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"These Aren't the Right Pictures"

Framing Strategies in Rutu Modan's Ha-nekes (2013)

ABSTRACT: The tension between referentiality and fictionality, or fictionalization, has historically been at the center of a debate concerning the function and, more importantly maybe, the reception, of three tools: the paratext, the photographic medium, and the literary genre of the graphic novel. In different contexts and from different points of view, these three elements have aroused reactions and questions about the definition of the boundaries between reality and fiction on one side, and renewed the longstanding debate over the ability of mimetic arts of being a truthful way of knowledge, on the other. By using the idea of framing as a way to define the borders between, at the same time, text and context, reality and fiction, what is seen and what is shown, the paper aims at analyzing the strategies employed in Rutu Modan's graphic novel *Ha-nekes* (2013) in addressing these polarities. Some of the implications in the use of the notion of framing will be especially developed in relation to what Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey defined as "the ability of the graphic novel to work on the borderlines of first-person narrative, history-from-below, and oral history as well as to introduce fiction with historical meaning (and vice versa)" and Marianne Hirsch's definition and use of "postmemory."

KEYWORDS: Rutu Modan, Paratext, Graphic Novel, Framing, Postmemory.

Ce retour malgré tout, malgré le fait qu'il n'y a
plus rien, plus rien à voir.
Georges Didi-Huberman, *Le Lieu Malgré Tout*

Words do have edges. So do you.
Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*

Introduction

In his analysis of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Georges Didi-Huberman describes the main dynamic of the documentary as a return to a place where everything has been destroyed and, at the same time, everything is still there. The director filmed this paradox as a topographer, succeeding in representing loss and destruction by showing to the audience the stillness of these destroyed places (Didi-Huberman 1995).

Lanzmann's documentary and Rutu Modan's graphic novel *Ha-nekes, The Property* (Modan 2013a, 2013b), share the same attention to places and to the spatial interpretation given to the return dynamic.¹ In both cases the importance granted to space goes far beyond the use of places as settings. The reality of these places and their human and ethical impossibility call into question the limits and the risks of representation. Also, literally in the meaning of making them present anew.

This perspective becomes even more clear if we consider the fact that both Modan's graphic novel and Lanzmann's documentary fall within the category that the filmmaker himself describes as "fiction de reel," a fiction based on real events². The director's definition could indeed be paired with the description that Rutu Modan herself gave of her graphic novel: her grandmothers' journey to Poland that never took place.

Rutu Modan, illustrator and comic book artist, published *Ha-nekes, The Property*, in 2013 both in Hebrew and in English. The fiction is based on real events, historical as well as autobiographical, according to what Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey (Baetens and Frey 2015) define as "the ability of the graphic novel to work on the borderlines of first-person narrative, history-from-below, and oral history, as well as to introduce fiction with historical meaning (and vice versa)."

The book describes the first journey to Warsaw that Regina and her granddaughter, Mika, undertake, apparently to deal with a property issue, as the title suggests. Under these appearances, there is another story that the grandmother never shared with her family: Regina, after the death of her son, Mika's father, decides to go back to Warsaw for the first time after the war to inform the real father, Roman, of the son's death. Before the war, Regina and Roman were a couple and they planned to leave the country and start a new life and a new family in Sweden. When the war sparked off, the couple was separated against their will: Regina, pregnant of Roman's child, continued her life in Palestine, Roman in Poland.

Paratextual Frames

Given the relevance of the spatial dimension and dynamics in Modan's exploration of the limits of representation—especially with respect to the spatializing of narrative as representation of time as space that might be

¹ I am not implying an equivalence between the two media. For a discussion about this topic see Roy Cook, "Why Comics Are Not Films: Metacomics and Medium-Specific Conventions," in Meskin-Cook 2012.

