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THE POETICS OF MODERNISM IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL. CHRIS WARE'S JIMMY CORRIGAN AS A NEOMODERNIST TEXT

Abstract: The present article seeks to analyze aspects of modernist poetics contributing to the unique, essentially neomodernist, aesthetics in Chris Ware's 2000 graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Particular emphasis is placed on three aspects: (i) the status of the graphic novel as mass product/work of art in the context of Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura"; (ii) modernist architecture, and (iii) the modernist concept of time as non-linear and "subjective." First, I will address Benjamin's notion of "aura" and its importance for modernist aesthetics, which will allow me to analyze Chris Ware's explorations of the tensions between the mechanic and the unique. Next, I will turn to the role of modernist architecture in *Jimmy Corrigan*, which functions in the story as a sign of progress and is incorporated into the graphic novel's sequential structure. Finally, I will examine the notion of time present in the graphic novel and its links with modernist Bergsonian ideas of "duration." Ultimately, it will be demonstrated how Chris Ware adapts modernist techniques and themes into the genre of the graphic novel and thus complicates the graphic novel's postulated status of a postmodern text, proving that the poetics of modernism is a vital component of the contemporary poetics of the graphic novel.

Keywords: neomodernism, modernism, graphic novel, comics, Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan*.

The graphic novel as a neomodernist text. Such a specification, at first sight, may seem surprising because the graphic novel as a genre and as a medium is very often seen as an inherently postmodern phenomenon, one which reuses and abuses old literary forms, combines them with visuals, and produces neo-teric hybrids. Indeed, Robert David Stacey has stated that "the rise of the graphic novel in the 1990s was part of the postmodern interest in the semiotic interaction of the visual and the verbal,"¹ while Jan Baetens considers the

¹ R.D. Stacey, *Re: Reading the Postmodern*, The University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa 2010, p. 45.

graphic novel “to be a typically postmodern genre.”² Contemporary graphic novels, fundamentally products of the “pictorial turn”³ defined in terms of the postmodern, postsemiotic, and postlinguistic, often question the very notion of literature, using such devices as irony, playfulness, and metafiction. W.J.T. Mitchell calls the graphic novel a “postmodern cartoon novel” and further observes that, for example,

Maus and *The Dark Knight* employ a wide range of self-reflexive techniques. *Maus* attenuates visual access to its narrative by thickening its frame story (...) and by veiling the human body at all levels of the visual narrative with the figures of animals (...). *The Dark Knight*, by contrast, is highly cinematic and televisual, employing the full repertoire of motion picture and video rhetoric while continually breaking frames and foregrounding the apparatus of visual representation.⁴

While graphic novels are firmly anchored in the postmodern aesthetics of deconstruction, as regards not only their formal aspects, but also the very concept of literary canon and “high art” (as texts which have their roots in popular comics), they also illustrate and inform the neomodernist tendencies in contemporary art and culture.

Indeed, as Monica Latham points out, postmodernist and neomodernist approaches should not be seen as competitors or alternatives that by definition rule one another out, but rather as trends that function concurrently. She notes that

Modernism therefore remains a vital impulse for today’s (...) fiction. Both postmodernists and neomodernists rework original modernist principles, commitments, and aesthetics; they dialogue with, revive, and extend their predecessors’ modernist heritage. (...) This implies a twenty-first century form of modernism, or, in other words, new and modern practices of engaging with formal modernist techniques.⁵

Contemporary graphic novels engage with their modernist literary and artistic heritage on many levels. Some authors, like Alison Bechdel in *Fun*

² J. Baetens, *Fun Home: Ithaca, Pennsylvania*, in: *Modernism Today*, ed. S. Houppermans et al., Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2013, p. 205.

³ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93-94.

⁵ M. Latham, *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015, p. 11-13.

Home,⁶ openly revive and refer to modernist literature and modernist masters, including James Joyce and Francis Scott Fitzgerald,⁷ while others, like David Small in *Stitches*,⁸ explore the possibilities offered by the stream of consciousness and the interior monologue in the visual form. Indeed, as David Ball argues in his discussion of the “literary status” of the graphic novel,

[it] complicate[s] most conventional notions of modernism and post-modernism in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. (...) Contemporary graphic narratives’ characteristic ambivalence about their status as popular cultural productions repeats modernist anxieties about literary value that reemerge precisely at the moment graphic narratives are bidding for literary respectability.⁹

The graphic novel may thus be defined as both postmodernist and neo-modernist; it stems from popular comics, but it also embraces modernist literary conventions and formulas. One graphic novelist who engages with modernist techniques and themes in the most complex and intricate manner is Chris Ware. Apart from such characteristic features of modernist literature as “epistemological difficulty, moral ambiguity, formal experimentation, and a conspicuous rhetoric of literary failure,”¹⁰ Ware also indulges in experimenting with the status of the graphic novel as a work that is simultaneously mass produced and unique, but he also references modernist architecture and experiments with the notion of time.

The present article seeks to present and analyze aspects of modernist poetics contributing to the unique, essentially neomodernist, aesthetics in Chris Ware’s 2000 graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*.¹¹ Particular emphasis will be placed on three aspects, namely (i) the status of the graphic novel as mass product/work of art in the context of Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “aura” of the work of art; (ii) modernist architecture, and (iii) the modernist concept of time as discontinuous, non-linear, and “subjective.” First, I will address Benjamin’s notion of “aura” and its importance for modernist

⁶ A. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Mariner Books, New York 2007.

