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## Comics Journalism and Fine Art: War, Massacre, and The Individual, in works of Pieter Bruegel, Joe Sacco and Otto Dix

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### ABSTRACT

As a pioneer of Comics Journalism, Joe Sacco's works have been linked to conflict studies, migration, education, and so on. But despite references that Sacco makes to 16th Century master painter, Pieter Bruegel, and 20th century New Objectivity painter Otto Dix in his interviews, there have been few studies on the potential link between comics of Sacco and works of these masters of fine art. In this study I explore this connection by examining the questions of war, individuality and portrayal of massacre in paintings of Bruegel and Dix and journalistic comics of Sacco. My greater aim is to demonstrate the potential of further comparative studies between arts and comics journalism, especially between Renaissance and modern artists.

**Keywords:** Bruegel, Comics journalism, Dix, Sacco, war.

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### 1. Introduction

Joe Sacco is a familiar name in comics scholarly circles, but his works have attracted attention beyond the field of comics. A Maltese-American artist who studied Journalism at university, Sacco is widely acknowledged as a pioneer of comics journalism. He has travelled extensively in war torn regions (especially Bosnia and Israel/Palestine), interviewing survivors of conflicts, focusing on atrocities that have not gained wide public attention and published the result in the form of comics.

Sacco's works have been examined by scholars from different fields of study. Dunn for instance, has studied Sacco's work from an educational perspective in "Teaching World Politics with Joe Sacco: Safe Area Goražde in the Classroom", while Holland combines studies from the disciplines of geography and comics studies, and focuses on the 'use of maps and mappings as narrative technique' in the works of Sacco (Worden ed. P.85). The issue of migration, which has currently turned into a crisis in different parts of the world has also attracted the attention of scholars. For instance, Oyvind Vagnes focuses on Sacco's 'The Unwanted' and suggests that Sacco tries to move the border of politics of hospitality close to the

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borderless morals of hospitality (Worden ed. P.158-167). Ben Owen and Jared Gardner both study the issue of time and discuss how Sacco moves between the present and the past. And essentially a great number of scholars, including Lan Dong, Isabel Macdonald, Marc Singer and Amy Kiste Nyberg have focused on the core issue of objective versus subjective and conventional versus new journalism (For an inclusive collection of studies of Sacco see *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World* (2015) edited by Daniel Worden).

While most studies of Sacco have wisely linked his most acknowledged journalistic works to issues such as objectivity, migration, time and so on, there have been very few studies on the artistic aspects of Sacco's comic journalism.<sup>2</sup> This lack of interest in scholarly circles is especially surprising considering the fact that Sacco himself has discussed this relationship in a number of his interviews. Although Sacco's works bear signs of American underground comix, his biggest inspiration in fine art is not a 20th century artist, but an artist of 16th century from Flanders; the Renaissance master painter, Pieter Bruegel. Sacco calls Bruegel his 'favourite fine artist':

Bruegel is my favourite fine artist, and I think of him when I'm drawing certain things. When I went to the town of Gorazde in Bosnia, there were almost no vehicles. There were horse-drawn carts and people were chopping wood, and I remember thinking, 'This is like a Bruegel painting'. (Salter & Sacco, 2013)

Bruegel of course is not the only source of inspiration for Sacco. In the same interview, Sacco mentions 20th century German artist Otto Dix whose drawings are in a very different style compared to Bruegel, as source of inspiration.

The connection between Sacco and these masters of fine art might appear unlikely at first. To begin with, Sacco is a 21st century journalist-artist. What sort of inspiration could Sacco, drawing comics on modern conflicts and massacres get from Bruegel, who is best known for drawing peasants and landscape? And what could link paintings of Dix who is most famous as a pioneer of new objectivity style to comics of Sacco whose style of drawing is hugely affected by his cartooning background?

In this paper I attempt to shed light on this rarely examined link by performing a close examination of works of Sacco, Bruegel and Dix. By conducting a comparative analysis, I firstly look for works of Bruegel and Dix which might have potentially inspired Sacco, and then compare and contrast these works by highlighting the elements that connect journalistic works of Sacco to paintings of Bruegel and Dix. I discover visual synonymity between works of Sacco and works of Bruegel, demonstrate why individuality is important in these works and how it is portrayed, and discuss the difference between portrayal of contrasting types of massacre such as invasion, subjection, and a massacre occurring in the battleground.