² See Cuau 1990, 15.

considered a characteristic of the graphic novel's medium³—the liminality that will be approached is the one related to the edges and contours of the text, to its frames considered as a multidirectional space shaping the text and the audience's approach to it. It is then from these borders that the issue of representation will be investigated and, in order to account for these multilayered spaces, the practice of framing will be used as a unifying concept. Between the materiality of the frames and the possibilities offered by the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity of the "framing" practice,⁴ this notion will be literally developed with respect to the three major meanings of the verb according to the Oxford Dictionary of English: place (a picture or photograph) in a frame; formulate (a concept, plan, or system); produce false evidence against (an innocent person) so that they appear guilty. The first meaning involves the frame as a structure that surrounds something and it will be doubly used with reference to the panels and to the paratext, considering then the materiality of these two spatial dimensions in relation to the peculiarity of the graphic novel medium.⁵ The use of the paratextual frames as a threshold allows also to explore how the notion of framing involves the audience in the two other senses of this term. By suggesting a way to approach the text, the paratextual elements configure the text, as stated by Jansen (Jansen 2014): "Paratextual thinking thus suggests itself as a dynamic, indeed multidirectional, approach to both the ways in which a work frames its meanings through the lens of its paratexts and the complexities behind our own interpretative strategy" (2). Secondly, the liminality of the paratext could be read as a signal that plays a major role in the tricky dynamic performed by the text at the expense of its readers in order to frame them, namely, making them guilty, so to speak, of finding themselves within a fictional world that plays them about the "nature" of the experience they are living.

The use of paratextual elements as a way of framing the text could be approached combining the conceptual framing notion with Gerard Genette's definition of the paratext. According to Werner Wolf (Wolf 2006), "Over the past few decades it has become a received notion that there is no human signifying act, no meaningful perception, cognition and communication without 'frames'" (1). Frames, in the sense of 'cognitive frames' could be defined as

³ See Baetens and Frey 2015, chapter 7; Chute-DeKoven 2006: 769; McCloud 1993. For a different approach see the survey in Hescher 2016, chapter 3; Cohn 2010; Cohn 2013.

⁴ Bal and Marx-MacDonald 2002; Culler 1988; Frojmovic 2007; Groensteen 2007, 40-43.

⁵ In the present contribution the paratext will not be taken into consideration in the context of a digital medium nor from the point of view of the translations practices and politics.

culturally formed metaconcepts, most of which possess a certain stability even if modified or new frames can emerge in certain circumstances; these metaconcepts enable us to interpret both reality and artefacts and hence other concepts that can be applied in perception, experience and communication. Frames are, therefore, basic orientational aids that help us to navigate through our experiential universe, inform our cognitive activities and generally function as preconditions of interpretation. As such, frames also control the framed. Similarly to the physical frames surrounding paintings, frames, for instance, help to select (or construct) phenomena as forming a meaningful whole and therefore create coherent areas on our mental maps. (5).

From this perspective, the paratextual frames are the only elements that signal the readers their entrance into the realm of fiction, because, as stated by Umberto Eco (1994) if “an incontrovertible signal of fictionality does not exist [...] elements of paratext can supervene. In such a case, what very often occurs is that one does not decide to enter a fictional world; one happens to find oneself within that world. After a while, one becomes aware of this and decides that what is happening is a dream.” The readers fall into what Eco defined as “artificial narrative” without being fully aware of it and then only paratextual signals allow them to recognize this world: “We usually recognize artificial narrative thanks to the para-text—that is, the external messages that surround a text. A typical paratextual signal for fictional narrative is the designation ‘A Novel’ on the book’s cover.” This back-and-forth movement could usefully problematize what has been considered one of the limits of Genette’s paratext (Genette 1997b), namely, its mono-directionality. The space defined as “an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much respiratory difficulty from one world to the other” (408) becomes then a passageway without losing its peculiarity as a threshold that has, among the other functions, the one of “présenter” the text, in the double meaning of introducing the text to the readers and of making it present, assure its presence, its existence in the world.⁶ According to this definition the paratext itself is a combination of the peritext, within the text, and the epitext, outside the text, implying that it is liminality that both defines the paratext and is defined by it. Even if this liminality is not exclusively associated with the distinction between referentiality and fictionality and, more recently, it has been redefined in terms of media and functions,⁷ the paratext as a border between text and context can be considered the first signal of the existence of the literary text, the first attempt to separate it from

⁶ Genette 1982; Genette 1997a; Genette 1987; Genette 1997b. See also Birke-Christ 2013; Calle-Gruber-Zawisza 2000; Ciotti-Lin 2016; Dauven *et al.* 2004; Jansen 2014; Maclean 1991; Marot 2010; Matthews-Moody 2007; Smith-Wilson 2011; Stein 2013; Wolf-Bernhart 2006.

