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## RESEARCH

# Graphic Backgrounds: Collective Dissociative Trauma in Rutu Modan's *Exit Wounds* (2007)

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This article explores how Rutu Modan's graphic novel *Exit Wounds* (2007) uses background art to provide richer insights into both the existential fear of complete annihilation experienced by many Israelis during The Second Intifada, and the inability of numerous Israelis to confront this fear directly. Drawing on comics studies, trauma studies, and Israel-Palestine studies the article examines markers of trauma, pulsating in plain sight yet hidden against a foreground of normality. In these backgrounds, recurring references to terror work to juxtapose the pretense of normalcy in the main narrative. By identifying repetitions of a common theme 'braided' throughout the illustrations, the reader has the potential to experience a supplementary affect outside of the narrative continuity of the work. The text simultaneously expresses a reticence to tell and a desire to show—rewarding close readings with a deeper understanding of the dissociative trauma that permeates Modan's Israel.

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**Keywords:** Braiding; Graphic Novels; Collective Memory; Israel-Palestine; Trauma

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## Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been explored through a variety of lenses in comics, ranging from travelogue, to memoir, to comics journalism (Delisle 2012; Abdelrazaq 2015; Sacco 2003). The emotional nature of the conflict and the visceral quality of its images have resulted in correspondingly dramatic portrayals in many of these works. Unlike these graphic life narratives, Rutu Modan's *Exit Wounds* (2007) is a graphic novel mystery set against the backdrop of The Second Intifada, a period from 2000-2005 marked by increased tensions and violence between Israelis and Palestinians, during which terrorist attacks directed against Israeli civilians became

commonplace. In the comic book, Koby Franco, an Israeli taxicab driver, discovers that his father Gabriel may have been the victim of a suicide bombing. Numi, an Israeli soldier, convinces Koby to embark on a fact-finding mission to determine if his father is alive. Despite this dramatic premise, Modan's illustrations avoid vivid depictions of violence, and the text eschews direct references to terrorism or The Second Intifada. The characters in *Exit Wounds* treat the idea of death with an emotional numbness, not allowing loss to distract them from their day-to-day routines. However, reading the background art closely in *Exit Wounds* reveals markers of trauma pulsating throughout the comic. In these backgrounds, recurring references to terror work to juxtapose the pretense of normalcy in the main narrative. These backgrounds have the potential to provide richer insights into both the existential fear of complete annihilation<sup>1</sup> experienced by many Israelis during The Second Intifada, and the inability of numerous Israelis to confront this fear directly.

In order to appreciate Modan's work in context this paper asks the following research questions: How can we apply the psychological framework of trauma studies to better appreciate how disassociation and numbness functions in Modan's Israel? Are these traumatic expressions universal or distinct to the Israeli context? In what ways can comics represent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that are unique to the medium? By exploring these questions, we discover a text that simultaneously expresses a reticence to tell and a desire to show—rewarding close readings with a deeper understanding of the dissociative trauma that permeates Modan's Israel.

This article offers a clinical exploration of the type of dissociative trauma being expressed in *Exit Wounds*, the symptoms specific to this type of trauma and examples of its expression throughout the text. Exploring the literary devices unique to comics, this work applies Thierry Groensteen's scholarship on 'braiding' to unpack how sequential repetition offers readers a potential affect that is supplementary to

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<sup>1</sup> Israeli sociologists identify The Second Intifada as a collective trauma, marking a psychological return to an Israeli sense of self-victimization. Almost all Israeli Jews surveyed at this time (92%) felt, "afraid or very afraid that they or their family members would be hurt by terror" and a strong majority (85.5%) believed that, "ongoing terror attacks might cause a strategic and even existential threat to the State of Israel" (Bar-Tal et al. 2010: 90–91).

the main narrative. Lastly, the importance of Israel's national sociology is incorporated in the critical analysis of the comic. By understanding Israeli society as one constantly engaged in a nation building project that rejects passionate displays of emotion, the trauma in the comic can be appreciated in a context that is simultaneously individually universal, and yet geographically particular.

