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## Modernism in the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Brad Prager

Yesterday, a turn away from the world meant a turn toward the self; a turn away from Marxism meant a turn toward psychoanalysis..... Today, even psychoanalysis and desire must be shunned as being too modern, and as requiring an assessment of late capitalism that the postmodern subject cannot tolerate.

Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*

Although Chris Ware's most recent work is essentially a lengthy comic book, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* has more in common with the high modernism of Kafka than with "Beetle Bailey" or "The X-Men." Like most of the sophisticated, adult-oriented comic artists such as R. Crumb or Art Spiegelman with whom he has been compared, his works are loaded with critical reflections on the complex forms of social alienation that accompany late capitalism. At the same time, his quasi-autobiographical graphic novel is filled to overflowing with psychoanalytically inflected motifs, some that contribute directly to the development of the narrative itself, and others that are geared simply toward exploring the mechanics of his unhappy protagonist's overwrought unconscious. Ware underscores how his alter-ego's burdensome familial anxieties have been reproduced and handed down from one generation to the next. Unique in his depiction, however, is the way that he stages psychic subjection in connection to its specific twentieth-century social context.

Insofar as Ware's graphic novel emphasizes the historical structures that define his subject's psychic life, the narrative of his main character's partly fictional family tends toward a modern rather than postmodern style. Although its fragmented and disjointed pace seems at times more postmodern than modern, it draws on modernist techniques of representation, creating a visual stream of consciousness. He comes to critique late capitalism in a manner consistent with both Marxism and psychoanalysis, thereby breaking the contemporary taboos to which Fredric Jameson alluded in the passage cited above. As has often been repeated, however, modernism is a somewhat arbitrary term that only serves to differentiate some art and literature from before 1900 (realism) and some from after the 1960s (postmodernism) from much of what came in between.

Although Jameson himself has spent much energy trying to define modernism, he is the first to caution against adhering too strictly to normative applications of the term, lest one be trapped by what he refers to as an "ideology of modernism" (Jameson 1988:117). He prefers to discourage

the rigid separation of modernist art from those prior and subsequent forms deemed to be bourgeois through and through, arguing that such a gesture -- typical of Adorno, for example -- is as ideological as that which it rejects. Yet the term is useful here as a delineation of works produced in a particular historical moment. As I will show, Ware, a twenty-first century graphic artist, is indeed more comfortable going back to stylistic and thematic tropes that predate World War II and which are generally associated with modernist works. He repeatedly brings the styles of prewar strips including "Krazy Kat" and "Gasoline Alley" into dialogue with the constellation of concerns suggested by writers such as Freud, Kafka, and Walter Benjamin in order to situate and define his critique of alienated forms of modern existence that persist from the dawn of the industrialized twentieth century until today.

Because modernism is as broad a term as it is slippery, it carries with it both bleak and emancipatory connotations. As Jameson argues, modernism has alternately optimistic and pessimistic sides that are each in their own way political, despite their claims to autonomy. Jameson argues that the many forms of modernism were each committed to "the fateful premonition of momentous impending transformations of the Self or the World" (Jameson, 1998:131). On the one side, modernism is taken by Adorno to refer to that high art that is relentlessly critical of bourgeois society, like that of Kafka or Arnold Schönberg. It is an aesthetics that emancipates only through releasing a negative, critical potential or by holding a dark, distorting mirror to modern life. On the other hand, modernism denotes an optimism, such as can be found in Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1988 [1936]) in which he highlighted the democratizing potential of film and photography; and in Brecht's many writings about the democratizing possibilities associated with radio. Even in Benjamin and Brecht, however, there lurks a dangerous side whereby the technologies of liberation themselves become oppressive. Despite periodic flashes of hope, both the modernism of high art and that which concerns itself with mass culture, irrefutably express anxiety about increasing anomie and the exploitation of labor at the hands of merciless capitalists in an industrialized society. By returning to these discourses, Ware's work is politicized in ways similar to that work for which Jameson nostalgically longs.

Some of Ware's gestures toward psychoanalysis, such as his thematization of sexual anxiety and of the fine line that divides dreams from waking life, might be self-evident; less obvious are the numerous implicit parallels to the writings of Kafka and Benjamin. Consistent with the work of these and other modernists, Ware's text returns to a very specific set of themes: the oedipal drama; the subjective experience of time; and the encroachment of urban life on the individual. It is not the case, however, that he simply reiterates these tropes out of nostalgia for prewar culture. Rather, as I will argue, he uses his quasi-autobiographical narrative to depict the despair that

comes of the continued intractability of the Oedipal drama as it is itself again and again mechanically reproduced within commodity culture. Thus Ware offers a unique synthesis of a fundamentally Freudian framework with Benjamin's Marxist critique of capitalism, linking Oedipal violence with the age of mechanical reproduction in a way that continues to think through the anxieties implicit in Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay. In contradistinction to much of the material at the 2002 Whitney Museum Biennial in which Ware was exhibited, his work shuns the postmodern, having turned away from such themes as the "global" and the "virtual." He instead undertakes a return to that which I have defined here as a modernist standpoint.

