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Laurike in 't Veld

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Reading presence and absence in *Fax from Sarajevo's* rape narrative

Laurike in 't Veld

Center for Historical Culture, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In Joe Kubert's *Fax from Sarajevo*, the chapter 'The Rape Camp' deals with the mass rape of women by Serb troops during the Bosnian War. Kubert's rape narrative displays a tension between presence and absence that is analysed on different (extra)textual levels. Formally, the two incentives interact when Kubert inscribes the sexual violence on the page but acknowledges its visual limitations by constructing it as an act that can be read from the faces of the people involved and through the use of language. On a narrative level, the chapter's disconnect from the rest of the story marginalises its content and does not explore the long-lasting effects of rape, though Kubert briefly refers to genocidal rape at other points in the graphic novel. Furthermore, the tension between presence and absence in Kubert's rape narrative is informed by a cultural backdrop of excessive images of sexual violence. The article argues that this oscillation between inscription and elision in *Fax from Sarajevo* works productively, as it demonstrates a reflexive awareness of the risks of visualising rape.

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Introduction

Joe Kubert's (1926–2012) *Fax from Sarajevo* (1996) details the story of Kubert's friend and fellow comic artist, Ervin Rustemagic, as he attempts to get his family out of a besieged Sarajevo between March 1992 and May 1993. Rustemagic, Kubert, and other supporting friends around the world communicate by sending faxes, and these messages and signs of life structure the different chapters of the graphic narrative. Kubert visualises the experiences of the Rustemagic family in a style that is reminiscent of his work for war comics like *Sgt. Rock*, as opposed to the panel-less, pencil sketchbook style employed in later graphic novels like *Yossel* (2003) and *Dong Xoai Vietnam 1965* (2010). The relentless Serb attack on the city during the Bosnian War is emphasised in panels that feature bold onomatopoeia and brightly coloured explosions accentuated by motion lines that show the impact of the shelling, as 'Kubert's experience drawing war comics came to bear in the effectiveness of the shots of caroming bullets, flaming rubble and explosions of every type' (Schelly 2008, 253). Kubert also takes pains to demonstrate the effects of the violence committed during the war, highlighting how vulnerable bodies are affected by the bombing of the city and in more direct physical

CONTACT Laurike in 't Veld ✉ laurikeveld@gmail.com 📧 Erasmus University Rotterdam, Post Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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attacks. In addition to following the story of the Rustemagic family, Kubert draws a wider picture of the war by including panels that provide further historical context and by introducing peripheral characters that share information about the atrocities committed. In one of the chapters, titled 'The Rape Camp', Ervin's wife, Edina Rustemagic, is visited by her friend, Samira. In detailing Samira's story, Kubert confronts readers with the mass rape of women by Serb troops.

Rather than 'merely' being a by-product of violent conflict, rape is often consciously employed as a tactic of war and genocide 'because of its destructive effects on individuals, families, and communities' (Reid-Cunningham 2008, 280). Rape took place on all sides of the violent conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but the majority of the assaults were committed by Bosnian Serb troops and Serb paramilitary units, who were systematically raping Bosnian Muslim and Croatian women. These rapes happened during attacks on cities and villages, but women were also taken to designated detention centres, or 'rape camps', where they would be raped and assaulted for longer periods of time (Sharlach 2000, 96). Recognised by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia as a crime against humanity in 2001, mass rape functions as an instrument of genocide. In the case of the Bosnian war, it drove a non-Serb population into flight, caused grave physical and psychological harm, and was used as a means to ethnically cleanse a target group through forced impregnation (Thomas and Ralph 1999). Furthermore, sexual violence and mass rape are used because of their long-lasting effects; not only are women's bodies desecrated, but frequently the stigma of being a rape survivor carries the burden of the experience far into their lives, inevitably also affecting relationships and communities.

Visualising a sensitive and traumatic topic like rape obviously poses a range of representational issues and obstacles. Not only does the topic lead to the (moral) difficulty of creating a respectful and adequate rape narrative that eschews deterring readers but, conversely, rape narratives also run the risk of becoming spectacular or sensational, with the added danger that the sexual content of the narrative allows for a sense of titillation or voyeuristic fascination. The tension surrounding the cultural representation of rape is theorised by Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver as one that oscillates between presence and absence. In the introduction to their edited collection *Rape and Representation* (1991), Higgins and Silver argue that cultural depictions of rape are framed along two contradictory impulses; images of rape are ubiquitous in our (contemporary) cultural landscape, but at the same time 'rape exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety, contradiction, or censorship' (Higgins and Silver 1991, 3). Following this notion of the simultaneous inscription and elision of rape narratives, Kubert's *Fax from Sarajevo* similarly displays a tension between presence and absence in 'The Rape Camp'. This article traces how this tension manifests in the interaction between words and images on the comics page and shows how, on a narrative level, sexual violence is not only inscribed through Samira's story, but also simultaneously elided when the work struggles to deal with the long-lasting impact of the events. In order to better understand this negotiation between presence and absence, the article also considers how (responses to) 'Holokitsch' discourses of excessive visual depictions of rape and sexualised violence inform Kubert's rape narrative.