### **The Dissociation of Koby Franco**

While discussing the representation of trauma in comics Dominic Davies remarks on the scope of a field "that has migrated across histories, geographies, and disciplines, morphing, modulating, and adapting at every turn" (Davies & Rifkind 2020: 1). Drawing upon the work of fellow comics scholar Kate Polak, Davies emphasizes that in the case of comics trauma is affective, "built into the readerly encounter" (2). The ability of comics to represent trauma affectively has become a canonical staple of the field inasmuch as comics studies and trauma studies "are bound up in one another's genealogies, locked in a mutually constituting and continually symbiotic relationship with no clean beginning or end" (9). Based on the breadth of representations of the traumatic in comics it is prudent to be specific about exactly what we *mean* by trauma in the clinical sense before unpacking how representations of this particular trauma function to produce an affective encounter within *Exit Wounds*.

In *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Chronic Traumatization* (2006), Onno van der Hart and his colleagues explore trauma as an emotional wound that stems from experiences the subject is unable to process at the time they occur. *The Haunted Self* stresses that symptoms of trauma are not always demonstrated through extreme emotions such as anger or fear, but alternatively through structural disassociation. In other words, dissociative trauma implies the co-existence of two parts of the personality, one concerned with living everyday life, and the other with avoiding traumatic memory. As such, those experiencing structural dissociation may present a façade of normalcy on the surface, while at the same time undergoing emotional numbness, and a subjective detachment from reality (Hart et al. 2006: 48). In *Exit Wounds*, Modan represents the nuanced reality of dissociative trauma through her portrayal of Jewish Israelis living through The Second

Intifada. On the surface, life seems to continue as usual, despite the prevalence of suicide bombing attacks. Characters go about their day-to-day routines in a manner that appears surprisingly unaffected by the volatile political conditions and spontaneous violence of the region. At the beginning of the narrative, Koby is informed that his father may have been killed in a bombing at the Hadera Central Bus Station (Modan 2007: 17). Koby's mother is previously deceased, and he is estranged from his father. His closest—albeit perpetually strained—relationships are between his aunt Ruthie, his uncle Aryeh, and his sister Orly, who lives in New York. When Koby hears about the potential death of his father, with whom he has not spoken in years, he calls his sister from the apartment of his aunt and uncle to see if she can shed light on the situation (21). Modan juxtaposes the severity of the possible loss with the matter-of-fact way the characters respond to it. In Tel Aviv, Koby paces back and forth on the phone, while his uncle complains to his aunt about the soup they are having for dinner— and she in turn complains about his inconsistent palate. In New York, a disinterested Orly attempts to extricate herself from the conversation as soon as possible (**Figure 1**). She feigns busyness, while pictured eating cereal and reading *The New York Times* in a bathrobe (21). At first glance, the entire scene speaks to the communal indifference the family feels towards violence. Despite the imminent possibility of discovering death, life, with all its day-to-day mundanities, its



**Figure 1:** Potential Death and Normalcy in *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan, 2007: 21. © 2007 Drawn & Quarterly – Rutu Modan.

questionable soup, morning coffee, and the ritual perusing of the daily newspaper continues unabated.

