

Panels and Gutters: Empathy, Comics Journalism, and Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*

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Background

Comics journalism is the practice of reporting news and history through the framework of sequential art. Drawing on literary devices practiced by New Journalism, comics journalism incorporates an additional, visual dimension that alters reader experience. Joe Sacco's 2009 graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza* employs visual and verbal elements to tell the story of past and present instances of violence in the Gaza Strip.

Methodology

The analysis draws on the comics theory of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* to examine how formal visual and verbal elements in *Footnotes in Gaza* narrow the distance between reader and subjects of journalistic stories. The essay theorized the ways that Joe Sacco breaks with conventional ideas of journalistic objectivity that do not jeopardize the literal truth of the story. The conventions of U.S. media coverage of the conflict in Gaza was analyzed and compared to Sacco's comics journalism approach. A key difference in Sacco's approach was theorized in terms of sequential art's capacity to manipulate the rate of consumption, which it was posited, allows for more empathetic engagement. The essay includes hand-drawn artistic renderings of this theory by the researcher (See Figure1).

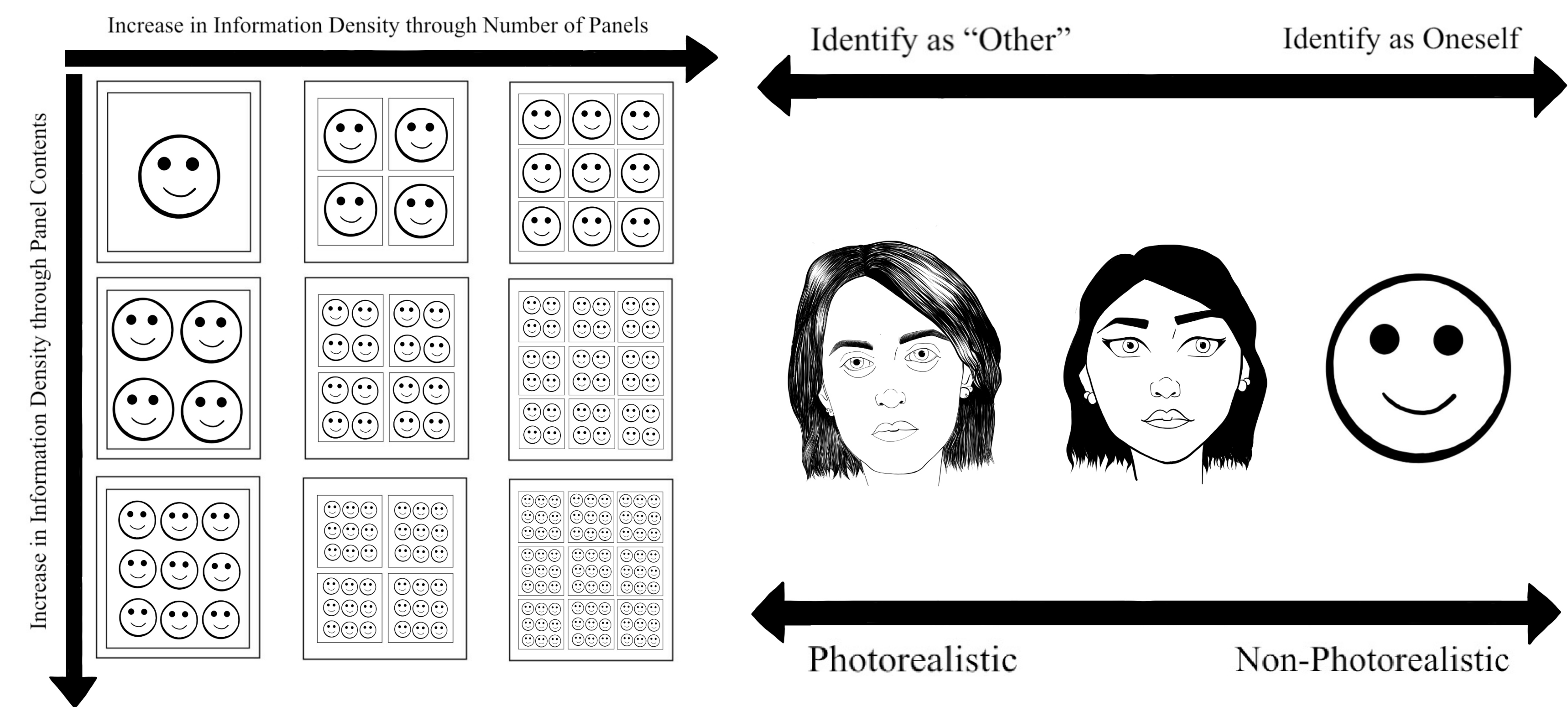


Figure 1

Figure 2

Results

Breaking with traditional journalistic objectivity by including himself in the story, Sacco allows readers to project themselves into the shell of his character and to engage in the world of the story in a safe yet stimulating manner that encourages understanding (see Figure 2). *Footnotes in Gaza* engages readers in the reality that Sacco experienced and that Gaza residents underwent in the past and present. Sacco further encourages readers to project themselves into other generically rendered human characters through juxtaposition with realistic backgrounds.

Conclusion

The inclusion of a journalist or creator's experience and perspective has the potential to create empathetic connections with readers because it breaks with conventional ideas of journalistic objectivity. The encouragement of empathetic connections between readers and the subjects in the story goes beyond individual visual and verbal elements and depends on the frequency and relational positioning of these elements on the page. The stake of reader empathy toward Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are high, given critical infrastructural strain and political change that is needed.

References

Footnotes in Gaza - Joe Sacco
Understanding Comics - Scott McCloud

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