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Hillary L. Chute. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of Hillary L. Chute. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016.

Keywords

comics, women, gender, history, documentary, war, trauma

Hillary L. Chute. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016. 359 pp.

Hillary L. Chute is, in my view, the most impressive scholar of comics to emerge over the last decade, and a new book by her is a welcome event. Comics scholars will be familiar with the journal volume she co-edited with Marianne DeKoven, *Graphic Narrative*, a special issue of *Mfs: Modern Fiction Studies* (Winter 2006), particularly their “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” which lays out theoretical contexts that have shaped discussions in the field for a decade. Chute’s prescient interview in that volume with Alison Bechdel has been cited in nearly every essay on the artist.

It was Chute’s 2010 book, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, however, that catapulted her to the forefront of comics studies. It is a richly encyclopedic source not just on traditions and achievements in women’s comics, but also on theorizing comics in relation to other modes of visual-verbal representation. It focuses on how feminist cartoonists have made important interventions—for example, engaging with issues of family incest in the challenging work of Phoebe Gloeckner, framing the crisis of political witnessing in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* volumes, and interrogating the relationship of photographic and documentary archives in the work of Alison Bechdel. Chute’s extended and erudite discussions offer occasions to reflect on the personal and global contexts of trauma and crisis, while her insistence on comics as works that are made—drawn, painted, printed across frames and gutters—emphasizes craft in comics practices of feminist witnessing.

Chute also worked with renowned comics artist-author Art Spiegelman as associate editor for over a decade on his massive and definitive sourcebook *MetaMaus* (Pantheon 2011), which shows how the world-changing *Maus* texts were constructed from interviews, documents, and photographic archives. (These were available on hyperstax in the early nineties, but virtually unusable a decade later). Her subsequent book, *Outside the Box: Interviews with Contemporary Cartoonists* (U of Chicago P, 2014) does similar work in relaying insightful dialogues with many cartoonists. And the collection *Comics & Media: A Critical Inquiry Book* (U of Chicago P, 2014) that she co-edited with Patrick Jagoda carves out a publishing space for the vigorous scholarship of the past decade, signaling her energetic devotion to “growing” the field.

Chute’s most recent book, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, draws together aspects of all her earlier scholarship in proposing an encompassing, multi-medial historical framework for the rise of comics engaged with political crisis. It asserts the potency of comics to subversively intervene and report in compelling ways on dense, contradictory historical situations of conflict. Chute’s focus is, above all, on comics as not just an

aesthetic medium, but a mode of historical documentation drawing from earlier forms of visual documentation attentive to the violence of war and the personal and collective trauma it generates. Framing her analyses as what one reviewer called “comics as history,” she explores autobiographical graphic narratives in which the artist inserts himself on the scene as both the author and a character profoundly changed by witnessing events. Importantly, Chute observes how this practice calls on the viewer to also become a witness.

Chute is a meticulous researcher and her impressively erudite and wide-ranging study of landmarks of the documentary comics genre ranges internationally. *Disaster Drawn* is organized into an introduction and five substantive chapters, plus a Coda, copious notes, a helpful index, and about a dozen illustrations per chapter, some in excellent full-page color reproductions. The introduction is theoretically oriented, laying out terms and arguments, with a focus on conceptualizing the relationship of comics to witnessing and specifying its practices and forms. Chute thinks about how comics, as “a visual-verbal narrative documentary form” (14), is tied to other documentary forms, such as film, but observes the distinctiveness of its particular affordances, above all the “marks” on the page that compose hand-drawn comics. She probes, in chapter segments, how the key components of making comics are fundamental to its service as a mode of documentary witness in ways that are illuminating for theorizing that work. For example, while writing a recent essay on *Nylon Road*, a little-known but fascinating Iranian comic by Parsua Bashi, I repeatedly turned to *Disaster Drawn* as a resource for discussing the importance in Bashi’s work of such key elements as the gutter. Importantly, Chute’s discussions remain firmly fixed on the vital question, “How does it work?” (38).

