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## Characterization and the Aesthetic Representation of Violence in the Graphic Novel "Esperaré Siempre tu Regreso", by Jordi Peidro

Deirdre Kelly

*Technological University Dublin*, [deirdre.kelly@tudublin.ie](mailto:deirdre.kelly@tudublin.ie)

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## CHAPTER IX

# CHARACTERIZATION AND THE AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *ESPERARÉ SIEMPRE TU REGRESO* BY JORDI PEIDRO

DEIRDRE KELLY  
*Technological University Dublin*

### Introduction

The graphic novel, *Esperaré siempre tu regreso* (2016, Desfiladero Ediciones) by the author and illustrator, Jordi Peidro (Alcoy, 1965), is a biographical and historical text that centres on the life in exile of Francisco Aura Boronat (or Paco Aura, Alcoy, 1918-2018), a Spanish communist and Republican who survived the horrors of the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. Drawing on comics studies and memory studies, the analysis will discuss how Peidro navigates ethical and aesthetic issues when representing traumatic and violent memories related to the Spanish experience of Civil War, exile and deportation to a Nazi concentration camp. Firstly, it will contextualize *Esperaré siempre tu regreso* within a burgeoning genre of contemporary graphic novels published in Spain that deal with Spaniards in Nazi concentration camps. Secondly, it will consider the “unique spatial grammar” (Hillary Chute 2016, 3) of the comics format, which provides a distinct means of representing histories of war, trauma and genocide. Subsequently, through an examination of kitsch and anti-kitsch strategies, the chapter will focus on characterization and the aesthetic representation of violence in Peidro’s graphic novel. Finally, it will reflect on the ways in which graphic novels such as this contribute to memory debates in contemporary Spain.

### Contemporary Graphic Novels about Spanish Republicans in Nazi Concentration Camps

In Spain since the 1990s, the boom in historical memory has witnessed a concomitant surge in comics and graphic narrative about the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, such as *Un largo silencio* (1997, Edicions de Ponent) by Francisco and Miguel Gallardo, *Todo Paracuellos* ([1977-2003] Debolsillo, 2007) by Carlos Giménez, *El arte de volar* (2009, Edicions de Ponent) by Antonio Altarriba and Kim, and *Los surcos del azar* (2013, Astiberri) by Paco Roca, to name but a few. Many of these graphic novels seek to “recover and visualize forgotten or untold stories from the Spanish Civil War from a leftist perspective” (Amago in Amago and Marr 2019, 33). However, it is only in the last decade—the “Golden Age” of graphic narrative on the Iberian Peninsula, according to Muñoz Basols and Muñoz-Calvo (2017, 652)—that Spain’s involvement with the Holocaust, particularly concerning Spanish Republicans who were left to their fate in Nazi concentration camps, has been depicted through the medium of the graphic novel. This follows a more general silencing about Spain’s involvement in the Holocaust, which, notwithstanding the country’s support of the Axis powers during World War II and its complicity in the deportation of Spanish Republicans to Nazi concentration camps, is only in recent years being addressed in a broader way.<sup>1</sup>

This burgeoning genre of historical graphic narrative in Spain about Spanish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps includes: *Prisionero en Mauthausen* (2011, Edicions de Ponent) by Toni Carbo and Javier Cosnava, *El convoy* (2015, Norma Editorial) by Eduard Torrents, Denis Lapière and Marie Froidebise, *Deportado 4443: Sus tuits ilustrados* (2017, Ediciones B) by Carlos Hernández de Miguel and Ioannes Ensis and *El fotógrafo de*

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<sup>1</sup> In her 2018 monograph, *Spaniards in Mauthausen: Representations of a Nazi Concentration Camp, 1940-2015*, Sara J. Brenneis refers to Spaniards who experienced the concentrationary universe of Mauthausen as “unacknowledged ghosts” (2018, 7). In 2020, Brenneis and Gina Herrmann edited the volume, *Spain, the Second World War, and the Holocaust: History and Representation*.

*Mauthausen* (2018, Norma Editorial) by Salva Rubio, Pedro J. Colombo and Aintzane Landa.<sup>2</sup> These texts form part of a movement that strives to recover neglected and unacknowledged memories of the Spanish experience of the Holocaust, a movement which has been influenced by the national culture of commemoration, particularly the Historical Memory Law 2007, by international discussions on Holocaust remembrance and by the awareness that survivors and witnesses have passed away.<sup>3</sup>

These graphic novels lie on a spectrum, from historical fiction to non-fiction, and from “postmemory” to “affiliative postmemory” accounts, to use Marianne Hirsch’s terminology.<sup>4</sup> Whereas *El convoy*<sup>5</sup> and *Deportado 4443*<sup>6</sup> are postmemory accounts (that is, works by second- and third-generation relatives of survivors), the other texts lie closer to affiliative postmemory accounts, such as *Prisionero en Mauthausen*, which incorporates the Holocaust narrative into the work as a plot-structuring device in a fictionalized story, and *Esperaré siempre tu regreso* and *El fotógrafo de Mauthausen*, which integrate it through biographical accounts of real people.<sup>7</sup> These texts focus, to varying degrees, on concentrationary memory from a Spanish perspective. Whereas some of them primarily concentrate on the Spanish experience—only obliquely, if at all, referencing other groups of Nazi persecution, including Jews, homosexuals, Roma and the disabled, *inter alia*—others, such as *Esperaré siempre tu regreso*, offer a transnational, transgenerational approach in line with Rothberg’s notion of multidirectional memory.

### The Comics Medium and Representations of War, Trauma and Genocide

According to Chute, the “unique spatial grammar” of comics, with its “narrative scaffolding” of gutters, grids and panels is suggestive of architecture (2016, 3). This multimodal medium creates a “generative friction” between word and image which involves a high level of reader participation and engagement (2016, 34). Jared Gardner states that the “bifocal form” of the comics medium necessitates a “double vision” on the part of the creator as well as the reader-viewers, who are encouraged to fill in the gaps between panels (2012, 176-177). For his part, Will Simpson claims that “the particular communicative multimodality within comics, as well as the necessity, nature, and extent of reader engagement, offer readers uniquely constituted opportunities for emotional engagement and responses” (2018).

