style would be evidently influential over the likes of Harry Clarke, especially in the haunting illustrations for the 1919 version of Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*[6] and a 1925 version of

4.   The images are available online as part of British library collection here: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/aubrey-beardsley-illustrations-for-salome-by-oscar-wilde

5.   On this see especially Frederick Douglass speech, "What to the Slave is the 4th of July? An Address delivered in Rochester New York, on July 5, 1852" in Blassingame, 1982.

6.   For the artwork of Harry Clarke related to Tales of Mystery and Imagination see:

Goethe's *Dr Faust*.[7] It would also be central to what would eventually be called Art Nouveau. To conjure the words of Wilde from an inscription in a copy of *Salome* he gave to the artist, "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the Dance of the Seven Veils is, and can see that invisible dance".

Figure 1: Aubrey Beardsley, Artwork for Oscar Wilde's *Salome*

Critics might invariably point out here that the artwork of the likes of Botticelli is a world away from the artwork of the more contemporary comic book genre. This is undoubtedly true. And yet we should not forget that art is ultimately a matter of taste and not a competition. We certainly should also not underestimate the influence or question the integrity of artists who work in this style, whose originality and technical skills are so evident and worthy of our appreciation. Just as there are exceptional and mediocre figurative artists, so there are exceptional and mediocre graphic novel illustrators, whose creations truly enrich the human conditions. The exceptional and pioneering work carried out by Studio Ghibli, which have notably been so influential within the genre, perhaps being the case point. Productions such as *Spirited Away* show how it's possible through a harmonious combination of image and narrative to truly speak to different audiences, in a style that is able to traverse generations, while also touching about the most serious issues of tragedy, violence, loss, resistance and love, while affirming the power of the imagination. Though less visually dynamic, what the graphic novel

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https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/harry-clarke-s-illustrations-for-poe-s-tales-of-mystery-and-imagination-1919

7. For artwork of Harry Clarke related to Dr. Faust see: https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/10/19/harry-clarke-faust/

Figure 2: Harry Clarke, Cover Art for *Dr. Faust*

Figure 3: Harry Clarke, Artwork for *Tales of Mystery & Imagination*

does offer then is a means for the adaptation of a text and giving it over to a certain characterisation. Admittedly more simplified, it does then have merits and value on its own terms. But this is also where the intellectual dangers lie. Many of the criticism of the graphic novel might also be applied to film making or any other form of cultural production that seeks to visualise a discursive narrative. There are good adaptations, and there are bad adaptations. What's at stake here is not about simply staying true to the original. It is all about igniting the affective, aesthetic and atmospheric registers such that the work takes on a life and distinct quality of its own meaning and purpose. Many studies show how the mind respond to images in ways that open up new pedagogical ways for discovery or what John Berger famously called "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1972). And it is also now widely accepted that in the age of new media technologies, the more effective ways of teaching offer a blend between the textual and the visual.[8] It isn't therefore so much a question about how whether the use of images have value or not in how we navigate the world. It is how they are achieved and brought together in ways that are pedagogically challenging. With these points in mind, I will now provide some critical reflections on my own productive experience with the graphic book format, revisiting the process, and offer some points of guidance for academics and scholars who are considering experimenting with the genre.

2 Researching the Genre

As already noted, part of my initial hesitation with the project was simply being unfamiliar with the graphic novel style. Hence, like all research projects that demand our attention and pedagogical application, before fully committing I began to research more intently about the history of the genre and its district political usefulness. Aside from acknowledging how the comic book and graphic novel industry was evidently commercially successful (though even this I had underappreciated), from the widespread appeal of Marvel to Manga, I was nevertheless already a firm believer in the importance of art and aesthetics in terms of developing the necessary pedagogical tools for critiquing violence. This I believe is an important first step in any collaboration of this kind. Now leaving aside the issues concerning the distinction between the comic book and the graphical novel (largely based on debates concerning maturity of audiences), what my research revealed was how the graphic novel connects to a rich history of illustrative critique, which not only can trace its explicit satirical routes back to the work of the likes of William Hogarth, but in the more serious prose of some the texts already mentioned, offers a genealogy that can arguably be taken back to the artwork of William Blake,[9] who engaging with literary classics mastered the mix between art, figuration and fantasy for the purpose of expressing a story on the nature of the human condition. Indeed, the connections between the more recent and highly celebrated graphic novelist Alan Moore (whose works notably include, *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*) and Blake is often lauded amongst the genre's critics and writers (Whitson, 2006). The art of fabulation would not then only be an integral part of art and literary history, as philosophically appreciated by Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway. It could also be seen as an important precursor to the growing academic interest in the graphic novel from the 1980s onward.[10] Evidently in keeping with the much wider cultural tradition of muralism in Mexico that dates back to the revolutionary turn at the beginning of

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8. On this see Russell, 2000; Louden, 1994.