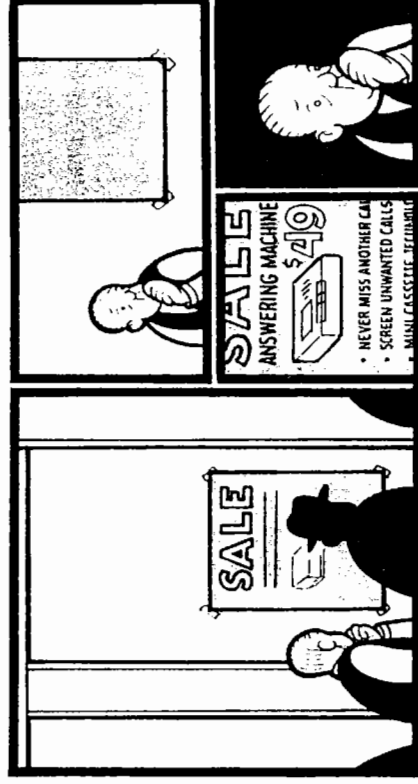


Figure 1. Jimmy Corrigan: *The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) n.p.

Ware has produced more than a dozen issues of his single-author comic book *The Acme Novelty Library*. Some focus solely on the character "Quimby the Mouse," a brutal send-up of prewar "Mickey Mouse" stories that brings out the extreme violence inherent in children's cartoons. Others contain a sad and long-suffering character referred to only as "the bent-over, ugly potato man." Most, however, focus on Ware's alter-ego, Jimmy Corrigan, who holds a nondescript clerical job in Chicago, lives alone and fantasizes about a life with normal social contact, one that has been forbidden to him because of his stilted and unhappy childhood (Fig. 1). Taken as a whole, that narrative moves freely between stories in which Jimmy is a boy who has no contact with his absent father and patiently attends to his mother's needs, and those in which Jimmy is a 36 year old man who feels guilty for not spending enough time with her. An altogether alienated subject, Jimmy deals with his loneliness and isolation by making an occasional prank phone call or by fantasizing about how he might one day come to have a personal conversation with his female co-worker, Peggy. Some issues of *The Acme Novelty Library*, the ones that focus on Jimmy, were collected in Ware's graphic

novel entitled *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. The title is meant ironically: it refers to the illusion that ingenuity -- smartness -- could help Ware's protagonist transcend the strictures of his crippling psychic development. Simultaneously, it calls attention to the fact that however old Jimmy may get, he is perpetually an emotionally stultified "kid."

To summarize briefly, in the series of stories that defines the graphic novel's central narrative, the adult Jimmy suddenly receives a letter and a plane ticket from his father whom he has never met. Despite a broken ankle and a sense of guilt about leaving his mother behind, Jimmy accepts his father's gesture towards reconciliation and flies from Chicago to Waukosh, Michigan to meet him during the week before Thanksgiving. His father is a disappointment. He is neither sensitive, nor is he much of a host, expecting Jimmy to pay for their meals. Jimmy spends their time together daydreaming on the one hand that his father is a wealthy, educated yacht owner, and on the other that he is stabbing him to death. The narrative then flashes back to 1892, where eleven year old James Corrigan, Jimmy's grandfather, lives alone in a single room with his working-class father, who treats him very badly. James starts a flirtation with a girl his age, and like Jimmy, his twentieth-century counterpart, he daydreams both about romancing and murdering his new love interest.

Meanwhile, back in present-day Michigan, Jimmy's father reveals that he has an adopted daughter, a black woman named Amy, who will spend Thanksgiving with father and son. Shortly thereafter, while Jimmy is taking a nap, his father gets into a car accident that sends him to the hospital. There, Jimmy meets Amy, and while Amy initially responds comfortably to Jimmy's presence, Jimmy is confused and unable to interpret his feelings. His discomfort stems in part from her blackness; not only has he had little direct contact with black people, but this black woman is supposed to somehow suddenly be "family" to him. The strangeness of the encounter and the unfamiliar proximity produce wildly inappropriate sexual impulses toward her. He imagines, for example, protecting her from a nuclear blast that leaves only the two of them to repopulate the Earth in their skimpy shreds of clothing. The day following the accident, the two are informed that their father has died during the night. Amy, feeling suddenly estranged from Jimmy and associating his presence with this tragedy, physically pushes him away from her. This is the last they see of one another, and Jimmy immediately heads back to Chicago. At this point, Ware brings the climax of the twentieth-century narrative together with that of the 1893 one in which Jimmy's ill-treated grandfather James has been abandoned and effectively orphaned by his father at the World's Fair, repeatedly referred to as the site of "man's greatest accomplishment." In other words, both the nineteenth-century James and twentieth-century Jimmy are orphaned in parallel ways, one after the next.

There are a number of directly and indirectly autobiographical elements in Ware's graphic novel. Despite the fact that the author apologizes to his mother in his afterword, disavowing any similarity between her and "the miserable wretch who dominates poor Jimmy," he also acknowledges that the story is for the most part a thinly veiled autobiography, tracing developments directly parallel to Ware's own experience. It is, however, not genuinely autobiographical, enabling Ware to keep an authorial distance from his protagonist's suffering. Ware admits that his own life may not have been as irredeemably alienating as that of Jimmy Corrigan, but like his main character, Ware's own estranged father first contacted him when he was in his thirties, hoping to reconcile. Their meeting with one another was predictably awkward, and his father died before any real reconciliation could take place. Ware tells the story in the postscript (the "Corrigenda") to *The Smartest Kid on Earth*. There he affirms that the graphic novel is an attempt to work through the details of his own past, and similarly, of his overall career as a cartoonist, adding: "I had spent my entire life avoiding contact with my own father, and I guess I thought that once this story was finished, I would somehow have 'prepared' myself to meet the real man, and then be able to get on with my life. Of course, real life is much more badly plotted than that."