Reading the interaction between presence and absence on different levels (formally, narratively, and culturally), I demonstrate that Kubert's chapter poignantly exposes the tensions at play in representing rape narratives. In addition, I argue that this oscillation between presence and absence in *Fax from Sarajevo* works productively, because it shows a reflexive awareness of the risks of visualising rape. Kubert aims to counter the exploitative and voyeuristic pitfalls of representing rape without completely effacing the atrocities, and this awareness demonstrates that Kubert is taking a moral responsibility for his rape narrative.

Faces, stand-in language, and narrative inscription/elision

The chapter 'The Rape Camp' consists of 12 pages, almost half of which are reserved for Samira's experiences of sexual violence. It remains unclear whether Samira is based on an actual person; the post-face to the graphic novel – which gives additional information to the different chapters – seems to suggest that Kubert has inserted the story as a symbolic representation of the fact that '[m]ore revelations of atrocities committed against the civilian population began to surface' (197).¹ However, at the start of the post-face, Kubert also states that '[t]his story is true. The characters are real ... Some of the names are fictional, most are factual' (183), which alludes to the fact that Samira's story is based on an actual witness account – though the encapsulated position of the story within the overall narrative seems to suggest otherwise. In the sequence, Kubert explicates the ethnic identity of the perpetrators – Samira refers to 'Serb soldiers' and 'the Chetnik' – but he does not provide more background information about Samira, though the fact that she lives in Dobrinja, a suburb of Sarajevo, and is violated by the Serb soldiers makes it clear that she probably has a Muslim background. While telling her story, Kubert switches his panel borders from rectangular to soft-edged, and he mutes the colour scheme to yellow and brown tones. This shift to a more monochromatic style indicates that the sequence takes place in the past, but the muted colours also add a sense of gloom and threat to the story. Throughout the sequence, Kubert conveys the violations perpetrated by emphasising the faces of those involved, while also using language as a means to stand in for what is not shown visually. In doing so, *Fax from Sarajevo* displays an awareness of the fact that rape narratives inevitably 'help inscribe a way of looking' (Projansky 2001, 7). Kubert's work displays a tangible hesitation around any straightforward or unambiguous conditions of looking at rape, instead proposing a visually more indirect interaction with the narrative of sexual violence.

In the flashback sequence, the Serb soldiers are positioned as menacing and sadistic figures that clearly enjoy exerting their power. One of these figures is highlighted throughout; he is the officer in charge and his appearance with beard and cap distinguishes him from the other men. At the start of the sequence, the Serb soldiers kill Samira's father in a panel that follows Kubert's visual strategy of drawing bodies mid-attack in dynamic compositions that show the impact of the assault, as bullets riddle the body of the father while Samira's brother is thrown back by the force of the blast. In contrast to this fairly explicit rendering of the violence enacted on innocent and vulnerable bodies, Kubert uses more restraint when dealing with what happens next to Samira and her mother. Over the course of two pages, Kubert shows the brutal and

involuntary nature of the attack on these women by highlighting the faces and facial expressions of those involved. The final three panels on the first page juxtapose body parts of the perpetrator – his hands, his eyes – with the faces of Samira and her mother. The women are boxed into the panel in a way that communicates their precarious position, while the close-up of the hand and the extreme close-up on the perpetrator's eyes function as ominous bodily markers that frame the frightened faces of the women.

Language also comes into play in constructing the rape narrative. The threat of the situation is aptly communicated by the perpetrator's callous remarks. He vocalises the fact that '[f]orced pregnancy was a central strategy of the Serb forces during the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina' (Reid-Cunningham 2008, 286) through the text balloons: 'and you will have the honor of bearing **Serb children**. The fathers of your children stand before you ... **Now**' (102). This verbalisation of the strategy of ethnic cleansing is continued on the next page, where the rape of Samira is foreboded through the soldier's remarks that she will 'experience a **man**. A **Serb officer**' (103). The fact that women were often raped repeatedly in specially designed camps is explicated when the persecutor states that the women will be delivered to a camp 'for the pleasure of **others**' (103). Although this speech might be seen as needlessly demonstrative, it adequately captures the symbolic constructions of power and notions of masculinity that underlie sexual violence, as well as shows how derogatory language and verbal abuse are central to the Othering of the victim. Wartime rape is instrumental in constructing masculinities for soldiers in an environment that constantly threatens to undermine that masculinity (Reid-Cunningham 2008, 284) and the text balloons demonstrate how this sexually aggressive 'hyper-masculinity' is constructed. In addition, the remarks also demonstrate that rape does not only take place on a physical level, but also that the dehumanisation of the raped woman is enacted through symbolic language as well.