9. On the wider cultural relevance of Blake see Eisenman, 2018.

10. For an insightful overview and analysis of this history see McCloud, 1993 and Eisner, 1985.

the last Century,[11] the power of fabulation would be later given renewed political dynamism in the writings of Subcomandante Marcos and his illustrated conversations with Don Durito the errant knight beetle, who is seen as a Zapatista Don Quixote and a Mexican cousin of the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*.[12]

Figure 4: Featured Artwork for *Subcomandante Marcos Conversations with Don Durito*

While the 1980s are widely recognised as a pivotal moment in the development of the graphic novel,[13] it would be my own encounters during the preliminary research with one particular novelist and illustrator who rose to global prominence during this period, which fully convinced me to set aside any lasting doubts. Encountering the works of Art Spiegelman is a lesson in the seriousness and importance of the graphic novel genre. Spiegelman also provides the standard to which all who experiment with the format should aspire. His books *Maus* (1986) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) transformed my understanding of the graphic novel and should be mandatory reading for all before committing to a project of this kind. The Pulitzer winning *Maus* comprises of an extended exchange between Spiegelman and his father Vladek about his and Anja's (Spiegelman's mother, who later committed suicide) experiences as Jews in prison camps in Germany and Poland. Not only does the narrative deal with issues concerning the lived experience of the Holocaust, the complex nature of memory is purposefully addressed through the literal reworkings of political animality. As Jeff Adam notes on its sequential style: "narratives of the past [are] located within the present. By these means their pedagogical projects emerge: the transmission and dissemination of experientially

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11. For an excellent exploration of this see Coffey, 2012.

12. Subcomandante Marcos, 2005. All stories and accompanying artwork are also available online at: http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/Chiapas95/CWDTableOfContents.html

13. On this see McCloud, 2000.

derived (albeit partial and fragmented) traumatic historical societal events. The image text, 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 in which we come to experience, and to know, traumatic history" (Adams, 2008). A point further emphasised by James E. Young who noted how the book suggests "itself as a pointedly anti-redemptory medium that simultaneously makes and unmakes meaning as it unfolds" (Young, 1993, p. 22). We might note the evident comparisons and contrasts here between Paget's rampaging *Baskerville Hound*, the terrified mice at the start of chapter two of Spiegelman's *Maus*, and the movie poster for the animated adaptation of Richard Adams beautiful, tragic and politically resonant *Watership Down*.

Figure 5: Sidney Parnet, *Hound of the Baskerville*

In the Shadow of No Towers also connects to Spiegelman's personal experience of witnessing violence, this time the attacks of September 11th, 2001, in New York where he was now living. Alongside offering a compelling narrative on the violence of that fateful day, the brilliance of this work is to further connect it to the politics of everyday life on the streets on the vibrant yet often brutalising city. Thus, capturing what Tim Grierson called "the fractured mindset of a frightened age" (Grierson, 2004, par. 4), Spiegelman, in short, shows the power to literally *animate* a problem, thereby allowing its author to also find reasons to believe in this world despite the horrors it continues to throw at us. As Carlo Wolff noted, "An artefact, a slab, a monument — this is no mere book. Unpaginated, ungainly and heavy, it seems to demand its own space. A coffee table can't contain a statement so thick and unsettling, a cry that
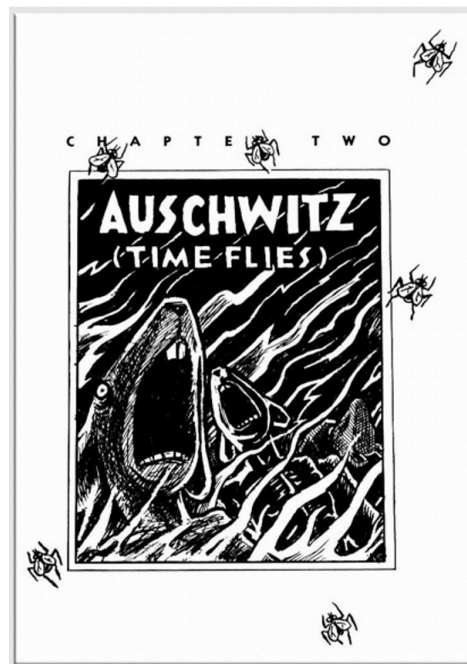
Figure 6: Art Spiegelman, *Maus*