This emotional engagement tends to become even more pronounced when dealing with sensitive subject matter, such as war and genocide. As Claire Gorrara points out, graphic narrative is “a medium [which is] able to disrupt conventional ways of seeing war” (2019, 112). Chute maintains that “[d]riven by the urgencies of re-seeing the war in acts of witness, comics proposes an ethics of looking and reading intent on defamiliarizing standard or received images of history while yet aiming to communicate and circulate” (2016, 31). According to Sarah Harris, the unique characteristics of the comics medium, “including collage and visual intertext, the interaction between text and image, use of color, page design, visual simultaneity of past and present,

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<sup>2</sup> For a general overview of comics and graphic novels published in Spain that deal with the topic of Republican exile since 1939, see Collado Cerveró and García Raffi 2021.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed and up-to-date discussion of the reasons for Spain’s denial of Holocaust involvement prior to the millennium and its subsequent interest in Holocaust remembrance since the early 2000s, see Baer and Correa’s chapter, “Spain and the Holocaust: Contested Past, Contested Present” in Gigliotti and Earl 2020. The last Spanish survivor of Nazi concentration camps was Juan Romero Romero (1919-2020), who passed away on 3 October 2020 (Carlos Hernández 2020).

<sup>4</sup> In *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), Hirsch famously defines postmemory as: “[T]he relationships that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. [...] Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection and creation” (2012, 5). Hirsch distinguishes postmemory from “affiliative postmemory”, which refers to those who have no direct familial relationship with the Holocaust (2012, 5).

<sup>5</sup> *El convoy: Edición integral* was translated from French [*Le convoi. Première partie* and *Le convoi. Seconde partie*; first edition 2015] by Robert Juan-Cantavella. The illustrator, Eduard Torrents (1976, Barcelona), recreated episodes from his family’s past. The title alludes to the convoy of 927 Spanish men, women and children, which was the first train to arrive with civilians at a Nazi camp in 1940. Although Torrent’s family did not travel on the convoy, nor were they victims of the Holocaust, they did suffer the hardships of exile in the camps in the south of France.

<sup>6</sup> In 2015, the journalist, Carlos Hernández de Miguel (Madrid, 1969), told the story of his uncle Antonio Hernández Marín—who spent four and a half years in the Mauthausen concentration camp—through tweets on a Twitter social media account. These tweets, accompanied by Ioannes Ensis’ illustrations, form the basis of the graphic novel, *Deportado 4443: Sus tuits ilustrados*.

<sup>7</sup> Whereas *Esperaré siempre tu regreso* is a biographical account of the life of Francisco Aura Boronat, *El fotógrafo de Mauthausen* is based on the life of the Catalan war photographer, Francesc (Francisco) Boix Campo (1920-1951).

identification with specific characters, and the spaces (or gutters) between panels” make it “a particularly suitable medium to convey collective trauma” (Harris 2009).

Laurike in ‘t Veld, in her monograph, *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels: Considering the Role of Kitsch* (2019), discusses the limitations and benefits of kitsch and anti-kitsch strategies in a series of international graphic novels that deal with genocide, including the Holocaust. On the one hand, she identifies kitsch with excess, melodrama, exaggerated sentimentality, superficiality, simplification and historical universalizations. She discusses kitsch strategies, such as the stereotype of evil Nazi officers as sadistic villains with a malicious, at times eroticized, appearance, which makes them both “terrifying and attractive” (2019, 85). On the other hand, in ‘t Veld analyses anti-kitsch devices, such as “a modernist fixation on vision and the visual” (Hansen 1996, 302 in in ‘t Veld 2019, 175), paratextual truth claims and “anonymising strategies” that nuance the Manichean dichotomy of the innocent victim versus the evil (Nazi) perpetrator (2019, 106). Rather than viewing kitsch strategies as insubstantial or inappropriate *tout court*, in ‘t Veld considers how kitsch devices—such as visual metaphors of animals and dolls or the explicit and excessive representations of mass violence—can enable an affective interaction with genocide narratives.

### *Esperaré siempre tu regreso*

Jordi Peidro, from Alcoy, Valencia, created *Esperaré siempre tu regreso* after conducting various interviews with the Spanish Republican, Paco Aura, also from Alcoy, about the latter’s experiences of exile and deportation to Mauthausen.<sup>8</sup> Peidro’s graphic novel is a dramatic, visual and narrative biographical account based on historical events in Aura’s life. It recounts how, after fighting on the losing side in the Spanish Civil War, Aura goes into exile in France, along with nearly half a million Spanish Republicans. There, he stays in three internment camps for refugees<sup>9</sup> and subsequently joins the Company of Foreign Workers for the French army, where he works on the Maginot Line. During the German invasion of France in World War II, he is sent to a *Stalag* (prisoner-of-war camp) and then deported to the Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen in Austria, where he remains for the next four years until the camp’s liberation. Fearful of the possible repercussions if he were to return to Francoist Spain, after the camp’s liberation in May 1945, Peidro goes to Paris and then to the south of France, where he works in a mine, before returning to his native Alcoy in 1953. Peidro illustrates Aura’s experience of the Spanish Civil War, exile in France, the awful conditions in French internment camps and the abhorrent and inhumane treatment by the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) in Mauthausen.<sup>10</sup> The author-illustrator depicts several ranks of collusion and participation with the Nazi regime, from ruthless Nazi officers to vicious *Kapos*<sup>11</sup> to prisoners within the hierarchy of the Nazi system, as well as from officials in the Franco regime and the Vichy government.