In terms of visualising the act of rape, Kubert includes a panel that shows a high-angle perspective on the room where the rape of the mother is taking place. In a schematic outline, we see different soldiers in various stages of undressing, indicating how women were often raped by multiple men. The positioning of the bodies also demonstrates that force is involved and that Samira's mother is held down. Here, Kubert does not eschew inserting a visual manifestation of rape, but he limits the conditions of looking through the high-angle perspective and the fact that the characters are drawn as schematic figures, rather than fully detailed individuals.² Although Kubert consciously uses this perspective in order to avoid an overly explicit visual rendering of sexual violence, the angle employed also carries in it the risk of a sense of voyeurism. If, as posited by Joseph Witek, the panelled environment of comics already carries within itself a sense of 'Peeping Tomism' (Witek 1989, 72) – the panel borders function as the visible window frames that allow access onto another world – the high-angle perspective of Kubert's panel further reinforces this notion of being a fly on the wall. Here, we observe a scene of sexual transgression from a viewpoint that implicates, through the perspective of a surveillance camera, an illicit position of looking – one that might, willingly or unwillingly, spark a sense of excitement or titillated shock.

However, Kubert's visual strategy employed here arguably aims to counter direct and explicit representations of rape in favour of an image that does not negate the horrors of sexual violence, but uses literal distance in order to inscribe the scene without having to rely on details. Furthermore, Kubert's strategy of negating explicit imagery is further

established when he switches back to the use of faces to construct the rape narrative, including a panel where the faces of Samira and the perpetrator are brought together in close vicinity. This close-up panel of the two faces works in conjunction with the schematic high-angle panel that depicts the rape of the mother, offering a much more detailed and intimate rendering of Samira's experiences. The contorted faces of both actors, particularly Samira's expression of disgust and resistance, provide a highly visceral and intimate counterpart to the previous panel, while upholding Kubert's strategy of indirect representation that shows but simultaneously also refrains from showing.

It is noteworthy that Kubert uses this close-up panel to switch the style of narration. Where the voice of the Serb perpetrator verbally dominates the previous panels, Kubert inserts Samira's voice in a caption box in the image as she takes over the narration of her own story: 'I could hear my mother's moans. I felt **nothing**. I could only smell the **stink** of the man on top of me' (103). In the preceding panels, the perpetrator's voice captures the methods of intimidation and abuse and verbally stands in for what is not shown visually. By switching to Samira's narrative voice at the most poignant moment of transgression, Kubert inscribes the rape narrative as one that is owned and experienced by Samira, rather than continuing with the omniscient and narratively detached approach that shows how the events unfold in the previous panels. Samira's voice adds a level of embodiment to the rape narrative that is further displayed in the final panel on the page. Here, Samira is shown in the present as she continues narrating her experiences while staring out of the page. She states that she was loaded into a truck with other women, girls, and children, who were 'all with blank, staring eyes' (103). Kubert connects Samira's story to the experiences of other rape victims by drawing the faces of these victims around Samira. These women represent the other women in the truck as mentioned in Samira's story, but the fact that their faces are floating around Samira on the page, and the observation that these women display different emotions – they have blank and staring eyes but their facial expressions also show anger and grief – adds a more metonymical quality to their appearance, as they come to represent the thousands of rape victims of the war. Here, Samira's position as a survivor of the rape camps blends in with the experiences of other victims in order to demonstrate that sexual violence was committed on a large scale.

The interaction between presence and absence thus manifests in the dialogue between the words and images on the page; the observation that rape narratives cause 'textual anxiety' (Higgins and Silver 1991, 3) is visible in Kubert's choice to censor explicit images of the events in favour of an emphasis on the faces of those involved. The visual inscription of sexual violence is consciously limited in order to avoid a misplaced and inappropriate reading of the act of rape – to counteract a certain way of looking – and the focus on the faces of Samira, her mother, and the other women aims to preserve a sense of physical integrity that does not allow their bodies or experiences to become a visual spectacle. Scholarship around the depiction of sexual violence points out that the representation of sexual violence is an inevitable part of the act of rape, as images of rape co-constitute what rape means in contemporary culture (Projansky 2001; 2; Horeck 2004; 81). The danger of inscribing a rape narrative is that the violation is repeated through its representation, effectively causing a second violation. In this repetition of transgression, the spectator's moral

position becomes questionable. Do we, as belated witnesses, become complicit in sexual violence by virtue of looking at these images, particularly when considering that sexual transgression on display might allow for a morally ambiguous consumption? Or, is the cultural representation of sexual violence in the context of war and genocide a necessary feat in order to expose how rape is an instrument of the genocidal mechanism?