This study provides new insight into the works of Sacco by examining and expanding on a notion suggested by the artist himself in his interviews, that Sacco was inspired by Fine artists such as Bruegel and Dix. The findings of this study can contribute to further studies both within the fields of comic studies and between comics and other forms of art.

Following the introduction, I lay out the method for conducting this study, and then briefly introduce Bruegel before starting the comparative analysis between satirical and journalistic comics of Sacco and paintings and drawings of Bruegel.

In the latter part of this paper, I extend this comparison to works of Sacco and Dix, and after putting the spotlight on a work of Sacco, which seems to bear signs of inspiration from works of both Bruegel and Dix, I reach the conclusion of this study.

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<sup>2</sup> A notable exception is the valuable study by Jeff Adams in which he compares Sacco's depiction of refugee camps in Palestinian territories to Bruegel's landscape paintings such as *The kermess of Hoboken* (1559). (see chapter four of *Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism* (2008) by Jeff Adams.)

## 2. Methodology

This study is comparative in nature. At the root of this study is an interview by Sacco in which he mentions Bruegel and Dix as sources of inspiration. But there is only one painting of Bruegel that Sacco specifically refers to as a source of inspiration: his 1562 masterpiece of a hell on earth in Bosch style; *Triumph of Death*. Sacco does not mention any specific work of Dix. Therefore at the first stage of this study, I went through all the paintings, drawings and engravings of Bruegel, and all the paintings and etchings of Dix (especially the works that were related to war). I specifically looked for paintings, engravings and etchings that might have potentially inspired Sacco, or might be otherwise notable for a comparative study. After a thorough examination of Bruegel and Dix's works, I suggest that the following works could be considered as sources of inspiration for Sacco; Bruegel's painting and engravings such as *Wrath* (c. 1558), *Peasant's Wedding* (c. 1567), *The Last Judgment* (c. 1558), *Massacre of Innocents* (c. 1566), and *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (c. 1556), and Dix's *the Trenches* (1923), *War Cripples* (1920), and the etching series *Der Krieg* (1924). In this paper I will compare Sacco's works with Bruegel's *Triumph of Death*, *Massacre of Innocents*, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, and *Peasant's Wedding* and Dix's *War Cripples* and *Der Krieg*. The comparison is based on the visual aspects of each work, the subject-matter of paintings, the historical contexts in which they were created, and the motive of the artists for creating these war related and at times controversial works.

## 3. Sacco and Bruegel

As I mentioned in the introduction, Bruegel is named as the main source of inspiration for Sacco from the field of fine art. Although most scholars are familiar with Bruegel and his works, a short introduction might be helpful.

Pieter Bruegel was born in Flanders between 1526-31. As a master of Renaissance art, Bruegel is most famous for his vivid portrayal of peasants and village life, and innovative and inspiring depiction of natural surroundings and landscape, but there can be found an underlying yet profound awareness of social and political changes of the time in many of his works. From 1552 to 1568 Bruegel created more than 170 works (paintings, drawings and engravings). He passed away in 1569 in Brussels.

### 3.1 Visual synonymity in 'Apocalypse, Then' and big fish eat little fish

One of the earliest works of Sacco, which bears signs of inspiration from Bruegel is 'Apocalypse, then'. Sacco created this stand-alone short piece comic in 1987. This rarely studied work is not journalistic but a satirical piece about the troubled everyday life of an ordinary man (a fictional character) in Medieval Europe. A fish appears on the first and the last page of this comic. With its wide-opened eye and mouth, and being sliced with a knife, the fish clearly reminds one of Bruegel's *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (Fig 1).

*Big Fish Eat Little Fish* was created in 1556. In this drawing turned engraving, Bruegel, like many other of his works depicts a common proverb. Here, as Sellink explains, the saying is; " 'big fish eat little fish', meaning that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer..." (p.88). The big fish, however, lies dead and Sellink (2007) believes that this often overlooked detail manifests the moral of the story that is 'greed does not pay'



Figure 1: The fish in Bruegel's *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (Left) and Sacco's 'Apocalypse, Then' (Right) (Bruegel Reproduced in Sellink, 2007, p.88 and detail of 'Apocalypse, Then' in Spotlight on the Genius that is Joe Sacco p.43 (Right).

(p.88). Sacco's big fish also has something to do with money if not with greed. Instead of little fish pouring out of its stomach, what comes out of the fish's stomach is a professor Smythe, who goes on lecturing about investment in late 1300s 'post-plague environment' (Sacco, 1994, p. 43).