⁷ For a discussion of Modernist references in *Fun Home* see: J. Baetens, *Fun Home...*, p. 205-219 and A. Freedman, “Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*”, *Journal of Modern Literature* 2009, vol. 32, no 4, pp. 125-140.

⁸ D. Small, *Stitches: A Memoir*, W.W. Norton, New York 2009.

⁹ D. Ball, “Comics Against Themselves: Chris Ware’s Graphic Narratives as Literature”, in: *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, ed. P. Williams, J. Lyons, University Press Of Mississippi, Jackson 2010, p. 103.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

¹¹ Ch. Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Jonathan Cape, London 2000.

aesthetics, which will allow me to analyze Chris Ware's explorations of the tensions between the mechanic and the unique in the graphic novel as regards the book's format and drawing style. Next, I will turn to modernist architecture in *Jimmy Corrigan*. It is presented as a sign of progress in the story and internalized as the organizing structure imposed on the sequential art of storytelling. Finally, I will examine the notion of time present in the graphic novel and its connections with modernist Bergsonian ideas of "duration" and "subjective time." Ultimately, it will be demonstrated how, thanks to the modernist techniques and features translated and adapted into the genre of the graphic novel, Chris Ware complicates the graphic novel's postulated status of a post-modern text and proves that the poetics of modernism is a vital component of the contemporary poetics of the graphic novel, which, as a work that combines the verbal and the visual, draws its modernist inspirations from a variety of sources, including philosophy, literature, and architecture. As a matter of fact, *Jimmy Corrigan* extends modernist innovations and revisits modernist "percepts of innovation, experimentation, creativity and artistic accomplishments."¹²

Published in 2000, *Jimmy Corrigan* is an award-winning graphic novel dealing with a difficult childhood, loss, loneliness, and a desperate need for love and understanding. The square and rectangular panels arranged in Mondrianesque grids depict the life of a thirty-six-year-old Jimmy Corrigan. Jimmy leads a solitary life in his hometown Chicago. He has a mundane office job, disrupted only by the frequent calls from his domineering mother. One day the protagonist receives a letter from his father and faces the difficult task of meeting him for the first time after years of abandonment. Jimmy travels from Chicago to a small town in Michigan and spends a Thanksgiving weekend with his father. Three storylines, that of Jimmy as a child, middle-aged Jimmy, and Jimmy's grandfather as a young boy (this part of the story is set during the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition), interweave throughout the nearly four hundred unmarked pages. The graphic novel was conceived as an intricate network of interconnecting storylines and, as such, may be regarded as informed by essentially modernist aesthetics. The story's graphic realization, however, adds still more depth to this initial concept of multiple interweaving plotlines, as it plays with the notions of originality, mechanical reproduction, and "aura."

The graphic novel and its progenitor, the comic book, are mainly associated with popular mass culture and "mechanical reproduction," but Ware has nevertheless managed to constructively engage with this heritage. Indeed, the reading of *Jimmy Corrigan* as a work that problematizes mass production is

¹² M. Latham, *A Poetics...*, p. 11.

best investigated in the context of Walter Benjamin's "aura." In his now classic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction",¹³ Benjamin laid the foundations of modern aesthetics. The text reflects on how modern technological reproduction has changed "traditional" art and begins with Benjamin's discussion of such notions as originality, creativity, and genius. Benjamin points out that mass production influenced the world of images first via lithography, and then through photography and film. "Just as lithography virtually implied the illustrated newspaper," Benjamin writes, "so did photography foreshadow the sound film."¹⁴ The effect of mass reproduction on the work of art is the loss of its "unique existence" and the devaluation of the status of the original.¹⁵ The work of art loses its "aura" - its unique status of something "distant" and thus admirable. According to Benjamin, "reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former."¹⁶ Thus, modernism is seen as caught between the ideals of equality offered by the images circulating freely thanks to the modern modes of reproduction, yet at the price of the loss of their "aura," and the classical aesthetics concerned with elitism and autonomy.

Ware incorporates these different meanings of modernity in his work by skillfully exploring the tensions between reproducibility and uniqueness. *Jimmy Corrigan*, though truly a work of mechanical reproduction, first serialized in the *Newcity Chicago* newspaper and then sold in over 100,000 hardback copies,¹⁷ resists and challenges the demands put forward by mass reproduction. To begin with, the format of the book is unique in itself. The page, a horizontal rectangle, is 6 and 1/2 inches tall and 8 inches wide, as opposed to the standard format of 10 and 1/8 inches by 6 and 5/8 inches used in most comic books and graphic novels.¹⁸ The majority of the sequences is arranged horizontally, with two or three rows per page, yet from time to time the narrative deviates from this organizing principle and switches to a vertical format. The reader/viewer is thus required to turn the book around so that he or she can read the sequence,

¹³ W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in: *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, Jonathan Cape, New York 1970, pp. 217-242.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

¹⁷ S. Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, Peter Lang, New York 2008, p. 189.

