The Poetics and Politics of Staring
Spectacle and Disability in Chris Ware's *Building Stories*

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Abstract:
Challenging the idea that processes of 'closure' function as primary means by which comics involve their readers, this article investigates how Chris Ware's Building Stories uses spectacle as a symbolic form that disrupts narrative as much as it depends on it to engage its readers. My reading of Building Stories serves to illustrate that some comics offer a visual pleasure that is not strictly based on narrative and the sequentiality of their images. Spectacle in Building Stories, I argue, functions as both an element of disruption and of orientation. I propose that, by using spectacle, the book not only guides its readers through a hardly navigable narrative web but also allows them to participate in acts of staring. By inviting readers to stare, Building Stories turns the disability of its protagonist into a highly visible and disruptive element while, at the same time, narrativizing it as a part of ordinary, everyday life.

Introduction

A household name in the comics scene, Chris Ware has long been celebrated as one of the most avant-garde comic artists of the twenty-first century (Olsen 197; Lau 156; Dittmer 478). Alongside his published work in newspapers and magazines, his award-winning books *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid of Earth* (2000), *Building Stories* (2012), and *Monograph* (2017) have, among others, been praised for their experimental style (Cohn; Kashtan), their illustrative and typographic precision (Dittmer; Heller), and their (post)modernist take on recounting US-American everyday life in its past and present (Morini; Haddad). While critics and scholars have interrogated Ware's oeuvre from a range of different perspectives, most texts mention or discuss readers' increased engagement as a central feature of his work and specific mark of distinction. Todd A. Comer, for instance, asserts that Ware's widely acclaimed

Building Stories "radically exemplifies" practices of closure (44).[1] Comer's claim not only highlights *Building Stories*' narrative qualities but also stresses the book's engagement of its readers through narrative. In a similar vein, scholars frequently emphasize and discuss *Building Stories* as both a 'manifesto' of the traditional print book and one of Ware's most playful pieces (Chute and Jagoda 7). Published in 2012, the book received four Eisner Awards and was, according to Aaron Kashtan, the most critically acclaimed graphic novel of 2012 (421). Yet, while *Building Stories* has been praised for both its narrative complexity and its overall playfulness, its employment of spectacle has not received much attention. As a consequence, this article sets out to examine the use of spectacle in *Building Stories*. In doing so, I aim to further investigate and challenge the means by which Ware's comics engage and thus fascinate their readers.[2] Instead of approaching individual readers and their responses to reading *Building Stories*, though, this paper focuses on the book's affordances. Originally a term used in design studies, affordances, as Caroline Levine defines them in the context of literary studies, are "potentialities [that] lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements" (6-7). Inspired by Levine's study of the affordances of different forms, this paper foregrounds the potential uses and engagements that *Building Stories* offers its readers.

While the very format of *Building Stories*, a collection of fourteen comic pieces contained in an almost Monopoly-sized box, draws attention to its presumedly ludic qualities, this article highlights spectacle as one of the book's central features. More than a liminal space between play and narrative (Grennan and Hague), the very format of *Building Stories* constitutes a spectacle that not only breaks with prevailing expectations of what a book supposedly looks like but also expands the medium's common affordances. The first part of this article thus regards the 'whole' of *Building Stories* as a spectacle, elaborating on the overall structure and unusual appearance of the novel. In a second step, the article goes on to interrogate the

1 According to Scott McCloud, comics engage their readers in a distinct way, as the comic gutter demands readers to perform closure between panels (63). Since the publication of McCloud's 1993 *Understanding Comics*, numerous scholars have critically discussed the concept of closure, analyzing readers' engagement in comics more closely (Wildfeuer and Bateman 3). As will be discussed in the following article, the nonlinear fashion in which Ware frequently assembles his panels does not only mark a departure from the traditional structure of the comic gutter but also speaks to the potential failure of performing closure in some of his comics.