Similarity in this case is mainly limited to visual aspect and the early medieval age that Sacco satirically depicts in 'Apocalypse Then' is hundreds of years apart from Bruegel's Renaissance era. But as Sacco develops his journalistic comics in late 1990s and early 2000s and turns his focus on contemporary conflicts, similarities become less evident on the surface while deeply imbedded in the content. One such example is portrayal of massacre in Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde* and Bruegel's *Massacre of Innocents*.

### 3.2 Cruelty, subjection and agony in 'Around Goražde' and *massacre of innocents*

Bruegel created *Massacre of Innocents* in 1566. (Fig 2)

As the title suggests, this work is a biblical event drawn in contemporary terms. The biblical event is the order to kill all baby boys in the town of Bethlehem around the time of Birth of Jesus Christ. Bruegel sets this event in a contemporary Flemish village during the suppression of Flanders in 16th Century. Flanders towns and villages started rebelling against the Spanish King from 1566. Bruegel created *Massacre of Innocents* around the same time, and there are many speculations about his choice of setting for this painting, and whether he is covertly criticising Duke of Alba for his violent campaign. Sellink (2007) says:

Arguing that the way in which Bruegel's contemporaries could have interpreted the painting is more relevant than the (unknown) intentions of the painter himself, Kunzle proposes that the work should be seen primarily as an explicit criticism of Habsburg repressive politics. (p.235)



Figure 2: *Massacre of Innocents* by Pieter Bruegel (Reproduced in Sellink, 2007, p. 234).

A similar tragedy unfolds in Sacco's journalistic comic, *Safe Area Goražde* (2000), especially in chapter 19 titled 'Around Goražde'. 'Around Goražde' consists of 11 pages. It contains the testimony of people living around Goražde, an Eastern town of Bosnia which was an enclave surrounded by Serb militias during the Civil War.

'Around Goražde' is one of the most shocking chapters of *Safe Area Goražde*. In this chapter, Sacco portrays atrocities done around Drina river, which runs close to the border between Bosnia and Serbia, and passes Visegrad; a small town north of Goražde. In 1992 Visegrad had a majority Bosniak population. In June 1992 Serb Nationalists took control of the town and many atrocities against civilian population followed. 'Around Goražde' focuses on testimony of two people. One of them is Rasim, a resident of Visegrad who gives testimony to Sacco. Sacco does not provide much detail about Rasim. Judging by Sacco's drawing, he appears to be a humble middle aged man.

Rasim describes how he saw Bosniak muslim families brought to the bridge over Drina river and massacred there: 'the Serbs took my neighbours from their flats, even without shoes.... I was in Visegrad until June 17... my home was between two bridges and I watched what happened. In only three days and three nights, I saw 2-300 killed' (Sacco, 2011, p.110)

Rasim's testimony takes little over 8 pages of the chapter. One of the most poignant parts of his testimony is the scene, where families are brought to the bridge by soldiers in the middle of the night. Sacco portrays this scene in 7 panels. In panel 4 (Fig 3), a soldier is dragging a small boy by one hand, holding the knife with the other hand. The little boy is screaming helplessly, his family is around but has



no means to save him as he is being dragged in a pool of blood. At the background, bodies are floating in the river; It is a frightening reminder of the fate that awaits the child and the other man.

The fate of the little boy and his family being surrendered by soldiers is shockingly similar to the fate of little boys in the *Massacre of Innocents*. In the background of this oil painting created on a 109.2×156.7 cm panel. (Sellink, 2007, p. 234), a large group of soldiers have gathered around a central figure. They are apparently looking on silently but their faces are obscure. In front of them, soldiers are piercing little children's bodies with spears. One of them is smiling, one has a serious face, and others' faces are hidden. Behind them, a mother is trying to shield her child, as the soldier is pulling her away by her hair to stab the child. Other mothers are crying, screaming in pain and shock, and some mothers try to hide their children. In the middle of the painting, a mother is solemnly mourning the murdered baby on her lap.



Figure 3: Little boy and his family brought to be slaughtered in 'Around Goražde' (panel 4 (Left), panel 6 (Right)) (Detail of *Safe Area Goražde*, Sacco, 2011, p.110)

What stands out in both Bruegel and Sacco's works is the helplessness and agony of the families; they are present but have no means to stop the bloodshed or to save their children.

