Drawing on the Past

North American Studies

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Drawing on the Past

Graphic Narrative Documentary

For my parents

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Introduction

A photographer travelling through Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, taking thousands of pictures that capture landscape, inhabitants, and fellow-travelers. The milestones in the life and times of the iconic leader of the civil rights movement of 1960s America. An artist with a traumatic family past, who was witness to the 9/11 attacks and now struggles to come to terms with the event and its aftermath. A journalist who turns his back on the spectacle of current conflict and instead decides to begin investigating two decades-old massacres.

Beyond their respective settings in times and places of what can broadly be labeled as political conflict, and the fact that all were published in the first few years of the twenty-first century, these four stories could hardly appear more different. They do, however, share two overarching traits. All four are graphic narratives. And in their objective to give readers a sense of real-life events, their attempts to find ways to convey what *happened*—in short, their engagement with the elusive reality of lived experiences—all four can be categorized under the general term of *documentary*.

Drawing on the Past: Graphic Narrative Documentary explores what has emerged as one of the most innovative and fastest-growing categories of an itself already booming comics landscape. As early as 1996, Roger Sabin noted that "something of a revolution" (1996, 7) in comics production had resulted in "new spaces for more complex and imaginative stories and artwork than ever before" (7). This trend, coupled with vastly increased reader interest, has only accelerated in recent years. Even today, traces remain of the perception of comics as being, at best, insignificant and unworthy of critical attention and, at worst, crude and corrupting. Yet at the very latest since the publication of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning Holocaust memoire *Maus* in the 1980s, the certainty has gained firm hold that this medium (whether defined primarily as a hybrid form of text and image or, as an alternative school of thought has it, as a

predominantly visual form marked by "images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 1993, 9)) must be taken seriously as an art form worthy of study.[1] Apart from the great number of original and experimental graphic narrative works of fiction published during the period, the last thirty years have also shown that there are plenty of artists willing to push boundaries, experimenting with the form to reveal ever-new "complex and imaginative" means of capturing real-world events in drawn images.[2] Individual works by four of these innovative artists will be discussed in the ensuing chapters: Emmanuel Guibert's (and photographer Didier Lefèvre's) *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders*, Ho Che Anderson's *King: A Comics Biography*, Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, and Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*.

The most significant connotation carried by the term *documentary*, as applied to graphic narratives, is marked by tension.[3] These works purport to

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1 As comics increasingly leave behind their status among the broader public as a medium of ill repute, a similar trend is unfolding in academia. The work (in the U.S.) begun by earlier classics like Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History* (1989), and especially Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) has spawned a fast-increasing number of works on all manner of graphic narratives. These include, but also move beyond, comics theory and the interrogations of the way in which comics' verbal and visual elements interact to include every aspect and genre available—though, as Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester point out, contemporary comics studies "consistently returns to core themes: the history and genealogy of comics, the inner workings of comics, the social significance of comics, and the close scrutiny of comics" (2009, xi). Theoretical approaches to comics, meanwhile, comprise, as Hans-Christian Christiansen and Anne Magnussen already observed in 2000, "general media theory, cultural and sociological studies, semiotics, poststructuralism and literary theory" (7); one can add to this very broadly also the fields of history and art history. Within the field of nonfiction comics, autobiography has received the most attention, not least since a very large portion of nonfiction graphic narratives published in the last few years fit into this category, especially the touchstone text of nonfiction comics: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which probably remains the most influential graphic narrative for comics artists and scholars alike. Noteworthy scholars here are Hillary Chute, Charles Hatfield, and Ole Frahm.

2 For an overview of range of themes and styles, see, for example Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (1996); Gravett (ed.), *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* (2005); and Brunetti (ed.), *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories* (2006).

3 As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, the term *documentary* itself is far from straightforward—as are, of course, connected concepts of *actuality*, *reality*, *the real*, and *authenticity*. The complexity and difficulty of these last should be taken into account throughout their use in the discussion in the following chapters.

While supporting the line of argument that documentary may be viewed as a subcategory of nonfiction (see Grünefeld 2010, 18), the terms *documentary* and *nonfiction* will be used somewhat interchangeably here for stylistic reasons. Furthermore, the choice of the term documentary is not meant to suggest that terms which have already been employed for

present subject-matter that is grounded in actuality, with all the attendant expectations of authenticity, evidence, and veracity. Concomitantly, they reveal, even showcase, the shaping subjectivity of artistic interpretation. The most compelling graphic narrative documentaries are effective precisely because they put to use this inherent contradiction rather than attempting to overcome it.