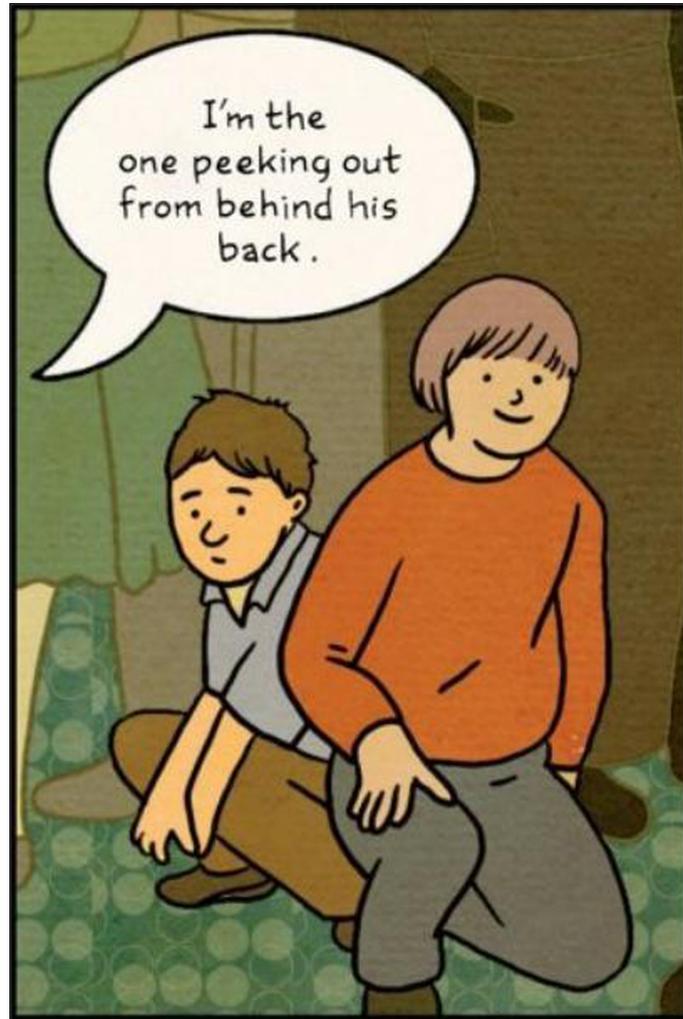
Interestingly, this sequence shows the unaddressed trauma of violent death as visibly present, yet hidden in the background, where its significance is overshadowed by the action in the foreground. In the background of the kitchen there is a framed photograph of Tulik, the son of Ruthie and Aryeh, smiling in his army uniform. Over these four pages, the portrait appears in ten separate panels. In eight of these panels, the portrait is obscured, either by characters standing in front of it, or by speech balloons indicating dialogue figuratively talking over it (**Figure 2**). The portrait is only clearly visible in the first and last panels of the sequence, where Koby, who has received neither confirmation nor denial of his father's survival, glances towards it and is momentarily lost for words. Above Koby, a single speech balloon reads, "um..." (25). At this stage in the narrative, the portrait is not accompanied by identifying text, and Modan offers no visual clues as to whom it depicts. Only later,



**Figure 2:** Obscured Representations of Trauma in *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan, 2007: 22. © 2007 Drawn & Quarterly – Rutu Modan.

in the second section of the comic, "My Travels With The Giraffe," when Koby and Numi are reminiscing over a family photograph from Koby's past, do we learn that Ruthie and Areyeh had a son, Tulik who was killed in the war in Lebanon (66). This new information acts to change the meaning of the portrait in retrospect. Like many Jewish Israelis, Koby exists simultaneously in the everyday, but also in the unspeakable, and unaddressed shadow of death. Once the reader becomes aware that Tulik has been killed in the conflict, a recursive reading allows a new appreciation of the role that Tulik's portrait plays as a visual commemoration of a war martyr, without anyone ever explicitly saying the words 'war' or 'martyr.' For readers, this new information may provide a retrospective meaning to the repetitions of Tulik's portrait in the previous background imagery; it immerses readers into a world that constantly alludes to death, but never overtly engages with it.