In navigating this field of tension, Kubert includes the rape narrative in order to show how it is an instrument of genocide; but, he acknowledges the visual limitations of depicting sexual violence by constructing it as an act that can primarily be read from the faces of the people involved. Where the face of the perpetrator is partly obscured by his cap, Samira's face is more clearly visible, functioning as a physical and emotional marker that guides us through the sequence. There are two panels, positioned at the start and the end of the flashback, which show Samira seated in the present, telling her story while she is staring directly out of the page. This active look, and its repetition over two panels, has a twofold function; it counters a voyeuristic scenario – which is partly enacted by the obscured face of the perpetrator and the high-angle image of rape – because it inscribes the victim's look at the start and end of the narrative, thereby anchoring the experiences as one that is embodied and lived through by the character, and it implicates the reader more clearly as a witness to the events, as Samira's look out of the page is inevitably also directed at us.

In analysing Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), Rebecca Scherr (2015) argues that the artist avoids the visual pitfall of using the singular face as metonym for an entire people, as is often the case in human rights discourses, by using multiple faces and showing a collectivity of experience that prevents an easy and decontextualised consumption of the face of the other (126–127). In contrast to some extent, *Fax from Sarajevo* adheres to this human rights discourse, as it primarily focuses on the image of a singular face in order to avoid a problematic and decontextualised consumption of the rape narrative and the body of the victim. Here, the image of the singular face is inserted to prevent an explicit manifestation of the violations while also firmly anchoring the experience with a victim who has a clear visual identity. However, rather than allowing for an othering of the victim when the face becomes an empty signifier that is detached from lived experiences, the image of Samira is more consciously connected to an active look, so that she is not just someone to be seen but someone who looks back, thereby also countering the extreme close-up of the perpetrator's eyes in the sequence. In addition, Kubert hints at a multiplicity of experience in drawing different faces of rape victims together in the same panel. In this sense, the absence of graphic images of sexual violence works to allow for a more sustained and central presence of the rape survivor and her experiences.

Furthermore, direct language is employed to transfer the brutality of the events in a manner that is perhaps more easily digestible for readers than a confrontation with graphic imagery. Kubert juxtaposes the coarse and misogynistic language spoken by the perpetrator with Samira's distinct, narrative voice and this linguistic contrast between perpetrator and victim further establishes the brutal violation of the events. Where the perpetrator's speech combines explicit vulgarity with contextual information about histories of rape during the Bosnian war, Samira's voice anchors the start and end of the flashback, assigning to her a sense of narrative control. Samira's physical integrity as

preserved by focusing primarily on her face thus works in conjunction with the fact that, within the graphic narrative, she is a named character who narrates her own experiences. This embodiment of the traumatic experience of sexual violence as explored in *Fax from Sarajevo* can be contrasted with other graphic narratives that deal with war and genocide that put forward anonymous and voiceless rape victims, or show how rape is followed by death. Works like Jean-Philippe Stassen's *Deo gratias* (2006), Rupert Bazambanza's *Smile through the Tears* (2007), and Matteo Casali and Kristian Donaldson's *99 Days* (2011), which deal with the Rwandan genocide, and Paolo Cossi's *Medz Yeghern* (2007), which focuses on the Armenian genocide, are visibly grappling with the same tensions surrounding the visualisation of rape in stories that confront the destructive effects of mass violence. In these works, the absence of the rape narrative is partly inscribed through the anonymity of the victim and/or the lack of an individual voice when rape leads to death. In contrast, Kubert's story assertively positions Samira as an eyewitness with a distinct identity and a clear narrative voice.³ The question of who speaks is instrumental in the construction of a rape narrative (Higgins and Silver 1991, 1) and Kubert oscillates between affirming the voice of the perpetrator as a means to convey the horrors of the event, while also using the testimonial qualities of Samira's speech to assign to her a sense of control. However, the question of who speaks can also be extended to include Kubert-as-author, who is effectively speaking/drawing for Samira. Notwithstanding the artist's aim to convey the traumatic experiences in a respectful and considerate manner, the question surfaces whether a male author ultimately, however unwittingly, places the inscription of the rape narrative in recurring patriarchal structures.⁴

