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Traumatic Absurdity, Palimpsest, and Play: A Slaughterhouse-Five Case Study

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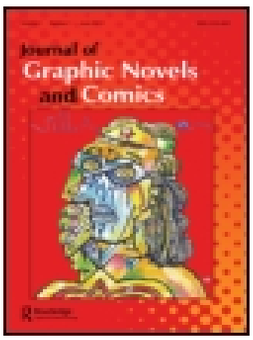

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Traumatic absurdity, palimpsest, and play: A *Slaughterhouse-Five* case study

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ABSTRACT

Comics has a complex relationship to trauma. Earle argues that comics offers unique representational strategies for narratives of trauma and distress (See). Trauma (specifically the individual experience) is often characterised by symptoms relating to temporality *flashbacks and catatonia), and a compulsion to repeat acts. Comics pivots on an ability to make time visible and to keep it moving through a narrative using sequential images. The relationship between the two offers rich and diverse opportunities to look at how trauma can be made visible to a reader.

In this paper, I demonstrate the ways in which the comics adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut, North and Monteys, 2020) visually represents the traumatic experiences within the source text and, moreover, how the book is able to speak to the experience of trauma that trauma theory has been grappling with since Freud. I explain how the presentation of this text in a visual form is able to create something that I am calling traumatic absurdity – the coming together of textual and visual tropes to create a story that neither glorifies, nor condemns, war, but highlights the absurdity of the experience and creates a comic that is at once both amusing and emotionally affective.

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Reading texts through the lens of trauma theory is not a new endeavour: both scholars and readers have been aware of the experience of trauma since the Ancient Greeks (See Konstan and Meineck 2014). However, dominant cultural media in the twenty-first century Western world appears to have adopted trauma as the lens through which texts dealing with difficult experiences, including violence and conflict, are viewed. In part, one may suggest this is due to the events of 11 September 2001, which many see as a watershed event for representations of atrocity and war at the dawn of the new millennium, as well as the culmination of a vast array of traumatic experience including the Shoah and the Vietnam War. However, it is equally valid to point to the wider scope for research into the effects of trauma on the psychology of both individuals and groups, as well as the huge number of personal stories of trauma that have been published in the past twenty years since the 9/11 attacks, thanks in part to these changing attitudes to trauma and in part to the development of new tools for sharing such stories.

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This paper considers the representational strategies at play in comics, using the 2020 comics adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (North and Monteys) as its case study.[1] I contend that this comic has developed visual representational strategies to recreate the absurdity of the novel, which is acutely aware of its own ridiculous construction. *Slaughterhouse-Five* centres on the bombing of Dresden but the event is largely absent from the story.[2] Instead, the plot is everything surrounding the event, following protagonist Billy Pilgrim and guided by Vonnegut as an omniscient narrator. Billy is so traumatised by his experiences in the war, including as a prisoner of war in Dresden during the bombing, that he 'come[s] unstuck in time' and begins to time-travel (Vonnegut 1991, 16). This continues throughout his life, even during his period as an exhibit in an alien zoo on the planet Tralfamadore. The novel is as much a science fiction story as a war story; indeed, it is more an anti-war story than anything. What Vonnegut seeks to do is show the ugliness and violence of war in ways that will not only make it more comprehensible (inasmuch as this is ever possible) to the reader, but also reduce it to the barer bones of the conflict: the human interactions that sit at its centre. In doing so he demonstrates that he is acutely aware of the mammoth nature of his task and its potential to fail, both of which only add to the absurdity of the work itself. The result is a novel that speaks about the trauma of war while also encapsulating that same trauma in the person of the author and narrator.

The comics adaptation of the novel is not a straightforward rehashing with pictures (indeed, it is doubtful such a thing would ever be possible). Instead, it works with the original novel – and the original author – to use the comics form to extend Vonnegut's words and textual-linguistic metaphors into the visual sphere. The comic makes visible the trauma that is so keenly felt in the words of the novel. Vonnegut himself is also made visible and several sequences show him in discussion with his own creation, Billy, bringing Vonnegut's distinctive authorial voice into the comic.

This paper considers how this textual-written traumatic absurdity translates into the visual comics form. I begin by outlining trauma theory and how this relates to comics, with reference to my previous publication on traumatic mimesis (Earle 2017a). Then, I move onto close readings of two representational strategies that heighten the traumatic absurdity: the use of palimpsest and visual playfulness. In closing, I consider how these artistic and analytical techniques may be used for future traumatic representation and analysis.