Tension is created in a graphic narrative documentary between the implied subjectivity inherent to the form and the demands of objectivity commonly expected of the genre primarily because the shaping subjectivity of artistic interpretation is always in plain sight: it is the artist's line on the page. Following Jared Gardner, "the trace of the hand, the graphic enunciation that is the drawn line" (2006, 54) is the key to both the simplicity and the complexity of graphic narrative, especially in its most recognizably cartoonish incarnation as a bold black outline. It lends an (at times) deceptive straightforwardness to images thus boiled down to only their most essential features, allowing for room for projection and a reading between the lines, as it were, that finds no equivalent elsewhere. As a sketchier or ratty line, meanwhile, it can, for example, indicate a degree of tentativeness or unreliability to a story—or the reverse (see discussion in Chapter 4). The drawing style chosen thus impacts the work completely.[4] The complicated authenticity of the comics line is compounded even further, once another aspect is taken into account. Unlike, for example, a photograph, it is not customary to conceive of a *hand-drawn image* as providing evidence, in the sense of verifying and confirming that what is depicted did in fact occur. Following Hillary Chute, however, such an image, through the sense of materiality of the artist's handmark on the page, may be interpreted as providing a different kind of authentication or verification—that of a signature.[5] But in graphic narrative, this level of implied authentication is not uncomplicated. The reader encounters the potentially authenticating handmark

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one or several of these graphic narratives, and others like them, are not valid: *comics journalism* for much of Sacco's work, for example; *comics biography*, as Anderson's *King* is described in its own subtitle; or, for the work of Spiegelman, among others (e.g. Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel) the selection of *graphic memoir*, *autobiographical comics*, or *autographics*. For discussion of "tension" in a broader context, compare Hatfield (2005).

4 As Gardner ruefully notes, however, in current scholarly discourse on graphic narrative, as yet, "the line, the mark on the page, would seem inevitably to fall to the non-narrative aesthetics privileged by the proponents of 'pure art' from Lessing to [Clement] Greenberg" (2006, 57), relegated to the basic description of style and examined for its impact on the mood of a text.

5 Compare Chute (2011) and (2016). See also the discussion in Chapter 4.

one degree removed: while in the process of creating the artwork, the artist does usually create an original; an inherent aspect of the comics medium is that this original is then duplicated. The process of mass-production would thus appear to once more leave the reader with a highly subjective artistic interpretation—and a mere copy, at that.

Taking these factors into account, we begin to understand how graphic narratives like those of Guibert, Anderson, Spiegelman, and Sacco can thoroughly complicate—and thereby give their readers room to question—presumed boundaries between *fiction* and *nonfiction*, even between such supposedly distinct categories as *work of art* and *historiography*.

Given the vast range of formal possibilities that the comics medium allows for, any discussion of graphic narrative documentary is well-advised to avoid the constraints of too strict a categorization beyond the basic tenets outlined above. More constructive is an approach centered on detailed analysis of individual works that have found particularly compelling means of utilizing the unique affordances of the form to negotiate the issues at play. The four works to be discussed in the following chapters have thus been selected in part precisely because they differ so significantly in terms of structure, scale, and style. A key task of this project is to trace each text's distinct techniques of implementing strategies for capturing the reality of lived experience in order to more closely triangulate what *can* be done in graphic narrative documentary, and to what effect. As a result of this eclectic approach, a number of complex and diverse issues will come into play in the analyses, of which fictionality and authenticity, evidence, materiality, the problems surrounding the representation of limit events like war without aestheticizing the violence and suffering, and even the role of the artist as both creator of a visual account of and, frequently, participant in the events, are just some.

One more feature comes into play, particularly relevant for all four works to be discussed here, especially with regard to the role that *evidence* plays in the genre. For all their differences, they share one important formal device. All of these graphic narrative documentaries engage, in varying degrees, with the medium of photography—ranging from the pervasive presence in Guibert's work of the photographs the titular *Photographer* actually took in Afghanistan in 1986 to the manner in which photography and media representations, while not made manifest on the page, are alluded to, and inform, Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*. In complete contrast to the artist's line, photography's ability to verify, to confirm that that which is depicted did in fact

occur, is, at least initially, rarely questioned. Essentially, then, all four works pit an artist's image against both photographs and words—the other constitutive element of graphic narrative. Very different aspects and understandings of their respective implications for the representation of actuality are thereby simultaneously activated. It is a juxtaposition that further allows for gauging the possibilities of the genre. Taking this contrast of photography and comics as a point of departure, a guiding question of the following analyses is thus how, in graphic narrative documentaries, which in various ways combine drawn images, text, and photographs, these three elements work together (or, conversely, play off against each other) in the quest to capture the elusive reality of the respective events shown.