2 Ware's comics are said to "demand extraordinary things from the reader" (Boxer) while, at the same time, being "so astute and compositionally engaging that they cannot fail but connect with their audience" (Heller). What is striking about these and other assessments of Ware's work is the positive undertone with which critics and scholars generally approach his comics. David B. Olsen goes so far as to speak of a "Cult of Chris Ware" (197), a term that can also be understood as a sign of caution to engage more critically with Ware's work.

functions of spectacle, narrative, and their interplay within and across the novel's fourteen individual pieces.

I propose that, by using spectacle, *Building Stories* not only guides its readers through a hardly navigable narrative web but also allows them to stare at the book's protagonist, a disabled woman. As I will illustrate, staring at disability—otherwise strictly regimented by social codes—is a practice that readers will most likely engage in when reading *Building Stories*. My analysis is interested in the pleasures that *Building Stories* and its depiction of disability offer their readers through their engagement with the stare. Similar to how some scholars have come to understand film (Bukatman; Partington; Littau), I argue that comics like *Building Stories* offer a visual pleasure that is not strictly based on narrative and the sequentiality of their images. Predecessors of today's comics studies, such as McCloud, emphasize "closure" as a fundamental process that engages readers in comics (63). However, Ware's book goes beyond that traditional formula and uses spectacle as a distinct symbolic form that, although it is dependent on processes of narrativization, also engages the reader via the disruption of narrative.

Building Stories between Narrative, Play, and Spectacle

Considering its overall format, *Building Stories* is likely to leave a lasting impression on its observers.[3] Placed in a big, colorful cardboard box, the fourteen objects that make *Building Stories* consist of two hardcover comics books, a gameboard-like folding screen, and a total of eleven, variously sized comics in either broadsheet, newspaper, or flipbook form—none of them containing page numbers. As Comer remarks: "While items in the collection 'may,' after a few readings, be placed in an approximately linear order, there is no way of ensuring linearity in a first reading" (44). Indeed, the novel provides few indicators of time and, as Simon Grennan and Ian Hague have calculated, there are over eighty-seven billion ways of placing the individual pieces of *Building Stories* into one reading (6). Next to its gamelike appearance, this nonlinearity speaks to the playability of the book. At first glance, reading the novel resembles the task of piecing together a puzzle. This specific puzzle, however, is not based on one coherent image that readers can neatly reassemble. Unlike most games, there are no rules to be followed, no goal to be reached.

3 Of course, it is impossible to make an exact claim about readers' first responses to the book. From experiences at conferences and talks, I can, nonetheless, describe a noticeable difference between an audience's reaction to more traditional comics (e.g., in magazines) and reactions to *Building Stories*. After presentations, audiences usually spent more time looking at and asking questions about the latter. Initial responses should, however, not be falsely equated with numbers of readership. Some audience members are even quick to admit that the mere size of *Building Stories* would keep them from purchasing or reading the novel.

In games, as Grennan and Hague point out, the order in which a player chooses to engage with individual pieces "determines both what happens and the causal relationships between events." In *Building Stories*, however, "what happens" is predetermined; agency, as a crucial characteristic of play, is only simulated.

Instead of changing the outcome, the book provides its readers with the possibility of retelling and, quite literally, looking at one story in multiple ways. Unlike most games, *Building Stories* does not afford its readers the pleasure of successfully finding one or a limited number of definite structures. As Nina Eckhoff-Heindl observes, *Building Stories* is likely to initially invoke expectations about its playability that, in the proceeding interaction between book and reader, will not be fulfilled ("Building Stories" 85). Yet, while the book does not fulfill the qualities of what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call "meaningful play" (33),[4] the box and its content certainly create a liminal space between narrative and play that draws immediate attention to *Building Stories*. More than playability, though, I propose that one of the major appeals of *Building Stories* lies in its interplay of narrative and spectacle. In its entirety, *Building Stories* constitutes a spectacle that is both visual and haptic and that is closely connected to the liminal space between narrative and play that I have outlined thus far.