Disaster Drawn’s argument is closely historical. Chute asserts that “comics texts give shape to lost histories and bodies,” thereby offering “a new seeing” (38). More precisely, she argues that the “emergence of nonfiction comics in its contemporary specificity is based on a response to the shattering global conflict of World War II” and that “social and psychic pressures . . . impelled the form’s reemergence . . . and the formal innovation across national boundaries . . . that comics took and created” (5-6). But to make these claims Chute has to tease out a history of visual witnessing in drawn forms, which chapter 1 does insightfully, with its focus on the prints about war of seventeenth-century French artist Jacques Callot, the etchings in nineteenth-century Spanish artist Goya’s *Disasters of War*, along with ongoing references to the contemporary work based in drawing of the brilliant South African artist William Kentridge. She asserts that, along with such twentieth-century German artists as George Grosz and Otto Dix, they “today offer insight as documentarians of wartime atrocity, artist-reporters at the juncture of the history of art and the history of journalism, and [are] figures marking turning points in the history of thinking about the relation of ethics and vision” (41).

Chapter 2 goes on to develop the implications of this historical intervention in modern American comics. Chute trenchantly observes: “Comics is a form that fundamentally relies on space—the space of the page—to represent the movement of time” (77). Her charting of modern comics history references several artists and traditions unknown to me, as a non-specialist: Rodolphe Töpffer, Winsor McCay, Lynd Ward with his wordless novels, as well as so-called “outsider artist” Henry Darger, *Mad Comics* founder Harvey Kurtzman, Jules Feiffer in *The Village Voice*, and others. She probes the impact of the Comics Code in the Fifties that drove comics artists outside the mainstream and the rise of the underground comix movement that generated “figurative drawing during a period governed by the sanctities of abstraction” and spawned such comics artists as Justin Green, Robert Crumb, and of course Art Spiegelman (105). This informed and textured overview of the field through the century sets the stage for the three chapters at the heart of the book on works concerned with war and historical devastation in the aftermath of World War II. All three artists—Keiji Nakazawa, Art Spiegelman, and Joe Sacco—began their work with short forms in 1972, which she calls “the crucial moment for the global emergence of comics as a form of bearing witness to war and historical devastation” (111).

Chute terms Nakazawa’s early *I Saw It* a work of “atomic bomb manga” and discusses how it generated his subsequent multi-volume, globally circulated series, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*. She situates Nakazawa doubly, as a six-year-old survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima and as the inaugurator of documentary comics of witness in Japan. The young boy, horrified by seeing the blackened corpse of a friend’s mother, turned to making manga to intervene in the silence around the atomic bomb’s legacy in Sixties Japan. When in 1972 his eyewitness autobiographical comic was published, Nakazawa “invented comics . . . in Japan as a form of witness,” establishing it as a serious mode of documentary (118). While Nakazawa’s globally prominent manga *Barefoot Gen* is still controversial in Japan, for Chute it is “a work deeply engaged with remembering terror and its aftermath” (121) that critiques Japanese militarism and imperialism as well as American warfare practices. Chute focuses on the making of *I Saw It* because of its hand-drawn form of marks, which implicitly counter the technology of the bomb and inscribe a mark that “burns inside a reader’s brain” (138). Describing the plasticity of Nakazawa’s line becomes a way to also speak about the trauma that haunts the “political-aesthetic” (140) and the comics that emerged in the US grounded in anxieties about radioactivity, such as *Spider-Man* and Robert Crumb’s work.

In chapter 4 Chute’s discussion of Spiegelman situates it as both parallel, and in contrast, to her exploration of Nakazawa’s comics. The cartoon “Maus,” first published in *Funny Animals*, also in 1972, is a similarly hand-drawn form that reinvented the form of documentary witnessing evident in Spiegelman’s longer

works. Focused on his “oxymoron of life in a death camp,” Chute’s chapter traces documentary sources not only in public historical archives, but also in his parents’ collection of small-press pamphlets by survivors, emphasizing that the young “Spiegelman’s comprehension of these pamphlets was, at the time, visual and *necessarily* not verbal” (167). Chute’s extensive discussion of these, and of hand-drawn images of witness from World War II by other artists such as Alfred Kantor and Horst Rosenthal, provides a basis for her assertion that visual representation in “the previous half century has changed comics’ ability to express what is routinely referred to as ‘unspeakable’” (178). Speculating on the form that testimony takes in drawing as not only the mark but also a spatial form, Chute probes several depictions of kinds of horror in *Maus* as “deliberately unsynthesized collisions of style” that make its depiction of Auschwitz’s machinery of death so arresting (186). Her discussion of *Maus* as a “work of archiving and . . . *about* archives” in a “visual idiom of witness” attests to both its recurrence and its preservation in Spiegelman’s form of documentary comics (191). Chute’s allusive and theorized discussion, drawing from her encyclopedic conversancy with Spiegelman’s artistic craft and sources, is unquestionably the richest essay I have read on *Maus*.