Even when Modan identifies Tulik as both Koby's only cousin and a fatality of war, his death is never treated as exceptional, or expounded upon by the characters. Tulik is only mentioned once in the narrative by Koby, when he corrects Numi, who has mistaken Tulik for Koby in a family photograph. Upon realizing Numi's mistake Koby explains, "that's Tulik, Ruthie and Aryeh's son. He was killed in Lebanon" (66). Koby's tone is matter-of-fact, and the event is left as such. Numi does not offer condolences. Koby does not offer further explanation, and he concludes by describing the photo with a single sentence: "I'm the one peeking out from behind his back" (66). Koby's statement says nothing, and yet alludes to everything. In *The Haunted Self*, Hart et al. identify the phenomena of being "fixated in trying to go on with normal life" as a common symptom of structural disassociation in the acutely traumatized (Hart et al. 2006: 5). Modan illustrates this insistence on trying to press on with the ordinary, coupled with the inability to move beyond unaddressed trauma in the photograph of the two cousins. In a close-up panel, Koby and Tulik are depicted as children. Koby is pictured crouched, peeking out from behind the back of his late relation (66). Drawn in the same position as a shadow, he is looking out past Tulik, literally in the shadow of death and looking beyond it (**Figure 3**). The everydayness with which these Jewish Israelis treat death is reflected in both the photograph of Koby glancing out from behind Tulik, and by the portrait of Tulik that is perpetually



**Figure 3:** Koby Peering Out from the Shadow of Death in *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan, 2007: 66. © 2007 Drawn & Quarterly – Rutu Modan.

obscured, alluding to a societally normalized worldview of looking around, yet never into death.

### **Benumbing Backgrounds & Stupliminal Signposting**

Modan's portrayal of Tulik as a symbol of death, to which characters continually do not respond, creates an affect that is simultaneously startling and banal. A keen memory, or a second reading, would allow a reader to deduce Tulik's role as a recurring and yet unaddressed representation of death and precarity. His portrait and

photograph take on the role of memorials, unmentioned reminders of the proximity of death in an unstable political climate. When Modan later reveals the identity of Tulik, and the nature of his violent death, his function as a background image while Koby inarticulately mumbles “um...” (25), holds new meaning. In *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Sianne Ngai discusses stuplimity, an emotional state where boredom and astonishment paradoxically coexist (271). Ngai explores mechanisms that other writers have used to produce the effect of stuplimity, including, “a drastic slowdown of language, a rhetorical enactment of its fatigue...uncomfortably prolonged through a proliferation of precise inexactitudes” (255). Ngai asserts that enacting this slowdown of language expresses “the theme of survival and endurance in the wake of a traumatic loss” (255). Modan accomplishes the emotional tone of stuplimity through the aforementioned verbal slowdown. Koby’s inability to articulately express himself is indicative of a structural disassociation; he is unable to process or address the reality of death and the devastating potential of loss. The image of Tulik hangs over this interaction, a visual representation of unaddressed trauma, of which the verbal slowdown is merely a symptom (**Figure 4**).

Tulik’s image reappears throughout the comic book and, despite being obscured, is still recognizable. The portrait’s repetition speaks to the truth of trauma theorist Cathy Caruth’s declaration that, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (Caruth 1995: 4–5). Tulik is a recurring image, one that possess the reader who integrates the background meanings into the foreground action. Achieving this recognition allows readers the potential to experience Ngai’s stuplimity. Because Tulik’s image continues to recur throughout the text, though not in a spectacular, or visceral way, it begins to signify numbness, as characters in the comic refuse to engage with, or unpack the representation of death it embodies. Koby’s “umm...” is a non-word, a stand in, a verbal expression of being unable to express. Modan shows, but does not tell—rejecting overt emotional signposts, such as the use of textboxes in these sections allows readers space to digest the text’s stupliminal tone. Surprisingly, Ngai reminds us that, “the loss of strong links in the text paradoxically strengthens an affective link between text and reader, transferring the text’s



**Figure 4:** A Drastic Slowdown of Language in *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan, 2007: 67. © 2007 Drawn & Quarterly – Rutu Modan.

stupor to him or her” (257). The same affect is achieved by Modan through Koby’s stilted dialogue. Rather than simply viewing Koby’s disassociation, readers who pay careful attention to the text’s backgrounds and context are rewarded with another level of insight into the socio-political and cultural contexts of the primary narrative. Modan’s backgrounds work in conjunction with the main story to historicize, contextualize, and provide an affective window into the numbing and dissociation enacted by Koby and his family.