Peidro employs various kitsch strategies throughout the graphic novel, such as the use of strong, vibrant colours, explicit and graphic depictions of violence, bleeds, splash pages and double spreads. The scenes of conflict and violence show extreme close-ups of guns, hands, eyes, mouths and teeth, and pained or angry facial expressions. Peidro’s use of colour conveys the oppressive atmosphere and illustrates the starkness and cruelty of Mauthausen. The colour palette changes depending on the historical period and circumstances narrated. It ranges from burnt orange, rusty red and ochre, which evoke the fire and ash of crematoriums, to cold blues, greens and greys, which represent the cold, harsh winters of Central Europe. Whereas the ochre tones symbolize violent scenes, the cold shades denote severe conditions. Colour changes are often accompanied by motion lines to convey the emotion of the scene. Occasionally, Peidro colours the panels in red, white and black, reminiscent of Nazi propaganda posters (p.30). Visual representations of the stereotypical evil Nazi figure proliferate, and, at times, the graphic novel illustrates the Manichean divide between good victim and evil perpetrator. The grid is not uniform and shows a variety of page compositions. The most common page layout depicts nine rectangular panels,

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<sup>8</sup> This is the first graphic novel published in the series *Colección Memoria Gráfica* by Desfiladero Ediciones. To date, the other titles in the series are: *Plaza de la Bacalá* by Carmelo Manresa (2017); *Panteras Negras* by Bruno and David Cénou, translated by Helena del Mar Masià (2018); *Miguel Núñez: Mil vidas más* (2021) by author, Pepe Gálvez and illustrator, Alfonso López; and *El partido de la muerte* (2021) by Pepe Gálvez and Guillem Escriche.

<sup>9</sup> Argelès-sur-Mer, Saint Cyprien and Le Barcarès.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the experiences of Spanish deportees in France after the Spanish Civil War, see chapters by Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand (185-198), Robert S. Coale (199-213) and Juan M. Calvo Gascón (214-236) in *Spain, the Second World War and the Holocaust: History and Representation*, eds. Brenneis and Herrmann, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *Kapos* were prisoner functionaries in Nazi camps. They were appointed by the SS to carry out administrative tasks and supervise forced labour in exchange for certain privileges. Many of them were criminal convicts who were known for their cruel and inhumane treatment of other prisoners.

similar in shape and size. However, Peidro alters this layout when the narrative requires it, changing to three-panel layouts, splash pages, double spreads, and other pages with panels of varying shapes and sizes. This variation in the grid affects both the meaning and the narrative rhythm of the text and captures the tensions between excess and restraint, revealing and concealing, and kitsch and anti-kitsch aesthetics.

Notwithstanding, and perhaps because of, the intense violence of the subject matter—war, exile and concentration camps—Peidro employs several of the strategies that in 't Veld associates with anti-kitsch strategies. These include: an emphasis on a subjective witness perspective; visual and verbal representations of the fragmentary experience of trauma; nuancing and anonymizing strategies to blur the Manichean divide between good victim and evil perpetrator; the incorporation of paratextual truth claims; and the self-reflexive acknowledgement of the limits of representation. Rather than making violence a key attribute of the graphic novel, Peidro uses violent scenes, when necessary, in the service of Aura's story. The author-illustrator does not avoid dealing with the cruel and barbaric acts. Rather, he negotiates between revealing and concealing the violence and uses strategies to obscure the most extreme violence.

Peidro uses a minimalist, simple drawing style. Each chapter opens with a title page and a watercolour image. The volume consists of fifteen titled chapters, with a series of analepses which clearly mark the various stages of Aura's life in exile, as well as leaps into the future of the story time and a postface of eight pages, which provides paratextual materials to complement the graphic narrative. Aura's memories are narrated through a flashback technique prompted by the Civil War in former Yugoslavia in 1992 (p.7-14). Other leaps into the future include: one set in a university in 2001, in which Paco Aura gives a talk about his time in exile (p.17-18); one in Mauthausen in 1990, on the 45th anniversary of the camp's liberation (p.105-110); one takes place in 1998, during a meeting of camp survivors (p.151-156); an interview with a journalist during an unspecified time in the future (p.189); and another prolepsis at the end of the text, in 2014, in the protagonist's hometown of Alcoy, in which Aura represents the memory of 22 deportees from Alcoy who were deported to Mauthausen and to whom the town's main bridge is dedicated (p.190-191). As well as providing various points of retrospection for the protagonist, the prolepses depict Aura's commitment to ensuring that the memories of all those who, like him, suffered through exile, deportation and concentration camps, are not forgotten. The depictions of Aura describing his experiences of exile to large audiences and to journalists reinforce both the protagonist's and the author-illustrator's pedagogical and didactic intentions. The prolepses underscore the Spanish survivor's moral imperative to remember, and recount, his harrowing experiences at Mauthausen. Although most of the graphic novel—the analepses from 1936 to 1953—is narrated in chronological order, the prolepses are achronological. This polychronic temporality underlines the influence of the past on the present and draws attention to the central theme of memory in the work.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, these temporal leaps illustrate the modernist representation of trauma, which, according to in't Veld, is an anti-kitsch strategy that “emphasise[s] the impossibility of creating a closed and straightforward representation, [and is] ultimately used as a means to ‘rebuild fragmented experience’” (Earl in in 't Veld 2019, 178).

In 't Veld maintains that the inclusion of paratextual materials in comics narratives is an anti-kitsch device employed to substantiate the text's veracity, the value of knowledge represented and the authorial statements of intent (2019, 198). However, the eight-page postface of *Esperar siempre tu regreso*, with the title “Contenidos adicionales”, contains various hagiographic articles which pay homage to Aura. The article, “Dignidad frente al odio” (193-194), by two history teachers, Francesc X. Blay and Àngel Beneito, pays tribute to Aura and underscores his efforts to educate others—particularly young people—about his experiences in Mauthausen, through conferences, interviews, talks and media appearances. Each of the articles by Aura's three children are inflected with emotion and they extol the virtues of their father (195-197). Similarly, the article by Jordi Peidro, “La canción del horror” (198) praises the dignity and honour of the deportee.

Notwithstanding the hagiographic nature of the postface, it illustrates some of the anti-kitsch functions of paratexts highlighted by in 't Veld. Peidro's paratext, “La canción del horror” underscores the importance and value of the knowledge represented through the author-illustrator's emphasis on the balance between singularity and anonymity in his depiction of Aura:

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<sup>12</sup> Polychrony: “a temporal designation that takes into account narratives in which the then and the now are not clearly and unequivocally delineated” (Erin McGlothlin 2006, 86 in Jenni Adams 2014, 241).