Comics and traumatic mimesis

Trauma theory is the study of trauma in all its forms, both individuals and collective. The earliest studies of trauma as a diagnosable medico-psychological entity are usually considered to be those of Freud, Breuer, and their contemporaries, published towards the end of the 19th century. *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, published by Freud and Breuer in 1896, is a landmark text, and Freud's recognition and understanding of many of the key symptoms do map cleanly onto a modern definition of trauma, but his work only takes this study so far. The widespread medicalisation of trauma and the eventual establishment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a diagnosable medical condition began with its inclusion the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III* in 1980; the inclusion was based a huge amount of clinical research undertaken during the 1970s,

continuing into the 1980s. However, the studies' designs sit at the core of the largest issue with a significant amount of trauma theory – this research centres on male combat experience, especially that of draftees, as opposed to 'career' soldiers. Not only does this exclude the myriad other experiences of trauma, but also the demographic groups into which most of the world fits. The most obvious limitation of trauma theory is its narrow focus to the exclusion of other voices. For this reason, scholars should be wary of considering trauma theory in a vacuum. It should also be noted that Vonnegut's original novel was published in 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War, and before the widespread medicalisation of trauma had become commonly known. The novel therefore sits in awkward relationship to trauma theory itself; not directly related to it, but instead it sits alongside, an artistic comment on the same material that drew academic and medical interest.

Contemporary trauma theory, also called the 'pluralistic model', suggests that 'trauma causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time' (Balaev 2014, 4). In my 2017 book *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War*, I write

> The experience of (and recovery from) trauma is highly culturally charged and regulated by socially and historically determined sets of signs and psychological markers that assist the individual in their narrativization of the experience (2017: 37-28).

It is this insistence on the recognition of the cultural implications of trauma – and that the traumatic experience itself remain with the individual – that is central to contemporary trauma theory. Moving away from the Freudian concept of trauma as 'unspeakable' or 'unclaimed' (to use Caruth's terms) maintains the individual's ownership and highlights the centrality of this individualist focus to the study and treatment of trauma as both medical condition and cultural experience.

I discuss the different representational strategies found in comics that depict traumatic experience. Much of my analysis centres on traumatic mimesis:

> The specific structural and artistic techniques of comics is able to mimic the symptoms of a traumatic rupture in the formal presentation of the narrative, which in turn is able to mimic the experience of a traumatic rupture in the reader (Earle 2017a, 196).

The formal presentation to which I refer includes a wide range of technical and artistic choices made by the creator(s) of the comic. For example, in the first issue of Marvel's Vietnam War series *The 'Nam* (1986–1993), Ed Marks is thrown into combat as a conscripted soldier. Ed's first experience of a bombing is represented in bright, bold colours that are distinctly *not* the natural colouration (Murray and Golden 2009, 12). The majority of the panels within the issue are presented in a more typical, realist colour palette and so the stark change that occurs during the bombing scene is a disruption to the flow of the story and the reader's experience. The visual shock of the colour change mimics Ed's shock at the bombing. Another example that mobilises a specific artistic choice as mimetic tool is the use of a continuous page bleed image in Joe Sacco's 2013 comic *The Great War*. It is a twenty-four-feet-long single unbroken panel, on accordion-folded paper, representing the first day of the Battle of the Somme (1 July 1916), a day on which upwards of 30,000 soldiers were killed and a further 50,000 were seriously injured. As the reader unfolds the pages, the panorama grows and grows. The artwork itself

contains horror upon horror; the sheer length and detail is overwhelming. The massive amount of detail and length of the unbroken image mimics the trauma and unparalleled scale of the battle and the huge loss of life.