The interaction between inscription and elision that takes place on a formal level can also be traced on a narrative level, by taking into account how the sequence operates within the overall storyline. Although Kubert spends a fair amount of panels on Samira's story, the sequence stands out as a narratively detached episode that does not engage with the long-lasting effects of sexual violence. Just as quickly as Samira enters the story, stating that she did not know where to turn for help, she leaves the Rustemagic family after relating her experiences, with a confusing remark that she only came by to warn the family, and that she has family to go to. This narrative disconnection between Samira's sequence, who quickly enters and leaves the story, and the rest of the storyline positions the rape narrative as one that is shocking and painful, but easily dismissed in the overall arch of the narrative. The central story of *Fax from Sarajevo* is ostensibly not about sexual violence; it focuses on the Rustemagic family and their attempts to get out of Sarajevo, with Ervin as the central action-driven character. In contrast to the depiction of the members of the family unit, who we see confronted with a variety of situations, Samira does not transcend her status as a rape survivor. There is a particularly marked contrast between Ervin and Samira. Where Ervin is a clear protagonist with a well-developed character that is articulated through a range of emotions and actions, Samira's experience with sexual violence is what defines her presence in the graphic novel, effectively reducing her identity to a single marker. The consequence of this narrative inscription and simultaneous elision is that Kubert presents Samira as a marginal figure whose story is positioned as a peripheral effect of the conflict. This marginalisation of Samira's story can be seen as another dimension of the patriarchal structure that underlies Kubert's graphic novel. The central narrative

quite literally presents the family patriarch as main agent and driving force, while the story of sexual violence directed against women is side-lined and contained in a single chapter. Furthermore, the tension between confronting the historical reality of sexual violence but not wanting to extend the rape narrative or its narrative ramifications within the overall narrative arch means that, in some ways, the position of the rape sequence mirrors the longstanding misconception of sexual violence as a side effect of war, rather than a defining act of the genocidal mechanism.

However, Kubert manages to refer to the long-lasting effects of rape in subtler ways. When Samira is introduced by Edina as her friend, she briefly refers to the impact of the events, and the cultural position of rape survivors, by stating that she is ashamed (again, Kubert focuses on her distraught and tearful face in a close-up panel). As pointed out by various scholars, a consequence of surviving rape can mean that the woman carries the stigma and shame of being a rape survivor, as her sexual purity and symbolic position linked to honour and womanhood are tarnished. This affects familial relationships and community structures and can lead to the 'second rape' of rejection by the woman's family and society (Thomas and Ralph 1999; 210; Reid-Cunningham 2008; 285; Sharlach 2000; 96, 101). The effects of the violation are poignantly vocalised by Samira when she states that 'It – it was **horrible**, Edina. Worse than **dying**' (100). On the one hand, this statement works as a portent that prepares the readers for the flashback that follows, and on the other hand, in conjunction with Samira's confession of shame, it suggests the long-lasting effects of the rape experienced. If the device of the flashback implies 'how trauma returns and imposes itself upon the subject' (Horeck 2004, 105), the framing of the rape sequence as Samira's traumatic memory further adds to the temporal awareness that the events have a destructive impact on those involved. In this way, Samira's story echoes beyond its inscription in the chapter because it presumes a timeline that is extended beyond the events depicted.

This narrative echoing can also be traced in two brief references to rape earlier in the work. In a brief cutaway from the main narrative, Kubert shows how a Muslim family – they remain anonymous – is raided and assaulted by Serb soldiers, who take the daughter of the family away (21). At another point in the narrative, Kubert again employs the strategy of briefly moving away from the story of the Rustemagic family to incorporate historical context by including four inset panels that provide more background information to the conflict. One of these panels references the atrocities directed against women; the image, rendered in dark tones, shows a group of four soldiers in profile while superimposed on the background we see the shadowy outlines of a soldier grabbing a woman by the wrist (47). These references to sexual violence demonstrate Kubert's effort to extend the inscription of the rape narrative beyond Samira's story, while taking pains not to linger on the details of the transgression.

This echoing of the main rape narrative also takes place in a more implicit manner through the presence of Edina Rustemagic. The abovementioned brief references to rape are both visually framed by panels that feature Edina, and her position in the vicinity of these references functions as a reminder that she too could fall victim to sexual violence. The page preceding the sequence that shows the raid of the Muslim family features a panel with the Rustemagic family watching Milosevic on television talking about the subjugation of the Serbs at the hands of the Muslims and Croats. In the large final panel at the bottom of the page, Edina brings her hand towards her face

in a gesture of worry and fear. An insert shows Ervin in close-up while he states that ‘now terror will strike without the fear of reprisal’ (20). In the second example, the inset panel with the shadowy figures is superimposed on a large vertical panel that shows a crying Edina as she expresses her feelings of guilt for wanting to stay in Sarajevo. Again, she is drawn with her hands to her face and a tear on her cheek.