Figure 7: Official US Poster Watership Down

would outshout chaos […] Unlike a work that's all text, you can 'get through' this quickly. Absorbing it takes more time. It's Spiegelman's attempt to keep the memory of the World Trade Centre from frying his brain. Patiently created, with great emotional trepidation, this signals Spiegelman's fresh commitment to a world he's just beginning to trust again" (Wolff, 2004, par. 2–5). Or as Spiegelman himself would later explain in an interview with *The New York Times*, "How vulnerable New York — and by extension, all of Western Civ. — actually is. I took my city, and those homely, arrogant towers, for granted. It's actually all as transient and ephemeral as, say, old newspapers" (Dreifus & Spiegelman, 2004). While the book is full of deep insight and critical awareness, arguably the standout page concerns the juxtaposition on page six, that deals with the history of the antisemitism he continued to encounter in New York, the return of *Maus* in these new fearful terrain, accompanied by the side art that reworks Richard Drews infamous image of the falling man.[14] The three boxed narrative is certainly amongst the most striking in the whole novel:

> "He keeps falling through the holes in his head, though he no longer knows which holes were made by Arab terrorists' way back in 2001, and which ones were *always* there".

> "He is haunted now by the images he didn't witness… images of people tumbling to the streets below… especially one man (according to a neighbour) who executed a graceful Olympic dive as his last living act".

> "But in the economic dislocation that has followed since that day, he has witnessed lots of people landing in the streets of Manhattan".

Invariably — the strength of Spiegelman's work comes directly from a position of authenticity. Very few of us would have to endure the suffering he faced; nor would we ever want that for others. But there is another lesson we can take from Spiegelman in our attempts to do justice to the subject of our concern. While it is important to speak with an authentic voice, it is also important to have the courage to speak truth to power. Hence, any such engagement with the image and text for the distinct purposes of developing a critical awareness, should push the boundaries of critique and be open to interrogate the operations of power. To echo the words of Henry Giroux who wrote the foreword to our particular book, "Creating alternative futures requires serious and sustained investment in arresting the cycle of violence, imagining better futures and styles for living amongst the world of peoples. It is to destroy the image of a violently fated world we have created for ourselves by taking pedagogy and education seriously, harnessing the power of imagination and equipping young people with the confidence that the world can be transformed for the better" (Giroux, 2016). Such a pedagogical understanding I would argue is crucial if the project is to have any critical meaning.

3   Narrating the Violence

The basis for the book was actually informed by a master's level course I had been teaching for several years concerning "Theories of Violence". While teaching this author-based program, there were a number of pedagogical lessons I would learn, which ended up being instructive for this volume. 1) There is no universal language when it comes to critical engagement. Often

