Spatio-topia, Space and Sensation in Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*

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ABSTRACT: *The present paper explores the potency of the spatio-topical system of Joe Sacco's Footnotes in Gaza in (re)tracing the historical events that happened and still happen in the war zone of Gaza without being reductive to the importance of the testimonial culture that is based on listening to and engaging with the different recounts of the Gazan survivors from the 1956 Khan Younis and Rafah killings and the present horrible moments of destruction, dispersion and oppression. For this purpose, this paper embraces Thierry Groensteen's concept of 'spatio-topia' that denotes the systematic distribution of the space on the graphic page in order to give the graphic aesthetic, the driving force of reading. Therefore, graphic spatio-topia configures the conceptual form of the story world that allows the reader to participate spatially and sensationally in Sacco's journalistic investigations through its different tools like the panel and its frame with their spatio-topical parameters of the form, the seize and its site. The systematic operativity of the graphic spatio-topical elements of Footnotes in Gaza promotes a flexible and a meaningful flow of the graphic narrative and transports the reader to the graphic space where he develops a spatialized history and a dense web of sensations like belief and pain.*

KEYWORDS: Spatio-topia, spatio-topical system, space, sensation, spatialized history, graphic narrative.

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Introduction

In his book, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,* Scott McCloud (1993) defines the cartoon— an approach to image-drawing used by the medium of comics— as "a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled […] an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm" (p. 36). That is why the medium of comics is a universal way of telling stories, travelling to different cultures and experiencing human emotions without being rejected or judged for your real identity. Therefore, comics make it easy to travel "horizontally rather than hierarchically inside one culture" (Said 2002, 71). This kind of movement as a working act of communication and a journey of recognition outside one's culture is held by the American graphic novelist and journalist Joe Sacco in his graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza*. In this journalistic graphic novel, Sacco records both the everyday life of Palestinians in Gaza in the present (2003) and the individual testimonies of two forgotten events on November 3rd, 1956 in the City of Khan Younis and later after eight days in the City of Rafah in the Gaza strip. These two events were not highlighted whether in the media or any historical documents other than the recording documents of the United Nations archives in Gaza because they happened during the Suez Canal Crisis as if they were 'marginalized' from the main theatre of the crisis. This work of graphic journalism investigates these two horrible events using the image and the text. However, the research questions here are the followings: why did Sacco choose the graphic novel rather than any other tool of journalism in transferring his recordings of Khan Younis and Rafah's events? Or in other words, how is the aesthetic description of the Graphic novel exploited in transmitting historical events? And why does the journalistic graphic novel and specifically *Footnotes in Gaza* provoke the affective factors in the receiver? The answers to these questions constitute the topical focus of this paper.

The present paper investigates how the graphic novel of *Footnotes in Gaza* is aesthetically, historically and affectively a transnational cultural product by studying the simultaneous workings of the image and the text as a spatio-topical system. In this case, the image and the text constitute the language of the graphic novel. The concept of 'system' is introduced by Thierry Groensteen in order to distinguish the comics' language from any other language.

According to Groensteen (2007), the harmonious operativity of the discursive and the visual codes cannot happen if not controlled by a systematic order that gives leadership to the visual code, and in order to understand this coherence, it is primordial to analyze the internal positioning of the image and the text in the graphic novel. For this purpose, Groensteen suggests a macro-semiotic approach that is based on the idea of 'iconic solidarity' between the images in the different pages of the graphic novel. In considering the page as the basic unit of the comics' language, Groentseen attempts to make spatial connections between the different images in one page and between the different pages of the graphic book. Because Joe Sacco travelled from his home country to Palestine and exactly Gaza strip, the spatial movements in his graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza* are translated through the use of 'spatio-topia' which is concerned with the articulation of the image within the spaces of both the pages and the graphic novel as a whole for the aim of producing pertinent meanings. Groentseen (2007, 21) defines spatio-topia as a sign or "a term created by gathering, while maintaining distinct, the concept of space (espace) and that of place (lieu)".

The graphic novel appropriates specific spaces like the balloon, the panel and its frame, the strip, and the page in order to develop creative graphic productions. In other words, in the comics or the "commix" (to use Spieglman's word) (as cited in Young 1998, 672) — the commixture of image and text— system, the importance of space and place is highlighted and well-established. Therefore, the spatio-topical system of the journalistic graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza* is behind its ability in conveying historical witnesses of the Palestinians' perpetrated suffering in Gaza in a personal and autobiographical dimension rather than a collective one.

