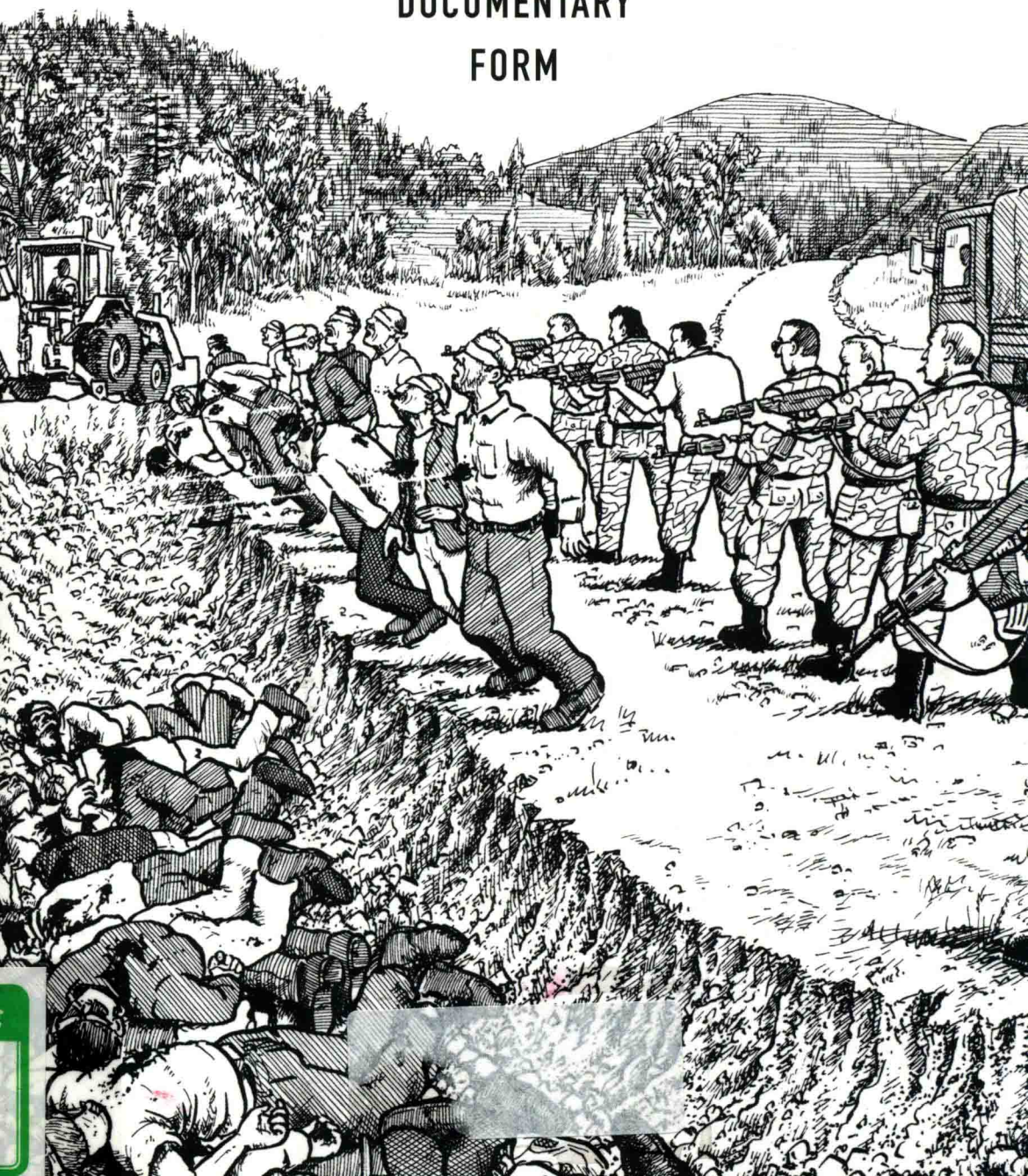


HILLARY L. CHUTE

# DISASTER DRAWN

VISUAL WITNESS,  
COMICS, AND  
DOCUMENTARY  
FORM



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VISUAL WITNESS,  
COMICS, AND  
DOCUMENTARY FORM

HILLARY L. CHUTE

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For my parents, Richard and Patricia Chute,  
the two people I respect and admire most

---

And for Shahab Ahmed

## A NOTE ON THE FIGURES

All images presented here as figures appear at or close to their actual size. I have not enlarged any images, although some by necessity (double spread pages, for example) appear smaller than they do in print.