The complexity of the genre, in its graphic narrative iteration, does not fully explain its overall appeal. Why, one might ask, are documentary comics thriving *now*—especially those that, like the example texts discussed here, engage not just with the present moment but with historical events? As Hillary Chute observes in *Disaster Drawn*, her own recent work on comics documentary and the first book-length discussion of this topic, "[we] are now in a kind of golden age of documentary, in which attention to myriad forms of recording and archiving is greater than ever" (Chute 2016, 5).[6] The more specific appeal of comics in this "age," meanwhile, is most succinctly expressed through an interview comment made by Joe Sacco, perhaps currently the most prominent artist working in the genre. As he observed in a 2005 interview with *Mother Jones*: "It's a visual world and people respond to visuals. With comics you can put interesting and solid information in a format that's pretty palatable" (Gilson 2005, n.p.).

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6 As Hillary Chute notes in the recent *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (2016), hers is the first "sustained critical study of documentary comics" (5). In contrast to the focus chosen here on contemporary works and the use of photography, the resulting emphasis on formal analysis, and engagement with the current media landscape, Chute's work takes a diachronic approach centered on trauma and the act of witnessing. As she argues with regards to her line of inquiry, "war generates new forms of visual-verbal witnessing" (5)—a prevalence that can also serve as explanation for the theme of political conflict shared by (not just) the four works under consideration in *Drawing on the Past*. With regard to her illuminating approach of tracing the historical development of the form, Chute posits two key arguments, which compliment the one made here on Mitchell's "Pictorial Turn" in the twenty-first century. Chute thus states that "the forceful emergence of nonfiction comics in its contemporary specificity is based on a response to the shattering global conflict of World War II" and that contemporary documentary comics add to "a long history of forms" (5).

Works in the graphic narrative form are certainly uniquely positioned to engage with (and reap the benefits of) the broader developments and increased significance of visuality and imagery in the twenty-first century.[7] On that increased significance, W.J.T. Mitchell comments in *Cloning Terror* (2011): "[In] our time, both the things done and the things said are filtered through mass media, and the role of *images and imagination* is much expanded" (xi, emphasis added). His statement is linked in that book to his analysis of the flood of images in the wake of 9/11, which is, after all, *the* marker for the beginning of the twenty-first century. But it is a development much longer in the making. In his 1994 book *Picture Theory*, Mitchell thus already argues that a "Pictorial Turn" has taken place, defined as a "postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality" (16). His theory on the pictorial turn, he takes care to clarify, "is not the answer to anything[, but] is merely a way of stating the question" (1994, 24) based on the realization that visual literacy is far more complex than previously perceived, and that models of textuality heretofore utilized in the study of images do not do sufficient justice to the complexity of visual culture. In the post-9/11 decade, as Mitchell emphasizes in the more recent *Cloning Terror*, the pictorial turn reached heightened relevance. More than ever, contemporary war, political upheavals, and conflict situations around the globe are now presented in images in real time: on television, in social media, via uploaded photographs taken by cell phones. As Mitchell argues, the consequence is that the "shaping of perceptions of history does not have to wait for historians or poets but is immediately represented in audio-visual-textual images transmitted globally" (2011, xi). "[The] era of the War on Terror," he continues, "[will] be remembered as a time when the accelerated production and circulation of images in a host of new media […] ushered a 'pictorial turn' into public consciousness" (2)—a pictorial turn in which graphic narrative can have an integral part.[8]

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7 The following is based on an argument previously already made elsewhere. See Wege (2017).

8 This line of argument does, however, hold the danger of leading to an over-evaluation of the role comics play in today's visual culture. In *Die Sprache des Comics*, Ole Frahm notes the proliferation of graphic narratives in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, which was attributed in contemporary debates to a "genuine relationship" (144) between comics and war. A previously unimaginable catastrophe such as the attack on the Twin Towers, so the argument among comics scholars (and fans) ran at the time, creates, or in itself demands, more and different pictures. Frahm is rightly critical of this simplified justification

On the flood of media images in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Mitchell further comments that

> [images] have always possessed a certain infectious, viral character, a vitality that makes them difficult to contain or quarantine. […This] has been a period of breakout, a global plague of images. And like any infectious disease, it has bred a host of antibodies in the form of counter-images. Our time has witnessed, not simply more images, but a war of images. (2011, 2)