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14.   I have engaged with the importance of Drew's falling man and what it means for the aesthetics in Evans, 2013.
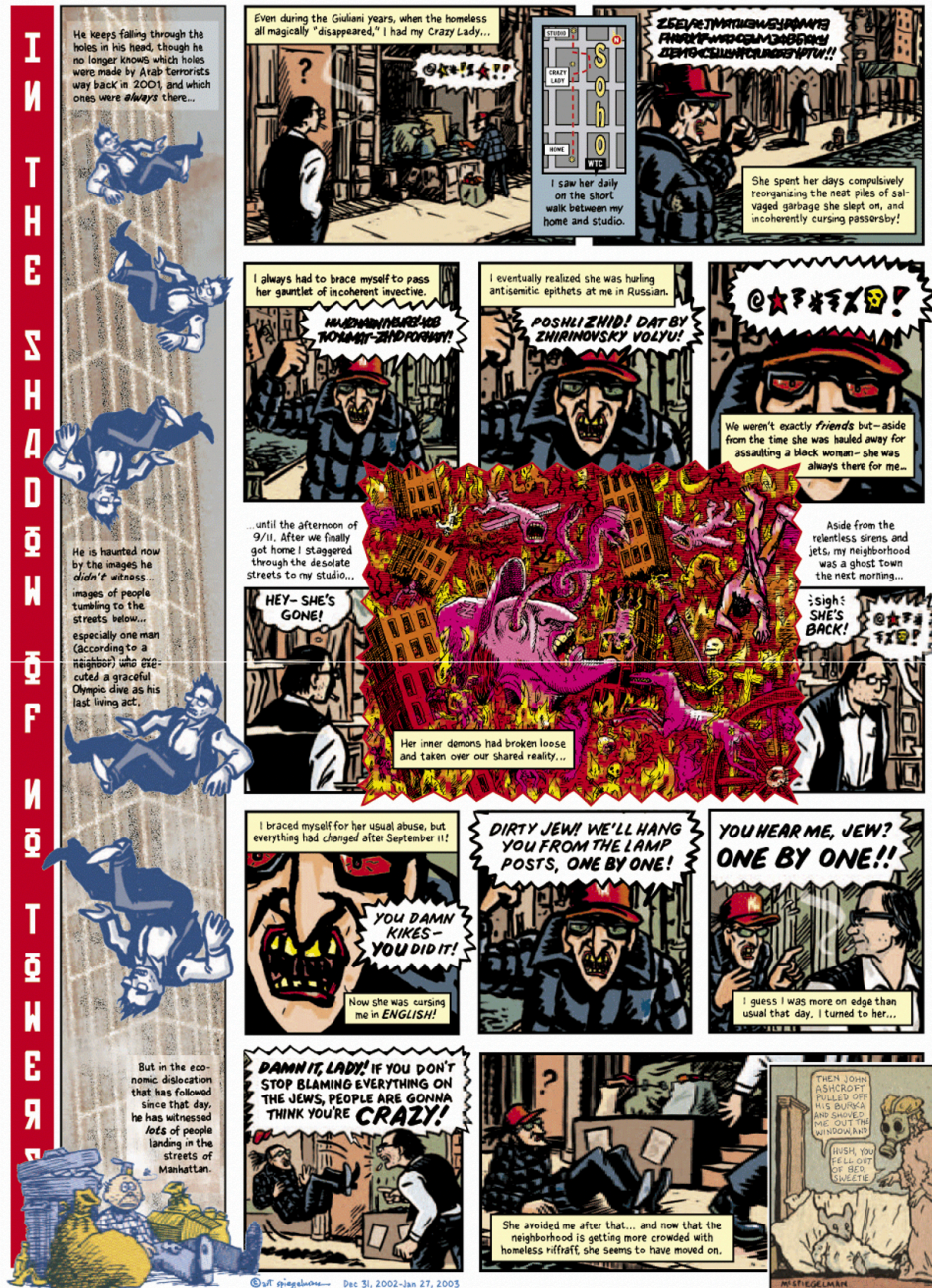
Figure 8: Art Siegelman, Artwork from *In the Shadow of No Towers*

in fact, when a student fails to grasp a concept, this can reveal more about the limits of language and its capacity to reach out and truly capture the mind of an audience. It is incumbent therefore upon the academic to learn to speak in multiple grammatical ways, presenting the same concept, idea or problem in different ways depending on the listeners; 2) The overburdening use of visual discourse on teaching platforms such as PowerPoint is the surest way to kill the critical imagination if it is done badly. Students respond in far more engaged and inspired ways if you manage to bring alive a problem through the use of imagery and the focused use of textual narrative from a range of theoretical, poetic and literary sources; 3) There is however a danger when using imagery in the context of violence. While there is a need to remain ethically sensitive to a problem, being parasitic to an image and use it merely as a prop or object is bad practice. Violence often stems from the objectification of life, hence to objective its representation is nothing short of committing a further act of intellectual and aesthetic violence; 4) To overcome this, there is much to be gained from resourcing the history of art. It is in fact possible to narrate the entire history of war, violence and the human condition through a handful of masterpieces; 5) Art however is not simply about a cultured or even more censored way to visualise problems that are by definition horrific. Critical thinking on violence has to confront the intolerable, while being open to the emotional field. Any educator on violence would fail if they didn't intellectually and emotionally challenge their students; 6) Central here is how we understand the importance of aesthetics. Politics doesn't simply borrow images or use them when it's convenient. Politics is aesthetic as it is all about creating images of thought, images of belonging, images of the world; 7) In this regard, when dealing with critical pedagogy, we are always dealing with the art of politics, which demands an appreciation of the power of images as both a negative and transformative force; 8) Trying to follow in the footsteps of all the wonderful and inspiring educating orators, such as Cornel West, the ultimate test for the academic is to be able to bring a timeless concept or idea to life and make it resonate in the present. The art of lecturing is all about telling a story, building a narrative, weaving together the conceptual with the historical, while presenting those ideas so that the imagination is captivated and the intellectual journey travelled enriching, even if that journey is to take you into the most brutal chapters in history or the dark recesses of the mind.