Moving away from my formalist focus, some comics have mobilised publication contexts to turns the issue of representation and mimesis sideways. The series *Blazing Combat*, written by Archie Goodwin, ran from 1965 to 1966 before being abruptly cancelled. The series had been created to offer a different perspective to the gung-ho, Manichaean war stories that were common at the time, especially in American PX shops (shops on American military bases overseas). The second issue ran a story set in Vietnam from the point of view of a Vietnamese rice farmer; this proved to be the series' death knell (Goodwin and Orlando 1966). US Army retailers refused to stock it because, while the comic is not necessarily anti-war, it steadfastly refused to subscribe to any glorification of war and instead concentrated on individuals and the trauma of their experience, including characters who were 'the enemy'. In turning the focus on the other 'side' of the conflict, *Blazing Combat* amplifies the trauma of the event, not only by showing that this is something that affects *all* those caught up in it, but also by humanising the enemy and making it clear that the enemy is not a faceless, inhuman entity, but a set of fully human individuals, many of them totally unrelated to the conflict. For many soldiers, the recognition of shared humanity that often follows their time in theatre can be among the most traumatising aspects of their combat experience, especially if they have been responsible for deaths (see Purcell et al. 2016). In their representation of the other side, *Blazing Combat* is mimicking the recognition of humanity and therefore mimicking some aspect of this traumatising experience.

Of course, this is not to say that comics about trauma fully repeat that same traumatic experience in the reader: it is not within the ability of a text to do this, though it may trigger some similar or related feelings in the reader. A 'full traumatisation' would not be possible as the experience of trauma occurs on the actual experience of an event, typically a life-threatening one, that massively disrupts the individual's ability to function in a healthy, normal manner. Furthermore, I do not suggest that mimesis is the only aim of trauma comics, as 'traumatic art is also about emancipation, relief, revenge, and the need to tell' (Earle 2017a, 9). That said, in recent years there has been an upsurge in the use of trauma as a lens for framing stories of conflict and war, and, furthermore, it is among the most prominent theoretical positions for reading these texts (see Chute 2011; Earle 2017a; Davies and Rifkind [eds.] 2019). However, mimesis is not the only representational strategy at play in trauma and conflict texts, both visual and textual. In the following close analyses, I demonstrate how absurdity is a viable representational mode for trauma, as shown in *SH5C*'s use of palimpsest and playfulness.

At this juncture, it is incumbent on me to explain my use of the term 'absurdity'. This is a term with a long and studied literary meaning, derived from the work of Albert Camus, and 'often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value' (Baldick 2015: n.p.). The absurd in this manner is typically discussed with reference to writers such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, Edward Albee, and Václav Havel. However, this is not the way I am using the word here. I mean to be plainer and to consider 'the absurd' as that which, in line with the dictionary definition, is 'causing amusement or derision; [a thing that is perceived as] ridiculous, silly' (OED 2021: n.p.). I argue that the use of toys in a war narrative provides both

amusement and a place for derision (of Weary in general, and his body in particular, but also of the other soldiers). The palimpsest makes clear the ridiculousness of the situations characters find themselves in by showing their dreams and futures. In bringing the two temporal levels together, the reader is reminded that these largely unprepared and poorly equipped men are in a situation that is ridiculous: it is absurd.

Overlapping horrors and narrative palimpsest

A palimpsest occurs when one set of writing or image overlaps with another but without fully obscuring either. The term comes from the Greek 'palímpsēstos' (παλίμψηστος, 'again scraped'). As writing surfaces – first wax-coated surfaces or parchment, later paper – were a commodity not to be wasted, this practice encouraged recycling. In modern usage, a palimpsest can be anything where we see one thing superimposed over another, but with traces of both visible. The palimpsest as a concept comes from Thomas De Quincey's 1845 essay 'The Palimpsest' with 'inaugurating the palimpsest as a metaphor though which to understand abstract notions of time, memory, and selfhood' (Mitchell and Jones 2015, 7–8). Mitchell and Jones write:

> De Quincey imagines the mind as a 'natural and mighty palimpsest' upon which 'everlasting layers of ideas, images, [and] feelings' have fallen. And while 'each succession has seemed to bury all that went before', he insists that 'in reality not one has been extinguished' (2015: 8).

Sarah Dillon argues that the adjective 'palimpsestic' (referring to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest) is not the most useful construction in this instance, but we should instead consider the 'palimpsestuous' which 'describes the complex (textual) relationality embodied in the palimpsest [and] the structure with which one is presented as a result of that process, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script' (2005: 245). For traumatic narratives, in which the event is often not fully uncovered or present within the story (while also not fully concealed), the palimpsest suggests a way of seeing both this (attempted) erasure and its continued presence and influence.