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Spatio-topia and Space: The Linguistic Translation and the Historical Interpretation

Groentseen's theory of the spatio-topical system of comics reasserts the interpretive significance of space in reinterpreting the historical narrative in the graphic novel. In this respect, Groensteen (2007, 1) argues that:

> "Every drawn image is incarnated and is displayed in a space. The fixed image, contrary to the moving image of cinema, which Gilles Deleuze has shown is at the same time a "movement image" and a "time-image," only exists in a single dimension. Comics panels, situated relationally, are, necessarily, placed in relation to space and operate on a share of space. These are the fundamental principles of this spatial distribution that will be examined at the sign of the spatiotopia."

According to Groensteen, what distinguishes graphic images from cinema images is the spatio-topical organization that is the essential component of the comics system: Spatio-topia has an authoritarian role in the comic system as it governs the relations between the images in the sequential pages of the comic. These relations form what is called arthrology. There are two types of arthrology: 'restricted arthrology' and 'general arthrology' which are realized through the operations of breaking down (découpage) and braiding (tréssage) respectively. While the 'restricted arthrology' represents the linear relations that form the narrative level of the content, the 'general arthrology' refers to the translinear or the distant linkages between the narrative flow and the spatio-topical organization. It is noticeable that the formal characteristics of the apparatus of spatio-topia and the narrative features of arthrology function harmoniously and simultaneously in order to realize the efficiency of the machinery of comics. Based on this spatio-topical system, Joe Sacco built his graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza* to represent Gazans' testimonial history through the space of its graphic page.

Notably, the spatialization of history is well-established in Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*, and its importance is highlighted by Edward Said (2002, 73) who defines history as being:

> "essentially geographical and territorial, a history made up of several overlapping terrains, so that society is viewed as a territory in which a number of movements are occurring. The vision of overlapping and contested terrains is to me a more interesting view of history than the temporal one going back to a fons et origo- a miraculous, originating point."

What is clearly argued in this quote is the strong interrelationship between history and space and the priority of geography in (re)reading history. In addition, the focus on space rather than time in articulating the historical meanings in Sacco's novel is expressed through the overlapping and the continuity of the past and the present manifested by the Gazans' bewilderment when Sacco asks them about the Khan Younis and Rafah killings of 1956 because they are still living under the Israeli attacks (Sacco, 2009). For them, remembering or searching for the truth of these past events is not important because nothing has changed since 1948 and they still suffer from dispersion, dispossession and death. However, shifting towards a spatial history does not mean silencing time or creating an anti-history criticism, but rather strengthening the links between history and space as a container of time. In this regard, Spiegelman notes that comics "are about time being made manifest spatially, in that you've got all these different chunks of time—each box being a different moment of time—and you see them all at once. As a result, you're always, in comics, being made aware of different times inhabiting the same space" (as cited in Chute 2006, 201-202). What is important to spotlight briefly here is that Spiegelman emphasizes the potency of the spatial aesthetic in materializing and visualizing the time (past, present, or future) through the integration of the temporal shifts within the comics' space. Therefore, the translation of the interior and the exterior structures of the spaces (the balloon, the panel and its frame, and the strip) in Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* provides a useful intervention in spatializing the historical narrative of the Khan Younis and Rafah events of 1956.

The spatial layering of the critical interpretation of history expressed by the individual witnesses in interrelated panels in Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* is reinforced by the distributional power of the spatio-topical system. The iconic coherence between the spatio-topical and the arthrological aspects of the novel

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reproduces the historical narrative to map visually the different spatial sites where the same event happened. In other words, the spatio-topia in *Footnotes in Gaza* gives the Gazans the opportunity to tell history individually as they lived it or more precisely as they remember experiencing it. As Leichter (2017, 175) claims, "Memory is notoriously fickle—not only do we add details to our memories or get them wrong, but also these details of our memories change over time and we often "remember" being at events that we did not directly experience". Because all these individual testimonies are constructed through the process of memory that entails forgetting at the same time, the spatio-topical features, including the panel and its frame, the balloon, and the page embrace the interplay between the divergence and the coherence, leading to an arthrological flow of the historical narrative. For example, the spatial juxtaposition of the slightly different accounts of the survivors from the attacks of Khan Younis on November 3rd, 1956; namely, Saleh Shiblaq from the middle of Khan Younis, Misbah Ashour Abu Sa'adoni who was living on Jalal Street in the center of Khan Younis a couple of dozen meters from where Saleh is living, Takreem El batta who resided on the same street as Misbah, Faris Barbakh who was living near Khan Younis' Mamluk Castle, Dr Abdullah El Horani, and Omm Nafez in the refugee camp enables the reader to navigate through the various corners of Khan Younis as one of the two central places where the historical narrative of Footnotes in Gaza takes place. These recounts also differ in situating spatially the place where the Palestinians were killed: some say that they were killed and shot in their homes, some in the streets, and others against the walls. However, despite the inexact spatial memories, the "essential truth" (Sacco 2009, 275) is that Palestinians in Khan Younis town and camp were killed by the Israeli soldiers.