⁷ See Alexander-Lange-Pillinger 2010; Birke-Christ 2013; Ciotti-Lin 2016; Smith-Wilson 2011.

the context. However, the decision of considering this separation as a dynamic process works also precisely against the notion of "context," enabling instead the framing practice as a way to describe, in Bal's words, "what happens before the spectacle is presented" (Bal and Marx-MacDonald 2002, 137).

Rutu Modan's Textual and Visual Paratext

This moment that precedes spatially and temporally the spectacle is first of all made of the epitext that provides the information about Rutu Modan's family history: the fact that she is of Polish descent on both sides of her family and that this graphic novel was an occasion to imagine the travel to Poland that Modan's grandmothers never did, as previously mentioned.

The peritext reinforces this autobiographical dimension. Verbally it is composed of three elements: the dedication, the exergue, and the modified version of the classic disclaimer at the end of the book. The book is dedicated "To my mother Michali" and the exergue reinforces the family dimension by stating that "with family you don't have to tell the whole truth and it's not considered lying," a quote attributed to Modan's mother. These elements belong to the paratext while referring to the epitext dimension, using then referentiality as the key to the autobiographical familiar dimension and, at the same time, problematizing it with the content of the quote. Moreover, instead of the classic "All characters appearing are fictitious," Modan uses a slightly modified formula, here in the English translation of Jessica Cohen, "the characters in this book (the Polish ones, anyway) are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the authors."

As the Lynda Barry's questions that open her "autofictionalography": "is it autobiography if parts of it are not true?", "is it fiction if parts of it are?" (Barry 2002),⁸ *The Property's* textual paratext evokes the vast debate concerning the possibility of representation of facts and fiction in the graphic novel and especially in graphic memoir, the "problem of taxonomy," according to the discussion about the appropriate section, fiction or non-fiction, in which Art Spiegelman's *Maus II* should have been listed.⁹

The use of a textual paratext that is both factual and fictional (Hescher 2016), and the content of the exergue frame the graphic novel on the border

⁸ Regarding the autobiographical memoirs within the comics and the tension between facts and fiction see Baetens-Frey 2015; Chaney 2011; Chute 2010; Gardner 2008; Hatfield 2005; Hescher 2016, §3.2.2; Morris 2002; Pedri 2013; Stein-Thon 2013.

⁹ See Spiegelman 1991.

between reality and fiction with respect to family story and history, as a *fiction de réel*. As stated by Pedri, precisely about the graphic memoir: "To highlight the union of fact and fiction in graphic memoir is to suggest that fact and truth telling have little to do with reference. Instead, here they rest, at least in part, in openly confronting that the real, the remembered, and the subjective share center stage with fictional creativity" (2013, 133). However, Modan pushes this logic a little bit further because if the fictionality of the literary work can be read precisely as a way to fill an omission in order to make the narrative whole, this use of the verbal paratext not only reassures the audience of the graphic novel's "authenticity" precisely by stating its limits but states that fiction is not a way to fill the referentiality gap, but to represent this void, to make it present anew.

The claim of a fictionalization as a way to depict the loss is even more clear in the pictorial paratext. Visually the paratext is represented by a Swedish landscape whose intense colors are used in the graphic novel—in addition to the sepia of some other pages—exclusively to depict episodes from the past, as the readers will discover later. This palette is indeed the one used in the second chapter for the section devoted to Regina and Roman plans about their future. The couple is depicted rowing a boat on the Wistula river in May of 1939, as stated at the top of the first panel of this sequence. They are discussing their imminent move to Sweden, with all of their hopes and worries, when the intervention of two officers abruptly interrupts the conversation and puts an end to their shared future. The notion of a future never realized is also thematically linked to the fact that Regina in this sequence is pregnant and, as above mentioned, the reason of her travel to Warsaw is precisely to inform Roman of the death of their son, a son that he never met.

Moreover, even if the readers will discover this aspect only later, what is used as the visual paratext is the graphic representation of a picture, a drawn photograph of the country where Regina and Roman planned to start their life together. More precisely it is not just a picture of Sweden but a photo of the country shown at the Fotoplastikon in Warsaw. The very same drawn photograph is also used as the back cover of the book. The triple presence of this image, at the beginning, in the middle—chapter three—and at the end of the text creates a spatial as well as temporal dynamic on a narrative as well as on a meta-narrative level of the text that is important to retrace in order to describe the photographic image's fictionality implications.