In comics, palimpsests usually involve the use of two images occupying the same page space but both visible. For Hillary Chute, the palimpsest is one of many technical strategies that assist in the representation of space and time: she suggests that comics are a powerful narrative form because of their ability to '[make] literal the presence of the past by disrupting spatial and temporal conventions to overlay or palimpsest past and present' (2011: 109). The material space of the comics page allows two images to exist side by side or on top of each other without either being obscured, allowing the reader to consider what links can be made between them. There are two examples of palimpsest in *SH5C* that I will discuss here: Roland Weary's imagined conversation and Edgar Derby reading a book by Billy's bedside.

Roland Weary is a thoroughly unpleasant individual. Vonnegut writes that Weary was 'stupid and fat and mean and smelled like bacon no matter how much he washed' (1991: 25). Not only does he revel in cruelty and an alarmingly comprehensive knowledge of weaponry and torture methods, but he delights in bullying Billy, whom he sees as weak and not fit to be in the Army, referring to him as 'Joe College' (1991: 27). Weary and Billy are forced together by circumstance, along with two other soldiers called only 'the scouts', as they attempt to walk to safety lost behind enemy lines. In an early section of the comic

Figure 1. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Ryan North, Albert Monteys and Kurt (Vonnegut, North, and Monteys 2020): n.pag. ©Archaia. Used with permission of Ryan North.

that recounts the four Americans' walk across the German countryside, Weary spends his time imagining how he will tell a future girlfriend about his war experience (2020: n.p.). [Figure 1]

The dream conversation is presented across three pages, with six uniform panels to a page. In clear, large bubbles, he imagines himself at a table. He is older, suave and confident in his deportment, with the receding hairline and girth of a middle-aged man; an attractive woman listens, although in several of the images, she appears to the reader to be less than keen and there is a hint of conversational acquiescence about her. As he

talks, this version of Weary devours a plate of large sausages and swigs beer from a lidded stein. In the lower part of the panel, Weary's head and shoulders are drawn in coloured profile; his expression changes slightly in each panel, with him smirking in delight as his dream persona describes the fast friendship of 'The Three Musketeers', his nickname for himself and the scouts. The images within the bubbles are line drawing with minimal detail, suggestive of the preliminary sketching that takes place before inking and colouring – an idea not concrete, only a rough draft. The thoughts are beginning to take shape in his head as the planned conversation he would no doubt attempt to manoeuvre himself into at any possible time. The background does not change drastically, and it is difficult to suggest how much time has passed as we do not know the speed of movement; readerly movement is dependent on Weary's own speed of thought and the story he is telling himself.

Though this short episode may not seem outwardly traumatic on first reading, there are several factors at play: escapism, self-reference, and self-reflection. Weary is engaging in a type of escapism, one that is not uncommon in a range of situations but is perhaps most likely to crop up in stressful situations. He is placing himself in the 'after' of the event, thinking about the things he will be able to do once he gets through his current predicament. He is projecting glory onto himself pre-emptively and the thought is motivating. Secondly, this episode relates to the first chapter of the original novel, where Vonnegut writes at length about his inability to find the way to write about his experiences in Germany in 1945, despite his feeling that this should be an easy exercise. Vonnegut's openness about his perceived failure to capture his experience and the resulting 'lousy little book' (1991: 2) stand in stark contrast to Weary's easy dream story. It is ironic that this dream of his 'post-war' life is, in fact, the life that Billy receives. He marries well and settles into a comfortable middle-class life which brings neither happiness nor healing from the trauma of his war experiences. Even if he received his dream, Weary would not escape his past; it is unlikely he would be able to be the bold hero he imagines. However, while Vonnegut grapples with his experiences and the clichés of war stories, navigating through both in order to create what he deems to be an appropriate retelling, Weary is not so concerned. In one panel of his dream story, he quips 'War's hell, darling' (2020: n.p.).

It is this cheap line and his macho posture, akin to a John Wayne war hero, that demonstrates the final issue – self-reflection. Weary's version of his story is not true, in a Vonnegutian sense, because it does not penetrate to the truth of his experience and his feelings towards them. Similarly, he does not appear to understand (the) war at all, nor his position in it: though the reader is never explicitly told how much Weary knows about the reasons for the conflict or his deployment, his dream suggests he sees it as no more complex that a child's game. His gung-ho retelling is a clear representation of his arrogance, self-aggrandisement, and inability to comprehend his experiences. This is not surprising – he is still in the middle of the experience and there is a large body of research to suggest that many individuals develop systems of trauma at a later date (see Kirmayer, Barad, and Lemelson 2007; Tanielian and Jaycox 2008). This is a symptom of trauma that has been recognised since the earliest iterations of trauma theory. Freud uses the word '*Nachträglichkeit*' (literally 'afterwardsness' but generally translated as 'deferred action') to describe the phenomenon.