In *Massacre of Innocents*, on the left middle corner, a person— perhaps a parent – is kissing a baby's forehead as the soldier is whisking him and another infant boy away, the soldier looks at him, perplexed. All around, fathers, mothers and other villagers are crying, asking for mercy, and trying to reason with soldiers and officials, but it all seems to be landing on deaf ears.

Families in 'Around Goražde' seem to have already surrendered to their fate. In panel 6, the first soldier has already dropped the body of the little boy in the river. The second soldier is dropping the body and looking at the third soldier and his victim –perhaps urging him to finish the job. In the background, some victims are praying. A child is clinging to a woman –perhaps her mother. A man armed with a knife mockingly laughs at the man he is about to kill. A soldier is dragging an old woman to the edge of the bridge, holding a gun in another hand, as blood is dripping from bridge stones.

Sacco and Bruegel both portray many different expressions of all the people involved. This is especially the case for Sacco who depicts soldiers' expressions here as well, a rare case in his works. Soldiers are angry, laughing, serious, one seems hesitant. Sacco also portrays expression of the ordinary people about to be killed; frightened, screaming, calm, and solemn, praying. The attention to different expressions of individual figures could be interpreted as a strong indication that both artists portray people as individuals and pay attention to their feelings. Moreover, despite their reputation for drawing grotesque figures, neither Bruegel nor Sacco depicts these individuals in a satirical or grotesque way.

Another comparison between the two works may be based on the setting for these scenes. Both Sacco and Bruegel drew these scenes using their imagination, and none were present there at the time of the massacres. In an interview about *Safe Area Goražde* which is provided at the end of the special edition of the book, Sacco describes his method which is based on witness testimony and how he interviews the witnesses and the specific questions he asks. For example, on drawing a scene about murdered civilians whose bodies were found months later, he says:

My friend Edin described how they'd found the bodies of his friends, and that they were in bad shape. They'd been buried... [I asked Edin] 'listen, I hate to ask you this, but your friends...can you sort of describe a bit more what they looked like?'... he was able to describe... (p. 241)

While Sacco bases his portrayal of massacre on witness testimonies, there is no such information about Bruegel. Had he seen suppression of any Flemish village or its aftermath? Many scholars have tried to answer this question, but because of the scarcity of information about Bruegel, the only accurate answer at this time is: we simply do not know.

In fact *Massacre of Innocents* as a painting itself has a tragic history; once sold, *Massacre of Innocents* was passed on from one royal collection to another, and for reasons unclear to us, by the time it reached its current location, the Royal collection in London, the painting had been so gravely altered that massacre became an irrelevant title to the work; The slaughtered babies were painted over with objects such as bundles, food and animals, so much so that instead of a massacre, the painting appeared to be a general case of plunder. Some scholars suggest that the scene of massacre was deemed too violent for the opulent halls the work was brought to decorate, but there might be other reasons as well. Fortunately there are many copies of the painting. The most important one is the version drawn by Bruegel's son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger, which is kept in Vienne Museum. This painting is a faithful copy of the original *Massacre of Innocents*, and in this paper is used in the cases where alteration has happened. (Fig 4)

As other scholars have mentioned, Van Mander, a prominent art critic contemporary to Bruegel's son, writes the earliest known passage on *Massacre of Innocents* in 1604. This passage clearly refers to the original version of the painting. Of the agony of the defenseless villagers Van Mander says:

.... *Massacre of the Innocents* in which many effective details can be seen, of which I have told elsewhere: how an entire family begs on behalf of a peasant child which one of the murderous soldiers has grabbed in order to kill; in which the grief and pallor of the mother and other effects are well expressed. (Van Mander Cited in Sellink, 2007, p. 290)



Figure 4: Slaughtered babies replaced with bundles and animals (Detail of *Massacre of Innocents* by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Left) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Right) Reproduced in Sellink, 2007, p. 235).

The two works may also be compared on the visual level. 'Around Goražde' panels are filled with black because these particular murders happened at night. It could be said that blackness also adds to the horror of the scene. On the other hand, *Massacre of Innocents* is set in white snow. It softens the immediate effect and shock of brutality. Also, in Bruegel's work little blood is shown, while in 'Around Goražde' part of what appear as blackness are in fact pools of blood. While in both works the atmosphere is dismal, in 'Around Goražde' the scene is more visually violent, showing harrowing acts such as throat being slashed.