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## DISASTER DRAWN



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# INTRODUCTION

## SEEING NEW

*Form is the record of a war.*

—NORMAN MAILER, *CANNIBALS AND CHRISTIANS*, 1966

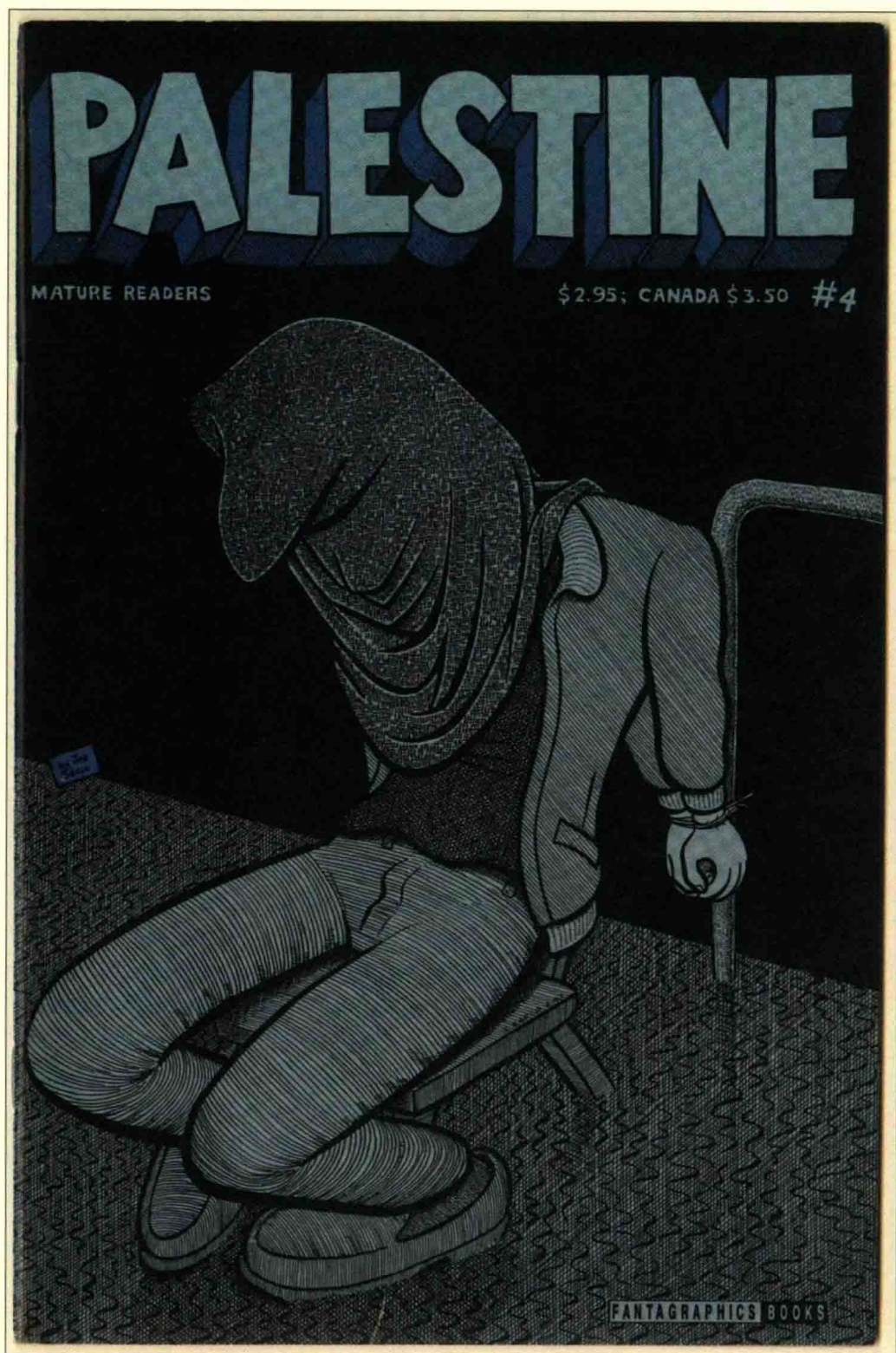
My interest in comics as nonfiction—as a form of documentary, as a form of witnessing—began with realizing how comics as a medium places pressure on classifiability and provokes questions about the boundaries of received categories of narrative. In 1991, cartoonist Art Spiegelman's *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale*, a work about his Polish father's experiences during the Holocaust that depicts Jews as mice and Nazis as cats, made the *New York Times Book Review* best-seller list, on the hardcover fiction side of the ledger. Spiegelman wrote in a letter to the *Times*: "I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special 'nonfiction/mice' category to your list?"<sup>1</sup> Apparently editors at the *Times* were debating after receiving the letter whether or not to move the book, and one of them said, "Hey, let's go down to Soho