¹⁸ As Ware himself observes, the decision to change the format of the book was a conscious choice to distance himself and his work from the format established by superhero comics and should thus be seen as significant in the interpretation of *Jimmy Corrigan* as "not-a-comic book." H. Chute, "Panel: Graphic Novel Forms Today: Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Seth, Chris Ware", *Critical Inquiry* 2014, vol. 40, no 3, p. 154.

which makes one actively engage with the work. The physicality of the graphic novel challenges the mass production models which one would like to enforce upon it and, consequently, strives to establish itself as a piece of handwork and craftsmanship. Indeed, as Thomas A. Bredhoft points out,

when Jimmy Corrigan was reprinted (...), it had a full set of new seeming-paratexts attached: brand new wrap-around artwork for the covers [which can be folded out and displayed as a poster – M.O.] and interior pages featuring selections from reviews (presented typographically) juxtaposed to a greatly reduced version of the artwork that first appeared on the interior of the hardcover’s dust jacket (...).¹⁹

By emphasizing the non-standard physical materiality of the book, Ware plays with the notions of reproducibility and uniqueness. The author simultaneously explores two sides of modernism: one informed by machine-age aesthetics and the other informed by its elitist ideals. Although, as some critics claim, the defining modernist feature of contemporary graphic novels “is their continued desire to disassociate themselves from the mass media forms in which they were first produced,”²⁰ Ware is in fact much more nuanced in his approach. In a meaningful gesture, the artist addresses the notions of both “obscurity” and “reproduction” in two short paragraphs inserted on the inside of the book’s cover. The postulated impenetrability of his work is ironically mocked²¹ and the idea of reproduction is presented as a notion which conflates a number of both positive and negative meanings.²² Thus Ware demonstrates that he is trying to absorb neither the populist nor the elitist version of modernism completely, but rather reworks the tensions, ideals, and contradictions present in both of them.

The exploration of similar themes can be found in Ware’s approach to typography. On the one hand, Ware consistently uses hand-lettering in all word

¹⁹ T.A. Bredhoft, “Comics Textual Production”, in: T.A. Bredhoft, *The Visible Text: Textual Production and Reproduction from Beowulf to Maus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 147-148.

²⁰ D. Ball, *Comics Against...*, p. 106.

²¹ The first lines of the paragraph devoted to obscurity read: “While it was not the intention of the author of this publication to produce a work which would in any way be considered “difficult,” “obscure,” or, even worse, “impenetrable,” (...) some readers, owing to an (entirely excusable) unfamiliarity with certain trends and fads which flow through the tributaries of today’s “cutting-edge culture,” might not be suitably equipped to sustain a successful linguistic relationship with the pictographic theatre it offers.” Ch. Ware, *Jimmy...*, n.p.

²² Ware inserts a short definition of “reproduce” which reads: “reproduce: to produce a counterpart, image, or copy of, or, to bring to mind again, as in a memory; to generate offspring, or, to undergo copying; to print, or to publish; to make valueless.” *Ibid.*, n.p.

balloons and captions corresponding to individual panels. These “signals” of the private, the unique, and the intimate, as the handwritten letters are to be interpreted,²³ are then confronted with the elegant “impersonal” lettering used on the book’s dust jacket and in the captions which provide connections between the respective panels with verbal clues such as “later,” “thus,” “and so,” or “a few minutes later.” Besides the mechanistic connotations, however, Ware’s lettering also evokes other associations. Its highly-stylized character brings to mind ideas of craftsmanship and nostalgia. Indeed, as Daniel Raeburn informs us, the artist “copied fruit, cigar and cosmetics labels in order to attain a proficiency, then a fluency, in the increasingly antique art of hand-lettering.”²⁴ In another meaningful gesture, Ware transforms the lettering associated with mass-produced newspaper advertisements into a unique work of art (he draws each letter by hand and does not use computers or ready-made fonts) and then turns it again into something that can be reproduced and circulated on a mass scale, yet retaining a slightly nostalgic aura.

The drawing style employed in *Jimmy Corrigan* also resonates with the different meanings of modernity explored by Ware. It is both craftsmanlike and mechanic,²⁵ charged with emotions and characterized by clean execution, signature and inspired by classic American comic strips from the early twentieth century, as well as the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, Ware cites as his influences the early cartoon masters such as Frank King, George Herriman, Joe Shuster, Roy Crane, Ray Gotto, and Dick Calkins;²⁶ the contemporary classics, such as Art Spiegelman; but also Joseph Cornell,²⁷ Ernest Hemingway, Edward Hopper,

23 “[T]here is an intimacy to reading handwritten marks on the printed page,” Hillary Chute observes, “an intimacy that works in tandem with the sometimes visceral effects of presenting ‘private’ images.” H. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, Columbia University Press, New York 2010, p. 10.

24 D. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2004, p. 80.

25 The drawing and printing process is very time-consuming and arduous. The artist emphasizes that “It takes two days to write (draw) one strip, one day to ink it, and one day to color it. No one other than the fellow who photographs it and the printers – to whom I am weekly grateful – affect the outcome.” T. Littleton, *Popular Artifacts: An Interview with Chris Ware*, 2007, <<http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=128141>> [accessed 27 June 2016].

26 Ware confesses that he “came to prefer the earlier, more ideogrammatic cartooning of the thirties and forties (...). Their simplicity and awkwardness seemed more human and adaptable somehow.” J. Heer, “Interview with Chris Ware: The Art of Comics No. 2”, *The Paris Review* 2014, no 210, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6329/the-art-of-comics-no-2-chris-ware> [accessed 5 July 2016]. Jeet Heer discusses Ware’s cartoon and comic influences in detail in “Inventing Cartooning Ancestors: Ware and the Comics Canon” in: *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, ed. D. Ball, M. Kuhlman, University of Mississippi Press, Jackson 2010, pp. 3-13.