But these lessons are just a start point. I cannot emphasise strongly enough the importance of collaborating on such a project with an author who truly understands the genre and is able to animate the ideas. Writing of graphic novels is a unique skill that requires considerable dedication and know-how. As I learned through the hours of conversations, discussions around content, debates to ensure conceptual clarity, the drafting and redrafting of the prose, all this requires patience, compromise and above all the spirit of collaboration. This is especially the case when piecing together a narrative of the violence and transferring the structure and prose into a storyboard that has a credible arc to offers the reader a purposeful direction through the conceptual terrain. With the ambition being to add to a growing body of literature that both takes the genre very seriously and reaffirms the need for better visual literacy when it comes with dealing with the most pressing issues we face. As Lynell Burmark explains, "the primary literacy of the twenty-first century is visual... Our students must learn to process both words and pictures. To be visually literate, they must learn to 'read' and 'write' visually rich communications. They must be able to move gracefully and fluently between text and images, between literal and figurative worlds" (Burmack, 2008, p. 5). The task for the writer is therefore to produce the very kinds of works, which do ethical justice to the subject, pedagogical justice to the educated need for critically informed citizens, and aesthetic justice to the visual art of critical interventions for the purposes of rethinking and reimagining the world.

In our attempts to achieve this, we would draw upon a number of illustrative styles, from the complicated to the more minimal. Working with six different artists, each allocated a specific chapter based on the style we felt best suited to the narrative and questions being raised, it was important to ensure that each chapter retained its distinct focus. Like any public lecture, it was important to provide an informative background, clear insight into the conceptual problem, without stupefying or assuming the audience is incapable of understanding complex issues. We did however proceed on the basis of assuming no prior knowledge on behalf of the readership. To ensure the book was coherent and focused, each author was allocated ten pages, which featured one specific concept we felt best represented the author's contribution to the understanding of violence. While not in any way exhaustive, the book featured chapters such as Agamben and "*Bare Life*", Frantz Fanon and the "*Wretched of the Earth*", Noam Chomsky and "*Manufacturing Consent*", onto Susan Sontag "*Regarding the Pain of Others*". As part of my own visual learning process, I personally found it meaningful to work with a story board in which all the scenes were visible. This allowed for a visualisation of the full story, along with ensuring the conceptual arc was coherent. We would eventually piece together the final pages into a poster format for a number of public exhibitions.
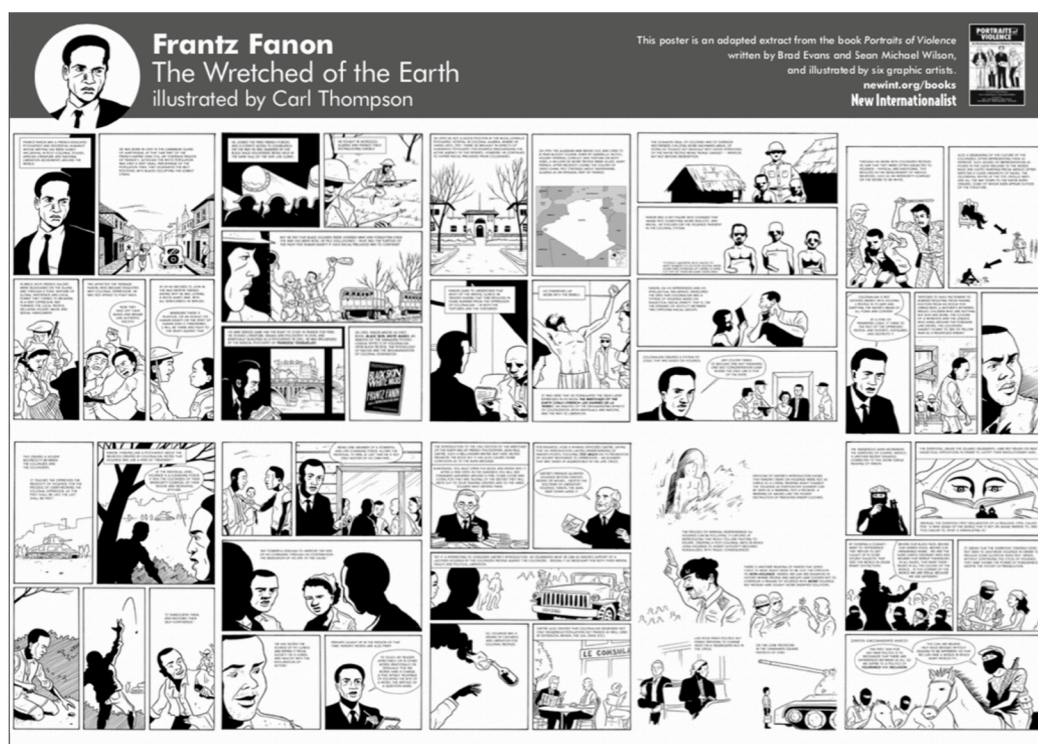