In both cases, Edina’s position on the page – near the (anonymous) rape references – as well as the ominous quality of both Ervin’s prediction and Edina’s statement contribute to the unspoken suggestion that terrible things could happen to the family, including (as the following panels show in both examples) sexual violence. This threat is of course conveyed more explicitly in the chapter depicting the rape camp. Furthermore, Edina’s vulnerability is articulated through her physique, as she is often depicted in melodramatic poses; she is drawn as an attractive woman whose features are reminiscent of an inter-war, stylised, and classical Hollywood appearance. In addition, in the majority of the panels in which she is present, Edina is drawn alongside her children, something that not only emphasises her role as a caring mother but also adds to a sense of fragility. Edina’s presence is layered; she is the caring and worried wife and mother, the motivation for Ervin’s actions, but she also functions as a haunting reminder that rape is a frequent occurrence and that she too could be subjected to sexual violence.

The panels that reference rape and Edina’s position as a reminder of the danger of rape both carry a tension between presence and absence. The panels not only confront the topic of sexual violence, but also elide it through a paucity of panels and a lack of interaction with the victims and the aftermath. In the case of Edina, Kubert emphasises her vulnerability and connects it to instances of rape, but does so in an implicit manner. However, these echoes of sexual violence work in conjunction with Samira’s story in ‘The Rape Camp’ and display a more consistent effort to inscribe and expose the topic of sexual violence in war.

Excessive rape narratives and elements of spectacle

The interaction between inscription and elision as proposed by *Fax from Sarajevo*, and the ways in which the graphic novel takes responsibility for the rape narrative, can be better understood when taking into account the wider cultural discourse of excessive visual depictions of rape and sexualised violence, particularly in the context of the Holocaust. The fusion of sex and violence has informed (early) cultural representations of the Holocaust, as the appeal of using the setting of systematic mass violence to explore sexual and moral transgressions finds an expression in a range of texts. Early examples of ‘Holokitsch’ (a term coined by Art Spiegelman, pointing to notions of excess and sentimentalisation in the construction of Holocaust narratives) include Ka-Tzetnik’s 1953 novel *House of Dolls*, which presents a ‘bizarre and startling mixture of kitsch, sadism, and what initially appears as outright pornography, with remarkable and at times quite devastating insights into the reality of Auschwitz’ (Bartov 1997a, 46) and the Stalags pulp novels that were primarily published in Israel in the 1960s, in which the Holocaust functions as a setting of sexual domination and torture between sadistic and nymphomaniac female SS guards and Allied soldiers (see Pinchevski and Brand 2007). In a cinematic context, the Nazisploitation genre – with films like *Love Camp 7* (Lee

Frost 1969) and *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds 1975) – aims to titillate and shock by presenting a purposefully spectacular fusion of sex and violence that combines elements of voyeurism, body horror, and pornography (see Rapaport 2003; Koven 2004; Magilow, Vander Lugt, and Bridges 2012). In addition, the Italian ‘sadiconazista’ (Stiglegger 1999; Stiglegger 2012) films from the 1970s – including titles like Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974) – rely on sexual perversity, theatricality, and (inverted) relations of sexual domination in order to engage with the memory of fascism. In contrast to the Nazisploitation genre, this group of films has been theorised as more self-reflexive and critical in its use of kitsch and excess (Ravetto 2001; Stiglegger 1999; 2012).

What these cultural texts share is a repeated (visual) emphasis on shocking and transgressive scenes of sexual violence in the context of war and mass violence. Although there are arguably varying degrees of critical and reflexive interaction with the use of rape as a visual and narrative device between the texts, the abovementioned examples all employ the excess of transgressive and violent sexual practices to deal with the Holocaust. This use of rape as a titillating device is not limited to the cultural margins of illicit novels, exploitation films, and arthouse shock, as mainstream Hollywood films like Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) have been criticised for scenes that inappropriately sexualise female bodies of Holocaust victims and invite viewers to align with the perpetrators (see for instance the *Village Voice* roundtable 1994; Hansen 1996; Horowitz 1997; Bartov 1997b; Picart and Frank 2004; Picart and Frank 2006). Overall, these texts forcefully suggest that ‘[t]here is an inherent problem with presenting rape as part of ‘entertainment’ even if the form of entertainment is capable of offering complex negotiations of gender and power’ (Jowett 229). What is deemed to be problematic about these excessive representations of rape is that they can offer a decontextualised interaction with histories of atrocity that uses the setting of mass violence and destruction to engage in a variety of transgressive stories, rather than providing an accurate and respectful treatment of the sensitive topic. Furthermore, the representation of rape can result in a second violation of the (fictional or non-fictional) victim, who is forced to relive the traumatic experiences in order to inform the audience and/or whose experiences and body become subjected to cultural mechanisms that can be exploitative. Finally, in addition to the portrayal of sexual violence in the context of war and genocide, the recurrence of rape as a plot device in contemporary culture also demonstrates the ‘versatility and ubiquity of rape narratives’ (Projansky 2001, 7). Rape as a (gratuitous) plot device has historically operated in a range of texts, including comics⁵, and with a variety of functions – contributing to its ubiquitous presence and simultaneous absence.