27 The artist openly states that he “really love[s] Joseph Cornell, who [he] kind of think[s] kept this warmth and humanism alive through the whole twentieth century of not so warm art (...).” H. Chute, *Panel...*, 158.

and James Joyce.²⁸ Ware's varied and eclectic set of influences brings to mind Marianne Moore's engagement with the old masters, such as Dürer, paired with her admiration for avant-garde Cubist artists and popular American culture, or Joseph Cornell's combined interest in the Victorian era, Surrealism, Dada, Marcel Duchamp, but also popular culture, especially movies and film stars. Ware incorporates both popular and elitist influences and develops an idiosyncratic style which rejects the simplification and infantilization of traditional comics and the formal demands of traditional painting. Indeed, Ware alludes to modernist painting by reducing his style to the essentials, such as the line and flat color fields. The artist does not use perspective and essentially thinks of his work in terms of two-dimensional compositions limited and defined by the page, stating that he wants his drawings to be as "stylistically dead and flat" as possible for the sake of their utmost clarity.²⁹ This idea of reducing the page to its essentials and experimenting with the visual language of the graphic novel echoes Michel Fried's observations regarding modernist painting, inasmuch as

[w]hat the modernist painter can be said to discover in his work - what can be said to be revealed to him in it - is not the irreducible essence of *all* painting, but rather that which, at the present moment in painting's history, is capable of convincing him that it can stand comparison with the painting of both the modernist and the pre-modernist past whose quality seems to him beyond question.³⁰

As such, with his explorations of the graphic novel's visual language, his interest in the early twentieth century comic art, as well as in modernist and contemporary classics, Ware contributes to the understanding of modernity as being in a constant relation with the past that is continually reinterpreted, revised, and revived by the present. In this sense, Ware is part of the modernist tradition that has never ended.

Such a vision of modernity is also reflected in *Jimmy Corrigan's* interconnecting storylines, in which the past informs the present and vice versa.

²⁸ Ware points out that: "Maybe because of my grounding in visual art, I'm drawn to synesthetic vividness, especially to Joyce. His ability to implant images in the reader's mind with what are essentially page-surface incomprehensibilities astonishes me—poetic sensations in *Ulysses* that suggest certain shuffling sounds and grainy, hot impressions, and only by the end of the page does one realize Leopold Bloom has been walking on a beach. Comics, in some ways, are already structurally more synesthetic than "text-only" writing, with their combination of pictures and words inducing a flowing sense of movement and sound and sometimes even smell." J. Heer, *Interview....*, n.p.

²⁹ T. Littleton, *Popular....*

³⁰ M. Fried, *How Modernism Works: A Response to T.J. Clark*, "Critical Inquiry" 1982, vol. 9, no 1, p. 223.

The pursuit of progress and technological advancements initiated at the Chicago's World Fair of 1893, which plays a crucial role in one of *Jimmy Corrigan's* subplots, continued throughout the twentieth century, until the present day. The continuity of the modernist ideals is thus clearly emphasized. Jimmy's grandfather visits the Fair with his father, and their trip is presented on nine pages of the graphic tale. Highly detailed full-page drawings of the Fair's exposition buildings are accompanied by the captions which attempt to render the impact of the exhibition at its opening. "Exhibit, after exhibit in building after building..." Jimmy's grandfather gushes, "hundreds of them... more than anyone could possibly hope to see... machinery, agriculture, electricity, weaponry, everything."³¹ The Fair in fact opened the door for modernity, especially when it comes to Chicago architecture. On the day the Fair opened, "the fondest (and also most megalomaniac) dreams of the architects were realized," David van Zanten writes, "and for a moment a new place clad in a new and glorious raiment of buildings (...) amazed an applauding public."³² Indeed, Chicago marked the beginning of modern architecture with the erection of the first skyscraper with a steel frame construction, The Home Insurance Building, in 1885. The Chicago School adhered to the principles of pragmatism, simplicity, and functionality, and followed the famous slogan "form follows function." In the act of building on the different modernizing trends which made Chicago one of the American, but also international, centers of modernism, Ware employs the language of architecture. The artist engages with Chicago's rich architectural history on two main levels, by presenting modern architecture in his drawings and by exploring its structure.

Chicago's modern architecture shapes the story and influences its tone. The city is depicted as a modern metropolis full of skyscrapers defined by pure geometric forms and reductionist aesthetics, with clearly recognizable drawings of The Willis Tower, The Reliance Building, and the Manhattan Building.³³ What is more, Ware also inserts two posters in the visual narrative. One advertises Chicago as a modern metropolis and depicts the city's most famous buildings, including The Hancock Tower, The Willis Tower, The Wrigley Building, The Water Tower, The Tribune Tower, and The Merchandise Mart. This poster is then contrasted, but also complemented, with Ware's reproduction of a poster

³¹ Ch. Ware, *Jimmy...*, n.p.

³² D. van Zanten, "The Centrality of the Columbian Exposition in the History of Chicago Architecture", in: *Chicago Architecture: Histories, Revisions, Alternatives*, ed. Ch. Waldheim, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005, p. 32.