The second example of palimpsest I discuss here also occurs during the middle of the action, to a person who does not appear outwardly traumatised – Edgar Derby. Throughout the original novel, Vonnegut repeats the fact that Edgar Derby, a middle-aged schoolteacher, was shot in the ruins of Dresden for stealing a teapot. The fact that it is mentioned repeatedly in relation to any other event mentioning the character suggests it is a type of ridiculous Homeric epithet. Whereas Homer used epithets to ensure the reader could keep track of his vast cast of characters – and they were usually a description of either their relationship to another or their qualities – Vonnegut includes this line as an absurd parody. Edgar Derby is a steady and stoic character; he is one of the few men among the prisoners of war who is consistently shown as a decent man. It is absurd that, amid the ruins of a city and 25,000 dead, a good man should be executed for so minor a crime; the repetition of this fact only increases the absurdity. The comics adaptation does equal work with the repetition, but it is not simply textual; there are visual reminders of Edgar Derby's fate.

Following their capture, Billy and Weary are transported to a camp for prisoners of war. The British soldiers lay out a feast (due to a miscalculation in ration packs that worked in their favour) and a performance of *Cinderella*. Billy becomes delirious and is sedated; Edgar Derby keeps watch over him and reads a book. On a single page, we see two events simultaneously: Edgar Derby reading next to the sleeping Billy and his death by firing squad. The scene is in a darkened room and so the colouration of the panel reflects this. The background is grey and the figures of Billy and Edgar in narrative layer one are yellow, to represent the low-level light of a candle. Edgar and the firing squad, narrative layer two, are shown in red. The figure of layer one Edgar does not move from his place at all. He sits upright on the floor with his back to a wall, and the book on his knees. There is no interaction whatsoever between the figures in layer one and layer two. In the final two panels, at the bottom of the page, the now-dead Edgar in red is slumped forward against the firing post, tied in place by rope, and his head is nearly touching seated Edgar in yellow. [Figure 2]

Both sets of images, in yellow and red, are presented on the same narrative level, within the primary timeline. These events are a palimpsest in the truer meaning of the word – neither set of actions is obscured. Weary's dream conversation takes place in a balloon, which exists as a distinct panel-within-a-panel on the page. The balloon represents the shift in narrative level and removes the action from the primary narrative timeline; it is a palimpsest that, visually, is opaque and so obscures the background of the rest of the panel image. Weary is totally absorbed in this dream conversation, and the opacity of the panel suggests this. In contrast, the shooting of Edgar Derby is presented in identical artistic ways to him babysitting the sleeping Billy.

The pairing of these two starkly different events serves two purposes. First, it heightens the sheer absurdity of the death of Edgar Derby. In *SH5*, Vonnegut considers this event to be the 'climax of the book': 'The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot' (1991: 4). In the greater scheme of the war, it is an event rich in propensity for ridicule and disdain: it is absurd. Sitting with Billy, Edgar Derby is demonstrating his compassion and gentleness; other characters, who are openly bullying and violent, are not treated in a similar way. To Vonnegut, war is a collection of events that sit in stark contrast to