and ring Spiegelman's doorbell. If a giant mouse answers, we'll put it in nonfiction." Clearly a mouse was not going to answer the doorbell, but in an unprecedented act the *Times* published Spiegelman's letter and moved the book to nonfiction. This series of events indicates the discomfort that people have with the notion of drawing (and its attendant abstractions) as possibly "true" or "nonfictional"—as opposed to writing, a system of communication seen to be more transparently true or accurate.<sup>2</sup> In 1992, the *Maus* series was awarded a Special Pulitzer Prize, because the committee was not sure into which category to place a comics work about the Holocaust that pictured Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. While *Maus*'s animal metaphor put the book's nontransparency on the surface (Spiegelman then proceeded to rupture his own visual conceit in all sorts of ways), it only amplified what many took to be the subjective quality of drawing that ought to keep it out of nonfiction categories anyway. Comics narrative, however—which calls overt attention to the crafting of histories and historiographies—suggests that accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention.

Why, after the rise and reign of photography, do people yet understand pen and paper to be among the best instruments of witness? There are many examples of the visual-verbal form of comics, drawn by hand, operating as documentary and addressing history, witness, and testimony. Today, figures such as Spiegelman, whose two-volume *Maus* (1986, 1991) cemented comics as a serious medium for engaging history; Joe Sacco, a self-described "comics journalist"; and a growing number of others all over the globe seize public and critical attention with hand-drawn histories and accounts from Auschwitz, Bosnia, Palestine, Hiroshima, and Ground Zero (see Figure I.1). The essential form of comics—its collection of frames—is relevant to its inclination to document. *Documentary* (as an adjective and a noun) is about the presentation of evidence. In its succession of replete frames, comics calls attention to itself, specifically, as evidence. Comics makes a reader access the unfolding of evidence in the movement of its basic grammar, by aggregating and accumulating frames of information.

*Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* explores how the form of comics endeavors to express history—particularly war-generated histories that one might characterize as traumatic. For that reason, it is centrally about the relationship of form and ethics. How do the now-numerous powerful works about world-historical conflict in comics form operate? To what end, aesthetically and politically, do they visualize testimony? How do they engage spectacle, memory, and lived lives—as well



**Figure I.1** Joe Sacco, cover to *Palestine* comic book #4, 1993. *Palestine* was a series before it was collected as a single book volume in 2001. (Used by permission of Joe Sacco.)



as extinguished lives? While the works I discuss here are each rooted in a different way in traumatic history, they all propose the value of inventive textual practice to be able to express trauma ethically. (By “textual practice,” I refer to the space of the comics page in its entirety—that is, to work in both words and images.)

I have written on comics’s visual form as an ethical and troubling visual aesthetics, or poetics, in *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. That book takes up the question of ethics in relation to notions of self-constitution in the face of trauma. The most relevant sense in that book in which I was interested in comics texts as ethical is expressed by Lynne Huffer’s posing of the ethical question as “How can the other reappear at the site of her inscriptional effacement?”<sup>3</sup> Graphic narratives that bear witness to authors’ own traumas or to those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they repeat and reconstruct in order to counteract. In this book, as before, I am fascinated by how comics positions and enacts itself as a form of counterinscription. Like the works I investigate in *Graphic Women*, many of the documentary comics I explore here, most notably those by Keiji Nakazawa and Spiegelman, are also narratives of the self that, however complex, are united by the fact that they are genealogical narratives of family history, or by the weight of history on family structures.