³³ Ware's architectural drawings from *Jimmy Corrigan* were also featured at *The Comic Art and Architecture of Chris Ware* exhibition held from November 2014 to January 2015 at the Art Institute of Chicago and at the *Architecture in Comic-Strip Form* (The National Museum - Architecture in Oslo, Norway, October 2015 - February 2016).

advertising the 1893 Fair (it is a hand-drawn copy of the original poster, another instance of Ware's play with the mechanic and the unique), in which the words "art," "science," "industry," and "electricity" feature prominently next to the panorama of Chicago with its first skyscrapers. Indeed, Chicago, a city in which the modern skyscraper and the American Bauhaus flourished, is an emblematic city of forward-looking modernism and is adequately presented in *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Architectural design, the concept of "form following structure," and references to the steel-frame construction, the symbol of modern architecture, are employed not only in the graphic novel's storyline, but also in its "construction." Indeed, *Jimmy Corrigan*, with its rigid divisions into panels, frames, and sequences, suggests an obvious parallel with modern architectural design. As Jeet Heer points out, "[a]rchitecture is not usually thought of as a narrative art form but buildings exist in time as well as space."³⁴ In the graphic novel, and other forms of sequential art, time, i.e. how the story unfolds from one moment in the narrative to the next, is translated into space, that is an organization of panels and sequences on the page. The sequences in *Jimmy Corrigan* are devised in a unique manner. The grids and the entire organization of the page emphasize the physicality of the page, which is treated as the space of storytelling. This space is delineated by means of thick black lines, which could be said to be equivalent to steel columns and beams used in steel-frame structures. Most of the pages feature a wide uncolored margin (i.e. it is the same color as the page), firmly defined by a thick black outline which visually echoes the shape of the page. The arrangement of the page into individual panels is realized through a strict and rigorous intersection of black gridlines. Commenting on Ware's use of architectural design in his works, D.J. Dycus emphasizes that "rather than drawing upon comics to inspire his own work, Ware identifies the medium with other, more disparate artistic media."³⁵ The division into panels and sequences, equivalent to the architectural concept of steel-frame, supports and organizes the entire story. The clean, elegant lines of the panel outlines on the page echo the functionalist architectural form.

This emphasis on form and structure is not only rendered implicitly in how the graphic novel is organized but also finds its further explicit realization in some of Ware's drawings. Indeed, in the subplot which deals with Chicago's World Fair of 1893, Ware devotes entire two pages to the drawings which depict the steel-frame construction of one of the exhibition's buildings. As described above, both pages are rigorously divided into square and rectangular panels.

³⁴ J. Heer, *Sweet Lechery: Reviews, Essays & Profiles*, The Porcupine's Quill, Erin 2014, p. 223.

³⁵ D.J. Dycus, *Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan: Honing the Hybridity of the Graphic Novel*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2011, p. 101.

The first page is composed of, in all, 16 panels arranged in three rows. The first two panels in the first row at the top of the page take up half of the available space (i.e. they are half the width and height of the entire page). The following two rows of panels adhere to this principle of reduction by half. The height of the panels in the second row equals half the height of the panels in the first row and the height of the panels in the third row is half the height of the panels in the second row. The overall arrangement is characterized by a strict geometric order. Although they vary in size, all of the panels are parts of the same structure; they complement and correspond to one another. The structure established on the first page is then echoed on the opposite page, as the two pages face one another and together form an even bigger construction. Inscribed in the panels are the drawings of steel columns and beams which constitute the frame of one of the exhibition pavilions. This multiplicity of grids produces an interesting effect. The plot, the narrative which unfolds in *Jimmy Corrigan*, gives way to abstraction. The beauty of the arrangement, the simplicity and order of the geometric forms brings to mind the works of Piet Mondrian. Form follows function in sequential art, yet, as Ware also demonstrates, form may be captivating in itself. Even though, as Jeet Heer ironically observes, “[a]ll of us are boxed in. (...) Western architecture has never strayed far from its roots in Euclidean geometry, so the drama of our existence is played out on boxy stages defined by straight lines, right angles, squares, cubes, rectangles and other sharp-edged forms.”³⁶

Although Ware puts great emphasis on the beauty of form, realized as a careful arrangement of vertical and horizontal lines which make up the grid, he also acknowledges the negative connotations of such a model of structuring a story. Ingeniously, Ware uses the “sharp-edged forms” of the panels to explore the representation of time and engage with the concept of time examined in modernist literature. Indeed, the question of how to conceptualize time in the narrative is of equal importance in both the contemporary graphic novel and the modernist novel. As has been noted above, graphic novels represent time as space. Scott McCloud insists that time and space in the graphic novel or a comic book are “one and the same,”³⁷ while Ware himself comments that

Art Spiegelman has defined comics as the art of turning time back into space, which is the best explanation of the medium I think anyone’s yet come up with. The cartoonist has to remain aware of the page as a composition while focusing on the story created by the strings of individual

³⁶ J. Heer, *Sweet...*, p. 223.

³⁷ S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, William Morrow Paperbacks, New York 1993, p. 100.

panels. I think this mirrors the way we experience life – being perceptually aware of our momentary present with some murky recollections of our past and vague anticipations of where we’re headed, and all of it contributing to the shape of what we like to think of as our life. I try to flatten out experience and memory on the page so the reader can see, feel, and sense as much of all of this as possible, but it’s really not much different from composing music or planning a building.³⁸

Time in the graphic novel has thus the capacity to be compressed and extended, depending on the size of the panels and the page layout.