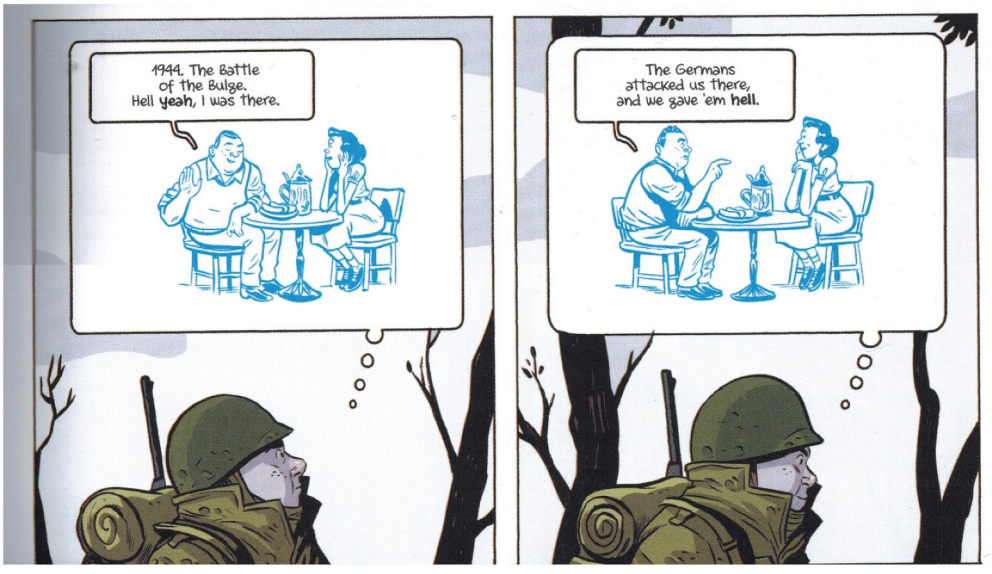

Figure 2. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Ryan North, Albert Monteys and Kurt (Vonnegut 2020): n.pag. ©Archaia. Used with permission of Ryan North.

each other. The second purpose is to give the Tralfamadorian perspective. When Billy is abducted and taken to Tralfamadore, the aliens explain to him that they see in four dimensions, and so time happens all at once. Because of this time-flattening, 'When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "So it goes"' (1991: 20).

Many of the symptoms of a traumatic rupture are tied to the individual's experience and understanding of time; we can see how this aspect of Tralfamadore clearly mirrors many of these symptoms. For many individuals, temporal disruption is one of the most noticeable symptoms of trauma; they 'lose their grip' on time when the threat to the self is recognised too late. It is this lack of temporal understanding and direct experience that causes the rupture and leads to the development of traumatic symptoms. In centring the temporal experiences of an alien planet and a character who time travels, Vonnegut is creating a system of representation of time and trauma; he is creating a reality for the reader by clearly segregating the healthy from the traumatised. Furthermore, he is allowing the narrative distance between Billy and his trauma through the alien abduction storyline to be read for what it is: a bizarre and abnormal experience that affects his normal functioning, as trauma does. In the comic adaptation, the traumatic absurdity is made visual on the page through the use of palimpsest. The original novel does not use palimpsest in this way, but rather uses a non-linear chronology and jarring juxtaposition of scenes to create this effect. The comic makes use of the visual and the reader can literally see the overlapping stories and the movement of Billy through time. The trauma is made visual and, in doing so, the absurdity of the situation in which it was created is

revealed. Roland Weary may roll out the cliché that 'war is hell', but in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, both novel and comic, it is absurd.

Childlikeness and play

There is a childlikeness[3] to many of the symptoms of a traumatic rupture or PTSD. A desire to avoid the event in any form – be it memories or physical proximity to a specific location – as well as defence mechanisms such as violent mood swings, tantrums, and self-injurious behaviours (see Vaillant 2011). As such, a return to childlikeness can be a useful visual metaphor for the experience of trauma, especially when viewing through the lens of absurdity. In *SH5C*, there are several artistic choices that relate to this childlikeness and more specifically to play and playfulness. In the following analyses, I consider the inclusion of a toy in the narrative – a Roland Weary paper doll – and what this suggests about play and trauma. I also discuss the decision to present the comics in the *ligne claire* style and its links to childhood reading.

The comic of *SH5* uses a paper doll as an adaptation technique for what would otherwise be a list of army kit. The use of this particular image creates a toy and introduces a playful aspect to the narrative. In *SH5*, there is a long description of Roland Weary's kit and all the items he is carrying: 'he had every piece of equipment he had ever been issued, every present he'd received from home' (Vonnegut 1991, 29). The list takes up a whole paragraph and presents a ridiculous selection of items, many of which will not serve Weary well in his current circumstances (for example, 'a prophylactic kit containing two tough condoms' [1991: 29]). In *SH5C*, this list is turned into the accessories for a paper doll. [Figure 3] Fat, underpants-clad Weary is shown in the middle of the page, with all his labelled equipment laid out around him. This image, complete with 'cut' lines around the figure, taps into a long history of paper dolls, first as a homemade toy and later as a manufactured item.