Mitchell's "war of images" is seen as being fought out first between competing propaganda pictures, the collapsing Twin Towers versus the Bush administration's "iconic counterattack" (2011, 3) in the shape of the invasion of Iraq. His argument quickly moves beyond what boils down to propaganda warfare, however. *Cloning Terror* explores the imagery of the War on Terror, aligning Western anxiety about terrorism, especially in the form of the self-replicating terrorist cell, with anxiety about cloning. In the vein of his concept of metapictures presented in *Picture Theory* (see discussion in Chapter 1), the clone, for Mitchell, is a "superimage," an "image of image-making itself" (2011, 29). Cloning as metaphor, Mitchell claims, and particularly the fear of cloning—grown out of "ancient anxieties about copying, imitation, artificial life, and image-making" (xiv) and a reincarnation of the modernist preoccupation with mechanical reproduction, especially the "mechanically copied image (paradigmatically the photograph)" (14)—provides "undertone and counterpoint" (xii) to the visuality of (not just) war in this new era. Mitchell thus sees cloning and biocybernetics as the heir to Walter Benjamin's description of the modern era as the "Age of Mechanical Reproduction," a time marked by "the twin inventions of assembly line in-dustrial production […] and the mechanical reproduction of images in the technologies of photography and the cinema" (1936, 20).

This inherent potential of the age of digital (re)production and dis-semination of images outlined above appears as an echo—amplified—of what Susan Sontag has written about with regard to the modernist period's preoccupation with changes to image production and perception via the camera as the instrument of *fast seeing*—with repercussions of this attitude being felt to the present day: "The cult of the future (of faster and faster seeing) alternates with the wish to return to a more artisanal, purer past—

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for (and over-evaluation of) graphic narrative's popularity, but the general stance that catastrophe has triggered more and different pictures does echo Mitchell's argument in *Cloning Terror*.

when images still had a handmade quality, an aura" (1977, 124). Comics
imagery, it can then be argued, has the capacity to straddle that wish. While
it is mass produced in its final form, it is at most a distant relative of
Mitchell's clone, preserving a sense of (though, as discussed earlier, one
degree removed) that "handmade quality."

In the graphic narratives discussed in the following chapters, meanwhile,
this ambiguity between handmade quality and mass production is brought
to the fore in a yet more complex manner through the inclusion of *real*
photographs (or, as in Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*, visual and textual references
thereto, and parallels drawn to the issues relevant in war photography). The
combination of the two types of images with text furthermore addresses
another problem, which Sontag notes, this time in *Regarding the Pain of Others*:
that, to her, photographs alone are rarely sufficient for understanding what
is seen, since, as she writes "[the image's] meaning—and the viewer's re-
sponse—depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified; that is,
on words" (2003, 29). The combination of photographs with not just words
but with a word-image hybrid, as will be discussed in Chapter 1, allows for
further insight into how meaning might be allocated or attributed in photo-
graphs.[9]

Without seeking to elevate the form to an all-out satisfying solution for
the challenges posed by the pictorial turn or the "war of images" (or implying
that a solution is either possible or essential), this can, at minimum, be
understood as a significant contribution graphic narrative makes. It is all the
more pertinent since, as Mitchell notes, the impact of the imagery of the War
on Terror, the inescapable barrage of digitally cloned pictures laying siege to
the senses of viewers, is vast and has transformed the way in which war
especially is presented to Western audiences:

Modern warfare is often portrayed as a de-realized spectacle, a mere simulacrum on
the order of a video game. And indeed, that is the way the American media and its
corporate and political minders would like to portray it: a war of faceless enemies
marching in anonymous ranks to be vaporized by superior weapons from a safe
distance. But television also has the capacity […] to present the "little picture," up
close and personal. And it can reduce our distance from events, even as it seems to
distance us. (2011, 98)

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9 In this context, the combination of photographic images with hand-drawn pictures usually
    presented in panels, i.e. explicitly and inherently framed, also serves to highlight the issues
    of framing (what is omitted, what is included, and how this changes perception and
    message of the image).

This capacity of the "little picture," a description coined by Edward R. Murrow "long ago" (Mitchell 2011, 98), finds a modern-day incarnation in some of today's groundbreaking graphic narratives, including those discussed in the following chapters. These works utilize the ability of the form to both reproduce and repeat the excesses of this imagery, while simultaneously providing their own narrative counterpoint to that excess. They function, as it were, as an extended form of Mitchell's metapicture, reflecting in images on images. And they achieve this not least thanks to the slow reading process their layout encourages, which affords the opportunity to slow down and contemplate more thoroughly fragments of that "flood" of pictures.