### **Truth in Sequence: Repetition and Affectless Affect**

In addition to individual trauma, Modan’s backgrounds provide rich insights into the societal numbness that permeates her fictional Israel that would be unattainable in other media. In *The System of Comics* (2009), Thierry Groensteen writes, “the comics image, whose meaning often remains open when it is presented as isolated (and without verbal anchorage), finds its truth in the sequence” (114). Modan’s illustrations of public space are replete with imagery of societal demands for normalcy that

gain currency through Groensteen's sequential repetition. These omnipresent signifiers remind characters in the comic book of the expectation of normality during abnormal circumstances, acting to force violence into the realm of the quotidian. In "The Art of Braiding (2016)," Groensteen looks at how comics panels are constantly in conversation with each other. Through identifying repetitions of a common theme within the illustrations, the reader has the potential to experience a "special effect," a supplementary affect outside of the narrative continuity of the work. Groensteen refers to this phenomenon as 'braiding' (93–94). In *Exit Wounds*, Modan's backgrounds feature references to the intense group social pressures that contribute to the individual numbness of Koby and his family that are not addressed directly by the dialogue or supporting text of the comic. Although some of these allusions may require contextual background or close reading to elucidate their meaning, Groensteen stresses how braiding is never necessary for the comprehensibility of the main narrative, but instead serves to enhance the meaning of the work; in this case, it increases the resonance of the comic's trauma for the reader (94). Correspondingly, attention to Modan's use of braiding creates an opportunity for readers to experience an affective window into the numbness and stupor that are essential psychological characteristics of many of the Israelis depicted by Modan, expanding the frame from individual structural disassociation to a broader societal numbness. Will Eisner writes that in sequential art, "the reader absorbs mood and other abstracts through the artwork" (Eisner 2008: 150). When done effectively, "there is a psychic transmission present... It carries the story's emotional charge to the reader" (Eisner 2008: 153). Contextualizing this 'emotional charge' Matt Reingold emphasizes that the Israel depicted in *Exit Wounds* is "a place where violence is already a known and accepted reality and it is therefore relegated to the background" (Reingold 2020: 2). By representing her lived experience in a fictional context "Modan is able to more directly address how terror affects those who have become habituated to it alongside the subtler ways that war is corrosive for a society" (2). Through braiding, Modan's backgrounds are constantly at work to create this affectless affect, both in the subtext of the actions of individual characters, but also through societal signposting, finding

small ways to signal the banality of trauma and its numbing effects on the reader and making them an active participant in the text's emotional non-participation.

While in search of the identity of the unknown bombing victim, Koby and Numi stop for lunch at a roadside restaurant. The driving force of *Exit Wounds* is the narrative tension of not knowing whether Gabriel is alive or dead. The flippant manner in which Koby seeks to determine whether his Schrödingeresque<sup>2</sup> father is deceased makes potential space for readers to reevaluate how Modan's Israelis perceive death and dying. The act of stopping for lunch is illustrated as banal, and it is accompanied by dialogue casually addressing the suicide bombing attack, both working together to strip the sequence of any feeling of urgency. Numi states pragmatically, "at the time of the bombing there were seven people in the station cafeteria. Five were killed" (64). Pictured slouched backwards in a disinterested posture, Koby replies "including our mystery man" (64). In turn Numi remarks, "and two survived" (64). The matter-of-fact mathematical nature of the conversation coupled with the routine body language of a mundane excursion work together to portray indifference as Koby's dominant emotional response towards death. Greice Schneider explores the techniques cartoonists can use to create the impression of boredom, such as illustrations depicting the body at rest, featuring "an absence of movement," and, "a minimalist economy of gestures" (Schneider 2016: 103). Coupled with repetition, these images of lethargy help convey a sense of apathy. During the restaurant lunch break, Koby's body language is static. He is drawn seated and reclined, with his shoulders slumped, an arm resting on the table (**Figure 5**). The empty coffee cups and uncleared dirty dishes recur across the sequence, slowing time and establishing the scene as motionless and quotidian (**Figure 5**). This indifference towards death is also reflected and reinforced at a societal level through the newspaper on the table displaying portraits of the suicide bombing fatalities (Modan 2007: 64). Directly below the deceased, the paper displays an advertisement for a "CRAZY SALE" (64). Modan's

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<sup>2</sup> The infamous thought experiment by Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger in which a living being existing in a state of possible mortal danger remains simultaneously alive and dead (Schrödinger 1980).