Both the gamelike appearance of the book as well as its disruptive qualities emphasize the very physicality of *Building Stories*. Like other experimental novels of the last years, *Building Stories* "defamiliarizes the book's body" (Ghosal 78). Aligning all pieces of the box next to each other, the 'whole' of *Building Stories* constitutes a spectacle that readers are invited to marvel at.[5] This spectacle disrupts the usual reading process while, at the same time, it might also trigger an interest in reading the novel in the first place. *Building Stories* does not demand but certainly encourages its readers to assemble its pieces in unusual ways. The central setting, for instance, an apartment building that tells its own story, is printed on a folding screen which can be placed in a vertical position. While its story can also be read by placing it flat on the table, the relative novelty and self-reflexivity inherent in the vertical position of the comic offer a "pleasure of disruption" that is characteristic of the symbolic form of the spectacle (Bukatman 76).

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4 According to Salen and Zimmerman, "[*m*]*eaningful play* in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action" (34; emphasis in the original). In *Building Stories*, there is little to no response to the action of the reader as there exist no apparent indicators that promote one order of reading the book over the other. One possible goal readers can set for themselves, however, is to roughly make out a chronological order according to which the individual pieces can be assembled.

5 A Google search reveals a general fascination with the book's unusual layout: Images frequently display all pieces of the book neatly aligned next to each other with some pieces placed in vertical and some in horizontal order.

The spectacle that *Building Stories* constitutes in its entirety is twofold: One the one hand, *Building Stories*' gamelike appearance defies usual expectations of what a comic book or a novel looks like and thus serves as an immediate eye-catcher. The reader's "mental model" (Norman 17) of the medium of the book is challenged.[6] On the other hand, the publication history of *Building Stories* also does much to turn the boxed set into a spectacle. Before the book came out as a 'whole,' excerpts of *Building Stories* were published in newspapers and magazines. Between 2007 and 2011, various parts of *Building Stories* appeared in a range of different outlets, from the acclaimed *New York Times Magazine*, to free-of-charge, local Chicago newspapers (Worden). During this initial time of distribution, no apparent order or logic to the development of an overall story was revealed. Before *Building Stories* was made available as a boxed set in 2012, one last piece—for iPad users only—was published in 2011 (Kashtan 441).

While this article is primarily interested in the final print version of the book, knowing *Building Stories*' publication history seems crucial to understanding one of its many appeals. The various publication venues certainly helped to spark interest in the novel long before its publication. Using these multiple venues—including both print and digital media as well as outlets of supposedly 'high' and 'low' culture—*Building Stories* is exemplary of what Henry Jenkins has famously coined "convergence culture." The publication of *Building Stories* did, as Jenkins explains with regard to the notion of "convergence culture," "encourage[] [readers] to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (3).

Readers were invited to actively seek out new content across media but they also had to patiently wait for the publication of *Building Stories* in its entirety. This mixture of participation and anticipation helped to generate interest in the book, making its published and final form a spectacle in and of itself. Spectacle, in this sense, is not a fixed property of the novel but created through the interaction between readers and the material before, during, and after its publication. As Douglas Kellner points out in his book *Media Spectacle*, although spectacles work through staging the unexpected and extraordinary, their use is by no means out of the ordinary. According to Kellner, spectacles function as a marketing tool that dominates American consumer culture in the twenty-first century (14). In less evaluative terms, this function neatly aligns with Scott Bukatman's understanding of spectacle, who argues that spectacles create attraction through their "direct address to the spectator, novelty, [and] a presentational (as opposed to representational) set of codes" (78). In other words, Bukatman defines spectacle as an open display of

6 Cognitive scientist Donald Norman uses the term "mental model" to describe "the models people have of themselves, [...] and of the things which with they interact. People form mental models through experience, training, and instruction" (17).

the unexpected and, furthermore, places it in strict opposition to narrative and its representational concerns.[7]

Rather than pitting different definitions of spectacle against each other, I propose that it is most productive to synthesize them. As my analysis has illustrated thus far, Kellner and Bukatman's different takes on spectacle do not need to be placed in opposition to each other. Rather, their work provides us with a multifaceted understanding of spectacle that becomes very much evident in *Building Stories*. Yet, *Building Stories*, with all its excess and novelty in appearance, is testament not only to how spectacles interact but also to how they overlap with other symbolic forms, making them inherently dependent on each other. Its suggested playability and the nonlinearity of its narrative are as much part of what constitutes the spectacle of *Building Stories* as is its unusual appearance. The spectacle of *Building Stories* is thus created through a coming-together of different elements: its unusual publication history and nonlinearity, the haptic interactions it offers, as well as its unusual gamelike appearance.