Yet another aspect of temporality is worth mentioning here. Many contemporary graphic narrative documentaries, especially when one includes in this category the work to be found on comics journalism websites, do engage explicitly with current news items—though by necessity rarely within the confines of the 24-hour news-cycle.[10] Yet many of the longform comics documentaries published in the last few years also still appear as the polar opposite to the speed with which news and images of disaster reach us today. Not only can their creation be an exceptionally timeconsuming process (Spiegelman, for example, spent over ten years on *Maus*, and the time extended to the creation of the four texts discussed here likewise ranges from at least eighteen months to over a decade), but the political events

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10 Even as the connection between comics and nonfiction remains tenuous to the minds of many readers today—not least because these works are usually still marketed and sold as graphic *novels*—, the influence of graphic journalism on the development of today's nonfiction comics contests any assertions that documentary comics are an entirely new concept. Hence, as Albert Boime notes: "While comics attained their maturity in the United States as a result of newspaper growth and mass circulation, this unfoldment did not occur in isolation from other forms of journalistic art" (1972, 21), especially pre-Civil War illustrated journalism (work now achieved by tabloid photographers). According to Boime, the early American comic strips were "the final manifestation of old-fashioned illustrated journalism, and their origin is thus related less to technological advances than is generally claimed" (21).

In 2013, meanwhile, the first regular magazine dedicated solely to comics reportage was inaugurated: the French-language *La Revue Dessinée*, published quarterly. As its editor Franck Bourgeron notes in a recent interview, *La Revue Dessinée* builds on a long tradition of nineteenth Century graphic newspapers (examples are *Le Journal Illustré*, *The Graphic*, and *Le Petit Journal*), where reportage and journalism were supplemented, pre-widespread use of photography, with extensive illustrations and image galleries (Gasser 2014, 36). It was certainly not a purely American phenomenon. More recent examples include work in the 1960s and 1970s in the satire magazine *Hara-Kiri* (later re-named *Charlie Hebdo*), and, currently, the online comics journalism website *cartoonmovement.com* (whose subject matter ranges from the Arab Spring to conservatives' attempts to infringe on abortion rights).

featured are frequently not even current hot conflicts. They are thus doubly
lacking the immediacy of images transmitted via new media.

The most commercially successful comics that can be classified as
belonging to the documentary genre broadly, such as Marjane Satrapi's
Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood (2000) or Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001), deal
with conflicts that, while still maintaining political currency, do not dominate
the news. To a certain extent, and tying in with their capacity to provide
"counterpoint," as discussed above, it can thus be argued that in many of
these comics, the artists have taken on the task supposedly neglected by
many developments in the media. Therefore, in Mitchell's words, they act as
"historians and poets" in their work, (re)shaping perceptions of the conflicts
they portray, adding depth to the real-time flood of images. Many of the
conflict   regions   covered—among   them   Iran,   Israel/Palestine,
Afghanistan—still remain topical. The artists' work may be seen as drawing
an arc between past and present crises and in the process quite literally
providing a new way of looking at these regions and conflicts. In pointing
to this aspect of the graphic memoir *Persepolis* in particular, Hillary Chute
notes the manner in which it addresses "the ethical visual and verbal practice
of 'not forgetting'" and how, through visual-verbal witnessing, comics like
it can "[contest] dominant images and narratives of history, debunking those
that are incomplete and those that do the work of elision" (2010, 136).

An additional useful angle when considering history, especially with
regard to formal possibilities of the medium, can be added when scrutinizing
more closely the terminology used for the medium at hand. There is wide-
spread consensus over the use of the single-image *cartoon* and the (usually)
multi-panel short *comic strip* familiar from newspapers. And especially outside
academia, *comics* remains the common name for the medium. For long-form
comics like those to be discussed here, meanwhile, several competing terms
are currently in use, of which *graphic novel* is now the most prevalent. It
entered the mainstream with the publication of Will Eisner's *The Contract with
God* in 1978. Initially, it was primarily considered a marketing tool (and
remains the collective label under which comics are most commonly cate-
gorized in bookstores) to gain a broader readership among those who would
not consider buying a lowly *comic book*, associated as that term has been for
so long with the serialized pulp magazines. Graphic *novel*, however, implies
both fiction and, to an extent, at least in common usage, non-seriality, thus
giving a somewhat limited or even misleading impression of many of these
works. Scott McCloud's image-focused understanding of comics leads to

this groundbreaking comic scholar's endorsement, based on comic legend Will Eisner's earlier definition in *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), of the term *sequential art*. Meanwhile, in the more recent *Alternative Comics* (2005), Charles Hatfield briefly reintroduces the somewhat cumbersome *long-form comics* before recommending a return to the simple *comic book*.