Remarkably, the continuity between various characters' experiences enacted through a spatially historical interpretation of the sequential images of *Footnotes in Gaza* highlights the importance of spatio-topia for opening up a linguistic translation of the meaningful arthrologic enchainment of events in the graphic narrative. Indeed, as Christian Metz states, "to move from one image to two images is to move from image to language." (as cited in Groensteen 2007, 104); reading the comic images posed in a spatial sequence requires an elaboration of linguistic translations or pertinent logical inferences that build up in the end a coherent narrative. For example, on the ninth page from the "Footnotes" section (see Figure1), the threshold of the historical narrativity is constructed gradually through reading and linking semantically the five images inside the five panels. The images are accompanied with reporting notes written by Joe Sacco for informative purposes. The first image, on the left inside a long vertical panel, captures the buildings of the city of Khan Younis viewed from the sky in a way to show how history as a global narrative excludes the "footnotes" or the smaller narratives from its discourses. We notice that the more the vision scope gets distant, the more the image becomes more blurring. Noticeably, the image says that the official historical discourse of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict usually obscures us from seeing the image clearly. Then, moving to the second image, the visionary scope gets closer and we can see clearly a building standing still and the image shows nothing in specific. In the third panel, the vision is focused on a specific apartment in the building, and in the fourth the visionary focus shifts to the windows of this specific apartment. Finally, the fifth image takes us inside the apartment, and we can see frontally three men: Joe Sacco and his Palestinian companion Abed and in front of them a Palestinian; they have just met checking his arm. The arthrological linking between these five images enable us to give a logical interpretation. Therefore, we can maintain that Sacco, through his comic images, succeeds in transmitting the idea about the importance of the "footnotes" in constructing a verifiable historical narrative centred of the human being and his/her experience spatially and not virtually.

This narrative proposition is primarily conducted by the unfixed spatial reading orientation of the images in the panels because "there is no unidirectional vectorization in the construction of meaning" (Groensteen 2007, 110). Thus, what control the reader's visionary orientation are the spatio-topical features of the comic page. For example, we can read the ninth page in both ways from left to right or from right to left and the delivered meaning remains the same because of the spatio-topical lines that

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dictate the "contextual rapports" (ibid, 107) between the images. For example, if we take the reading orientation from left to right, the eyes movement from one image to the next corresponds to the positioning of the image within the frames of the five panels.