Staring at Disability as Moment of Disruption and Guiding Practice in *Building Stories*

The broad scope of its story increases the challenge that *Building Stories* sets out for its reader. The novel covers a time span of approximately one hundred years, from the early twentieth century to the present, and includes the stories of six characters—the most striking character being the apartment building itself. The apartment building not only tells the story of its own erection in Chicago ninety-eight years ago but also reveals much about its former and current residents, thus connecting the central characters of the book: On the first floor lives the elderly landlady of the building. The landlady's story mainly features impressions of her past while, in the present moment, her life seems to be marked by an eerie absence. On the second floor of the building resides a couple that constantly argues, mostly about the fact that she has gained too much weight over the last years—they, too, seem to be trapped in a static present that clings onto moments long past. While the couple is either at work or at home fighting, a fifth character, a small bee, tries to collect pollen outside the building.[8] The majority of the fourteen artifacts, how-

7 Following Tom Gunning, who also thinks of spectacle as separate from narrative (Gunning 66), Bukatman ascribes an experiential pleasure to spectacle that is distinct from the pleasures that narratives offer their readers.

8 Paying homage to traditional children's books of the 1940s and 1950s in style, the story of Branford the Bee takes a number of unexpected turns, including the character's early death. For an intriguing in-depth reading, see Eckhoff-Heindl, "Branford the Best Bee."

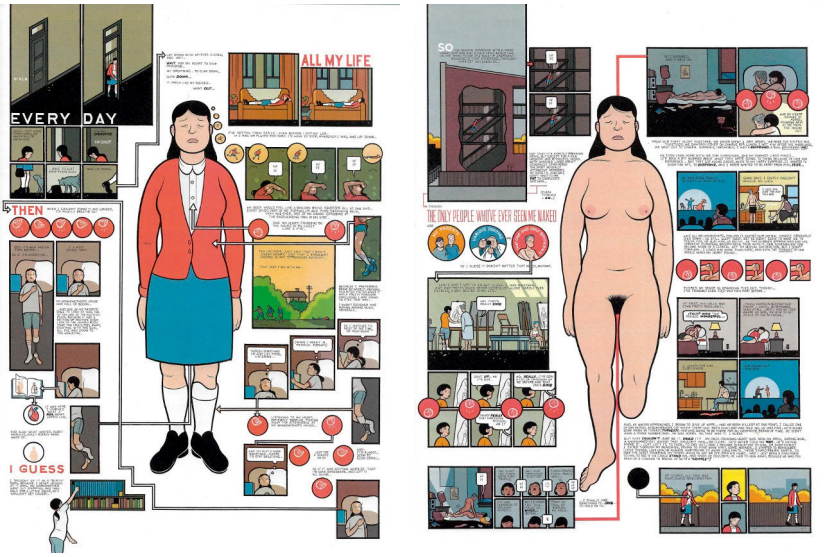
ever, concentrate on the sixth character, a lonely woman who lives on the third floor of the building—the daily life of the unnamed protagonist is exhibited in eight of the fourteen pieces. While main parts of her story are set in the apartment building, the unnamed protagonist eventually leaves the place to start a new life with her husband and daughter in the suburbs—a life that turns out to be not any less lonely. Encouraging a sympathetic reading of her character, the book also includes snippets about the protagonist's previous relationships, her failed attempts at becoming an artist, and an accident during her childhood that resulted in a below-the-knee amputation of her left leg.