In this aspect it reminds one of another masterpiece by Bruegel; *Triumph of Death*.

### 3.3 Invasion, carnage and chaos in 'The First Attack' and *triumph of death*

Bruegel created *Triumph of Death* in 1562. In this powerful oil painting painted on a 117×162cm panel, (Sellink, 2007, p.176), an army of skeletons is sweeping the earth, destroying everything on its way. In the background everything is burnt down and the landscape is barren. In the foreground, a jolly army of death wipes out the living. People are being drowned, slashed, hanged, and crushed. They are being killed indiscriminately. On the left corner, a skeleton is riding a ghostly horse moving a carriage of skulls and crushing people on its way. On the right corner, people are pushed into an enormous coffin with no hope for salvation. (Fig 5)

As we mentioned before, Sacco particularly names Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* and its unforgiving portrayal of death as a moving work of art and a source of inspiration. In his own words; '*The Triumph of Death* sits in my workroom. I look at it and think that however well or badly you're doing, death is going to come in the end. I like to be reminded about that every now and then.' (Salter & Sacco, 2013)

In his 1977 book, *Bruegel*, Walter Gibson has a similar impression of Bruegel's *Triumph of Death*:

in none of these earlier images of death, however, do the dead fall upon the living in such overwhelming numbers, nor do they comport themselves in such an orderly, military fashion. Indeed, Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* seems to parody the battle scenes which were so popular with his contemporaries... (p.116)



Figure 5: The Triumph of Death by Pieter Bruegel (Reproduced in Sellink, 2007, p. 176).

The battle scenes indeed make a good case for comparison. In the works of Sacco, *Triumph of Death* could be particularly compared to another chapter of *Safe Area Goražde*; the chapter titled 'The First Attack'.

As we mentioned before, Goražde in 1992 was an enclave surrounded by nationalist Serb groups. Near the fringe of the town, a couple sheltered around 120 men, women and children (war refugees) in their 3-story house. When Serb soldiers attacked this part of the town and started killing people randomly, people taking shelter in this house ran to the street in order to reach the river and escape. But unknown to them, the soldiers were positioned at the end of the street. They fired at people as they tried to pass the street and many were killed and injured.

Here too, both Sacco and Bruegel used their imagination to draw these scenes. However whereas both 'Around Goražde' and 'The First attack' are real incidents portrayed by Sacco, *Triumph of Death* (unlike *Massacre of Innocents*) is one of the most imaginary works of Bruegel. This fact, however, does not upset the case for comparison between 'The First attack' and *Triumph of Death*. The attacking soldiers in Sacco's 'The first attack' are no different than *Triumph of Death's* army of skeletons; their aim is total destruction. It is manifested in the way they attack; they pour into the neighbourhood, wipe it out of its residents, and kill indiscriminately. Scenes of chaos and carnage follow. People are running everywhere, trying to escape death. Many are shot, bodies lie in the street.

But in both works, few people put up resistance. In *Triumph of Death*, at the right bottom corner, young men whose costumes suggests them to be of a middle or high social status have drawn their swords, one is already on the ground, while another one is holding his sword, looking at the chaos in shock. Another man, perhaps a servant, not having a sword, has taken a chair as his weapon. In Sacco's 'The first attack', those putting up resistance are men of the neighborhood who are armed. Two of them give testimony to Sacco. One is Izzat who owns a small gun and later gets injured while trying to escape with her daughter. The other one is Ibro, the owner of the house who gets injured when the window he is guarding is hit by a tank shell, he later tries to escape as well (pp. 79, 80, 82) (Fig 6)



Figure 6: Few people put up resistance while most try to escape in Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* (Left) and Sacco's 'The First Attack' (Right) (Detail of *The Triumph of Death* reproduced in Sellink, 2007, p. 176 (Left) and *Safe Area Goražde* Sacco, 2011, p. 8



In both works, Massacre happens during a vicious attack; it is not a silent massacre of a town under control. In this sense, there is a difference between the two cases we compared before ('Around Goražde' and *Massacre of Innocents*) and these two pieces ('The first attack' and *Triumph of Death*). In 'Around Goražde' and *Massacre of Innocents*, there is a dismal atmosphere, the town is already under control of the attackers and the victims are surrounded. But in 'The first attack' and *Triumph of Death* the attack is still in its early stages and people are still hanging on their hope to escape.