The notion of time was also one of the key concepts in the modernist novel, mainly through the influence of the French philosopher Henri Bergson.³⁹ Bergson developed the concept of “duration,” that is time as experienced by an individual. Time is seen as “a mutual penetration, an interconnection and organization”⁴⁰ of moments. Indeed, the philosopher claimed that time should be interpreted as *durée*, that is a series of moments experienced subjectively and not measured “objectively” and “scientifically” by clocks.⁴¹ As such, time in the modernist novel could be conceptualized as continuance or persistence, or, indeed, as a sense of timelessness. It could also be governed by other purely conceptual categories. What matters the most is the embodiment of time in which a modernist split between the subjective experience of time by the character and the “objective” passage of time in the narrative subordinated to the question “What happened next?” comes to the fore. A similar understanding of time and its representation, that is of time split into “subjective” duration and “objective” narrative, can be found in *Jimmy Corrigan*. In the process of reading, the organizing architectural structure realized as gridlines, a construction that supports the entire graphic novel, is revealed to present a truly modernist vision of time, experienced as “duration” and, as such, highly subjective. Ware is thus situated within a “multidisciplinary, avant-garde framework,” as his work “exposes and manipulates the language of comics in ways that demand a great deal of the reader and test the representational possibilities

³⁸ J. Heer, *Interview...*, n.p.

³⁹ As Morag Shiach observes, “Most modernists have been called Bergsonian at one time. William Faulkner stated his agreement ‘with Bergson’s theory of the fluidity of time.’ Virginia Woolf’s conception of time is frequently called “Bergsonian” (...).” M. Shiach, *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 48-49.

⁴⁰ H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, transl. F.L. Pogson, George Allen/Macmillan, London and New York 1910, p. 101.

⁴¹ B. Randall, *Modernism, Daily Life, and Everyday Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 29-48.

of the medium.”⁴² Indeed, the gridlines constitute a powerful and defining element of each page. They both allow the story to proceed and “imprison” the moments in individual panels. Narration and experienced time challenge one another, as “modernist time passes through arrested moments.”⁴³ Ware explores this vision of time through the possibilities offered by the sequential art of storytelling.

On one page I wish to analyze in detail, such an understanding of time is examined through a sequence of different-sized panels. Jimmy is depicted in a bright yellow bathroom, as he is sitting on a toilet, obsessively thinking about his newly found father and half-sister – his father’s daughter from a new relationship.⁴⁴ Though it may appear grotesque and absurd, this moment in the graphic novel is actually an element of a wider tragic story. Jimmy’s father, long estranged from him, has been in a car accident and Jimmy spends two days at his hospital bedside. The yellow bathroom is the hospital bathroom adjoining the room in which Jimmy’s father is staying. Jimmy, who has never seen his half-sister Amy, is both anxious and excited to meet her for the first time. As far as the sequence’s design is concerned, it is a great example of what a carefully planned succession of images on the page may accomplish. The page comprises twenty square and rectangular panels in total. The first nine panels take up the top two thirds of the entire page and are arranged in four columns. The first panel is located in the top left corner of the page with panels two and three arranged in one column below it. Panels four and five, both vertical rectangles, equal the height of panels one through three and respectively take up the space of columns two and three. Panels six through nine in the last and fourth column on the right side of the page are horizontal rectangles arranged one under another. Panels ten through twenty are arranged in one row, taking up the bottom one third of the page. The structure of the page guides the reader/viewer presenting him or her with the suggestions on how to read the sequence and to interpret the time relations portrayed.

The reading begins in the top left corner of the page and ends in the bottom right corner. In the first panel, a vertical rectangle, Jimmy is sitting on the toilet, his pants down and his head in his hands. The bathroom is rendered sparingly with only a hint of a mirror and a washbasin on the left and a toilet paper dispenser on the right, as the perspective focuses on the protagonist. Next, one may move on to the two panels below. They are horizontal rectangles.

⁴² D. Ball and M. Kuhlman, “Introduction: Chris Ware and the ‘Cult of Difficulty’”, in: *Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, ed. D. Ball, M. Kuhlman, University Press Of Mississippi, Jackson 2010, p. x.

⁴³ M. Shiach, *The Cambridge...*, p. 57.

⁴⁴ Ch. Ware, *Jimmy...*, n.p.

Their combined height equals the height of the first panel, thus introducing a certain rhythm to the moment in the narrative that otherwise could be described as inherently static. Indeed, as Georgiana Banita observes, Ware in his comics resists the fast-paced rock and roll aesthetics of popular comics⁴⁵ and in the analyzed sequence time slows down for Jimmy and is experienced by him as prolonged duration. The second panel seems to be a reduced version of the first, presenting a close-up of Jimmy's chest and head hanging down in a gesture of depression. As far as visual representation is concerned, nothing spectacular is taking place. On the contrary, this two-panel structure appears repetitious and persistent. The only markers of passing time are the two word balloons invading the panels from the right, reading respectively "Just come down this hall and to the left, Ms. Corrigan" and "This was...". They do not correspond to the situation depicted in these two panels, however, and disrupt its silent and static character by letting in voices from the outside. At the same time, perhaps a bit ironically, the disruptive voices force a change in the progression of the visuals. The change comes – Jimmy lifts his head in the third panel, as if scared by the voices – while the space around him remains undisturbed, as the edges of the mirror and the washbasin on the left and the toilet paper dispenser on the right linger in their places.