Joe Sacco’s comics are less discussed than many others because of their density and difficulty, but they deserve the attention Chute focuses on them as a touchstone of documentary witnessing. Noting Sacco’s term for his form as “comics journalism” (197), Chute charts the space of documentary witnessing he carves out not only because he is “one of the most innovative figures to come out of centuries of traditions of witness to violence” but also because his works “provoke consideration of how history becomes legible as history” (198). His “conspicuously” hand-drawn comics are expressive of “history’s discursivity,” that is, the interpretation of “objective” or “realistic accounts that characterized New Journalism” but that also trace the structural relations underlying events (198-99). Sacco’s ability to elicit and draw firsthand testimony and the traumatic histories that inform it can seem photorealistic, given his style of “slow journalism” that thickly sows information and images on each page. Importantly, however, Chute observes that “Sacco’s investment in slowing readers down . . . is a deliberate technique positioned . . . against the restless acceleration of information that is characteristic of so many of today’s reporting outlets,” a deliberate pacing that concerns an “ethics of attention” (202). His dense graphic texturing creates “visual and verbal counter-archives to official histories” that “‘draw to tell’” others’ memories and testimonies “without assimilating them into narratives of easy consumption” while observing the otherness of others (205).

Each of Sacco’s three narratives that Chute discusses, *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995*, *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo*, and *Footnotes in Gaza* (treating two little-known massacres by Israeli soldiers of Palestinians in 1956), proposes a different approach to its history. I know of no

other critic who has explored Sacco's challenging corpus in such detail, with a combination of perceptiveness and compassion. While Sacco's hyper-detailed work may tempt the critic to microanalysis (and Chute at times succumbs), she is the reader his works have long awaited, and her articulations, at once erudite in their allusions to Bruegel's compositions and stark in their acknowledgment of his focus on "picturing atrocity" through expressive line work, calibrate Sacco's ability to produce recognition of the visually elaborated other" (220-21). In centering her critique on his work's focus on "the problematic of knowing and not knowing that is so essential to the transmission of traumatic history" (223), Chute moves our understanding of Sacco's work from journalistic chronicle to the terms and conditions of picturing atrocity and thereby emphasizes its centrality for a comics of witnessing to "the processes and the effects of history" (254).

Chute's magisterial investigation in *Disaster Drawn* concludes with a brief Coda that speculates on the current moment in comics as one in which "the revelatory strength of the image that operates with evidentiary force" is in tension with "its potency to trigger an affective response" at a time when images galvanize people in ways unlike verbal forms (255). Necessarily she turns to the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy and other crises around visual representations of Islam, noting how they attest to "the current power, for good or for ill, of hand-drawn images" even in this age of cameras and digital media (256). For her, the significance of comics about "difficult acts of witness" to historical violence resides in how they create "searing and yet non-exploitative word-and-image narratives" (257). Although two of the pivotal cartoonists in *Disaster Drawn*, Sacco and Spiegelman, have more than once had public disagreements on "the right to insult," the potency of images to galvanize attention and spur debate around the world remains both dangerous and compelling (261). Concluding with a discussion of work in "as yet uncharted formats," including Phoebe Gloeckner's in-progress multimedia work about the murder of young women in Ciudad Juarez and Coco Wang's near-real-time web comics in China that she calls "earthquake strips," Chute observes that "[d]rawing today still enters the public sphere as a form of witness that takes shape as marks and lines because no other technology could record what it depicts" (265). Her case for this position is both eloquent and convincing.

I finished reading *Disaster Drawn* wondering if more could possibly be said on its artists and focus. While it is a demanding read, it is one that richly repays. Chute's careful tracing of the history and the making of documentary comics is an indispensable resource to scholars and researchers. Further, *Disaster Drawn* would be an excellent resource in an advanced or graduate-level seminar on histories and theories of comics (or, for that matter, on visual art as a mode of testimony and political intervention). Its chapters suggest modules for syllabi that would ground students in issues around comics as a form of graphic representation, documentation, and witnessing. While its discussions are densely contextualized

and allusive, they will engender in students the kind of visual and historical literacy now essential in the field of global comics studies.

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