Esta es la historia de Paco Aura Boronat para todos y cada uno de los que le conocen. También es la historia de un superviviente del pasaje más abominable que ha vivido la humanidad en el pasado siglo. En ese equilibrio, entre la singularidad y el anonimato, es donde reside el interés de esta narración para cualquier ciudadano del mundo. (198)

Aura's individual experience functions as a synecdoche to represent a larger collective: not only exiled Spanish Republicans who ended up in Nazi concentration camps during World War II but all those who suffered the consequences of Nazism and fascism, and more generally, all victims of war and genocide.

Also in the postface, Peidro admits his inability to capture the full extent of the horror, alluding to the unrepresentability of, and the inability to fully comprehend, a traumatic, inconceivable event such as the Holocaust:

Muy lejos sigo de poder tener una visión de lo que fue 'aquello'. Por muchas fotos terribles, imágenes espeluznantes, duros testimonios absorbidos, seguía sin ser capaz de sentir lo que Paco (y tantos otros como él) sufrió en cada uno de sus eternos días de cautiverio. (198)

Although Peidro does not overtly express the difficulties of representing such traumatic events, he implicitly acknowledges the limits of representation. Aware of the sensitive and polemic nature of the subject matter, Peidro clarifies his authorial intention to aim for understatement and not to overdramatize the barbaric events: "He buscado no cargar las tintas, no aumentar el dramatismo. Esta historia es lo suficientemente dura como para no tener que incidir en ello" (198). At the same time, he admits to using a few narrative licences, "siempre sin tergiversar el fondo de la historia" (198). He also uses the paratext to reinforce the didactic aim of the graphic novel: "Siempre con la esperanza de que el conocimiento de los hechos, el relato de los sufrimientos, evite que nada parecido vuelva a suceder" (198). The inclusion in the postface of photographs of Aura before, during and after his time in exile, as well as the incorporation of a bibliography and videography, underscore the text's truth status and "facticity" (in't Veld 2019, 194) and highlight the tremendous work of documentation carried out by Peidro (Peidro 2016, 193-200).

### Representation of victims

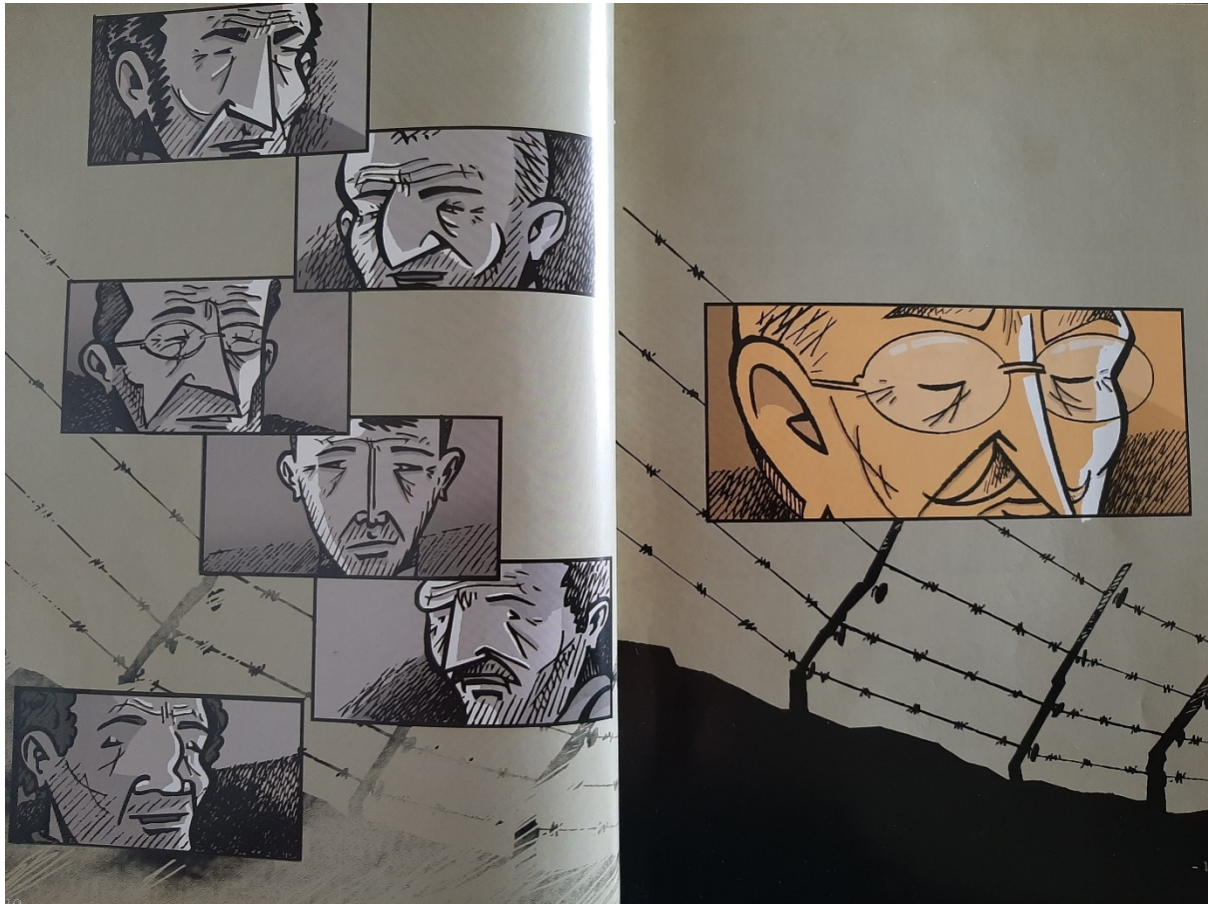
This graphic novel exemplifies affiliative postmemory, as Peidro appropriates Aura's testimonial voice to tell the story from the witness's subjective perspective. The author-illustrator creates what Samuel Amago refers to as a "relationship of nearness [intimacy and identification] between comics creators, historical witnesses, and contemporary readers" which Amago sees as typical of historical comics in Spain (in Amago and Marr 2019, 33). The opening chapter of *Esperaré siempre tu regreso*, in line with the thrust of numerous contemporary historical works, including graphic novels, "produce[s] the scene of testimony", in the words of Hillary Chute (2016, 206). However, unlike many contemporary historical graphic narratives from Spain and internationally, Peidro does not draw himself into the work nor does he include any autobiographical musings about his investigative research process.<sup>13</sup> Instead, he remains in the background, off the page, and gives voice to the subjective witness perspective.