According to the plot, the Fotoplastikon is the place where Regina and Roman agreed to meet after their first encounter at the apartment where Regina lived and that now is Roman's apartment. The Fotoplastikon, mentioned by Roman's daughter, is defined by her as the only place that is

still in the same place, managed by the same family and then suggested as an interesting venue for Regina as a tourist. Stillness as authenticity is then the main characteristic attributed to the Fotoplastikon. On a narrative level, the archival guarantee of preservation of the past through its pictures goes with the association between photographic medium and authenticity. As stated by Roy Cook, "even if photographs are not genuinely objective in the sense they are typically taken to be (by both everyday audiences and by some scholars such as Bazin), they are, in fact, *typically* taken (by both scholars and everyday viewers) to be objective—that is, they have what I shall call *objective purport* (2015, 16).¹⁰

In Modan's, *The Property*, this presumed "authenticity" of the photographic medium is associated with the Fotoplastikon. The first image of the Fotoplastikon in the third chapter already states that the gaze on the past cannot be detached from the notion of absence and loss: the Fotoplastikon is placed in an empty room where no one is looking at the photos of the past. Moreover, the access to these photos is possible only through a very rigid structure that cannot be ignored: the body must freeze in a very specific position and the eyes must see through the lens that frames the vision and the photos. The fence and the frames separating the photos from the viewers separate also one viewer from another stressing the unavoidable loneliness of the subject looking at them and at the past. The impossibility of sharing the gaze and the memories is visually represented by the gesture addressed by Regina to Roman in the Fotoplastikon room, a shared secret code whose meaning was "we are together," that now is no longer understandable for him. Moreover Regina and Roman verbally disagree about some details, for example the presence of the cinema on Grzybowska that for Regina is the place where they used to go together while, according to Roman, "There was no cinema on Grzybowska."

This approach is constructed by the visual setting of the page devoted to Regina and Roman looking at the Fotoplastikon pictures and exchanging the above-mentioned dialogue. The page shows indeed a discontinuity from the main pattern shape of the panels employed in the graphic novel. The panel structure in *The Property* corresponds to what has been defined by Benoît Peeters (1998); the rhetorical use of the panel/page structure. This use is characterized by the fact the "panel and the page are no longer autonomous elements; they are subordinated to a narrative which their primary function is to serve" (Baetens-Frey, 2015). The same mode used for instance by Hergé. In the page devoted to the Fotoplastikon, the panels are no longer boxes but their contours assume the shape of the lens through which is mandatory to

¹⁰ See also Cook 2012, 131.

look at the pictures of the Fotoplastikon. In each row, next to the three boxes picturing Regina, then Roman and then again Regina sitting and looking at the pictures, the graphic representation of the photographs that they are looking at is drawn contoured by the Fotoplastikon lens. The lens that frame the pictures graphically represented on the page visually and virtually put the reader in the same position of the two characters while confirming the unsharable nature of the gaze and the non univocity nor authenticity of the photographic medium rendered via the cartoon medium. The invincible opposition between these two versions of the past suggests indeed the non univocity nor authenticity of the past represented by the photographs that don't look as the appropriate medium to collect reliable information about it. Both the photographs and the past are the object of the partial gaze of the subject and precisely for this reason they can be part of a narrative, not in virtue of their alleged objectivity, authenticity, or authority. It is thus subjectivity that gives authenticity to the narrative, because the whole graphic novel is framed as the omitted fictional part of the truth that doesn't allow to qualify as lie and that is the most appropriated way to represent not wholeness but the irretrievable lack of it.

The key to this only apparent incongruence is the fact that the pictures framed in the Fotoplastikon are not what Regina expected, as she immediately states: "These aren't the right pictures." "Back then they used to show slides from all over the world. Like Sweden..." Regina comments and Roman replies "And now they show what Warsaw used to look like." What is "wrong" on the narrative level is then that instead of the photos that Regina used to look at before the war, the Fotoplastikon now shows only photos of the old Warsaw, photos of the past, of what has been. However, as stated by Didi-Huberman, this is the paradox of a return to a place where everything has been destroyed and everything is still there. What used to be a window on the world and the future is now a window on the past. Regina's disappointment for the wrong pictures gives a whole new meaning to Marianne Hirsch's statement that "Photography is precisely the medium connecting memory and post-memory" (1992, 9).¹¹ If in *Maus* the photographs represent what no longer is, what has been and what has been violently destroyed, in Modan's *The Property*, their use only graphically evokes Spiegelman's reproduction of some well-known pictures, as for example the one of the liberated prisoners in Buchenwald. In terms of their