Figure 9: Full Storyboard Artwork from Chapter on Fanon & "*Wretched of Earth*"

4   Representing the Intolerable

The most pressing challenge a book of this kind faces is to ensure you do ethical justice to the problem. Mindful of Arendt, at every stage, we therefore had to be continually mindful of the dangers of banalisation. There was also a need to have an acute understanding of the history of aesthetics so that we would be careful not to reproduce racial, gendered or class-based

prejudices. Fortunately, we already had the intellectual guidance of the authors chosen to feature in this book! Collectively they show how the history of systems of power have always depended upon the power of images and the ability to mark upon the body of the living crude essentialisations. Hence, while the very act of characterising life necessarily involves bestowing characteristics and attributes, which may always be open to claims of insensitivity, we at least tried to maintain ethical standards and cultured appreciation. But one question still remained. Was there a danger that in the act of reproducing violence, we end up adding to the trauma and pain suffered? My understanding is that violence demands engagement. And while ethically demanding, it also requires an emotional and intellectual investment that is willing to confront the intolerable. We don't in fact suffer from an over-exposure to violence, nor do I accept the conceit that younger generations are now desensitised and apathetic. My teaching has led me to believe the opposite. What we lack is the ability to ask deeply unsettling questions about the realities of suffering, including the violence underwriting our ways of living. No study of violence would be complete without reading the harrowing testimonies of Primo Levi (1991). They are upsetting, traumatic and difficult to read. But this in turn forces us to confront the violence of historical fascism and to re-evaluate our own shameful compromises with power by asking challenging and difficult questions of ourselves. We should apply exactly the same standards when it comes to aesthetics. As Giroux explained in the foreword, "Confronting the intolerable should be challenging and upsetting. Who could read the works of the authors and deal with the examples featured here and not feel intellectually and emotionally exhausted? It is the conditions that produce violence that should upset us ethically and prompt us to act responsibly" (Giroux, 2016, p. 10).

A graphic novel does undoubtedly simplify both the discursive and aesthetic fields. This invariably does mean that it has its distinct limits. One of the benefits of the graphic novel however is to allow for a depiction of the violence that is less explicit in its brutalities. Of course, there is a thin line to be navigated here where the process of simplification may lead to the stripping away of its demanded intellectual and emotional impact. This in turn does pose a district question of whether simplification extract the real horror an image might induce, hence suppress the desired empathy. While this is open to discussion, it would be remiss to say that a graphic adaptation could have the same effect as an original photograph that depicted the raw realities of suffering. And yet the graphic novel does allow for engagement with audiences for whom the emotional weight of a deeply traumatic image of violence would be too difficult to bear. Moreover, there have been some studies undertaken, which note how a simplified drawing can actually generate more empathy in younger persons as they are more able to project themselves into the scene. Tangentially related, we know how abstract art is by far a more powerful medium when it comes to dealing with the intimate and psychological realities of pain and suffering. Spending an afternoon in the presence of the works of Mark Rothko is far more challenging than anything you may experience when gazing upon the work of Titian. Now, while the graphic novel is certainly not abstract or possessing of the same depth, it does nevertheless invite more open interpretations. As Scott McCloud explains, such images are "a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled" (McCloud, 1993, p. 36). Simplification then is not about distancing; it can be a doorway into a more intimate understanding. What appears more ambiguous can be a strength as the readership literally fill in the gaps for themselves, especially when history appears over-determined. Mindful of this, perhaps the most challenging section of the book for us concerned the holocaust. I was particularly mindful here of the important work on aesthetics provided by Jacques Rancière, notably in his mediation on the "Figures of History" (2014). Challenging the "unrepresentability" of extreme suffering, as he

passionately explained, "so we have to revise Adorno's famous phrase, according to which art is impossible after Auschwitz. The reverse is true: after Auschwitz, to show Auschwitz, art is the only thing possible, because art always entails the presence of an absence; because it is the very job of art to reveal something that is invisible, through the controlled power of words and images, connected or unconnected; because art alone thereby makes the human perceptible, felt" (Rancière, 2014, pp. 49–50). This was precisely the spirit in which the chapter on Arendt was commissioned, whose abstract and more complex lines were continually reworked until the desired results were achieved.