### The Freudian Inflection

Ware's debut as a comic artist first came when Art Spiegelman saw his work in an Austin newspaper in 1987 and eventually invited him to contribute to *Raw*, which was at that time the highest profile publication for serious graphic artists (it was the publication in which "Maus" first appeared in serial form). Ware wrote a story called "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess" for *Raw*. Read strictly in terms of its images, the brief storyline takes after *Captain Marvel* stories from the 1940s (better known as *Shazam!*) in which the superhero battles a mad scientist who looks very much like Captain Marvel's diminutive nemesis, Dr. Sivania. On the level of the text, however, the characters give voice, in no particularly systematic way, to an ostensibly unrelated personal story of a young boy's perceptions of his mother's boyfriends, and his urge to protect her from them. Comics theorist Gene Kannenberg Jr. (2002) has pointed out how Ware used "visual polyphony" to communicate both an event and how that event is psychologically experienced. Kannenberg shows how the relationship between text and image is used specifically to support Ware's playful manipulations of narrative voice. In the story's final three panels, after the hero has saved the damsel in distress, the narrator's voice explains how he was happier when his mother's boyfriends weren't around. This 1991 publication encapsulates

the defining structural component of his later work: Ware uses superhero tropes to depict a gap between the ideal and the real -- between fantasized happy families (the utopian escapes that Freud referred to as "family romances") and actual familial dysfunction.

That the entire plot of his later graphic novel is defined by the presence and absence of his father sets the tone for its numerous Oedipal crises. In order to depict the intrusion of unconscious desires, Ware frequently depicts the slippage between Jimmy's dreams and waking life. At one point he imagines he hears a disembodied voice, admonishing him: "Stop sucking on your sister's hair," even though he nowhere has a sister in the story's central narrative. At other times Jimmy finds himself suddenly encased in a hard, robotic shell. Like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, his family members and those around him seem not to notice the perverse pain of his situation. Ware returns to other obvious Freudian tropes as well, such as the gouging out of eyes. In one narrative arc, the bent-over potato man, whose white-collar work day starts and ends with another man digesting him, loses his eyes after he has been excreted and has to show up for work eyeless the following day. On yet another page, in a parody of the well-known *Nancy* comic strip, poor Sluggo blinds himself with a pair of scissors (Fig. 2). As Freud wrote in his famous essay "The Uncanny," "A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration" (1963 [1919]:36). In a text in which the ordering structural principle is the absence and sudden reappearance of the father, the gouging out of eyes can certainly be said to bring the theme of castration anxiety into the foreground.



Figure 2. *Acme Novelty Library 3* (Fall 1994) n.p.

Ware's references to psychoanalytic discourse operate on more and less explicit levels. With respect to narrative development, Jimmy's affections for his mother stymie his enjoyment of his own life. The adult Jimmy is threatened when he has to share his elderly mother's attentions with her new boyfriend at Thanksgiving, despite the fact that she spends her days confined to a rest home. When he is alone with his father, he imagines him lying

naked on top of a woman who may be his mother (Fig. 3). While we see a lot of Jimmy's father in this primal scene and elsewhere, his mother remains largely unseen, her face always obscured by wisps of hair (Fig. 4). While the supporting figures in Ware's stories are often obscured, Ware leaves his mother in particular behind a curtain of sorts (to some extent like the adults in Charlie Brown's world) in order to emphasize what is at stake in seeing from Jimmy's point of view. The ban on representing her stems from an acknowledgment of Jimmy's repression of his incestuous desires. Any depiction of her is taken to be profane, because it calls attention to the fact that she is indeed an object of desire. The wisps of hair resemble a veil, which if it were pulled away, would reveal a face upon which Jimmy cannot gaze directly. In encountering her face he would be forced to confront his Oedipal wishes. When Freud analyzed fetishism in 1927, he focused in particular on the fetish for feet or shoes, because they were frequently the last images seen before a child inadvertently gazed up a mother's skirt. In Ware's text, the wisp of hair functions in much the same way. It is "the last impression received before the uncanny traumatic one" (2000:207); it is the last impression before one is compelled to encounter one's own desire for one's mother. The fact that the hair may then be preserved as a fetish accounts for why Jimmy finds himself sucking on his imaginary sister's hair in a dream.

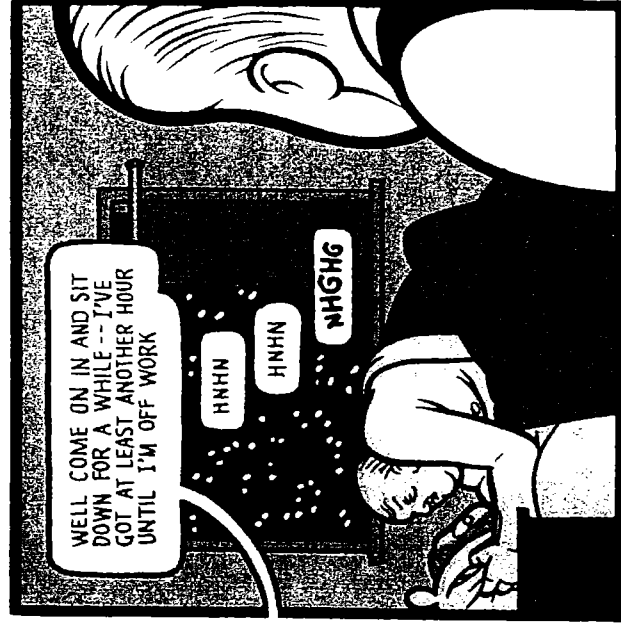


Figure 3. *Acme Novelty Library 6.5* (Spring 1995) n.p.