The first panel creates some expectations in the mind of the reader/viewer, which require to be either fulfilled or contradicted. However, the second panel halts the narrative progress and exposes the expected progression of the story as futile. One is forced to either reread the initial two-panel sequence, looking for the signs of narrative continuity or proceed, only to find some signs of difference, but not narrative progression, in the third panel. Commenting on Chris Ware's work, D.J. Dycus points out that Ware believes that "cartoons are images that must be read. (...) [Ware] might fill a page with twenty small images, which means that a lot of information is conveyed, even though the story has not moved along very far at all due to the slow pace at which Ware narrates his story."⁴⁶ Thus, what the short three-panel sequence in question does is suspend the reader/viewer in the process of reading, exposing the fact that time may be experienced "subjectively." In his formal experiments involving the number and arrangement of panels, Ware references the modernist novel, in which the passage of time is presented as it is experienced within the minds of its characters, rather than as a plot that unfolds and advances forward. In fact, it can be said

⁴⁵ G. Banita, "Chris Ware and the Pursuit of Slowness", in: *Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, ed. D. Ball, M. Kuhlman, University Press Of Mississippi, Jackson 2010, pp. 177-178.

⁴⁶ D.J. Dycus, *Chris Ware's...*, p. 90.

that the majority of Chris Ware's pages in *Jimmy Corrigan* are structured as "a rhythmic variation of multi-sized panels. These compositions interact with the diversity of the depicted scenes, sometimes alluding to a cosmic temporality, other times only to a few dreadful seconds. (...) Talking about 'reading time' and 'action time' would already reveal a lot about Ware's comics."⁴⁷

Once the reader/viewer goes through this three-panel introductory sequence-within-a-sequence, he or she may proceed to the left. Panel four is a vertical rectangle whose height equals the total height of panels one, two, and three. The visual "movement" from a wider shot to a close-up, observable in the transition from panel one to panel two is now reversed as panel four as if zooms out from Jimmy's face, depicted in panel three, and shows his entire figure. Again, apart from the change in the perspective, the only marker of difference between panel three and panel four are the two word balloons near the left border of panel four. The word balloons contain an exchange between a nurse and Jimmy's sister. Panel five echoes panel four in its size and format. It maintains the slow pace of time as experienced by Jimmy, showing a side view (the only visual "movement" in an otherwise static sequence) of Jimmy sitting on the toilet. Panels six, seven, eight, and nine, similarly to panels one, two, and three, are horizontal rectangles arranged one under another. The perspective is narrowed again. In panel six, Jimmy is seen from the side from the top of his head to the end of his torso. An almost identical scene is depicted in panel eight. The two counterparts are separated by panel seven which shows the bottom edge of the bathroom door. Somebody's shoes, either the nurse's or Amy's, are visible in a narrow gap between the door and the floor. Panel nine once again presents Jimmy from the front. The image is very similar to the one in panel three. Considered as a whole, panels one through nine may be described as a game of doubles and redundancies. Images echo one another and make the reader/viewer unable to go forward in the tale. Instead, they arrest the reader/viewer in the moment and through their number and arrangement convey how Jimmy, the protagonist, experiences time.

The sequence delays any conclusive narrative elements and instead focuses on the relayed and prolonged experience of the present moment. As Jacques Samson observes in his analysis of Ware's work,

[t]he effect of repetition of the panels generates a feeling of *durée*, similar to the feeling of extreme slowness experienced during waiting. Here, time drags and demonstrates its dragging. Nothing seems to move, except

⁴⁷ S. Conard and T. Lambeens, "Duration in Comics", *European Comic Art* 2012, vol. 5, no 2, pp. 100-101.

time itself. Rarely does one see time pass before one's eyes without it being wasted. Ware carved in the space of this page dead time.⁴⁸

This extension in space, through the arrangement of no less than nine panels, corresponds to the extension in time, with respect to the process of reading the sequence and the duration of the portrayed scene.

Jimmy is presented as imprisoned in the moment, which appears to last forever because at this point in the narrative he is caught in a personal dilemma. Faced with the deteriorating medical condition of his father, Jimmy is unable to face his half-sister who has come to visit Mr. Corrigan in hospital. Instead of coming out of the bathroom to meet Amy, Jimmy postpones the moment of this difficult decision. Such a reading is further problematized in the bottom and final row of the entire sequence and the entire page, in which Jimmy transcends the sphere of the real and imagines himself going out of the bathroom to greet his half-sister. The escape from the subjective "duration" of the moment and the sense of closure provided by Jimmy taking action is illusory, however, because Jimmy only imagines the moment in which he leaves his retreat. Indeed, even the imagined moment of meeting Amy is divided into three panels and ultimately deferred, inasmuch as the panels present the reader/viewer with three different, but equally impossible, scenarios. As can be seen, even the moment in which Jimmy attempts to escape "duration" by taking action and leaving the bathroom is further prolonged by the separation into three frames. In the first "dream" panel, Jimmy goes out of the bathroom and says: "I'm Jimmy. How are you?". The following two "fantasy" panels show Jimmy at the door saying respectively "I'm Jimmy. I've heard a lot of nice things about you" and "What's up? I'm Jimmy. I just want you to know that I'm not afraid of black people! [Amy is black – M.O.]"⁴⁹ The three panels are arranged in a column, one under another, and thus the expected progress of the narrative undergoes further temporization. Ultimately, narrative progress is discarded as impossible to attain. Such a conclusion is further emphasized by the final two panels which show Jimmy sitting on the toilet unable to take any action and arrested in the moment. For György Lukács "modernist" time "appears as no