The "scene of testimony" in this opening chapter is centred on the protagonist, Paco Aura, as witness, in this case to the deplorable conditions of refugees during the 1990s Balkan Wars. The chapter title page ("Balcanes", p.7) depicts a watercolour portrait of a refugee looking directly at the reader. This is followed by three splash pages, which show close-ups of the eyes of Aura and other refugees, an effective visual strategy that implicates the reader from the start (p.9-11; see Fig. 1-1). Aura's look of disappointment, along with the pained expressions of the refugees, are a plea to the reader to empathize with them and pay attention to their story. The narrative pace of these opening pages is slowed down by the lack of caption and dialogue boxes, the splash pages, the visual focus on eyes and the limited colour palette. This measured narrative movement adds to the emotional intensity and leaves space for reflection. The coloured panels of Aura and the black-and-white panels depicting the refugees highlight Aura's role as witness, as it becomes clear that he is reading a newspaper headline about concentration camp prisoners in former Yugoslavia in 1992 (p.12-13). The panels that depict the outstretched hands of Aura and a refugee across a barbed wire fence—conjured from the former's

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Amago, in his chapter "Drawing (on) Spanish History" (31-64 in Amago and Marr 2019), discusses how Spanish authors and illustrators of historical comics manipulate the inherently self-reflexive nature of the comics medium: "Spanish *historietistas* have drawn themselves into their own stories, where they become engaged participants in the crucial task of recovering historical memory, bearing witness to trauma, and drawing remembrance into the panels of the present" (58). Hillary Chute also discusses the self-reflexive strategies of testimonial, historical comics more generally: "The drama of the comics testimony is achieved, in large part, by the way in which the comics creator may place him or herself in the place of witnessing, at once drawing and inhabiting the page in a doubled act of apprehension" (2016, 212).

imagination—represent the protagonist’s empathy for, and solidarity with, the plight of these refugees. The didactic message of this chapter of history repeating itself is highlighted at the end, as Aura contemplates a black-and-white photograph on his wall of the liberation day at Mauthausen and thinks: “¿Es que en todo este tiempo no hemos aprendido nada?” (p.14). The four panels on the last page of the chapter reinforce Aura’s testimonial role as witness through the visual emphasis on seeing—and the difficulties of witnessing—with a gradual zooming-in effect to a close-up of Aura’s despondent facial expression as he takes off his glasses (p.14).



**Fig.1-1**

The close-ups of open and closed eyes throughout the chapter, along with the panels depicting Aura taking off his glasses, underscore the difficulties with bearing witness to traumatic historical events. This emphasis on the difficulties of bearing witness and recalling traumatic events is reinforced by the proliferation of suspension points in chapter two (“Recuerdos”), when Aura is asked about his most intense memory (p.18). The final panel of the page once more shows a close-up of Aura’s closed eyes behind his glasses, as he hesitates in his reply: “En fin, de todo lo sucedido.../ ...lo que más me marcó fue.../ ...aunque.../ tal vez sería mejor comenzar por el principio” (p.18). As in ‘t Veld points out, representational strategies such as these—which focus on subjective witness experiences, the difficulties of bearing witness and the limits of representation—are anti-kitsch devices used to counteract the plenitude and excess of kitsch aesthetics and are common in genocide graphic novels internationally (2019, 176-194). At various other stages in the text, Pedro visually portrays victims of National Socialist persecution looking directly at or facing towards the reader, similar to Paco Aura in the first chapter (e.g., p.68; p.92; panel 3, p.97), and full face profiles (p.94; p.115; p.130). The graphic novel depicts numerous fragmented images of close-ups of eyes and pained facial expressions of victims, such as the page representing the 35 ways of dying in Mauthausen (p.93).

At times, there is a focus on prisoners’ beads of sweat and tears (p.100). Although the visual homogeneity of the prisoners’ attire in the Nazi camp conveys their depersonalization and anonymity and shows how the Nazis

saw them as well as the extreme, severe conditions in which they lived, Peidro portrays their individuality—to a certain extent—before their imprisonment in the Nazi camp, through images of various face shapes and hair colour (final panel, p.55). The prisoners are frequently positioned as hemmed in by the Nazi officers within a single panel frame (p.117, panel 4) or between panels (p.118, panels 3-5). This apt visual strategy highlights their sense of entrapment. The visual depiction of the prisoners' sense of imprisonment is reinforced by the uniformity of the rectangular nine-panel page layouts. The geometric organization of these panels contrasts with the bleeds, strong colours and violent images contained within them and with the splash pages, double spreads and pages with varying panel sizes.

Peidro focuses on minute details, using a number of small, separate panels on the same page to frame body fragments. Thus, the prisoners are often shown in fragmented body parts (p.57). The few times they are depicted in full view, their body profiles are often spread over several panels (p.70; see Fig. 1-2). The traumatic effect of the *Kapo* hitting his fellow prisoners with a baton is visually illustrated by the arrangement of panels of varying shapes and sizes which fragment the full-page illustration (p.70; see Fig. 1-2). By rearranging panels and gutters, Peidro takes advantage of the inherently fragmentary nature of the comics medium which some scholars consider an ideal medium to depict the fragmentary nature of trauma (Harris 2009; Chute 2016). For her part, in 't Veld considers representations of fragmented experiences of trauma as an anti-kitsch strategy in graphic novels about genocide (2019, 176-194).