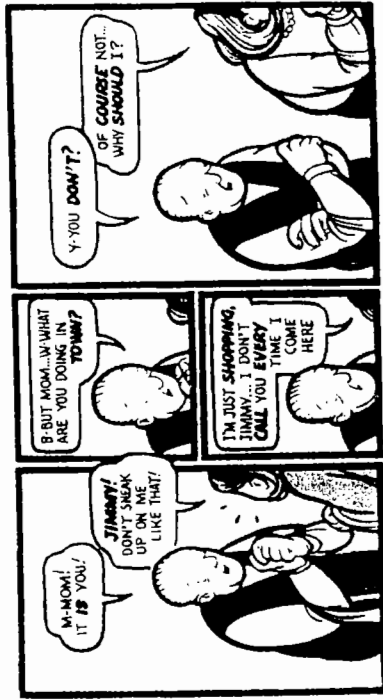


Figure 4. *Acme Novelty Library 1* (Winter 1993) n.p.

Jimmy's erotic feelings incessantly co-mingle with guilt during the course of his many daydreams. Sometimes they evolve into short story arcs that run parallel to the main narrative. In one of these apparently tangential story lines, Jimmy imagines that his mother has died. Ware depicts Jimmy's inability to mourn the loss and the subsequent consequences of his disavowal. He looks at his dead mother's telephone number in his address book and calls it in order to hear the recorded message explain that the number is out of service, inducing a chuckle in him rather than tears. Ware's most obvious use of the family romance, however, is his inclusion of a "pot-bellied Captain Marvel" to stand in for the wish-fantasy surrounding the image of his absent father (Fig. 5). Ware's play with the superhero genre underscores the contradictions at work in Jimmy's fantasies; he wants the missing man to be heroic, yet such daydreams are constantly interrupted by his visions of his father as an out of shape sadist. While superhero comic books are supposed to represent an escape, Ware's graphic novel employs the form to allude to the fact that (just as for Kafka or Beckett) even the most private paths of escape are barred.

In one of Ware's fantasy scenarios, the young Jimmy strangles his mother's new boyfriend to death just before the small boat the three of them are on capsizes, leaving Jimmy cast away on a deserted island (see ANL 10.4, Spring 1998). There, he waits for the occasional visit from his flabby superhero father who, like the doorkeeper in Kafka's "Before the Law," taunts him by saying that he will have to wait there just a little bit longer for his own good. At one point this oafish Captain Marvel (elsewhere referred to as "Super-Man" or "the Hurricane") leaves Jimmy with an antiquated nickelodeon machine, one penny, and the advice that he spend it wisely. Jimmy holds on to it and waits, driven mad by boredom and loneliness. When he is finally almost rescued by a crew of Robin-like adolescent superheroes, Captain Marvel returns and gouges out their eyes. As the voice of the

narrator explains it: "one by one, the costumed man plunged his super-strong thumbs into the helpless pre-teen eye sockets." He then vindictively reveals to Jimmy that the penny arcade machine he had one day hoped to watch contains only naked pictures of his mother.

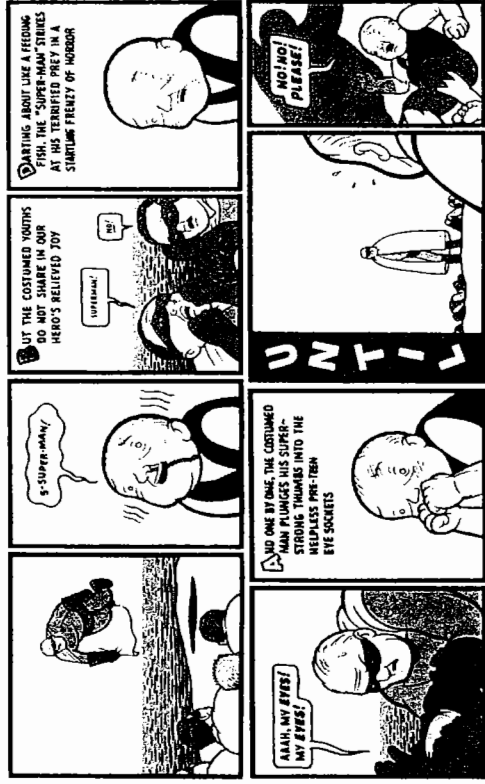


Figure 5. *Acme Novelty Library 10.4* (Spring 1998) n.p.

### The Telescoping of Time

The symptoms of Jimmy's unhappy psychic life as they have been described above -- the constant intrusion of his libido into daily life, the fear and desire that accompany thoughts of his mother, and the feelings of longing and contempt he associates with his missing father -- are not exclusively the problems and preoccupations of the adult Jimmy. On one level, Ware reaches back into his protagonist's childhood to show the way these anxieties have been a constant presence throughout his life. He depicts how the experiences of the boy and the man are of one piece. On still another level, Ware reaches back generationally to take the position that such problems are closely allied with the development of commodity culture from the 1890s to the present. He does this through a repeated juxtaposition of the 1893 story, the 1980s story, and multiple stopping points in between. The history of the twentieth century thereby becomes a single and undifferentiated scene of inner conflict. Choosing to set part of the story in turn-of-the-century Chicago ultimately enables Ware to foreground his own struggle to find the proper form through which to express this experience.