**Figure 5:** Everyday Death and Boredom in *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan, 2007: 64.  
© 2007 Drawn & Quarterly – Rutu Modan.

newspaper advertisement draws attention to a culture where there is a blurred separation between the sacrosanctity of death and day-to-day consumerism. A culture that can memorialize the victims of terrorism while at the same time selling furniture displays a particularly cavalier attitude towards violence. This scene recalls Susan Sontag's discussion of the ethics of representing conflict in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), where she remarks with surprise at the inclusion of advertisements alongside war photographs in a 1937 edition of *Life*, calling the combination "not just bizarre but curiously dated now" (33). In Modan's Israel the same phenomenon is remarkably unremarkable.

## Trauma in Context: The Israeli Condition

Koby's stilted emotional range is emblematic of a common and societally reinforced response to violence and loss in contemporary Israel. Unlike other countries, Israel's borders lack international recognition, and the status of its security is constantly perceived as uncertain by its populace (Amar-Dahl 2016: 2). The battle for international legitimacy and an ongoing national statehood project dominate Israeli social, military, and civil culture (Amar Dahl 2016: 2). As such, a national culture of bereavement has existed since the foundation of the State and manifests itself in a way that supports the Israeli national project. In "The Panopticon of Death" (2011), Udi Lebel examines the role that social pressures play in regulating Israeli reactions to loss. He postulates that, "in everything pertaining to coping with trauma in general, and loss more particularly, the individual is 'trapped' within a political psychology that enforces the institutional dominance on his or her ostensibly intimate and private response" (363). This political psychology is nationalist in spirit, rejecting impassioned responses to death while prizing emotional restraint (Lebel 2011: 358). Modan braids background imagery throughout the text to reinforce this nationalistically mandated societal numbness. The newspaper advertisement that accompanies the obituaries of the dead acts to underwrite Koby's indifference, but also to reveal that his emotions are linked to the society in which he lives. In the above sequence, Numi brings Koby up-to-speed on her sleuthing of the final victim's identity, while he slouches disinterestedly at the table. Having phoned one of the blast's survivors, Numi informs Koby, "I called him. He doesn't remember seeing Gabriel" (64). In the following panel, Koby can be seen smirking nonchalantly (**Figure 5**). Not having received any conclusive evidence as to whether his father is alive or dead, Koby's unconcerned reaction works with the background reflexively, enhancing the surreal combination of proximate death and everyday routine.

Panels that feature the everyday alongside references to death recur throughout the comic book, and this braiding produces a motif of the societal rejection of public displays of visceral emotion in favour of the pretense of normality. This repetition creates the possibility for readers to better appreciate how the Israeli culture of

trauma and bereavement functions at the everyday level. Wolfgang Iser believes that constructing meaning from literature necessitates, “not so much the fulfillment of expectations as to their continual modification” (Iser qtd. in Groensteen 2009: 114). For Iser, the reader must be an active participant, modifying their own preconceived anticipations to the universe of the literary work. Applying this framework to comics, Groensteen writes, “panels belonging to the same sequence are assuredly in debt to each other. On the semantic plane, *this iconic solidarity*, in which we have recognized the very foundation of the comics system, is programmed by the author at the breakdown stage, and, at the time of reception, postulated by the reader in the form of hypothesizing a coherent narrative” (Groensteen 2009: 114). For Groensteen, the act of reading requires context, sequence, and reevaluation. In the case of *Exit Wounds*, a situation such as Koby elucidating whether a family member has been killed— previously assumed to be urgent— now has the possibility to take on a sense of triviality, even boredom. Reingold stresses that “*Exit Wounds* extrapolates from the individual experience by considering more broadly the complexities, emotions, and mundanity of daily life amidst terror in wider Israeli society” (8). As such, an appreciation of Modan’s use of braiding offers a deeper reading, and although it is not crucial to the comprehension of the main narrative, it offers greater insights not only into Koby’s indifference, but also the wider societal pressures contributing to it.