Moreover, in 'Around Goražde' and *Massacre of Innocents* some town peoples are trying to reason with soldiers, but in 'The first attack' and *Triumph of Death* there seems to be no prospect of negotiations between the attackers and their victims.

### 3.4 The individual in footnotes in Gaza and peasants wedding

In the last part of comparison between Bruegel and Sacco, I want to focus on the issue of individuality. As I have argued before, in works such as *Massacre of Innocents* and 'Around Goražde', both Sacco and Bruegel take great care to describe the individual expressions of the people they depict, even when they appear in masses or are not the central figure.

To further argue this point, I want to examine two more cases. One is a scene from Sacco's other journalistic masterpiece, *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009). In this long piece comics, Sacco investigates two cases of massacre of Palestinians in Khan Yunis and Rafah in Gaza that happened during 1956 war, as well as mass demolition of Palestinian homes in the same places in 2004.

The scene I chose is the first page of a chapter titled 'Screening'. It depicts a schoolyard where Israeli soldiers have forcefully, in many cases violently, gathered all Palestinian men aged from 14 or 15 to 60 years old in order to screen out members of Fadayeen armed group. As Sacco hears from witnesses, all men were told to sit on the ground with their heads down and not to move for almost an entire day, without any explanation given for why they are being kept. What strikes most about this scene, which is far less violent than other events portrayed in the book, is the depiction of individuals. Although it is a scene depicting big mass of people, Sacco has taken extreme care to distinguish as many persons as possible. In this double-spread page, Sacco draws 700-1000 people, and yet as far as the eye goes, each person is drawn with a distinguished face and even a touch of personality.

For example, on the left front corner, two men, one wearing traditional clothes, are looking at people who are rushed for screening. A man behind them looks to be in pain and the one sitting next to him is looking down and not following the motions. Two rows behind them in the middle of the crowd, two men are quietly communicating, one of them looks very anxious and is putting his hand on his head. At the far end of the same row, a man can be spotted as he is raising his head, looking beyond the crowd. (Fig 7)

In an interview about *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco speaks about his intention behind emphasizing individuality of figures in large crowds:

My points is always that these are individuals and each has their own story.... I never want to make it look like a herd of cattle being led to the slaughter. These are people with their own lives, and you want to give the reader a sense of that. (Gross, 2011, p. 402)

It is a point also manifested in many of Bruegel's works. As we saw in *Massacre of Innocents*, Bruegel takes great care to depict figures in his paintings as individuals, especially those from lower social status



Figure 7: Sacco emphasizes the individuality of ordinary people in *Footnotes in Gaza* (Sacco, 2007, pp.298-9 (Right) and detail of the same (Left) ).



who might have normally been seen and labeled as a group rather than individuals. In *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), Kavalier focuses on Bruegel's *The Peasant Wedding* (1567) (Fig 8) and the attention the painter pays to every village guest:

... If their dress identifies them as farming people, it also helps distinguish them from one another; the variety presents each as singular and unique. Coats, trousers, stockings, and caps come in limited basic styles but are varied in color and combination. Supporting this effect is Bruegel's ability to represent facial expression and gesture.... (p.162)

Kavalier further demonstrates his point through a detailed analysis of the many guests of this 16th century village wedding:

'We find a similar interest in the *Peasant Wedding Feast* when we look to figures like the distracted bagpipe player, for Bruegel carefully conveys an impression of the diverse interior life of those gathered within the barn. The young man seated on the far side of the table avidly empties his bowl, while the man across from him turns to receive a portion of his own. Whether our attention is drawn to recent arrivals by the door or to the man filling jugs at the lower left, we are struck by the great variety of moods conveyed: curiosity, annoyance, and studied concentration. This projected sense of a self, of a person with distinctive feelings and desires, partially counters the tendency to reduce the greater part of company to a single class. (p.162)



Figure 8: Bruegel portrays the individuality of ordinary people in *The Peasant Wedding* (also titled *The Wedding Banquet*) (Bruegel reproduced in Sellink, 2007, p. 245).

Walter Gibson also points out the distinctive character of two youths who are bringing food and explains how Bruegel uses his artistic experience to create a distinctive feature for his allegedly undistinguished guests: 'As a result of his study of Italian art, he was able to endow his peasants with the same physical impressiveness that other artists employed for biblical and mythological heroes.' (Gibson, 1977, p.166) Indeed insistence on drawing individuals of apparently less social importance is a feature strongly shared between Sacco and Bruegel.