The spatial placement, for example, of the first image drives our eye movement and because it depicts the city of Khan Younis from a sky view, the aerial spatial orientation defines the meaning of this image. This bird's eye view changes into a frontal view in the next four images with a certain degree of zooming in for each image. Therefore, it is the spatial orientation of the two-dimensional comic images that allows the reader to imagine the third spatial dimension of the image or to construct what Pascal Lefévre (2009, 157) termed as the "diegetic space": an imagined space that can be constructed both through the presence and the absence of some elements within the frames of the panels. In this case, the 'diegetic space' is located virtually inside the image by the reader's seeing movement oriented by the spatio-topical system. This system allows the reader to enter inside the image and gives him/her the narrating prerogatives needed to translate and interpret the visual language. Most importantly, the comic spatio-topical apparatus invites and welcomes responsible readers all over the world to inhabit a fictional space that moves between the local and the global:
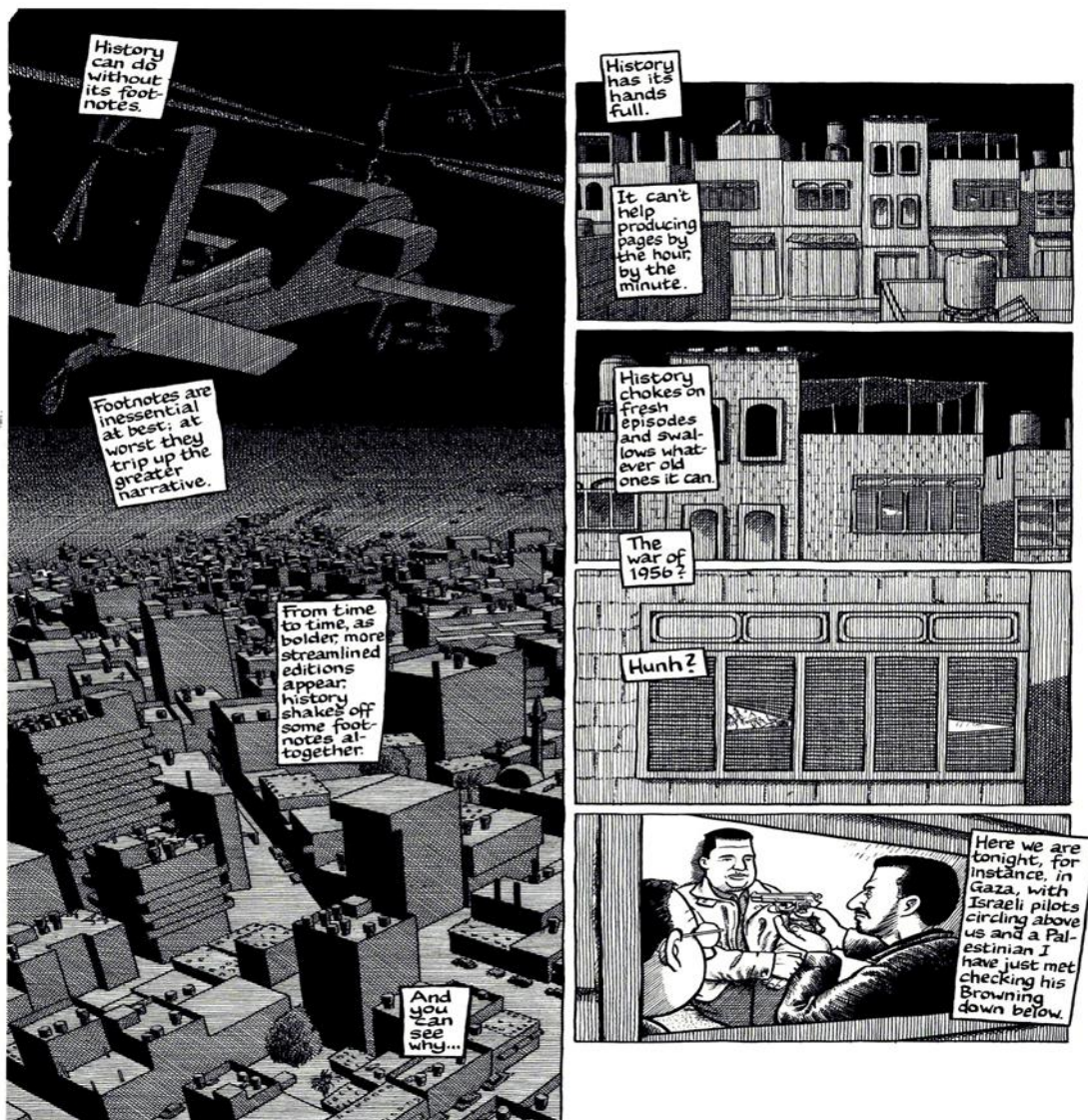

Figure 1. The Spatialization of History (Sacco2009, 9)

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Out(side) and In(side): From There to Here

The spatial orientation of the drawings and the spatio-topical elements, especially the panels' sizes and shapes in *Footnotes in Gaza* plays an important role in immersing the reader into the story world. Repeatedly, this readerly engagement switches between the embedding and overlaying panels within an unframed and continuous background. Generally, this kind of spatio-topical scheme (a framed panel(s) within an unframed larger panel) is actualized through the use of the adapted photographic techniques of 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' since *Footnotes in Gaza* is primarily defined as a journalistic graphic novel.

In considering the linear reading as a 'myth,' Horstkotte (2013, 36) suggests that "Since narrative directionality in comics is not dictated by technology, as it is in film, graphic artists may, and increasingly do, choose other ways of presenting a course of action than that of grids and sequences—either exclusively or intermittently". Eventually, the graphic drawings that are zoomed in and out need to be doubly viewed from a high and low angle perspective with a roaming eye movement going in all directions. For example, on the page 180 from the section "Attack West of Block J" (see Figure 2) and while Sacco was conducting his research about the 1956 events, his narrative is continuously interrupted by some important daily events like this one on this page of the dismantling of many houses in 'block J' by the Israeli soldiers. The graphic narrative in this page takes the reader forward and backward using an elastic eye movement. This page consists of two images: the first image is the background and it represents a general view of the debris from the previously bulldozed houses scattered over a large area, and the framed image on the top of the page represents Sacco with other Palestinians traversing the rocks in order to reach the place where a new bulldozing operation takes place.