The negotiation of presence and absence in Kubert’s rape narrative is informed by this cultural backdrop of excessive images of sexual violence. I have primarily highlighted cinematic texts here because they form an important frame of reference, as (scholarly) discussions around (in)appropriate and excessive depictions of sexual violence in the context of the Holocaust have often centred on film. It is more than likely that (discussions around the) representations of the Holocaust inform the work of comic artists who deal with other instances of war and genocide. As a Jewish artist, Kubert’s work has certainly reflected his awareness of, and preoccupation with, the Holocaust and ‘the capacity for evil in men’ (Schelly 2008, 154).⁶ In contrast to the

sexualised discourse of Holocaust texts, particularly those examples that unapologetically employ rape as a titillating and spectacular narrative device, Kubert's rape sequence consciously steers clear from this type of visual and narrative framing by demonstrating a more thoughtful consideration of what is acceptable and defensible to include when dealing with sexual violence.

However, this does not mean that Kubert completely shies away from using elements of spectacle in dealing with Samira's story. The first marker of a sense of excess is the chapter's title 'The Rape Camp', which carries an element of ominous spectacle that stands out in the list of chapter headings (other titles are more clearly descriptive, like 'Ervin Returns to Sarajevo', 'The Birthday Party', and 'Attempt to Cross the Airport'). This portentous use of language conforms to the perpetrator's speech in the sequence, which similarly works to set up the scene of the violation. Words are rendered in bold to emphasise their content; this is a stylistic device that is used in many comic books (and throughout Kubert's oeuvre), and it arguably loses its poignancy as readers are used to the convention. However, in the context of the rape narrative the boldly lettered words and phrases, both those of the perpetrator and Samira, emphasise the transgression of the events while also, in conveying these transgressions, instilling a sense of spectacle.

In addition, Kubert's drawing style, reminiscent of his war comics, posits a sense of excess through the use of bold and colourful onomatopoeia and hyperbolic explosions. The biographical elements of the graphic novel intermingle with Kubert's visual repertoire, as the rendering of Ervin as a square-jawed, imposing figure resembles the character of Sgt. Rock, while, as mentioned before, Edina's rendering is reminiscent of a classical Hollywood look (the photographs of the Rustemagic family at the end of narrative demonstrate that Kubert has not opted for a photorealistic style in the depiction of his characters). A further example of how the drawing style engages a sense of spectacle is in the depiction of the unadulterated evil of the Serbian perpetrator, which is visually and verbally emphasised by his (obscured) appearance, menacing smile, use of excessive force, and explicit language: all of these elements echo the use of the evil Nazi figure in many WWII and Holocaust representations (including war comics like *Sgt. Rock*). These Nazi figures are characterised by their cold, sadistic demeanour and unconstrained immorality and these extraordinary evil characteristics are often further enhanced by an explicit preference for sexual sadism (see Petley 2010; Kerner 2011; Magilow, Vander Lugt, and Bridges 2012). Kubert perhaps has fewer qualms when using these elements of excess because he employs them in a storyline that deals with historical atrocities but (seemingly) does not rely on an actual witness. This means that Kubert can heighten certain visual and verbal elements in order to convey the severity of the events without having to take into account the personal ramifications of displaying the story.