Fig. 1-2



In addition to using the technique of fragmentation to depict the traumatic experiences of the Spanish prisoners in Mauthausen, Peidro employs it to criticize their mistreatment while in exile in France. For example, in chapter three, “Exilio”, the French slogan, “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” [Liberty, equality, fraternity] is only partially visible on a sign as the Spanish refugees enter France (panel 8, p.25, panels 5 and 6, p.26; see Fig. 1-3). It is significant that the panel frames cut off most of the sign and only show it in close-up fragments. In this way, the author-illustrator highlights the tragic irony of the slogan for the Spanish refugees. Furthermore, these fragmented panels emphasize the traumatic experience of the subjective witness perspective. As the story is told from the narrative perspective of Paco Aura, the panel frames make visible the fragmented recall of his traumatic memories.



Fig. 1-3

Peidro repeats this technique of only partially revealing signs in chapter eight, “El holocausto”. At the forty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the Mauthausen camp in 1990, only a part of a commemorative sign dedicated to the Spanish Republicans at Mauthausen lies inside the panel frame (panel 2, p.106). In addition to stressing the fragmentary nature of traumatic witnessing, by not showing a full view of the sign—especially by cutting off the words “memoria” and “republicanos españoles”—Peidro covertly criticizes the lack of acknowledgement of the suffering and trauma experienced by Spaniards at Mauthausen.

After depicting the horrors of the camp, the psychological and physical violence inflicted on the Spanish prisoners, the pain of hunger and the long days of backbreaking work, along with the slim chances of survival, the protagonist explains that the SS treated the Jewish prisoners much worse. In chapter eight, “El holocausto”, Aura has a conversation with a fellow camp survivor, Mermenada, who had been forced to work in the gas chamber and crematorium. In the panels on the left side of the page, Mermenada tells Aura about how the SS inflicted their method of the “Final Solution” by exterminating Jews, Russians, the disabled, and others, in gas chambers and burning the bodies in the crematorium (p.107-108; see Fig. 1-4). The caption boxes in the contrasting panels on the right side of the page narrate the opinions of anti-Semites who wish to get rid of the

“Jewish problem”. These opinions are set against cartoon images of figures wearing the twelfth-century oil-can Jewish hat. The hats are personified with stereotypical Jewish features, large noses and scared faces. In the first of the five panels, their faces are visible. However, by the second panel, their faces have disappeared, leaving only blank heads. By the third panel, the faces of stereotypical Jewish features on their hats also disappear. By the fifth panel, only the cone shapes of the hats are visible. These stereotypical cartoon images reflect the dehumanization and ultimately, elimination, of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Illustrating double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin [1984] 2006, 194), Peidro appropriates the words of anti-Semites in the caption boxes. These anti-Semitic phrases contrast with the innocent facial expressions in the cartoon depictions of Jews and the terrified expressions on their hats, underscoring the tragic irony of their situation. By drawing cartoon images, rather than real human figures, to represent the mass extermination of Jews, Peidro uses a distancing technique which enables readers to engage with, and reflect on, the inhumanity of the atrocity. Furthermore, by narrating the Jewish Holocaust from the testimonial perspective of a prisoner who was forced to work in the crematorium, rather than from Aura’s perspective, Peidro remains faithful to the historical reality of the majority of Spanish Republicans in Mauthausen, who would have had very little to no contact with Jewish prisoners.<sup>14</sup>

The splash page at the end of the chapter depicts the black tower of a crematorium against an orange sky with clouds in the shape of a skull (p.110). The caption boxes refer not only to the six million Jews who were exterminated, but also to the five million non-Jews, among them political prisoners, Roma, homosexuals, Spaniards, Yugoslavians and Russians. The caption boxes highlight the scale of trauma inflicted by referring not only to the numbers of people killed but also to the numbers who were imprisoned—between 15 and 20 million—and the 42,500 camps and ghettos spread throughout central Europe. The inclusion of facts and figures not only underscores the scale of devastation but also works as an anti-kitsch strategy to counteract the emotive (kitsch) representation of violence and trauma in the graphic novel. In this chapter, Peidro implicitly argues for the inclusion of other victims of Nazi policies as Holocaust victims, yet without undermining the specificity and uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust.

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<sup>14</sup> Brenneis points out the differences between the treatment of Spanish and Jewish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Whereas the former were political prisoners, the latter were subject to the Nazi policy of extermination and were targeted for ethnic, racial and religious reasons (2018, 6). Furthermore, Spanish prisoners in Mauthausen had very little contact with imprisoned Jews, as the latter were frequently killed on arrival and those that survived more than a few hours were imprisoned in different barracks (16). Brenneis notes that the scale of murdered victims differs dramatically: whereas over six million Jews were annihilated, an estimated 5,000 Spanish prisoners were killed. She refers to the better conditions and treatment that Spanish political prisoners received compared to their Jewish counterparts. Notwithstanding this, Brenneis observes that between 1940 and 1941, “the Spaniards died at an alarming rate” and that it was only after 1942 that their living conditions and survival rates improved (16).



Fig. 1-4

### Representations of perpetrators

The visual representation of perpetrators in Peidro’s graphic novel—including SS soldiers, dictators, *Kapos*, French Vichy officials and soldiers, and officials from the Franco dictatorship—straddles both kitsch and anti-kitsch strategies. Peidro depicts the stereotypical evil Nazi characteristic of kitsch aesthetics, with a menacing, aggressive expression, in full SS uniform, with numerous close-ups of Nazi paraphernalia, including gloves, boots and hats (e.g., p.30, p.120). Added to this, there are no background details depicting the psychological motivations of the perpetrators and no narrative perspective from their point of view. Such a kitsch depiction of Nazis may have the undesired outcome of encouraging a sense of fascination with them (in’t Veld 2019, 85; Sontag 1981). However, it is important to keep in mind that this graphic novel is based on a subjective, biographical testimony from the perspective of a Spanish victim of both National Socialism and Francoism, which, understandably, may prevent a more objective or inclusive account from the perpetrators’ point of view.