Although the background image is seen from an elevated point of view that gives the reader the impression of being superior to the fictional world, the knowledge he can obtain from this image is very limited because "the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by peripheral vision" (Groensteen 2007, 19). However, when this seemingly privileged perspective approaches to the zoomed-in image, it gains omniscience and the reader transforms from being a virtual reader who was just inactively seeing horrible things happening to the Palestinians to a spatio-topically integrated reader running with Sacco and the other Palestinians, breathing the demolition dust, and feeling the rhythm of his and the others' heartbeats going up and down in multidirectional paths:
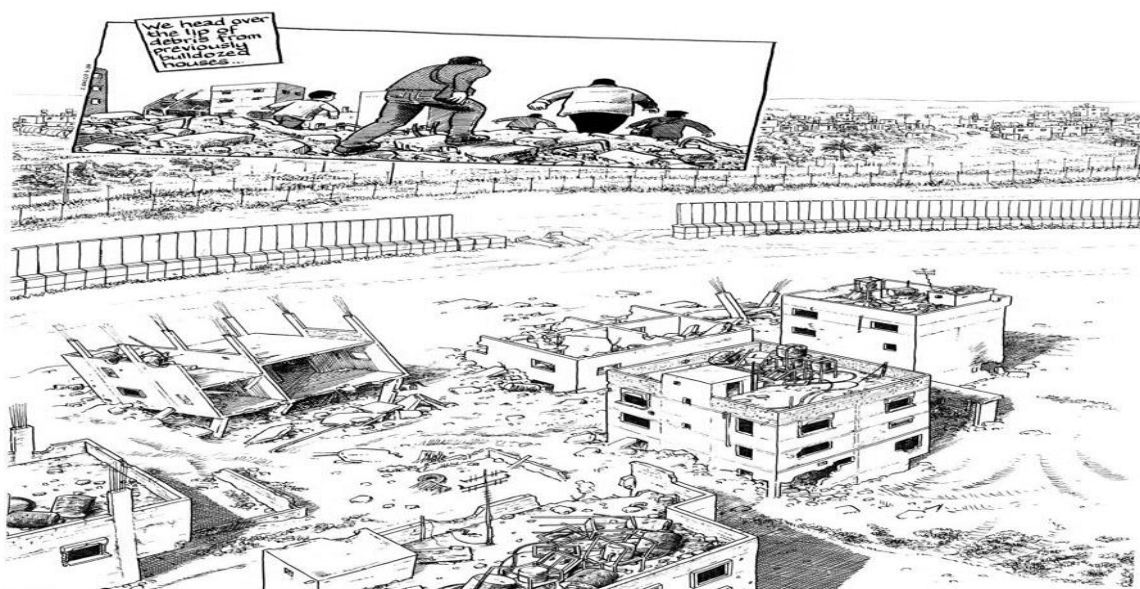

Figure 2. Zooming in and Zooming out (Sacco 2009, 180)

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Spatio-topical Sensations: Frames and Feelings

