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Witnessing and Empty Empathy: A Comparison Between Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Jérôme Ruillier's *The Strange*

Abstract: This article compares two graphic novels dealing with the subject of modern border crises, namely Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Jérôme Ruillier's *The Strange*, by considering empathy creation in visual media. Ruillier's *The Strange*, whose stated goal is to elicit empathy by presenting the viewer with as many narrative perspectives as possible, is a graphic novel dealing with the translation of a refugee in a nondescript fantasy world which only vaguely alludes to the recent refugee crisis in France. Ruillier gives passersby, police officers, activists, and the protagonist's own smuggler equal self-representation, which results in a fragmented narrative structure that does not bring the refugee's own voice to the fore. This technique, combined with the lack of a specific socio-political context for the protagonist's translation, engenders empty empathy in the viewer's reaction to the refugee's trauma, mainly due to *The Strange* being a patchwork creation of refugee stories whose common denominator is personal pain, something which cannot elicit authentic empathy. This article proposes a comparison with Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, which illustrates specific stories from Gaza and the West Bank, and whose events compel Sacco to throw in his lot with the refugees; this second perspective highlights the difference between empty empathy and witnessing, and in the process underlines what Ruillier's work lacks in its treatment of borders and refugees.

Keywords: refugee, empty empathy, graphic novel, witnessing, trauma