To assume that these elements of excess are by default aiming for (inappropriate) titillation and shock (a presumption that underlies the use of the term *Holokitsch* and often informs the critical work done on excessive Holocaust texts) would forego the opportunity to consider the ways in which these elements of spectacle can provide a productive interaction with the rape narrative. Hillary Chute argues that graphic narratives 'engage the difficulty of spectacle instead of turning away from it', thereby 'risking representation' (Chute 2016, 17). Kubert engages with the difficulty of

representing rape by finding a form that uses elements of excess while also refraining from extending these elements into a prolonged visual spectacle. *Fax from Sarajevo* risks representation by actively inscribing Samira's story as a rape narrative rather than using tentative allusions or complete silence/absence. The chapter title does not allow for any ambiguities about the content of the chapter, and this is further established by the visual and verbal evidences provided in the sequence. The use of a clearly evil perpetrator adheres to a stark binary logic, but it ultimately ensures there is no question or ambiguity about the nature of the violation or who is the violator/violated (as is often the case in the transgressive depictions of rape in the context of the Holocaust, as well as in other contexts). At the same time, Kubert's sequence displays a keen awareness of the pitfalls of excessive representations of rape in the context of mass violence. This awareness underlies Kubert's elements of elision; his use of stand-in language and focus on the faces of the actors involved suggest an indirection of representation that is better suited to the subject matter, and in keeping Samira's story as a separate narrative sequence Kubert aims to circumvent the use (and exploitation) of sexual violence as a main plot device.

In conclusion, *Fax from Sarajevo*'s construction of the rape narrative is characterised by a negotiation with presence and absence; Kubert aims to counter the pitfalls of excessive representations of sexual violence without resorting to a language of complete restraint and silence. Rather than seeing this tension between inscription and elision as one that harmfully shifts between the poles of invisibility and overexposure – so that sexual violence is either hypervisible or completely effaced – it is more productive to consider how the two incentives, showing and not showing, constantly and subtly interact. In the case of *Fax from Sarajevo*, it is the continuous negotiation between presence and absence that lends the rape sequence a sense of gravity, as it engages in representation while also visibly struggling with the implications of this choice. This negotiation takes place on different levels in the graphic narrative, and in navigating this visual, narrative, and cultural tension without decidedly choosing one incentive over the other, *Fax from Sarajevo* exposes some of the representational considerations at work in dealing with sexual violence. Rather than primarily viewing the interaction between presence and absence as one of the 'disturbing patterns' (Higgins and Silver 1991, 2) of the representation of sexual violence, it is thus important to also consider how this dual incentive can be used to take moral responsibility for the content of the rape narrative. Both the presence and absence speak, and it is in their particular dialogue that the rape narrative manifests itself as a contentious topic of representation. In the end, Kubert uses elements of spectacle and excess to inscribe Samira's experiences as violent and traumatic and to clearly position her as a victim of genocide, while the sequence simultaneously shows an awareness of the problems of visualising rape by consciously using absence and elision.

Notes

1. When including quotations from the graphic narrative, I provide page numbers, rather than repeating the author's name and the year of publication. I will render these quotations as faithfully as possible, so when words are highlighted in bold for emphasis – which is often the case in Kubert's work – I will use bold text as well. However, rather than using caps throughout, like Kubert, I relay his text in lower case writing.

2. This strategy of 'schematising' characters in order to avoid an overly explicit rendering of atrocity also returns in Kubert's *Yossel* (2003).
3. This use of the rape victim as distinct, narrative witness is echoed in Joe Sacco's (2001) *Safe Area Goražde*, in which witness Munira shares her experiences in a hospital Foca, where women were taken away by Serb soldiers to be raped.
4. *Fax from Sarajevo* constructs the rape narrative, and the 'perpetrator/victim binary' (Gunne and Thompson 2010, 3) along the conventional, and recurring, gendered lines. This is of course motivated by the fact that women were the primary victims of sexual violence during the war in the Balkans. However, the notion of a perpetrator/victim binary places attention on the extent to which other stories of sexual violence are obscured. For instance, Joe Sacco's 'The War Crimes Trials' and 'Trauma on Loan', published in *Journalism* (2012), complement existing war rape narratives by exploring how men became victims of sexual violence.
5. In a comics context, this ubiquity and versatility of rape as a (gratuitous) plot device has been noted by Gail Simone's *Women in Refrigerators* website. Also see the discussions on the use of excessive and/or gratuitous sexual violence in work by authors like Robert Crumb and Alan Moore (e.g. Sneddon 2011; Polak 2013; O'Connor 2017).
6. In *Fax from Sarajevo*, the position of the Holocaust as a historical reference point features in the publisher's paratext, as the inside cover text reads: 'In 1945, we told the world, "Never again." In 1992, we forgot our promise' (n.p.).

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Notes on contributor

Laurike in 't Veld holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chichester (2016). She is a lecturer at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication and a research associate at the Center for Historical Culture, Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her current research focuses on representations of genocide in graphic narratives and she is more broadly interested in non-fictional comics, the representation of mass violence and genocide in popular culture, and discourses around (Holo)kitsch.

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