The spatio-topical guidance of the historical narrative in *Footnotes in Gaza* affects the reader emotionally and touches upon his sensitivities rendering the graphic novel a vivid spatial human experience. Since "the frame dictates its law to the image" (Groensteen 2007, 26), its sizes and shapes manifestly provoke the reader's various empathetic sensations like the sense of belief. In most pages of *Footnotes*, the sizes of the rectangular or square frames representing the survivors' testimonies are the same creating what is called "the democratic page" (Kukkonen 2013A, 113), the fact that makes the reader believe the representations of the graphic novel. This sense of belief is also validated when two or three testimonies are the same like on page 265 (see Figure 3) where Mohamed Yousef Shaker Mousa and two other anonymous men show the body position in which they were arrested by the Israeli soldiers in the school yard during the Rafah events in 1956. These three framed images are put on a background image that shows the Palestinians sitting flocked next to each other on the ground with their hands on their heads. This 'democratic page' with an honest representation of the schoolyard scene corresponds to a feeling of a belief from the reader towards this historical event. In an interview with Joe Sacco, he talked about this scene and he said that he found it difficult to draw until he tried this posture himself in front of a mirror (Edbookfest 2013). Thus, the sensation of belief towards an honest graphic image is resulted from a real embodiment from the cartoonist. This honesty is embodied spatio-topically and sensationally:
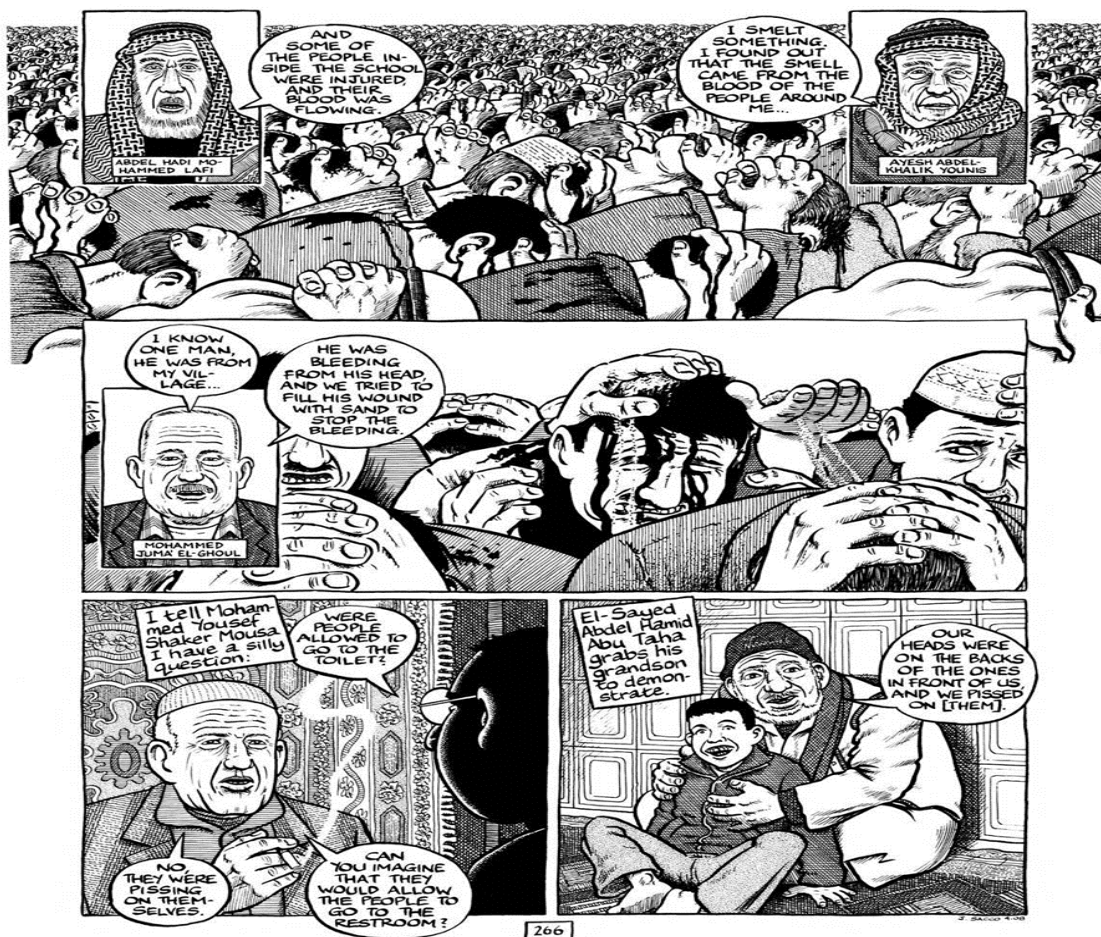

Figure 3. The Embodiment of Sensations (Sacco 2009, 265)