Grown-up Jimmy, with his hairless and shapeless face that might well approximate poor Charlie Brown's in the many lonely years to come is

almost indistinguishable from the youthful Jimmy. The immense weight of childhood on Jimmy's psychic life renders the boy and the man virtually identical. Ware occasionally switches narrating subjects, moving from the adult's point of view to that of the child without signaling. When Ware pauses to provide a cartoonish summary of events, he lets the boy serve as a stand-in. At times, Ware slides back and forth between the two characters, as when Jimmy wakes up in his father's house (Fig. 6). He is disoriented and imagines his father's sofa to be his childhood bed. There is little differentiating the posture, physiognomy, and overall sadness of the boy from that of the man. It is no coincidence that he experiences this abrupt regression when visiting his father's home. As in Kafka's "Letter to his Father," in which the author's father seemed so powerful that the son would never be able to become him and thereby support a family of his own, Jimmy, the "smartest kid on earth," is permanently infantilized by the burden of a life spent imagining his absent yet castrating father.

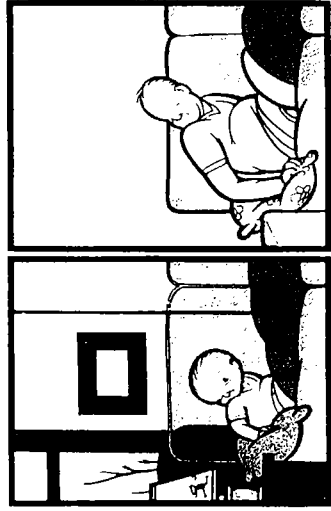


Figure 6. Jimmy Corrigan: *The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) n.p.

Time is telescoped in the text through stylistic quotation as well. Formally, Ware directly cites prewar comic styles. Not only does "Quimby the Mouse" draw on sources such as "Mickey Mouse" and "Krazy Kat," but Jimmy's appearance undeniably recalls that of earlier comic strip protagonists such as Uncle Walt from Frank King's "Gasoline Alley." Jimmy is out of place in the second half of the twentieth century and seems to be the only one unaware that his formless knickers are better suited to the 1920s. Ware then adds another layer to Jimmy's anachronism by lining the margins with apocryphal advertisements that satirize turn-of-the-century Sears catalogues. Consistent with the tone of the rest of the graphic novel, such advertisements help tighten the seal on Jimmy's temporal exile. They are each as depressing as the rest of the book, offering to the consumer, a "noose," a "genuine Roman crucifix," and even a "reason for living" (Fig. 7). The perpetual anachronism underscores Jimmy's intuition that it is not only his father, but progress itself that has left him behind.

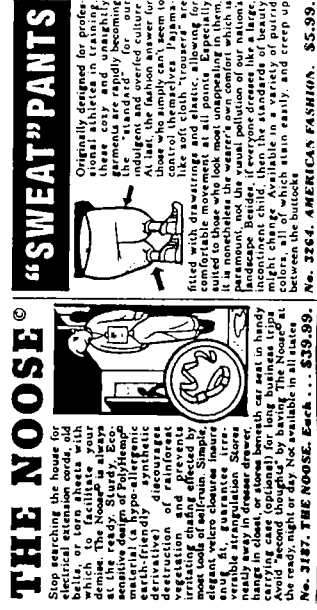


Figure 7. *Acme Novelty Library 10.4* (Spring 1998) 9 (catalog section).

To unearth the source of Jimmy's alienation, Ware chose Chicago as the showplace of his narrative. Ware himself has described his hometown as "a weird town," adding "there's no reason for it to be anymore. The stockyards are gone...modern life seems divorced from the essentials of living" (Ware, 1997:47). His depiction of Chicago emphasizes the alienation that began in the late nineteenth century and was accelerated by a decline in Chicago's industrial growth. Especially because of the World's Exposition, Chicago is depicted as the emblematic representative of American modernization at the threshold of the twentieth century. Ware ornaments his panels with the relics and fossils of urban debris. His approach to the city is similar to that of Benjamin, who wrote of the streets and storefronts of Paris as though they were filled with discarded objects that each signaled to him modernity's troubled relation to the past and to progress. Ware underscores his *tout court* contraction of the twentieth century by juxtaposing images of McDonald's, its darkly silhouetted golden arches high above the landscape, with the phantasmagoric spaces constructed for the 1893 exposition.

Better to emphasize the alienation that accompanied progress and development, Ware, like Benjamin, turns his gaze upon the turn-of-the-century. Just as Ware draws Jimmy Corrigan's rapidly industrializing town as seen through a child's eyes, Benjamin also chose to write two autobiographical essays about his childhood in turn-of-the-century Berlin. Benjamin recalled and reconstructed what it was like to see urban life as a child who grew up in an orderly bourgeois home. He allowed the changing cityscape, which he perceived as chaotic, to prompt his reflections about the limitations on the process of narrating his own biography. He struggled to find an appropriate style and gravitated towards approximating visual images in his writing and employing photographic metaphors to accommodate his abundant sensory experiences. For this reason his *Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1978) have been referred to as a series of snapshots-in-prose. The attempt to render his biography in snapshots and fragments contrasts sharply with orderly, linear narratives.