Nevertheless, Peidro nuances this portrayal of the evil Nazi. Hats, caps or glasses shade the faces and eyes of the SS officers (p.25, p.49, p.120). In contrast to the victims who are frequently shown facing the reader (p.135-136), the perpetrators often have their back to the reader (p.136, panel 4) or are only visible from a side profile (p.117-118). Shading, shadows and motion lines obscure a clear view of their features. Not only are these “nuancing gestures” (in’t Veld 2019, 27) applied to the SS officers but also to the French Vichy officers. For instance, the French border control officer is shown in fragmented body parts as Aura and other Spanish refugees enter France. There is no full view of the officer’s face or body. Although one of his eyes is visible, the rim of his hat shades it (panel 5, p.25; see Fig. 1-3). The fragmented panels highlight once more the testimonial witness perspective by making visible the fragmented recall of traumatic memories in the panel frames. Furthermore, as in’t Veld points out, such nuancing and anonymizing strategies negate the individuality of the Nazis—and, in this case, officers and soldiers in Vichy France—and consequently preclude the likelihood of turning the perpetrators into a spectacle (2019, 90).

Overall, Peidro depicts the *Kapos* on the side of the evil perpetrators rather than that of the innocent victims. The narrative voice and the visual imagery portray numerous instances of their unrestrained violence and brutal behaviour. Although they wear the blue-and-white striped uniforms of the other prisoners—as they, too, are

prisoners—their black coats, and an armband with the word ‘KAPO’, distinguish them. While their uniforms are different from those of the SS officers, Peidro uses the same anonymizing strategy of obscuring their eyes and faces, thereby somewhat attenuating the Manichean divide between evil perpetrator and innocent victim (p.70-71; see Fig. 1-2). Furthermore, there is a slight nuancing effect in the story of the *Kapo* who shares his room with a low-ranking prisoner and who the Nazis shoot dead after the pair attempt to escape together (p.125-126). The only other acknowledgement of the difficult situation the *Kapos* were in is in a caption box which reads: “A los Kapos no les gustaba nada quedar mal con sus superiores. Por la cuenta que les traía” (panel 1 p.70; see Fig. 1-2).

In chapter twelve, “Reencuentro” (p.151-156), in a meeting of concentration camp survivors set in 1998, Aura recognizes a fellow prisoner who served as a *Kapo* in his camp, a collaborator who now poses as one of the victims. The *Kapo* tries to ‘sell’ the image of a camp survivor by having a prisoner number tattooed on his arm, even though Mauthausen prisoners did not have their number tattooed on their arms, as those in Auschwitz did. Aura rejects this Nazi collaborator, refusing to shake his hand. Aura’s decision not to shake hands with the *Kapo* contrasts with his outstretched hand in the first chapter, whereby he shows a gesture of identification and solidarity with the prisoners of the Yugoslavia concentration camp. Aura is portrayed here as morally superior, as he, unlike the *Kapo*, did not collaborate with the torturers in order to survive. Peidro incorporates some nuancing gestures in his depiction of the *Kapos*, however, these are limited to only a few instances, and, overall, the text reinforces the kitsch dichotomy of good victim versus evil perpetrator in its portrayal of *Kapos*.

The inclusion of several comic strips following the Bruguera style, which narrate “Las aventuras de Serranito Suñer”, work very well as an element of criticism and at the same time as respite from the extreme drama of the work (p.31, p.53, p.179). These comic strips are reminiscent of the distinctive style that emerged in Spanish post-war humour comics published by Editorial Bruguera: overtly cartoonish comics with slapstick humour and satirical *costumbrismo*, which frequently focus on character expressions and onomatopoeia.<sup>15</sup> The satirical sketches about Hitler, Franco and Serranito Suñer contrast with the serious tone of the (fictional) newspaper headings. The use of diminutives and the childlike behaviour of the dictators infantilize them. Peidro uses satirical humour to criticize the negotiations between the two dictators as well as the involvement of Franco, and his brother-in-law and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ramón Serrano Suñer, for their complicity in facilitating the incarceration and deaths of thousands of Spanish refugees.<sup>16</sup>

## Representing Violence

Peidro does not shy away from showing the effects of violence on prisoners, yet, frequently, he chooses to leave the perpetrators outside the panel frame, instead illustrating, for example, a close-up of a boot in mid-air with special effects lettering and motion lines (panel 8, p.83; panel 5, p.89). This inevitably leads to a reliance on the reader-viewer’s imagination to fill in the gaps. Peidro represents pain and violence through comics strategies such as onomatopoeia, stars, fragmented panels and close-ups (e.g., p.71). This is most evident in the depiction of a Nazi officer beating up a prisoner over three pages. The abundance of special effects lettering, beads of sweat, motion lines and Nazi symbols compensates for the lack of caption and dialogue boxes over 23 panels (p.73-75). Peidro minimizes the visual scale of the violence by publishing the graphic narrative in large A5 format (170mm x 240mm) and using the most frequent page layout of a nine-panel structure. Therefore, the majority of events that are graphically depicted in the text are shown in small scale. At times, when Peidro shows the perpetrators inflicting violence on the prisoners, he portrays them in small panels, depicting the scale of the violence in miniature (p.90-91), or in large panels, splash pages or double spreads from a bird’s-eye view (p.64-65). For example, the double spread depicting the prisoners’ entrance to Mauthausen provides an extreme longshot with a close-up of SS officers looking down at the prisoners, who are depicted in very small scale. This extreme longshot, shown from the perspective of the SS officers, not only visually minimizes the violent imagery but also emphasizes the hierarchical power structure in the camp (p.64-65).

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<sup>15</sup> See Francisco Javier Illescas Díaz (2021). Examples of these post-war humour comics following the Bruguera style include: José Escobar Saliente’s *Zipe y Zape* created in 1947, Francisco Ibáñez Talavera’s *Mortadelo y Filemón*, created in 1958 and *Pepe Gotera y Otilio*, created in 1966.

<sup>16</sup> Ramón Serrano Suñer (1901-2003), Franco’s brother-in-law, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs from October 1940 to September 1942. As Sara J. Brenneis points out, “Serrano Suñer was complicit in the deportation [of Spaniards to Nazi concentration camps], having discussed the policy with Hitler himself during a meeting in Berlin in September 1940, a month before Franco’s own encounter with Hitler in Hendaye” (2019, 11).

The graphic features of the comic at times reinforce the narrative captions in the text-boxes (text-image synchronicity) and at other times, they are non-synchronous, and convey a disconnect between the text and image. As Chute points out:

Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning. (Chute 2008, 452; emphasis in original).