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Securing the reader's sense of belief is confirmed through the spatial embodiment of the physical movements of the Palestinians in the panels of Footnotes. Considering the bodily movements of the Palestinian characters on page 235 (see Figure 4) as they are enduring physical violence from the Israeli soldiers and beaten by sticks indicates that the graphic novel is "a haptic form" that "demands tactility, a physical intimacy with the reader in the acts of cognition and visual scrutiny" (Kukkonen 2013B, 112). The images on this page switch between the present and the past as each of the survivors reconstruct their lived experiences with the 1956 Rafah events through the embodied memories that describe the body pains of Ismael Abdullah Farahat and Mosa Abdullah El Hajj Mohammed. These body pains are continuous in the present. For Ismael, the continuity of his head pain is expressed verbally inside the word balloon; however, for Mosa, the prolongation of his forearm pain from the first panel of the present to the second panel of the past at the bottom of the page is effectuated through filling in the gutter, the space between the panels, with an image of a disembodied forearm beaten by a moving stick (McCloud1993, 66). This gutter is usually left empty for the reader's participatory imagination of what is not drawn in two successive pages, but by embodying the arm pain on it, the human imagination is not intended as much as the human sensation of the pain is emphasized. Here, the reader's sensational involvement with the spatio-topical arrangement of these three images happens because of what is called metalepsis (kukkonen 2013B, 61) that occurs at the level of the gutter because of an inherent connection between the reader and the story-world. It is as if the gutter is a lighted wall in darkness on which the reader's forearm beaten with a stick is reflected. Hence, the spatio-topical embodiment of Mosa's forearm pain contaminates and communicates the reader's feeling of pain which is again projected spatially on the gutter:
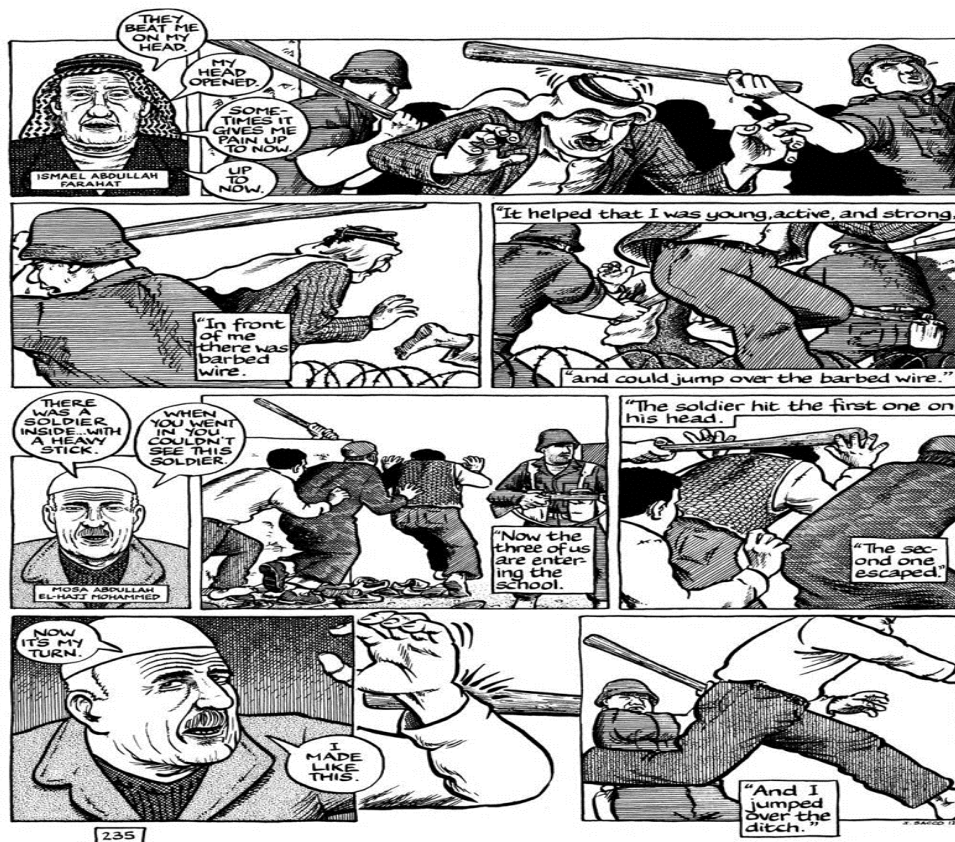
Figure 4. The Violent Gutter (Sacco 2009, 235)

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Moreover, the embodiment of sensation in *Footnotes* is enabled through the spatio-topical placement of sticky objects of emotion on the graphic page. The repetition of screaming mouth, for example, on page 271 (see Figure 5) renders the screaming face a sticky object that, as Sara Ahmed (2004, 291) states, "functions to 'block' the movement (of other things or signs) and it can function to bind (other things or signs) together. Stickiness helps us to associate 'blockages' with 'bindings'". In other words, the screaming mouths on this page blocks us as readers from moving to the next page and compels us to hear the scream(s) creating an emotional binding between the spectator and the drawn women and children who are crying out the detainment of their beloved ones during the 1956 Rafah events.

The sensational effect of the stickiness is thus spatially marked by the repetition of the same screaming mouth which is contagiously reproduced on the faces of many Palestinian women and children who are positioned in different spaces of the framed and unframed graphic spaces. That is, the visibility of the screaming mouth is established by the spatio-topical framing and deframing that make the mouth scream oscillates between the confined and unconfined.