David Darby has argued that Benjamin's generic experimentation lies at the heart of the difference between his twin autobiographical works, both written in 1932. In the second of the two texts, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin dispenses altogether with chronological organization, and according to Darby, "the reorganization of material illuminates a significant development in Benjamin's representational practice vis-à-vis the landscapes of modernity" (Darby, 2000:218-19). Not only is it an attempt to represent a transforming idea of the self in a shifting urban landscape, but it is an attempt to answer the question of how one narrates a life in the absence of an ordering structural principle. Jimmy Corrigan's life story, like its protagonist, seems to long for the guidance of a father.

Benjamin's snapshots-in-prose were an attempt to map the impact of social structures and urban architectures on the subject. Benjamin's understanding of how social structures have a material impact, allowed him to study the psychic consequences of urban life in terms of representation in space; a scaffolding of sorts. The city, for Benjamin, expresses itself in structures paralleled by conscious and unconscious experience; it is a labyrinth, a topography, and a web. For this reason, Benjamin reports in the *Berlin Chronicle*, he was one day "suddenly and with compelling force" struck by the idea of drawing a diagram of his life (1978:30). When the diagram was later lost, he was inconsolable. Inspired by revisiting urban life at the turn of the century, his desire had been to study the interconnections between the people and the institutions he had come across. He suddenly wanted to know, "what part is played by the primal acquaintanceships of different people's lives by profession and school, family and travel? And above all: is the formation of the many offshoots governed in individual existence by hidden laws? Which ones start early and which late in life? Which are continued to the end of life and which peter out?" (1978:31).

In no small measure, Ware's "map strips" parallel Benjamin's project. Ware's intentions, however, are a great deal less positivistic than Benjamin's seem to have been. Ware allows himself to paint a bleaker portrait of his protagonist's past than Benjamin painted of his own. Ware's quasi-mathematical diagrams and flow-charts that depict the genesis of Jimmy and others in the text are each Mobius strips, moving unendingly from moments of conception to those of heartbreak. In one such strip the artist's lens extends and we close in on a torn photo in a drawer in Jimmy's house, which is then explained in terms of a "map" (Fig. 8). At first this seems like an "origin" story, but there is neither beginning nor end to speak of. The family unit depicted in the photo appears to have been formed by simply arbitrary connections in a series. The fusion of sperm and egg that produced a child was accidental at best, and it is as if there is no organic connection between Jimmy and his own life. Ware later uses a map strip like this one to provide Amy's back-story. Despite the fact that she is adopted, there is no evident

difference between the cold chemistries that produced either of their lives. While Benjamin had been fascinated by the many entrances and exits on the map, for Ware's Corrigan, there is no pathway that does not "peter out." Corrigan himself is depicted sitting in the margins, barred from entering the blueprint that constitutes his own biography.

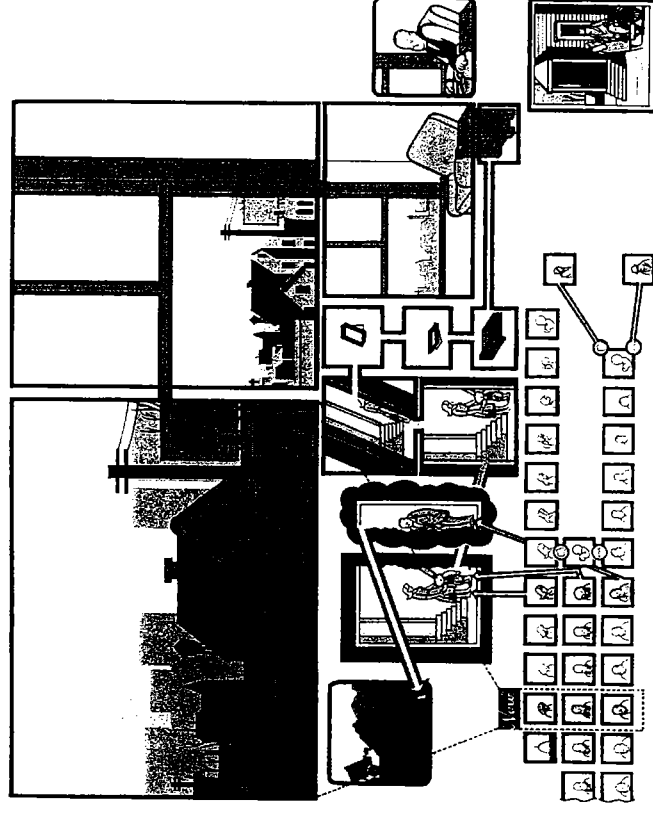


Figure 8. *Acme Novelty Library 6.5* (Spring 1995) n.p.

### Photography and the Urban Landscape

The most striking element of Ware's use of Chicago, however, is neither its alienating, modern architecture nor its decaying industry; it is much more that Chicago was the site of the World's Exposition. He sees the city through the same lens through which Benjamin viewed Paris, likewise interested in its World Exposition, and in particular the 1900 one for which the massive Eiffel Tower was constructed. From a perspective critical of capitalism, such expositions are the banners of progress, calling attention to the way capitalism advertises yet undermines its own ideology. That Ware sees capitalism growing out of control in Chicago is emphasized by the fact that young James Corrigan wanders around the fair dwarfed by the sculptures and monuments that celebrate progress. As Susan Buck-Morss (1989:91-92) summarizes in her reading of Benjamin's "Arcades Project":



Under conditions of competitive capitalism, pure numbers, abundance, excess, monumental size, and expansion entered into [the] semantic constellation, and became 'progress' very effective advertisement.... Cosmic proportions, monumental solidarity, and panoramic perspectives were the characteristics of the new urban phantasmagoria. All of its aspects -- railroad stations, museums, winter gardens, sport palaces, department stores, exhibition halls, boulevards -- dwarfed the original arcades and eclipsed them.

