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CAST

Michael Sacks Billy Pilgrim
Ron Liebman Paul Lazzaro
Eugene Roche Edgar Derby
Sharon Gans Valencia Merble Pilgrim
Valerie Perrine Montana Wildhack
Holly Near Barbara Pilgrim
Perry King Robert Pilgrim
Kevin Conway Roland Weary
Friedrich Ledebur German Leader
Sorrell Booke Lionel Merble
Robert Blossom Wild Bob Cody
John Dehner Professor Rumfoord
Gary Wayne Smith Stanley

CREW

Directed by **George Roy Hill**
Produced by **Paul Monash**
Executive Producer **Jennings Lang**
Screenplay by **Stephen Geller**
Based on the novel by **Kurt Vonnegut Jr.**
Edited by **Dede Allen**
Director of Photography **Miroslav Ondříček**
Music by **Glenn Gould**
Production Designer **Henry Bumstead**
Art Directors **Alexander Golitzen, George Webb**





THE WORLD ACCORDING TO BILLY PILGRIM

by Peter Tonguetta

Several years before Kurt Vonnegut completed his great 1969 anti-war novel *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* – and long before the book had entered the ranks of twentieth-century literary classics – he was already contemplating its future film adaptation.

Let me explain: in the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which the author uses his own voice to explain the circumstances under which he wrote the work of fiction that follows, Vonnegut recalls an encounter he had with producer Harrison Starr. Film buffs among us might assume that Starr, whose producing credits included such a courtier efforts as Arthur Penn's *Mickey One* (1965) and Paul Newman's *Rachel, Rachel* (1968), might have been hip enough to speak on the same wavelength as Vonnegut, but their exchange proves the opposite.

At one point, Vonnegut – who, while serving in the Army during World War II, was made a prisoner of the Germans and managed to make it out alive after the Allies undertook the firebombing of Dresden – informs Starr that he is penning a book with anti-war sentiments. The producer is decidedly underwhelmed. “You know what I say to people when I hear they’re writing anti-war books?” Starr asks Vonnegut. “I say, ‘why don’t you write an anti-glacier book instead?’”

The point, in case you missed it, is that war is akin to a glacier – unchanging and unchangeable, and certainly not quelled by the latest anti-war book. If Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) or Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) did not put an end to warfare, what hope was there for *Slaughterhouse-Five*? For his part, Vonnegut seems to shrug in agreement with Starr. “What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers,” Vonnegut writes. “I believe that, too.” Later in the same chapter, Vonnegut remembers meeting the wife of one of his chums in the Army, a woman named Mary O'Hare. Upon listening to Vonnegut expound on his war memories, Mary expresses skepticism about his novel-in-progress: “You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men.” Taking this all in, Vonnegut assures Mary that, not only is he uncertain whether he



will ever complete his book, but that if he ever does, “there won’t be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne.”

Well, Vonnegut did finish the novel that morphed into *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but when it came time for the book to be adapted into a feature film, he kept his promise: there were most definitely no parts for the likes of Sinatra or Wayne or any other traditional movie tough guy. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a film adaptation truer in spirit to its source material than George Roy Hill’s version of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which Universal Pictures released in March of 1972. In a passage in *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*, Vonnegut expresses gratitude for the craft and care with which the film was made. “There are only two American novelists who should be grateful for the movies which were made from their books,” the author writes. “I am one of them. The other one? Margaret Mitchell, of course.” Of course, it is unlikely that Hill – who, just a few years earlier, had been nominated for an Oscar for directing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) – would ever have been drawn to material as traditional as Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936). To the contrary, the native of Minneapolis, Minnesota, was most at home in the company of the rascals and rejects of American life, including the adolescent outsiders Val and Gil in *The World of Henry Orient* (1964), the ruffian hockey players in *Slap Shot* (1977), and the off-kilter mother-and-son writing duo T.S. Garp and Jenny Fields in *The World According to Garp* (1982) – not to mention the aforementioned Butch and Sundance.