As Judy Johnson writes, 'Paper dolls have existed as long as there have been paper and creative people to apply images to it' (1997: 14); most of early examples that still exist are from Asia and were used in rituals. The first manufactured doll was Little Fanny, produced by S&J Fuller of London, in 1810. It was not until the 1940s that paper dolls became a fixture in anglophone comics, especially girls' comics. To date, the most famous comics character-as-doll is probably Katy Keene (created by Bill Woggon), who first appeared in 1945 in several series published by Archie Comics. Comics publishers encouraged readers to send in their designs for the dolls' outfits and would occasionally recreate these into printed outfits in later issues. In the UK, paper dolls were a regular feature of girls' comics such as *Bunty* (1958 to 2001).

In addition to the obvious connection to the paper doll, the Weary toy is also an action figure of sorts. While articulated dolls and toy soldiers have been a part of children's play since at least 200 BCE, the action figure as a distinct object is credited to toy manufacturer Hasbro, with the release of 'GI Joe' in 1964 (Jackson and Moshin 2013, 105). Action figures are aimed primarily at boys and feature male figures who engage in stereotypically masculine or 'macho' roles, especially soldiers, or male characters from popular culture, such as 'He-man' (see Nelson 2005). In this respect, the Weary doll is distinctly *not* typical. Action figures are usually strong and muscular (often to the point of

Figure 3. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Ryan North, Albert Monteys and Kurt (Vonnegut 2020): n.pag. ©Archaia. Used with permission of Ryan North.

inhumanity), whereas Weary is fat and not at all in-keeping with the standard model of 'heroic'. He is a parody of the ideal hero instead.

As I have discussed elsewhere, there is considerable cross-over in the artistic and representational decisions made in trauma and in postmodernist texts:

> [T]here is a distinct playfulness inherent in many of the tricks of [comics'] narrative construction; reader and writer are involved in a game of sorts. Furthermore, given high modernism's rejection of popular art forms (playful art, if you will), comics is clearly excluded (Earle 2017a, 151).

For postmodernist scholars like Ihab Hassan, play is a central component of postmodernism; he contrasts it to modernism's focus on 'purpose' (1971: 269). It may be said

that the inclusion of this doll is typical of postmodernist playfulness. However, the inclusion serves more purpose that simply to tease the reader with mischievous narrative games. Such toys are a popular and commonly reoccurring part of the landscape of childhood and play for a huge number of people and, as such, the inclusion of a paper doll in this comic is not necessarily unusual, as it is closely connected to many centuries of children's play and imagination. What makes the inclusion unusual is that it is a male soldier doll in a graphic novel for adults about an intensely traumatic subject – it is out of place and its inclusion is not only a reference to childhood toys but also highlights the absurdity of the situation. War is game with no winners, only losers. The 'cutesy' inclusion of the doll makes this stark truth all the more glaring in its out-of-placeness: it marks the contrast between the truth of war and its representations, while also reminding the reader of the fragility of these representations. The second aspect of *SH5C* that suggests childlikeness and play is the choice of artistic style.

This comic uses *ligne claire*, a style commonly associated with the works of Hergé, 'which eschews shading, gradation of colours and hatching in favour of clear outlines, flat colours and geometrical precision' (Miller 2007, 18). I (Earle 2017b) have previously discussed *ligne claire* as an effective style for the rendering of traumatic narratives, describing it as 'a lens through which the world attains some level of clarity and comprehensibility' (Earle 2014, 2). This is not a new interpretation; Bruno Lecigne suggests that 'the ideological efficacy of the *ligne claire* lies not in what is chosen for depiction, but in the idea that the world is legible' (1983: 40).

Laurence Grove cautions that many artists 'reject *ligne claire* precisely to suggest that life is not always clear cut, and that the violent ambiguities of society can indeed be worthy of artistic portrayal' (2010: 183). It is precisely *for* this reason that Monteys' artwork invokes this deceptively simple style: presenting his narrative in clear and uncluttered artwork contrasts boldly with the violence and bleakness of the story itself and jolts the reader into careful reading. It is for the reader to bridge the gap of representation between bold, clear artwork and cheerless, messy action. It is a misconception that *ligne claire* always involves bright, bold colours: a great deal of the artwork in *SH5C* is presented in shades of grey and brown.