Two features of the medium particularly motivate my interest in how comics expresses history. First, comics is a drawn form; drawing accounts for what it looks like, and also for the sensual practice it embeds and makes visible, which I treat here as relevant to the form’s aesthetics and ethics. Second, the print medium of comics offers a unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels suggestive of architecture. It presents juxtaposed frames alternating with empty gutters—a logic of arrangement that turns time into space on the page. Through its spatial syntax, comics offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality—as well as on the idea that “history” can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one. While Rosalind Krauss laments that contemporary art has entered the “post-medium condition,” attention to comics reveals a form that is deeply rooted in the specificity of its medium as a source of cultural, aesthetic, and political significance.<sup>4</sup>

In asking why there are so many difficult and even extreme world-historical conflicts portrayed in the form of comics, and how it came to be a site of documentary that is expanding as I write, this book is centrally

occupied with the question of how war generates new forms of visual-verbal witness. It is not an accident that after 9/11 and the commencement of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there was an increase in attention to documentary experimentation—just as there was also during the period of the Vietnam War, both in visual realms (such as film and photography) and in prose (with the era's deep innovations in reporting). Indeed, the author of a recent study of 9/11 literature wondered if the enterprise of fiction could withstand the public appetite for documentary after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>5</sup> 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, and the work of documentary is central to all sorts of conversations (as, perhaps, the *New York Times's* recent “Op-Doc” category indicates).<sup>6</sup> But despite the fact that the hand-drawn form of comics has emerged afresh as a major location for documentary investigation—and that there is a wealth of very widely known, acclaimed graphic narratives that pivot on the figure of the witness—there has not until now been a sustained critical study of documentary comics.<sup>7</sup>

*Disaster Drawn* analyzes the substance and emergence of contemporary comics; it connects this work to practices of witnessing spanning centuries. In placing earlier documentary traditions in conversation with those of modern comics, I focus on contemporary cartoonists who work within well-established cultural traditions of comics writing and reception. (The United States, Japan, and France have the longest of such codified traditions, identified in Japan as manga and in the French or Franco-Belgian tradition as *bande dessinée*.) All of the artists I examine—Callot, Goya, Nakazawa, Spiegelman, Sacco—visualize war and death. Graphic narratives, on the whole, have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking what I think of as the risk of representation.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, in comics produced after World War II, despite the prevailing views of representing trauma after the Holocaust, we see that trauma does not always have to be disappearance; it can be plenitude, an excess of signification. All of the creators I discuss here engage traumatic history, and all grapple with what it means to “picture” suffering and trauma.<sup>9</sup>

This book makes two historical arguments, claiming 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 also that we need to see this work as adding to a long history of forms. *Disaster Drawn* seeks to provide a longer genealogy than is usual for nonfiction comics and



also to assess what is happening now. For that reason, Chapters 1 and 2, short opening chapters, focus on selective histories of visual-verbal witnessing going back to the Thirty Years' War and on the expansion of comics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in Europe and in the United States, when the form established the conventions recognized widely today.

Second, I investigate the social and psychic pressures that impelled the form's reemergence after World War II, and the formal innovation across national boundaries—along with the global routes of circulation—that comics took and created.<sup>10</sup> The contemporary cartoonists who have changed the nonfiction field most drastically are a Japanese artist (Nakazawa) and two European immigrants to America (Spiegelman and Sacco), each profoundly motivated by world war (Spiegelman was born Itzhak Avraham ben Zev). In Chapters 3 and 4, I analyze the work of two cartoonists creating comics at the same moment in Japan and the United States about World War II: the eyewitness Nakazawa and the secondary witness Spiegelman. In 1972, with their germinal, respective early works *I Saw It* (a stand-alone comic book) and “Maus” (a three-page comic book story), these artists invented nonfiction comics afresh, responding to a world gripped by the Vietnam War and saturated with its constant stream of televisual images.<sup>11</sup> Attentive to the ontology of different media forms, I argue that we can understand the return to a tradition of “drawing to tell” against the backdrop of this saturation and the discourses of technological power that shaped the atomic age, and specifically the Vietnam War, during which time, as Michael Herr writes, nuclear war loomed in the background and an “empty technology” characterized the institutional temperament of the war.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in Chapter 5 and the coda, the traditions of visual witnessing this book traces culminate in the body of work known as comics journalism, featuring Sacco, its contemporary innovator, and others. “It’s very unusual for this kind of art, this comic art, to become testamentary,” Michael Silverblatt mused about *Maus* in a 1992 interview with Spiegelman.<sup>13</sup> Almost twenty-five years later, one might say the opposite is true. Work that is historical and specifically “testamentary” or testimonial is the strongest genre of comics. (And sometimes where to find testimony and memory is ambiguous; Phoebe Gloeckner, whose project in progress on serial murders in Juárez, Mexico, I treat briefly in the coda, focuses in depth on *non*-survivors, chasing down the particularity of life and death occurring outside of the public eye.) The form of comics has taken center stage among

a range of documentary forms—moving forward, say, from the era of New Journalism and cinéma vérité—that innovate the parameters of documentary, investigating historical trauma and even the concept of history itself. Functioning conspicuously in two different narrative registers, the word-and-image form of comics expands the reach of documentary, recording facts while also questioning the very project of what it means to document, to archive, to inscribe. Pitting visual and verbal discourses against each other, comics calls attention to their virtues and to their friction, highlighting the issue of what counts as evidence. (The concept of “evidence,” as with “fact” and “proof,” has discipline-specific valences and a long history; in one commonplace view, as Lorraine Daston points out, evidence indicates “facts with significance.”)<sup>14</sup>