For example, the screams in the framed panel are bounded because they are directed towards the Israeli soldiers; however, the background image in the middle and the right bottom of the page is unframed and the direction of the screams is unbounded. This spatio-topical articulation of the scream through framing and deframing represents what Deleuze and Guattari call, "a passage from the finite to the infinite, but also from territory to deterritorialization" (as cited in Ospina 2010, 25). Therefore, they are the frame's intertwined lines with the word balloons and the frames of Sacco's notes that allow the scream to traverse the framed territory of the panel to the unbounded space of the infinite deterritorialized background permitting the survivors from the 1956 killings to offer their testimonies through the scream to the reader. In fact, the affective effect of this scream on the reader happens through the virtual hearing of the sonority of the scream that drives him deep inside the mouths of the screamers in the image and then leaves him alone in darkness and silence. It is this feeling of being left alone in a suffocating horizon that makes the spectator scream and thus become a part of the survivor's scream:
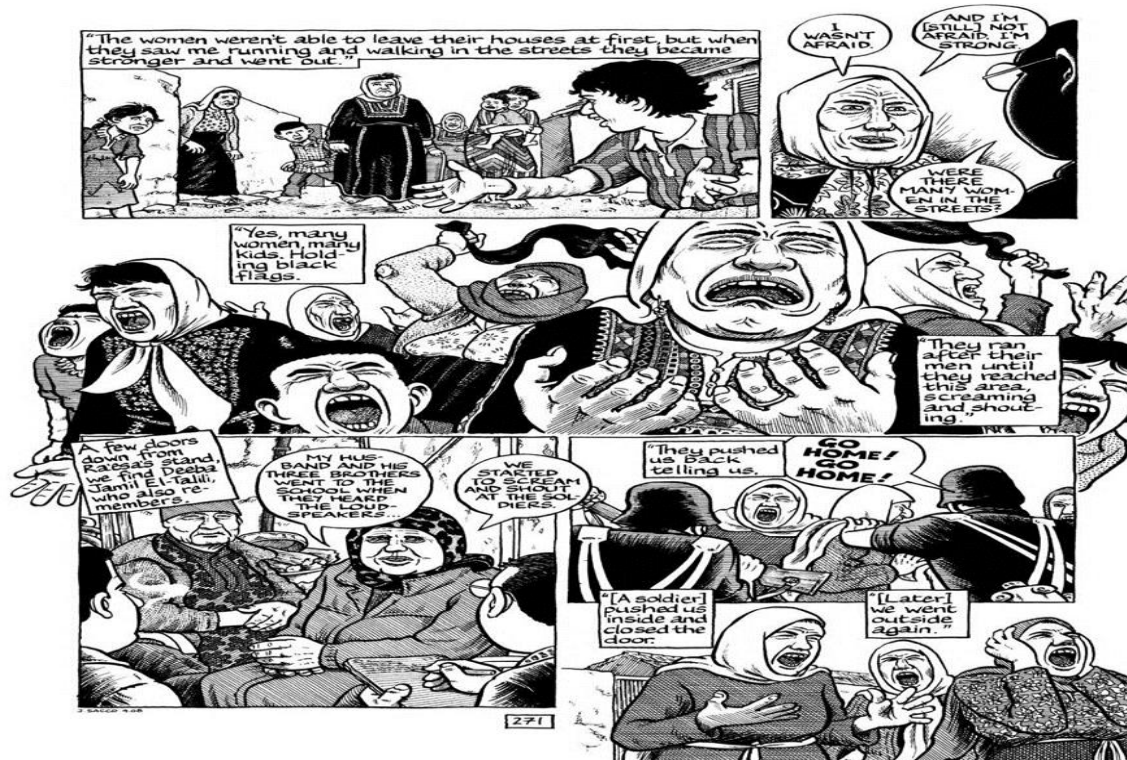

Figure 5. The Screaming Mouth (Sacco 2009, 271)

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Conclusion

In a nutshell, reading Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* from a spatio-topical point of view provides a wide range of possible insights into the spatial articulation of the image inside the multi-frame of the graphic novel. This spatio-topical reading of the novel reinforces the spatial privilege over the temporal trajectory of the historical narrative of Gazans' traumatic experiences between the past and the present. In effect, spatializing the graphic novel of *Footnotes in Gaza* aesthetically and affectively produces not just an iconic solidarity between the different graphic elements of this graphic novel, but also integrates the reader within its arthrological relations. Therefore, the spatio-topical system of *Footnotes in Gaza* makes the graphic novel the best artistic medium that can represent the Palestinian testimonial culture with its historical, economic and political complexities.

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