To this list we must add the central figure in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Billy Pilgrim, who is played in Hill’s remarkable film by the underrated Michael Sacks. Most widely recognized for his work in this film and his subsequent supporting performance in Steven Spielberg’s lovely pre-*Jaws* entertainment *The Sugarland Express* (1974), Sacks – who left the film business in the early 1980s – lends Billy a quality of docile calmness that conceals a mind capable of traveling far and wide. As Vonnegut writes in the novel, “Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next.”

To portray Billy’s habit of hopscoching across time, some filmmakers might have been tempted to haul out splashy effects. Indeed, it is easy to imagine a film that resorted to quick cutting or psychedelic opticals. Yet Hill – who, at his best, was a spare, unfussy filmmaker – took a different tack, clearly establishing each time and place inhabited by Billy. In the opening scene, for example, we meet middle-aged Billy – Sacks’s blonde hair has been streaked with silver and slicked back – seated at a typewriter at home as he hunts and pecks his way through a letter to the *Ilium Daily News*. “I have come unstuck in time,” Billy writes in an attempt to explain his unique situation. “I jump back and forth in my life

and I have no control over where.” Outside, Billy’s oval-faced grown daughter (Holly Near) and her slow, stocky husband (Gary Waynesmith) – each having come to doubt Billy’s mental well-being – peer through the windows and call for him.

Of course, the film quickly confirms that Billy’s daughter and son-in-law have it all wrong – that Billy is indeed free to lead his life outside of chronological order. After Billy’s head shoots up from the typewriter, the film cuts to World War II. There, cloaked in a shabby blanket, he roams behind German lines like a little lost deer. The images conjured by Czech-born cinematographer Miroslav Ondricek – who would later bring grace and restraint to Hill’s *The World According to Garp* and *Funny Farm* (1988) – have a brittle brilliance, suggesting the still photography of Ansel Adams. The snow in the sky and the snow on the ground blend to form a white haze.

Yet this idyll-within-war is interrupted when editor Dede Allen – already famous for cutting Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) – returns to middle-aged Billy at the typewriter. Soon enough, though, the setting shifts once more. This time, we encounter Billy lollygagging inside what appears to be a roomy cage somewhere on the planet Traftamadore, where he exchanges meaningful looks with a fellow captive earthling: vivacious, curvy film star Montana Wildhack (Valerie Perrine). As it turns out, some trips in time are more pleasurable than others.

In keeping with Vonnegut’s vision, Hill and Allen never permit *Slaughterhouse-Five* to settle into a stable present tense from which to anchor flashbacks or flash-forwards. Instead, no one particular period is privileged over another. In the expertly constructed screenplay by Stephen Geller, we meet Billy in middle-age before we encounter him as a POW, and we get glimpses of him on Traftamadore prior to seeing him as a scrawny child being tossed into a swimming pool, sink-or-swim-style, by his overbearing father.

In the end, the film winds up painting a picture of a man’s life that is more complete than many screen biographies. What’s more, the transition between years or decades is never less than carefully planned. For example, one sequence crosscuts Billy being pushed around by the Germans, who mockingly photograph him with his arms raised, with Billy being honored with a building in his name – for which he is also photographed by the local press. The choice to interweave the scenes is certainly bold, but the link between the moments has a certain inner logic – after all, who among us doesn’t find that our mind can wander at the most inopportune times? Billy may be the toast of Ilium, but can he help it if he’s still thinking about the war?



Indeed, *Slaughterhouse-Five* may be seen as one of the most sustained treatments of post-war trauma ever committed to film. Billy clearly emerges from the war a bedraggled, beaten-up figure. In a hospital after the fighting has ended, Billy is seen covering his head in a blanket. His mother tries to shake him out of his stupor: "Billy, sweetheart, the war is over. You can come out now." (As Mrs. Pilgrim reaches for Billy, the film cuts back to World War II, when a fellow POW makes the same action – reaching for him.) Yet, because of Billy's time-traveling, the war never really has an end point. In an instant, Billy can be deposited again behind enemy lines, and as far as the characters are concerned at those particular moments, the war is still raging. The forward march of history has been arrested.