The past century’s debates about documentary have been almost wholly about theorizing the filmic and the televisual—or the photographic. (One recent exception is Lisa Gitelman’s *Paper Knowledge*, about how genres of the document such as the photocopy and the PDF become epistemic objects.)<sup>15</sup> Stella Bruzzi’s oft-cited *New Documentary* (2006) is entirely about cinema and television—as are, in essence, Michael Renov’s *The Subject of Documentary* (2004) and John Ellis’s *Documentary: Witness and Self-Revelation* (2012), each of which also includes a smattering of photography and video analysis.<sup>16</sup> And works such as William Stott’s classic *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, on documentary photography of the 1930s—the period when the concept of “documentary” gained shape in the United States—are crucial precursors to the parameters of contemporary debates.<sup>17</sup> “Documentary,” like “witness,” is a nontransparent concept, or group of concepts, with a history and a set of debates attached to it. But what it has not recently landed on in critical discourse is drawing—the hand-drawn document.<sup>18</sup> As Bruno Latour glosses a predominant view in *Iconoclasm*, “The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image’s claim to offer truth.”<sup>19</sup> In *Disaster Drawn*, I work against this idea, as do Latour and others, by exploring comics’s documentary properties and aspirations.

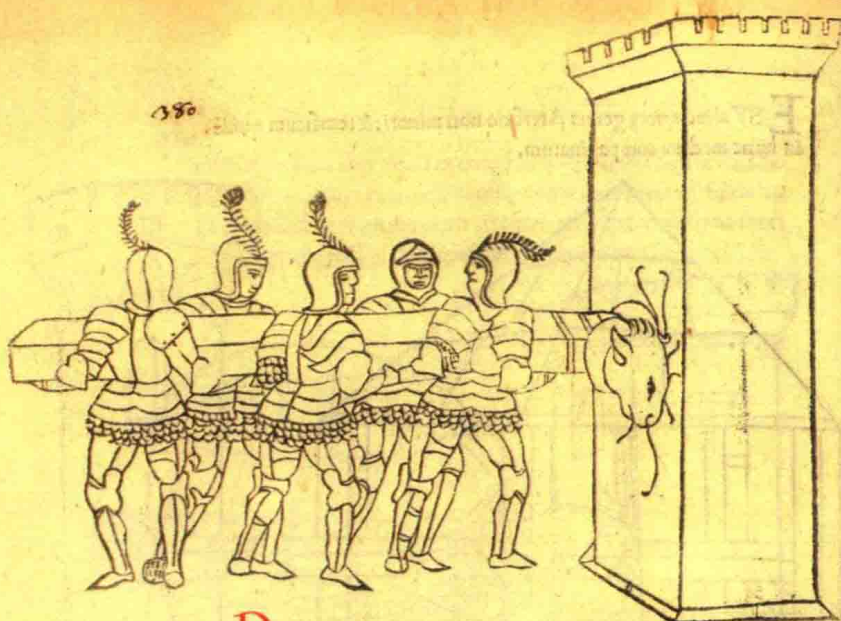
## War Comics

*Disaster Drawn* is the first book to present a substantial historical, formal, and theoretical context for contemporary comics that seek to document histories of war and disaster.<sup>20</sup> The visual depiction of war and the circulation



of such depictions are, of course, not new.<sup>21</sup> Attic black- and red-figure vases of the Archaic and Classical periods, for instance, portrayed scenes from the *Iliad*. This book is interested, however, in war in the context of print, and how at every turn war spurs formal innovation. Editions of Robertus Valturius's *De Re Militari* (*Art of War*), identified by the Museum of Modern Art as "the first illustrated book about the science of war," appeared at Verona in 1472, offering variously sized woodcuts portraying machinery (Figure I.2). William Ivins, in *Prints and Visual Communication*, characterizes its importance as a form of documentation: "This was not edification at all, and neither was it mere decoration. It was the deliberate communication of information and ideas. The historians have concentrated their interest," he continues, on technicalities of printing and who designed the woodcuts. "But they have unanimously overlooked the importance of these illustrations as the first dated set of illustrations made definitely for informational purposes."<sup>22</sup> The urgency of documenting practices of war had produced a new visual idiom.