Figure 10: Sample Artwork from Chapter on Arendt & "*Banality of Evil*"

I felt that the illustrative style for this chapter was suited as it tried to capture the very violence such representations further bring to the world, the violence of an unstoppable force, the violence that blurs the all clear lines leading into what Levi called the "gray zone" (1991) or Agamben the "zone of indistinction" (1998), the violence that moves across the page as the past reaches into the present. But due to its intensity, it was also clear that this style wasn't going to

be suitable for the entire volume. Like the logic of the camp, it demands concentration, which can be exhausting. Stylistic issues aside, there was also another important issue that needed to be addressed. We needed to be considered in what was actually simplified in the scene, while ever mindful of the importance of the wider intellectual framework being presented. From the outset, we appreciated that providing continuity across each of the chapters was important. And we also tried to bring together the necessity for developing a sequential narrative the format requires with the genealogical approach that offers what Foucault called a "history of the present". One of the benefits of the graphic novel is its ability to allow for a montage format, which is able to move away from linear and reductive notions of space and time. It is possible to draw upon history, in a way that impresses its contemporary relevance. Such an appreciation of the genealogical method would be most evident in the chapter concerning Edward Said and his concept of "Orientalism", which effectively offers an insight into the West's domination over the East, including over the domain of aesthetics. We also recognised that in this chapter, it was important to be clear on the history and reveal some of its less taught yet deeply important events in the history of colonisation. A notable example would be the battle of Lepanto, which Said pinpoints as being a pivotal moment. The chapter would then end with a mediation on Marcos and the Zapatistas, who not only explain their struggle as a continuation of the colonisation of the New World, but also provide an important lesson when thinking about strategies of non-violence. Why study violence after-all if we do not believe it can be overcome and peaceful relations a possibility?

Figure 11: Sample Artwork from Chapter on Said & "*Orientalism*"

What has been clear from feedback I have received from my students is how the graphic novel does make complex theory seem less intimidating, hence it provides a gateway into literatures whose first encounters can seem impenetrable. But this does require considerable thought in terms of actually presenting the complex theory in an accessible and relatable way. Violence is complex and it doesn't lend itself to easy explanations or solutions. Too often, the ways in which violence is taught reaffirms the idea that there are single "root causes", which once identified can be easily addressed in a neat cause and effect fashion. I appreciated that the strength of this project would be to retain the complexity, while also ensuring the theory wasn't inaccessible or so dense it lacked possible representation. The chapter on Agamben would be a litmus test here in working through his often dense and yet highly important and influential work on violence. Considerable time was spent trying to refine both the narrative and artwork concerning his mediations on bio-politics, how it related to sovereignty and the wider question of politically qualified and disqualified life. Adapting already familiar iconic representations, from the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes "Leviathan" onto Davinci's "Vitruvian Man", so the historical and the contemporary could be brought together, from Caesar to the football stadium, through to Guantanamo Bay.

When dealing with aesthetics, it is however important to still recognise the importance of realism. As the genre demands, there is a need to deal with the figurative in its more simplified form. This requires complimenting the work with depictions that offer a clear resemblance to the original in order to give a purposeful and striking reminder of the reality of atrocity. We found this of particular pedagogical importance when dealing with the chapter on Susan Sontag, whose work really centres on the uses and limitations of true representations of violence, notably photography. In order to do justice to Sontag's theorisations here, following a number of discarded drafts that simply didn't capture the forcefulness of her insight, we came to appreciate the importance of including the actual photograph within the illustrative body of the text. In this way, we wanted to allow the reality of violence to puncture the pages of the novel, thereby reminding of the importance of the original and how the novel is not seeking to forget the raw realties of suffering, which also should command our attentions. To my mind, the graphic novel is not a replacement. It's more a compliment, which opening up the problem in an accessible style, can lead to a more considered engagement.