However, *ligne claire* is more than just an artistic style; it carries with it tremendous iconic weight, thanks to its associations with Hergé, and indeed the wider European comics community. Gwen Tarbox suggests that artists who work with this style are able to 'take advantage of the deceptive simplicity of the clear line to provide commentary on violence and its attendant ideologies' (2017: 144). She further notes that the voiceprints[4] 'that are most frequently associated with the depiction of violence within a geopolitical context' are often similar in their artistic presentation, including 'jagged lines, crowded panels, and extensive shading within a black, white, and grey palette' (2017: 145). This traditional voiceprint for violence allows readers to 'move quickly or even avert his or her eyes after the first apprehension of the violence image, with still apprehending the overall meaning of the scene' (2017: 145). The use of *ligne claire* undercuts this averted gaze and forces us to view. In choosing this style, North and Monteys are aware of the weight of symbolism and history bound up within it.

There is a further dimension relating to *ligne claire* that draws on the specific contexts of *SH5C* – the way in which this artistic style is recognised within American comics. Though there have been several artists adopt this style for 'adult' comics

(perhaps most notably in the works of Chris Ware, but also in recent graphic novels such as Nick Drnaso 2018 and Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World* [1997]), it is generally associated with children's comics, especially those imported to the US from France and Belgium. This builds on the iconic weight of the form that I mentioned above, activating memories of childhood reading experiences. The comic outwardly appears to be following in the artistic footsteps of Tintin or *Suske en Wiske*and so one might assume that the story follows likewise: an adventure story that ends positively and with a well-rounded conclusion. The disjunction between artistic style and story action highlights the absurdity of the narrative. This story can be told effectively in this style – the art and traumatic experiences of a prisoner of war combine in a text that highlights its own horrible absurdity by drawing on the memory of comics read as a child. As with the inclusion of the paper doll and the playful Tralfamadorian 'novels', the overarching artistic choices that govern this comic aim to draw on childhood memory to bring absurdity to the fore.

Conclusion

The representation of trauma has not remained static throughout its long history, and especially not since the development and ratification of PTSD as a medical diagnosis. There is considerable debate surrounding the accuracy of perceiving 9/11 as an epistemic break and watershed moment for subsequent representations of traumatic experience (see Earle 2017b). It is more accurate to see it as a key event in a succession of events that ensure that our understandings of trauma – and of witnessing – remain in flux. Postmodernist theorists suggest that postmodernism breaks metanarratives and shuns the grand stories that have structured previous societies and cultural outputs (Lyotard 1991). The ubiquity of the traumatic lens for viewing any kind of complex violence or conflict experience suggests it is at risk of becoming a metanarrative for the twenty-first century and, as such, needs frequent reinvigoration to keep the representational tropes fresh and to avoid stagnation. Not only does this avoid stale narratives, but it is also crucial to keep traumatic representations affective. If some part of the reason for telling these stories is to demonstrate to the reader the emotions and individual response to a traumatic experience, then their creators cannot afford to become complacent in their storytelling strategies.

The *Slaughterhouse-Five* comic is doing something different. Rather than using the techniques of traumatic mimicry to trigger in the reader some sense of the event's traumatic magnitude and, by extension, the understanding that 'war is hell' as Weary would have it, instead the comic is highlighting the absolute absurdity of conflict. The novel had already stripped the war back to its human interactions and personal relationships, but the comic is making visual small, banal aspects of the wider conflict experience and highlighting them in all their ridiculousness. This war is not hell as much as it is stupid, confusing, inexplicable, and pathetic. The comic is not an adaptation as much as an extension: North and Monteys are building on the traumatic absurdity already begun in Vonnegut's original novel and using the visual strategies available through the comics form to make *traumatic visual absurdity* a tangible, effective, and affective alternative to traumatic mimesis.

Notes

1. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the novel as *SH5* and the comic as *SH5C*.
2. The bombing of Dresden is a blanket term for four aerial bombing raids, conducted by the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF). Between 13 and 15 February 1945, they dropped 4000 tons of bombs and incendiary devices; the raids killed 25,000 people and destroyed 2.5 square miles within the city.
3. I choose to use the term 'childlikeness' instead of 'childishness', as the latter carries considerable negative connotations of immaturity and infantilisation, which are not points I wish to include.
4. Jared Gardner uses the term 'voiceprint' to describe 'not the "metaphorical" voice of narrative theory, but the human voice of oral storytelling, of song, of performance'. The voiceprint of comics brings together 'voice and writing, orality and print, performance and text.'

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