#### 4. Sacco and Dix

In the second part of this paper, I want to briefly compare Sacco's works with another fine art master; Otto Dix, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century German painter and a pioneer of new objectivity style. Otto Dix is most famous for his frank portrayal of German society in Weimar republic, the pre-Nazi era between the two world wars. But he is also famous for his portrayal of war, especially the trench war. He witnessed war first-hand when he volunteered for the German army in the First World War at the age of 24. Dix fought on the front line from 1915 to 1918. As a gunner in a machine-gun unit, he took part in the harrowing battle of Somme and witnessed many horrible scenes there. Ironically, Dix's artistic aspirations played an important role in his decision to volunteer for the war. If Sacco went to lengths to hear testimonies from witnesses of the war, Dix decided to be a witness of war himself. Dix says: 'I am such a realist that I have to see everything with my own eyes in order to confirm that it's like that. ... that's why I went to war...' (Dix cited in Spanke 2013, p.14)

War's traumatic experiences are reflected in many of Dix's works. Most famously, he portrayed his experiences of trench war in a at-the-time-controversial work titled the *Trenches* – which is now lost, possibly destroyed by Nazi regime – and *Der Krieg* (*The War*) series (1924).

When naming Dix as a source of inspiration, Sacco speaks about portrayal of war veterans.

... People like Max Ernst and Otto Dix. People like that managed to convey a lot with what they drew.... Those depictions of grotesque figures in Berlin between the wars. Haggard old soldiers without legs, begging. Those images sort of spin around in your mind. Those images face the truth without flinching. (Sacco, 2011, p. 245)

Sacco's words might be a reference to Dix's famous painting *War Cripples* (1920). This work, printed on a 25.9×39.4 cm plate (Hess n/a), shows four physically disabled men in uniform walking the streets of Berlin. (Fig 9)

Daniel Spanke contextualises this painting among Dix's oeuvre:

the horrible suffering of the soldiers features as many as eight times in Dix's work, and in decidedly major works at that, such as *The Trench*, 1923, the *Metropolis* triptych, 1927-28, and the *War* triptych, 1932...while war cripples were a common sight on the streets, or even in people's personal environment...they were still uncommon as a subject of art. (Spanke, 2013, p.18)



Figure 9: Otto Dix's unheroic depiction of war veterans in *War Cripples* (Dix reproduced in The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Web)).

Spanke points out, specifically about *War Cripples* that: 'the depiction of the miserably crippled veterans unsettled and indeed, caricatured the usual heroic images of soldiers in a society that was thoroughly steeped in militarism'. (p.17)

This unapologetically unheroic, dark-humoured and caricatured portrayal of soldiers is reflected in Sacco's works, especially those dealing with the First World War. But as unsympathetic as they might be towards the war itself, it is hard to call Dix or Sacco unsympathetic toward the fate of individual soldiers.

#### 4.1 Horrors of trench war in the *Great War and Der Krieg*

In the years after the war, Dix created a series of fifty etchings under the title of *Der Krieg (The War)*, which were published in the form of prints in 1924. Dix created these works based on his memories of the battle of Somme and other trench battles. These works depicted different scenes of the battle, especially the aftermath of an attack.

Etchings such as *wounded soldier*, *Shock Troops Advance Under Gas*, and *Dance of Death* show shock and horror of soldiers caught up in a brutal, muddled mayhem. Years later, Sacco tried to portray one day of the battle Dix fought in *The Great War: July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme* (2013). Sacco,



Figure 10: Stretch-bearers carry the wounded in Dix's *Transporting the Wounded in Houthulst Forest* (Left) and Sacco, 2013, N/A (Right), (from *The War (Der Krieg)* portfolio reproduced in The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Web) (Left) and detail of *The Great War*

relying on his research of the First World War, portrays scenes that Dix had witnessed and later depicted in *The War (Der Krieg)*. If stretch-bearers are carrying away badly wounded soldiers on the British side in Sacco's *The Great War*, so do the German stretch-bearers in Otto Dix's *Transporting the Wounded in Houthulst Forest* (Fig 10). And the depiction of bodies of soldiers tangled in the barbed-wire in Dix's *Dance of Death*, are as harrowing as bodies torn apart between trenches in Sacco's *The Great War* (Fig 11

(below)). Indeed, it could be claimed that what both works most strongly demonstrate is the meaninglessness of the war, the many lives that are lost and the scars that will stay with the survivors as long as they live.