Not only does this non-synchronicity encourage reader participation, as Chute observes, but it leaves the violent acts outside the panel frames. An example of this is when the author shows a discrepancy between what he explains in the narrative textbox and what he graphically illustrates in the panel. For instance, the caption boxes in the three panels on page 21—which convey the violence and meaninglessness of war—detail the three injuries Aura received during the Spanish Civil War. However, only the final panel graphically illustrates the extent of this violence. The use of capital letters and exclamation marks in bold captures the sound of the bombs through onomatopoeia. The burnt orange and ochre tones of the panels evoke the violence of the scene. Whereas the caption box in the second panel on page 22 explains that the shrapnel from a bomb gets stuck in Aura's back and he is transported to hospital, the graphic image does not show the violent explosion, only the Red Cross ambulance. In the last panel, the caption box recounts how Aura decides to go into exile after he hears that Moroccan troops from Franco's army were going into hospitals and killing injured soldiers in their beds. The image, however, does not show this violence but instead depicts an army hospital.

### **Multidirectional Memory and Memory Debates in Contemporary Spain**

As Baer and Correa point out, two universalist tendencies—anti-fascism on the one hand and global Holocaust memory on the other—have been used to address Holocaust memorialization in Spain (in Gigliotti and Earl, 2020, 406). They observe that “the meaning of Holocaust remembrance is inescapably situated and contextual [...] [W]hether the Holocaust is presented as a unique event, or as comparable to other atrocities, it has become an expression of where one is positioned in regard to the Spanish memory conflict” (406). Thus, they note that the tendency in right-wing Spanish politics to focus solely on the singularity of the Holocaust has led to self-exculpation and whitewashing of Francoist past atrocities. On the other hand, the propensity, more common in left-wing Spanish politics, to associate Spanish anti-fascist rhetoric with anti-Nazi rhetoric, encourages Spaniards to confront the country's politics of memory related to both the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War (407-408).

*Esperaré siempre tu regreso* uses the Holocaust as a comparative signifier for other traumatic events in recent history. Like Pascal Croci's graphic novel, *Auschwitz* ([1999] 2012)—which is referenced in the paratextual bibliography—Peidro's graphic novel employs a flashback device inspired by the Civil War in former Yugoslavia in 1992 to bring the reader into the concentrationary universe. Furthermore, Peidro contextualizes the suffering of Spanish Republicans at the hands of both fascism and Nazism within the larger framework of the extermination of six million Jews in Nazi concentration camps and the comparative effects of the Holocaust on other groups, such as Yugoslavians, Russians and Poles. In this way, the author-illustrator stakes a claim for the acknowledgement and memorialization of the Spanish concentrationary experience of Nazism within both Holocaust Studies and in the public and political sphere in Spain. In addition to condemning the Nazi policies of persecution, Peidro also criticizes the Franco dictatorship for its complicity in the deportation of Spanish Republicans to Nazi concentration camps and the Vichy government for its treatment of Spanish refugees in France. By drawing parallels between fascism and Nazism, Peidro encourages contemporary readers to face up to Spain's memory politics associated with both the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

The comparison between the Holocaust and other historical traumatic events may lead to accusations of “a universalism that can obscure historical specificities and political and moral complexities” (in't Veld 2019, 26), which in 't Veld associates with kitsch aesthetics. However, it could be argued that Peidro points toward what Rothberg calls “a multidirectional ethics, that combines the capacious open-endedness of the universal with the concrete, situational demands of the particular” (Rothberg 2009, 22). Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory argues against competitive “zero-sum” approaches to distinct cultural, traumatic memories that acknowledge and commemorate one group's cultural memory at the expense of those of other groups. Instead,

he suggests a comparative, non-competitive approach whereby diverse cultural memories intersect, overlap and influence each other, without losing their specificity and uniqueness.<sup>17</sup>As Crapps and Rothberg point out,

Allowing for the transmission across society of empathy for the historical experience of others, cross-communal remembrance has the potential, at least, to help people understand past injustices, to generate social solidarity, and to produce alliances between various marginalized groups. (2011, 518)

Max Silverman advocates for the term “concentrationary memory” instead of “Holocaust memory” in his analysis of Alain Resnais’ 1956 film *Nuit et Brouillard* [Night and Fog], as he maintains that it is not restricted to the Holocaust of the Jews and rejects any such “ethno-cultural or religious particularization” (Silverman 2015, 48). For her part, Brenneis argues for the need for a comparative perspective to instigate an inclusive dialogue: “In Spain, the ability to understand the Holocaust both as a metaphor and as a historical moment allows conversations about the Holocaust to apply more directly to events that occurred inside the country’s borders” (2018, 21).

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the hagiographic nature of the portrayal of Paco Aura, the Manichean dichotomy between good victim and evil perpetrator, the emphasis on Nazi paraphernalia and perpetrator violence, and the Holocaust as metaphor for other traumatic histories, Pedro counterbalances and attenuates these kitsch devices with a number of anti-kitsch strategies. These include: the aforementioned anonymizing and nuancing of perpetrators; an emphasis on victims’ eyes and vision; foregrounding the testimonial, subjective witness perspective; representations of the fragmentary experience of trauma; distancing effects; paratextual truth claims and an emphasis on the text’s truth status; and leaving explicit acts of perpetrator violence outside the panel frame. Furthermore, by using the Holocaust as a “bridging metaphor” (Jeffrey Alexander 2009, 49) for other traumatic histories, Pedro encourages empathy and solidarity for victims of fascism, Nazism and for victims of war and genocide more generally. Through his depiction of Aura, Pedro draws attention to the underrepresented memory of the defeated and silenced and argues for the acknowledgement in the public sphere of the deportation of Spanish Republicans to Nazi concentration camps. The author’s focus on Aura is a way to help his contemporaries come to terms with, and make a place in the public realm for, those who suffered the consequences of fascism and Nazism.

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<sup>17</sup> See also: Levy and Sznajder’s notion of “cosmopolitan memory” (2002) and Max Silverman’s notion of palimpsestic memory (2013).

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