### **Death and Coca-Cola: Israeli Apolitical Remembrance**

Perhaps surprisingly, Modan’s Israelis never mention the Palestinians, nor the current unstable political conditions directly. However, as Kevin Howarth explores in depth in *The Comics of Rutu Modan: War, Love, and Secrets* (2019), the lack of physical representation should not be mistaken for an absence of presence. Indeed, Modan’s comic backgrounds include visual signposting that alludes to both the Palestinians and the political realities surrounding Israeli-Palestinian relations, as well as how discussing these realities is considered taboo under the current state of existential fear that grips the nation. Only one panel in the entire comic overtly references the ongoing volatile political conditions in the Palestinian Territories, in the form of a



and Lebel, bereavement and mourning take place in a compartmentalized emotional space. Death is perceived as sacred, not to be associated with the mundane and the day-to-day. In the spirit of this sacrosanctity, politics are excluded from the realm of death due to their articulation with the commonplace. In the case of suicide bombing attacks this creates a particularly incongruous position for those opposed to the political status quo. For Hermoni and Lebel, a memorial to a violent death contributes to “de-politicizing the circumstances that caused it and the national mechanisms responsible for it” (473). Paradoxically, memorializing the victims of suicide bombings simultaneously precludes speaking about the political conditions to which these bombings are intrinsically linked. As such, the panel background featuring Israeli protestors is not only the most overtly political panel of the comic book, but the background featuring the greatest violation of Israeli societal norms. The correspondingly drastic expression of rage from Koby highlights how taboo politics are in times of national mourning, but also increases the reader’s appreciation of Koby’s emotional range. This brief digression from the stupliminal tone that forms the emotional pulse of *Exit Wounds* acts reflexively to highlight the depth of the numbness pervading the rest of the comic book.

Preceding his encounter with the protestors, Numi and Koby visit the Hadera Central Bus Station, the site of the attack where Gabriel may have been killed. Numi lights a memorial candle at a makeshift monument for the victims of the suicide bombing attack, acknowledging the sacrility of the site in the Jewish tradition<sup>4</sup> (67). Koby does not interact with the memorial in any way. The background of this sequence also participates in braiding, featuring symbols supporting an emotionally stifled main narrative. The memorial features portraits of the victims, candles and flowers left in remembrance— as well as Israeli flags (**Figure 7**). This national symbol signals the space as a place that mitigates the expression of extreme emotion. For readers aware of the political context, the Israeli flags at the memorial have the potential to serve not only as a visual representation of the role of the state as a principal actor

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Yarhzeit’ candles are traditionally lit in memorial of the dead. The action of lighting these candles is considered a recognizable, common, and closely held practice across Jewish traditions.



**Figure 7:** A Depoliticized Memorial to Suicide Bombing Victims Acts to Regulate Emotional Responses in *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan, 2007: 64. © 2007 Drawn & Quarterly – Rutu Modan.

in a national memory project, but also as a moderating symbol of extreme reactions to loss at a community level. The place of this symbol upon the memorial serves not only to bring individual deaths under the auspices of the ongoing national statehood project of Israel, but also to mitigate the acceptable level of reactions to these deaths for characters who view the memorial. In Modan's graphic representation of

Israel, lighting a candle becomes an acceptable social practice, while visceral signs of mourning, and the discussion of politics, are expressly frowned upon.