Ware is conscious of this architectural drive, and in the inside covers of *The Acme Novelty Library* #3, he depicts his design for the new, fictional "Acme Tower" in Chicago, a synthesis of the building that housed the World's Exposition and the Eiffel Tower. Ware's promotional advertisement for the "recently submitted" tower design reads:

Rising directly perpendicular to the earth in reflection of man's increasingly rapid ascendancy, and turgid with the blood of the millions who fought and battled for the rightness of that rigid promise of conquest, the tower should be an oppressive symbol of mercantile virility.... Clearly, from the get-go, this was no nancy project. No coquettish concessions to frills or embellishment were permitted in the planning stage, and all molly-coddling notions were dismissed.... "This is no tea party!" was the oft-heard cry and a 'Sissies go home' sign was posted at the door of our research department.

In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin had described the Paris expositions as an attempt to build a heavenly city on Earth. Seventy-five years later Ware opts to satirize those same drives that caught Benjamin's attention by underscoring the oppressive masculinity that subtends the discourse of making such constructions more massive.

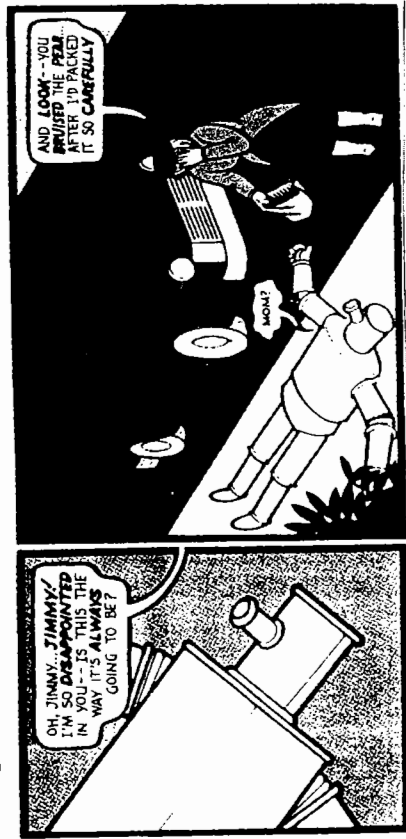


Figure 9. *Acme Novelty Library* 1 (Winter 1993) n.p.

The World Expositions were not only the site of massive constructions but the showcase for new technology. As Benjamin remarks in his essay on Paris and the nineteenth century, the 1855 exhibition in Paris introduced

photography to the public on a grand scale. Ware too thematizes the introduction of the new medium in Chicago, including a cartoon reproduction of Leland Stanford's famous horse-in-motion filmstrip among young James Corrigan's perceptions of the fair. On a formal level, Ware's style reproduces some of the stylistic tendencies of early film. Ware has indicated that he pursues an effect in his art whereby, as he explains: "I want my pictures to look as if they had died on the page. I don't want them to have any life in them. I want them to be static" (Ware, 1997:53). As is the case with the series of still images in a nickelodeon machine, the movement of time is nowhere embedded in the image itself (as might arguably be the case where figures race around on the pages of *The X-Men*); it requires work on the part of the reader. Ware elaborates: "The closest analogy I can come up with is music notes on a paper. They're just marks, unless you understand music, read them, and then it becomes music" (Ware, 1997:53).

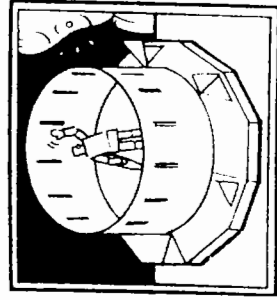


Figure 10. *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) n.p.

Benjamin, in his "Work of Art" essay, evinced his acute awareness of the way mechanical reproduction in the form of film and photography was altering our perceptions of reality. Benjamin optimistically conjectured that the new media of film and photography could emancipate us; they could bring about a different and more critical style of thought by removing the taint of ritual (aura) from the artwork and turning us into critical spectators. At the same time, however, these media had the potential to be co-opted by capitalism and fascism (which Benjamin at times took to be indistinguishable from one another in their capacity for manipulation). He saw that culture was becoming commodity culture, and in that moment the work of art, especially film and photography, move into the realm of politics; they fall under the spell of commodity production and participate in the stultification of the public. As Benjamin writes in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1978:152) the World Expositions together with the introduction of photography "open up a phantasmagoria that people enter to be amused. The entertainment industry facilitates this by elevating people to the level of commodities. They submit to being manipulated while enjoying their alienation from themselves and others."