This sense of madness and surreality, which Dix unreservedly portrays in *wounded soldier* and *Shock Troops Advance Under Gas* is also present in a double-spread page at the beginning of Sacco's latest work *Bumf* (2014), where, in a chaotic battleground, soldiers are fighting among the skeletons of their comrades (Fig 12). At the background, soldiers wearing gas masks are taken down one after another as they mechanically advance in a row. And in the chaos ensued in the front of the panel, the shock in the eyes of a terribly wounded soldier is a shadow of the expression on the face of the badly hurt soldier that Dix portrays in the *wounded soldier*.



Figure 11: Bodies lie between trenches in Dix's *Dance of Death* and Sacco's *The Great War*, (from *The War (Der Krieg)* portfolio reproduced in *The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Web)* (Left) and detail of Sacco, 2013, N/A (Right)).

Surprisingly, there seems to be homage to Bruegel right at the centre of Sacco's panel. The blind-folded soldiers following each other to the deadly bottom of the water are a stark reminder of the blind men following each other to brink of the river in Bruegel's *The Blind Leading the Blind* which he created in 1568, less than a year before he passed away. Indeed, the absurdity of the situation and the futility of the whole affair are at the core of what links these three works of different styles and eras.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, I have sought to respond to a number of research questions related to how comics of Sacco are related to paintings, drawings and etchings of masters of fine art Pieter Bruegel and Otto Dix. I asked in particular questions such as the role of individuality in works of Bruegel and Sacco, how different types of massacre are portrayed and where is the link between paintings of Dix who witnessed the First World War and comics of Sacco who based his art work on historical research of the same war. I conclude this paper by briefly foregrounding some of the study's implications for practice, and some of the directions for future research that stem from this project.

The main aim in this study was to address the lack of research on connection between works of Joe Sacco, recognized as a master of comic journalism, and the works of two great masters of fine art: the Renaissance painter Pieter Bruegel and 20th century New Objectivity painter Otto Dix. Sacco himself refers to Bruegel and Dix as sources of inspiration for his works and indeed the comparison between their works strongly demonstrate this connection. The massacred children and the agony of their powerless families, the army of death and their indiscriminate killing of the living, emphasis on the individuality and distinctive figure of ordinary people, and unreserved portrayal of suffering

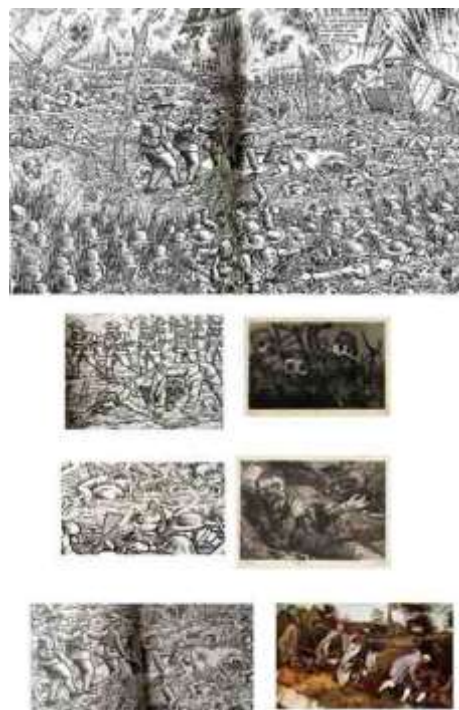


Figure 12: Madness and horror of war in Sacco's *Bumf* and Dix's *Der Krieg (The War)*, (*Bumf* by Sacco, 2014, pp.11-12 (Top), Details of *Bumf* 11-12 (Middle and Bottom left), *Shock Troops Advance Under Gas* and *wounded soldier* (Middle Right) from *Der Krieg (The War)* p



soldiers in a brutal battleground all reveal deep concerns that are at times implicitly and otherwise explicitly expressed in the works of Sacco, Bruegel and Dix.

Accordingly, the major contribution of the present research is to affirm and expand on the claim by Sacco that he was inspired by fine art masters Pieter Bruegel and Otto Dix. Furthermore, this study provides much needed empirical data for further studies of Sacco, Bruegel and Dix and encourages scholars both inside and outside the field of comic studies to reconsider the importance of empirical and comparative studies in providing a firm base for further in depth analysis of the link between fine art and comics.

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