As the movement of its chapters makes clear, this book traces a history that understands contemporary comics as part of a long trajectory of works inspired by witnessing war and disaster—works that in turn created new idioms and practices of expression. It considers visual-verbal forms of witnessing war going back to the influential French printmaker Jacques Callot, whose enigmatic 1633 *Les Grandes Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre* series, inspired by the Thirty Years' War, was not commissioned, and appeared with verse inscribed below its etched images. Moving across a fine art context, it lingers especially on Francisco Goya, who was directly influenced by Callot and worked on *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, his famous series of eighty-three captioned and numbered etchings of the Spanish War of Independence, from 1810 to 1820. Goya witnessed at first hand many, although not all, of the subjects depicted in the *Disasters of War*. Some of the etchings, those completed during the war, produce an account of the present, while others function to produce the recent past and perform the work of countermemory. A textured subjectivity emerges in the space of the relationship of caption to image, even as the images, many of which are of actual historical record, flag themselves as doing the work of reporting. The captions appearing below the images are not simply descriptive; some are sarcastic, and some work against the fact of presentation of the image itself, such as in plate 26, whose caption simply states, "One cannot look at this" (Figure I.3).



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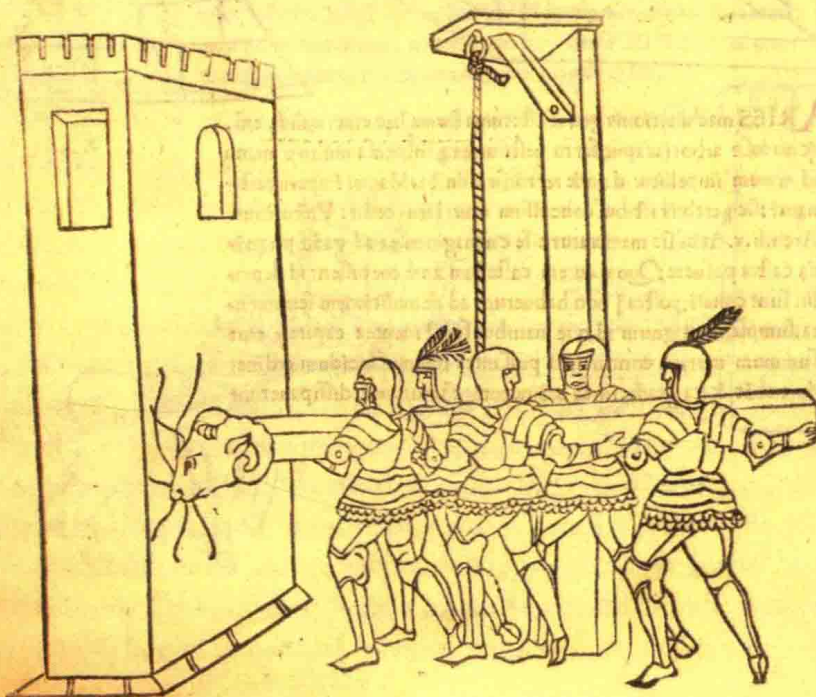


Figure 1.2 Robertus Valturius, from *De Re Militari*, 1472.





*No se puede mirar.*

**Figure 1.3** Francisco Goya, “One cannot look at this,” plate 26, *The Disasters of War*, 1810s, published 1863. (Image courtesy of Dover Publications.)

A new category of artist-reporter essentially developed in relation to war, in particular the Crimean War (1853–1856). This was despite the fact that war photography, such as that of Roger Fenton, considered one of the first war photographers, was also developing during the Crimean War, as well as during the American Civil War.<sup>23</sup> The role of the artist-reporter arose in periodicals in the 1840s, a time when, as Paul Hogarth argues, “the new picture papers were . . . providing artists with their biggest audience since the Middle Ages.”<sup>24</sup> Later, avant-garde experiment following the devastation of World War I, by figures such as George Grosz and Otto Dix, offered new idioms for reporting in a spate of new publications. Dix, who had been a machine gunner in the war, produced the disturbing series of fifty etchings *Der Krieg* (*The War*) in 1924, modeled after Goya. And in