Interestingly, the memorial itself is created from a Coca-Cola advertising stand. The commercial, commonplace nature of such an item normalizes the memorial space. In an interview with *The Comics Journal* on *Exit Wounds*, Modan acknowledges, “when the reality around you is so complicated or frightening people tend to detach themselves from it...we have to protect ourselves” (Modan 2007: 181). This detachment reveals itself in the blurred lines between the revered and the quotidian. The synthesis of public memorialization and everyday commodity culture makes the Coca-Cola cenotaph a particularly Israeli form of remembrance. In illustrating this background Modan shows readers an Israel where people have died, and yet life, with all its everyday commercial needs, continues alongside remembrance. Working in conjunction with the Israeli flags, this memorial simultaneously creates a sacred space that demands remembering alongside the continuation of everyday consumer culture. However, the everyday normalcy the memorial represents in this fictional Israel is also constructed as explicitly a-political. A close examination of the panel reveals that angry political graffiti has been scrawled onto the wall. This graffiti is literally and metaphorically obscured by the memorial, which acts to negate more visceral reactions to terrorism. Angry messages, presumably directed towards the Palestinian perpetrators of the attack read: “DEATH TO THE—” (**Figure 7**) and, “DON'T FORGIVE! DON'T FORGET” (**Figure 7**). Modan never addresses the politicized nature of violence in *Exit Wounds* explicitly, only by allusion. Readers must infer the target of the fierce political slogans behind the monument. In summary, the Coca-Cola memorial works in three ways: it blurs the lines between the sacred and the quotidian by not allowing space for bereavement to take place, it uses Israeli national symbols to mitigate the expression of extreme emotion, and it directly obscures the rawer, political expressions of outrage.

## Conclusions

Appreciating the depth of a society demands knowing the realities of its daily life, and comics are particularly well suited to this work. In “The Role of Culture in Comics of the Quotidian” (2015), Frank Bramlett explores how depictions of the everyday

offers readers an opportunity to experience “the cultural fabric of the comic’s universe” (246). In the case of *Exit Wounds*, Bramlett draws attention to the fact that “the story does not reveal the beginning of the trauma of war; instead the characters are already living in that environment when readers meet them” (254). As such, their worldviews and traumas have already been forged, and readers must infer these significant individual and collective experiences from the nuances of their day-to-day interactions. Bramlett’s work focuses on how Modan’s dialogue, which maintains a conversational tone despite its traumatic subject matter reveals an everyday reality, “bound by the sociocultural constraints in which the characters live” (257), and where “the possibility of violence takes up a good deal of the characters’ cognitive and psychological space in the everyday” (258). Although attention to the stilted dialogue of the comic book certainly casts light on Modan’s Israel, the backgrounds too offer an integral affective window into Israeli society. By reading these backgrounds reflexively, in conjunction with the comic, readers have the potential to apprehend the trauma and numbness that underwrite the Israeli condition. This trauma and numbness in turn expresses itself in a way that keeps emotional reactions at arm’s-length and sustains a-political social conditions.

*Exit Wounds* is neither a polemic nor a political treatise. In an interview, Modan expressed her intentions in representing Israel, “not to explain it or say what it should be- just to show it” (Modan 2007: 182). The work is a fiction which nonetheless provides an affective lens to the everyday trauma, numbness, and a-political real social conditions that Modan portrays as the Israeli norm. These emotions are not represented explicitly, they reverberate through the text, rewarding close readings with a greater nuance, and richer emotional context of the Israeli quotidian. In turn, this process of soliciting meaning makes potential space for readers outside of the Israeli context to imagine its day-to-day social life as both similar and different from their own. Davies would term this phenomenon as “an interpellation of the reader in the literal (and yet still metaphoric) constructions of trauma’s shape” (Rifkind & Davies 2020: 18). It goes without saying that the creation of this space is unique to the medium. Constructing it, Modan challenges prior preconceptions, contextualizes alternate representations than those found in the discourse of mainstream media,

and highlights comics' complex relays between background and foreground that Modan utilizes to foster a greater understanding of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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