¹¹ On comics and photography see Amihay 2015; Banner 2000; Cook 2012; Cook 2015; Cvetkovich 2008; El Refaie 2012; Groensteen 2007, 40-43; Hirsch 1992; Hirsch 1997; Hirsch 2011; Horstkotte-Pedri 2008; Lefèvre 2012; Miller 2007; Pedri 2011; Pedri 2013; Pedri 2014; Pedri 2015; Pedri-Petit 2013, part IX, devoted to comics; Postema 2013; Postema 2015; Postema 2007; Smolderen 2014, 119-135; Watson, Julia 2008; Wolk 2007.

functions «the right pictures» aren't the ones of the old Warsaw, namely what no longer is, but the ones that could represent another form of loss: the loss of the future. The right pictures are the ones that belong to this other archive, the impossible archive of the future, of the lost future. Consistently, after having specifically asked for them and then having the possibility to look at them Regina runs away: the view of the lost future in the postcard of Sweden is unbearable. Being the picture right, to look at it is impossible. This photograph drawn is unframed through the lens of the Fotoplastikon because no one is looking at it but is framing the text. Thus it emphasizes the fact that "is in the space between existing visual images and familiar storylines where we make meaning of our individual lives" (130), as Jennifer Lemberg (2008) states about Bechdel's *Fun's Home*, a graphic novel that shares with Modan's work not only the drawing of photographs but also the post-memory perspective. As in Bechdel, "what remains unspeakable in her family and unrepresented in her diary can be at least partially represented through images" (133) with the main difference Modan's *The Property* cannot be considered a graphic memoir.

The Archive of the Lost Future

This Swedish landscape is then a postcard from the past that is a reminder of a future never realized. The notion of a possibility that never becomes reality is represented through the graphic reproduction of a picture that frames the book. There is nothing in the graphic version of this picture that could connect it to the war or to the Shoah, nor to a family history. As stated by Hirsch "The horror of looking is not necessarily in the image but in the story we provide to fill in what is left out of the image" (1992, 7). Literally, what is left out is the image on *The Property's* cover: Regina and Mika in the Powązki cemetery on Zaduszki, All Souls' Day, as the candles and the numerous people suggest. The image covers the front and the last page of the book with its dark blue lighted up only by the colored cemetery lamps. The place that will be described later in the book by Regina as the only one "that still looks like I remember it," associated with the title *Ha-nekes*, "property" but also "asset," "something of value," introduce the reader to the notion of loss and memory. In a sharp chromatic and emotional contrast to this image, the reader will find in the next page the bright colors of a pleasant and deserted Swedish landscape, as attested by the presence of the flag. A lake is surrounded by mountains covered with snow, houses and green and pink trees. However, in this literally postcard-like landscape, it's another absence that strikes the readers, namely the human absence. This

parenthesis is thus closed by the presence of more cemetery lamps under the page where the title of the graphic novel is reproduced and that comes before the dedication and the exergue. Precisely as in the Fotoplastikon sequence, on the plot level as well as on the peritext level, this drawn photograph as fiction is framed by the "facts," the very same facts that transformed this postcard into a souvenir of something that could have been but never had. In Sontag's words "to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude" (2003, 46). In Modan's *The Property*, the framing technique serves doubly the notion of exclusion, first as a way to orient the gaze of the readers and, secondly, as a way to represent the loss as a possibility that will never become reality.

The paratext then powerfully evokes a family history of loss by giving a visual definition of what has not been. Without any contradiction, the lost future in Sweden used as a preface and as a postface to the graphic novel, is also a claim to the fictional nature of this form of life writing that could be defined as a possibility that never found a place in the referential reality as well as in the reality of the plot. Thus, the combination of epitext and peritext allows a possibility lost in one dimension to be found in another, in a way that doesn't compensate or give any comfort but, on the contrary, that is a lucid technique to define as clearly as possible the notion of loss by framing the past, the pictures of the past and the way of looking at them.

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