Of course, Vonnegut being Vonnegut – and Hill being Hill – not every sequence carries such weight. In one of the most unexpectedly charming passages in the film, Billy-as-POW falls asleep in a bowl of soup. Then, Billy-as-optometrist awakens on his well-manicured lawn as his dog lathers his face in licks. We see the Pilgrim family's handsome colonial home over a span of seasons – the brown grass grows green and then greener still – as Billy's pudgy, demanding wife, Valencia (Sharon Gans), prepares for him a succession of desserts. In both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The World According to Garp*, Hill evinces a deep appreciation for the pleasures, and dissatisfactions, of suburban life. In a subsequent scene in this vein, we find the Pilgrim brood – which also includes Billy and Valencia's son, Robert (Perry King) – at a drive-in movie theater running a flick starring Montana Wildhack, who is seen in a state of undress. In a lovely comic moment, father and son are equally enraptured by the starlet.

Yet no one could argue that the film treats the firebombing of Dresden – which Billy, like Vonnegut, is asked to endure – as anything but a climax. Upon being transported to the city, Billy and his fellow POWs are assured of its beauty and safety. The beauty part is undeniable: in one of the film's most poetic passages, the POWs amble through Dresden. German citizens on the street, as well as those peering out of windows above, make eye contact with the Americans. Ondříček's camera, meanwhile, takes in the city's architectural splendor. "I never saw anything like it," Billy says, in a haunting line. "It's the land of Oz." On the day of the firebombing – February 13, 1945 – Hill inserts title cards to indicate the date and time, a device he uses nowhere else in the film.

The firebombing itself is presented elliptically, with the POWs and the Germans clustered in an underground shelter. Lightbulbs flicker. Hands cover faces. Dust is shaken loose from the ceiling. Outside, Billy and the others stagger around a city that has been leveled. The sight of smoke billowing from ruins, and the sound of fires still crackling, are impossible to forget.

Yet, while the firebombing of Dresden stands as the key happening of Billy's life, Hill elected not to end with it. To the contrary, Billy's utopian existence on Tralfamadore is given precedence in the last stretch of the film. In a scene of remarkable beauty, Billy is seen looking out a window in his house in Ilium as a glowing white orb slowly approaches and transports him (and his dog) to the planet. Later, he is given a female companion in the form of a topless, shrieking Montana, with whom he eventually has a child – an earthling, of course, whose place of birth is Tralfamadore. What other way could this story end?

Near the end of the film, Billy speaks of the lessons he has learned after his lifetime of gallivanting through time: "The world is just a collection of moments, all strung together, in beautiful random order." In other words, he is at peace with both the terrors and joys of life, which he perceives to exist on a continuum. Few films express that stoic sentiment as well as *Slaughterhouse-Five*. No wonder Kurt Vonnegut was so happy with the final product.

Peter Tonguette is the editor of Peter Bogdanovich: Interviews. He has written for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Christian Science Monitor, Sight & Sound and many other publications.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Slaughterhouse-Five has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director at EFilm, Burbank.

The film was graded and restored at Pinewood Studios, London. Picture grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve and restoration was completed using PFClean software.

Audio remastering was also completed at Pinewood.

All materials for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

Pinewood Studios Group:

Rebecca Budds, Michael Davis, John Pegg, Jon Mann, Darren Rae, Jashesh Jhaveri, Lucie Hancock, Rob Langridge, Jason Stevens

EFilm:

David Morales

NBC Universal:

Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, John Edell

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artwork by **Corey Brickley**

Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Pat Bauman, Robert Crawford, Daniel Griffith, Rebecca Howard, Troy Howarth, David James, Perry King, Rocky Lang, Kim Newman, Daniel Schweiger



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