

Harriet E.H. Earle's *Comics, Trauma and the New Art of War* (2017)

Review

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In *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War*, Harriet E. H. Earle explores the ways in which the formal properties of comics allow cartoonists to use the medium to depict traumatic experiences related to wartime conflict, providing a thorough and insightful analysis of uses of the form in North America in the wake of the Vietnam War. As Earle acknowledges in her introduction, her exploration bears similarity to the excellent monograph *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (2016) in which Hillary Chute discusses the use of comics to represent witnessed historical events. However, while Chute limits her analysis to autobiographical texts, Earle includes works of historical fiction and superhero comics. Earle's broad range of sources effectively illustrates her central, persuasive argument: that comics "can represent trauma in ways that are unavailable to other narrative and artistic forms" (28).

Earle begins her discussion not with a comic but with Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which she views through the lexicon of the comic. The painting, a landmark depiction of warfare, is used as a touchstone for Earle's examination of representations of war experiences in comics. Cartoonists use the form of comics, Earle argues, "to reproduce and mimic the experience of a traumatic rup-

ture” (11). The use of such a hallowed cultural object as *Guernica* is representative of Earle’s interest in connecting seemingly disparate formal and theoretical approaches, and she does an excellent job of linking theory and detailed analysis of primary texts throughout the book. The former is her concern in the first chapter, in which she compares the “classical” model of trauma (found in the work of critics such as Cathy Caruth) with “pluralist” trauma theorists, who suggest that traumatic experiences differ depending on societal and cultural context.

Earle finds a middle ground between these schools of thought in representations of trauma in the comic form, which, she argues, “uses its arsenal of formal representational techniques to produce affect in the reader and, in doing so, mimics (some part of) the feelings and experiences of trauma” (43). In the second chapter, she cites examples of this mimicry, such as Alissa Torres’s *American Widow* (2008) and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (2003). These texts demonstrate the connection Earle finds between trauma and mourning, both in comics and in more canonical works of literature (*Beowulf* and *The Iliad*), while in the third chapter they form the basis of Earle’s analysis of the particularly visual experience of post-traumatic nightmares, along with Doug Murray’s series *The ‘Nam* (1986-1993).

The fourth chapter examines some of the many comics that address their creators’ relationships with family members who have experienced trauma, particularly when the creators themselves have not. These discrepancies lead to the fifth chapter’s discussion of the complexities of representing time and setting relative to trauma. Here, Earle reads Murray’s *The ‘Nam* and GB Tran’s *Vietnamerica* (2011) through the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope. The fluid ways in which these texts and others navigate temporality link comics with the techniques and concerns of postmodernism, as the book’s sixth and final full chapter explores. In addition to the depictions of time, comics have an affinity with the “popular art” of postmodernism (152). On the other hand, the aim of comics representing trauma to “rebuild fragmented experience” links them with more modernist interests; Earle therefore suggests that comics negotiate contrasts between modernism and postmodernism (156).

Following this discussion, and before her conclusion, Earle ends with a brief “excursus” in which she discusses the exclusion of female comics artists, both in her book and the comics world more broadly (171). As Earle explains, the positions of women in comics of trauma mirror the experiences of women relative to war, in which even women who do fight in battle have their roles questioned by male superiors. As a result, “women have long been bit players on the military

stage,” thus leading to their similarly marginalized role in the comics analysed in Earle’s book (174).

Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War offers contributions of interest to scholars working in a variety of disciplines, most notably (but not limited to) comics studies and trauma studies. Earle especially contributes to the former in her comparisons between alternative comics and superhero comics, as critics often treat the two separately. Earle’s analysis demonstrates how texts of both kinds can be put into dialogue with one another. For trauma studies, Earle bridges gaps between seemingly opposed schools of thought, showing how different understandings of trauma can be used together for a nuanced view of the subject. *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* also bridges gaps between theory and criticism of primary texts, as both share space and are used to further illuminate one another throughout this thoughtful book.

Harriet E. H. Earle’s *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* was published by University Press of Mississippi in 2017.