Since the topic under consideration is explicitly nonfiction, the increasingly prevalent term *graphic narrative*, as introduced for this very reason by Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven and broadly defined as doing "the work of narration at least in part through drawing" (2006, 767), will be the preferred term here (though for stylistic reasons it will be used interchangeable with the term *comics*). In light of the historic subject matter of the four documentaries analyzed here, and the problem of the representation of reality therein entailed, as well as the embeddedness of the imagery of these comics in various broader historical and contemporary visual discourses, using graphic *narrative* has an added advantage: it opens up a direct connection to debates and concerns surrounding the role of narrative in historiography. Most immediately useful is Hayden White's argument in *The Content of the Form*. For White, (prose) narrative is not, as assumed by "traditional historiography" (1990, ix) merely a "neutral medium" (ix) which historians employ to convey the lived stories of the past, "the truth of which would reside in the correspondence of the story told to the story lived by real people in the past" (ix–x). In that logic, the only "literary aspect" in the written work of historians is to be found in "certain stylistic embellishments" serving the sole purpose of making for more "vivid and interesting" (x) texts. White sees narrative discourse, rather, as "a particularly effective system of discursive meaning production" (x). It is a lack of objectivity disguised, essentially, by the manner in which the events thus conveyed "seem to tell themselves" (3). "Events seeming to tell themselves" might well be appropriate with regard to "imaginary events" (3), i.e. fiction. The problem White identifies for historiography, however, and the decidedly non-imaginary events it concerns itself with, is that narrative "endows them with an illusory coherence and charges them with the kinds of meanings more characteristic of oneiric than of waking thought" (ix). It is "the very stuff of a mythical view of reality" (ix) and a critique, he notes,

of a piece with the rejection of narrativity in literary modernism and with the perception, general in our time, that real life can never be truthfully represented as having the kind of formal coherency met with in the conventional, well-made or fabulistic story. (White 1990, ix)

The same concerns can be said to apply in the case of nonfiction graphic narratives in general, and the four documentaries under consideration here in particular. Like historiography, they can never operate in a "neutral medium." Far from it. This is true for their photographic images as much as those that are hand-created; though the reader may be less aware of this for the former—the supposedly *objective* photograph. In a sense, however, they are toying with this problem—and, ultimately, reader expectations. On the one hand, as self-contained works of art they do "endow with an illusory coherence" and "charge with meaning" for their readers the events they portray as stories in pictures. And yet, that coherence is always already undermined on various levels, due to the nature of the form itself as a text-image hybrid (see discussion in Chapter 1).[11] The always-visible perceived subjectivity of the artists' line, meanwhile, never allows readers to maintain an unquestioning faith in the neutrality of the medium used to convey the story of these *real* events. Moreover, considering the various kinds of photographic material that has been incorporated into these graphic narrative documentaries, with all the therein encased implications and various established (media) narratives, they exploit the potential to draw attention to *that* manifold "illusory coherence." In view of the enduring biases regarding their (in)ability to function convincingly as works of nonfiction, they have little to lose and everything to gain. It is their (lack of) status, perhaps, which provides them with the leeway they need to unfold a distinct approach to the representation of reality. How, precisely, they may do that, then, will be explored in the following chapters.

Emmanuel Guibert's *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* is the focus of Chapter 1. *The Photographer* is a collaboration between a photo-journalist, Didier Lefèvre, and the comics artist Guibert; it recounts and re-frames Lefèvre's journey in the mid-1980s to war-torn Afghanistan, combining post-*ligne claire* style drawn images with a large number of Lefèvre's original photographs to unique effect. Of all four graphic narrative documentaries, this work thus makes the most pervasive use of the medium of photography. Along with an initial discussion of both comics theory and the documentary genre, this chapter therefore also begins to explore how the tension between the different forms may

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11 Not least, pertaining to the works' description as narrative, in the tension between the narrativity created by images in sequence and the long tradition, from Lessing onward, of attributing an inherent non-narrativity to painting/images. See Mitchell, *Iconology* (1986) for discussion of non-narrativity in painting.