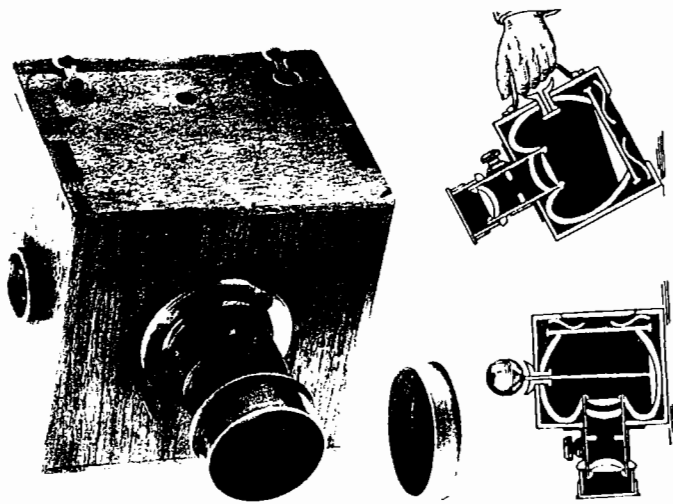


Figure 11. Camera ca. 1864

Ware literalizes Benjamin's anxieties about the drift towards a mechanistic and de-humanized world view by periodically providing Jimmy with a clunky, nineteenth-century camera in the place of a head. Inasmuch as one understands the robot-Jimmy and the camera to be identical, then Benjamin's predictions about the transformation of perception through mechanical reproduction become quite ominous. Seen in connection to *The Acme Novelty Library*, Benjamin's theses about the transformations in thinking and perception in the "Work of Art" essay can be understood to have a horrifyingly literal component. Benjamin claims that the audience's identification with the action on screen is really an identification with the camera itself (1988 [1936]:228), yet as Benjamin was apparently aware, one might not wish to *really* become the camera. Benjamin was, as is Ware, highly attuned to the fact that what one actually risks in the age of mechanical reproduction is that the self is itself merely a mechanical reproduction, like the photographic machines introduced in the nineteenth century. Jimmy, because of the mechanistic world of which he is a part, is fundamentally a steely assemblage -- a claim to which Ware calls the reader's attention through providing cut-out kits with which readers can themselves construct the robot-Jimmy (Fig. 12).

A SPLENDID TOY MODEL GIVEN FREE WITH THIS VOLUME.

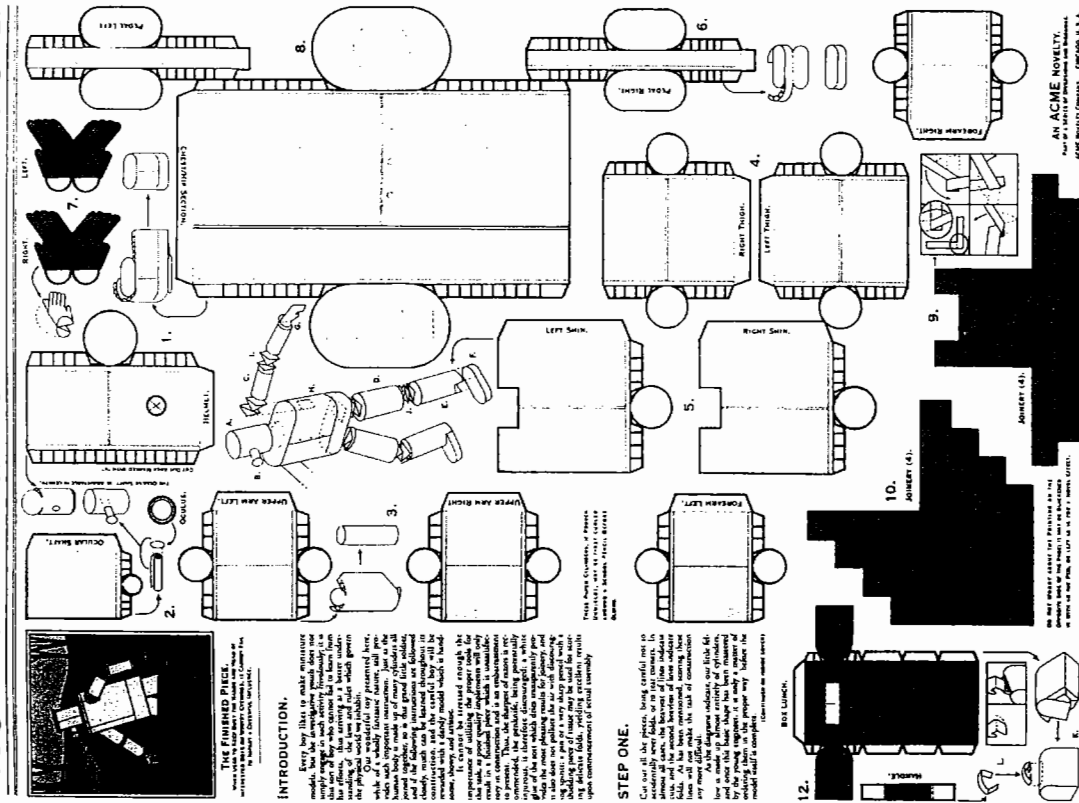


Figure 12. Acme Novelty Library 1 (Winter 1993) back cover.

*The Acme Novelty Library* and *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* claim that in the industrial age we are bound physically and psychologically to the endless repetition of the Oedipal drama; that the line between human reproduction and mechanical reproduction has become blurred. Ware's modernism is committed to depicting the unhappy armor of everyday life and telling the impossible story of individual origins in the age

of mechanical reproduction. Jimmy Corrigan, then, is Charlie Brown set in terms provided by Kafka, Benjamin, and Freud. Yet while that strip, which Charles Schulz began drawing just after World War II, came to represent American "innocence" and optimism, Ware has chosen to cite only those moments of impotence when the lonely boy lies on his back, crippled by a passing line drive.

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