What I learned is how a book of this kind is always an experiment. In terms of the production, many of the scenes demanded rewriting and the artwork redrawn as the initial ideas simply didn't work. On occasions, it was clear that some of the theory was too overburdening, while on others the artwork didn't sufficiently reflect the problem or do justice to its gravity. There were admittedly a number of difficult decisions that needed to be made, including the dropping of an entire chapter, along with the redrawing of another entire chapter in a different and more suitable style. I cannot also stress how important it was to have a team of reviewers on hand who were able to continually read the drafts and make rigorous and critical comments on the style, which included a handful of younger readers up to retired academics. Their ongoing feedback proved invaluable and were crucial in the development, refinement and re-evaluation of the project from its inception through to its final drafting. And as with all written projects, looking at the final production today, there are elements I believe that have stood the test of time, while others I would undoubtedly change if starting again. There are a number of intellectual slippages, points in which the theory could be better explained, along with some inconsistencies in the quality of the artwork that only really become apparent once the producers have a certain distance from the final product. Such issues are part of the learning process and will be invaluable moving forward.

5 The Grammar of Resistance

Violence demands naming, it demands exposure, it demands representation, it demands critique, it demands resistance. At the heart of critical pedagogy is this resistive imperative. Working from the premise that education is always a form of political intervention, what is seen as critical is precisely the ability to imagine and outlive the forces of annihilation in the world. But from my understanding, such resistance is not about negating or lamenting the state of things. As Deleuze reminded, if violence ultimately seeks to destroy what makes us different, seeks to enforce uniformity over the affirmative qualities that give originality to a life, then to "create is to resist". Or to put it another way, if the final word on power is that resistance comes first, it is precisely the power of the imagination and the art of the possible that puts itself on the side of life and against those who seek to destroy and oppress the peoples of the world. In the spirit of Paolo Freire, who features in the book, my understanding is that critical books are important tools in the battle against violence in all its forms. And to that end, I would think that *Portraits of Violence*, in its own small way, is a form of creative resistance, which opens up criti-

Figure 12a & b: Sample Artwork from Chapter on Agamben & "*Bare Life*"

Figure 13: Sample Artwork from Chapter on Sontag & "*Regarding the Pain of Others*"

cal dialogue, including dialogue of the types of resources critical theorist can deploy. Though, ultimately, I know this is something for others to determine.

Like everything we produce, the book invariably has its limits. The graphic genre as a whole is beset with these. That is why, as mentioned, I see the book as an accompaniment and not a replacement for the original texts, which the volume draws upon. It is my hope that upon reading the book, students then turn to the original sources already armed with an animated appreciation. I am not suggesting here that we should return to insisting upon hierarchies of pedagogical importance. Such rankings in pedagogical outputs represents the worst in academic elitism, which not only upholds centuries of intellectual privileges that end up producing the very kind of sovereign academic the book openly has in its critical sights, it also bequeaths a form of what Erin Manning has referred to as neuropolitical policing premised upon a "neurotypicality and the largely unspoken criteria that support and reinforce the definition of what it means to be human, to be intelligent, to be of value to society" (Evans & Manning, 2018). Students should be encouraged to draw upon multiple grammars for resistance when dealing with violence. They should be encouraged to recognises no hierarchy in the order of thinking. And that there is no hierarchy in the senses when it comes to creative expressionism. Students should learn to appreciate the educative value of all such productions, whether we introduce them to the thought of Fanon, the artwork of Frida Kahlo, the poetry of Paul Celan, the music and lyrical poetry of Kendrick Lamar or the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. Being critically literate means being discursively, aesthetically, audibly and emotionally open to the transgressive potential of the arts, humanities and social sciences. For these reasons alone, it should be evident to us that graphic novels have their rightful pedagogical place.[15]

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15.   For further reading on the pedagogical importance of graphic novels see Jacobs, 2007, pp. 19–25; and Burger,

None of the pedagogical work we undertake should be devoid of self-reflection on our own practices. We have all delivered bad lectures, written poorly conceived papers, lost audiences as we have gone down some intellectual detour that only we seem to have followed, while trying to do justice to our concerns. While such failures can prove to be instructive, we also learn from those moments and engagements when our practices have the intended critical results. This is not about quantification in some crude numerical module evaluation. It's about a feeling you get when you can recognise how the students world is suddenly thrown out of joint, when the wonder of thinking and perceiving the world differently comes into focus, when the critical spark is so ignited you know they are not simply repeating some rehearsed orthodoxy. The task for the educator is to be alert and also learn from these moments. Seeing how my students have positively responded to this book, I set about a few years ago to introduce an entirely new mode of assessment in which they simply select any image and write an essay about why it allows for a viable critique of violence in the world. The responses have been outstanding, while each year a number on their own volition select artwork from graphic novels. Some of these have been amongst the best student essays I have read. That alone is perhaps the only real measure of success any of us should need.

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