⁴⁸ "L'effet de répétition des cases engendre une sensation étirée de durée, telle l'impression d'extrême lenteur éprouvée dans l'attente. Ici le temps piétine, en exhibant son piétinement. Rien ne paraît bouger, sauf lui. Il est rare que le temps bouge sous nos yeux sans que ce ne soit en pure perte. Ware a sculpté dans l'espace de cette planche du temps mort." [translation mine, M.O.] J. Samson, «Micro-Lecture 2: Le Regard Furtif de Jimmy», in: B. Peeters, J. Samson, eds: *Chris Ware: La Bande Dessinée Réinventée*, Les Impressions Nouvelles, Brussels 2010, p. 149-150.

⁴⁹ Ch. Ware, *Jimmy...*, n.p.

longer the neutral, objective and historical medium in which men move and develop. It is distorted into a dead and deadening outward power. The passage of time is the frame within which a person suffers degradation. It turns into an independent and remorseless machine (...).⁵⁰ Similarly here, time is presented as a deadening power which prevents any action. In a meaningful gesture, the final panel of the page in the bottom right corner is almost identical with the first panel in the top left corner. Jimmy is sitting on the toilet, his pants down and his head in his hands, which refers one back to “square one,” emphasizing the sensation of time not moving forward.

As can be seen, Ware engages with modernism in *Jimmy Corrigan* by exploring a number of its formal and thematic aspects. He experiments with the graphic novel's status as a work that is simultaneously mass produced and unique on the levels of the book format, typography, and drawing style. The artist also creatively utilizes Chicago's rich architectural history. On the one hand, modernist Chicago architecture is depicted in his drawings, which is an obvious reference to the modernist ideals. Beside constituting a telling urban setting, however, modernist architecture is also integrated into the graphic novel's “construction.” The structure of the steel frame and the modernist principle “form follows function” are realized as panels and frames in *Jimmy Corrigan*'s sequential structure. Finally, thanks to a careful organization of the page and the arrangement of the panels, Ware investigates the notion of time inspired by the Bergsonian concept of *durée*, in which time is experienced in a highly subjective fashion. Therefore, thanks to the modernist inspirations found in philosophy, literature, architecture, and the visual arts, Ware's creation demonstrates that the poetics of modernism is a vital component of the poetics of the contemporary graphic novel. *Jimmy Corrigan* establishes itself as a truly neomodernist text, one which creatively reworks and adapts modernist concepts. These neomodernist aspects of the graphic novel obviously complicate the popular definition of the form, which associates the graphic novel with postmodernism only. As *Jimmy Corrigan*'s example shows, the graphic novel in its inherent verbal-visual duality is able to embrace both postmodernist and modernist tendencies.

⁵⁰ G. Lukács, *Essays on Thomas Mann*, transl. Stanley Mitchell, Grosset & Dunlap, New York 1965, p. 79.

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**POETYKA MODERNIZMU W POWIEŚCI GRAFICZNEJ.
JIMMY CORRIGAN CHRISA WARE'A JAKO TEKST NEOMODER-
NISTYCZNY.
(streszczenie)**

Artykuł skupia się na analizie aspektów modernistycznej poetyki w powieści graficznej Chrisa Ware'a pt. *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). Poruszone zostaną w szczególności trzy problemy: (i) status powieści graficznej jako produktu kultury masowej / dzieła sztuki w kontekście koncepcji „aury” dzieła sztuki Waltera Benjamina; (ii) modernistyczna architektura; oraz (iii) modernistyczna koncepcja subiektywnego postrzegania czasu. Punktem wyjścia dla pierwszego problemu jest omówienie pojęcia „aury” Benjamina oraz jego znaczenia dla modernistycznej estetyki, co pozwoli na analizę eksperymentów Chrisa Ware'a ze statusem powieści graficznej jako dzieła kultury popularnej i elitarnej, w szczególności pod względem formatu książki i stylu rysowania. Następnie opisana zostanie rola architektury modernistycznej w *Jimmym Corriganie*. Architektura w analizowanej powieści graficznej jest prezentowana jako symbol nowoczesności oraz internalizowana jako struktura organizująca sekwencyjnej sztuki opowiadania. Ostatnim z analizowanych aspektów jest pojęcie czasu i jego prezentacja w powieści graficznej, która jest ściśle związana z modernistyczną ideą *durée* Henri Bergsona. Analiza powyższych trzech aspektów wykaże, jak Chris Ware adaptuje techniki modernistyczne na użytek powieści graficznej, a tym samym problematyzuje postulowany status powieści graficznej jako tekstu post-modernistycznego, dowodząc, że poetyka modernizmu jest istotnym elementem współczesnej poetyki powieści graficznej.

Słowa kluczowe: neomodernizm, modernizm, powieść graficzna, komiks, Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan*.