While, narratively speaking, the protagonist's disability does not take up much space, the visual space of the comic is deeply marked by her disability. Not only does the comic's medium demand the disabled body to be omnipresent, but the book also openly plays with the visibility of its character's disability. While partially obscured by furniture in some panels, other parts of the graphic novel show the protagonist's disabled body enlarged across the page. In some of these images, the protagonist is shown undressed and without a prosthesis, further foregrounding the physicality of her body. Unlike in comics that follow a clear gutter, these images do not advance the narrative of the book as they make closure difficult to impossible. By displaying the protagonist's naked body across the page, *Building Stories* turns disability into a spectacle that disrupts narrative.

By staging disability as a spectacle, the book grants readers the opportunity to openly stare at the visibly disabled body. While staring is a natural ocular response to what we do not expect to see (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 3), it is also an act that is commonly frowned upon. Far from being a mere biological response, staring can best be understood as a cultural practice that is interwoven in a web of sociohistorical meanings. As such a cultural practice, staring is, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson remarks, "drenched with significances, scrupulously regulated, and intricately ritualized" ("Staring at the Other"). The enlarged images of the protagonist's body in *Building Stories* therefore do not constitute a spectacle in and of themselves. Instead, the social regimentation that denounces acts of staring in everyday life generates both, the spectacle of disability and the potential pleasure of staring at it.

The spectacle of the disabled body and the potential pleasure that comes from looking at it are thus no inherent properties of *Building Stories* but are produced by an interplay between reader and text. The pleasure of staring offered by the novel is culturally and socially situated and depends to great extent on whether a reader's response to the protagonist's displayed body is one of surprise or familiarity. Just like the spectacle of disability, staring is not an act inherent to reading *Building Stories* but something that it makes possible—an affordance. Next to its open display of the disabled body, the privacy in which books in general, and a book of this size in particular, are read, affords the reader to stare without much external restric-

Fig. 1 and 2: Two consecutive pages from Chris Ware's Building Stories, centering the protagonist's body.



tion. Like other popular comics about disability and illness,[9] *Building Stories* makes use of the fact that the usual codes of social interaction do not apply to readers' interaction with the images of a fictional character.

Although the spectacle of disability disrupts the narrative of *Building Stories*, it also provides a focus from which to discover the nonlinear structure of the novel. Next to the book's unusual format, the individual layout of some of its pieces is likely to disorient readers. On several of the variously sized pages, the panels do not adhere to any particular structure as they are assembled without any clear order and are also differently sized. In line with this, the typographic layout frequently lacks consistency and does not seem to follow an apparent logic—readers will encounter up to five different typographic layouts, all presented on one page. As Vincent Haddad points out, trained reading habits—to move from the upper left to lower right—are thus challenged. In this experience of disorientation, the symbolic form of the spectacle functions as a focus, a starting point that structures

9 Comics about disability and illness—also known as graphic pathographies—have become increasingly popular over the last decade. For a list of primary and secondary texts, see www.graphicmedicine.com.

the reading at least a little. Across and within the individual pieces that make up *Building Stories*, images of the disabled body—and more generally of human and non-human bodies—draw attention to specific pages and, within these pages, to specific parts of the story. Due to their size and their potential novelty, the novel's images of disability are likely to be among the first things that catch the eye. They thus become one of the book's guiding elements,[10] a visual anchor from which reading experiences develop individually and in manifold ways. Spectacle, in this case, is not only used to disrupt the narrative but to guide the reader. In doing so, *Building Stories* challenges any strict opposition between narrative and spectacle that understands narrative as a stabilizing form and spectacle as a mere form of disruption. Spectacle in *Building Stories* functions as an element both of disruption and of orientation.

The Politics of Presenting and Representing Disability in *Building Stories*

Questions of embodiment are central to both the format and content of *Building Stories*. Not only does the book foreground its own physicality but it also emphasizes the embodiment of its characters: from repeatedly addressing the weight of female characters, to depicting processes of aging, for instance by displaying characters naked at different points in time or by including enlarged images of the protagonist and her daughter. While *Building Stories* exposes both, the disabled and the nondisabled body as central means by which we 'build' and experience the world, the disabled body is used as a particular marker of embodiment. Disability in *Building Stories*, I argue, functions as a 'special effect,' an epitome of embodiment that is based on the idea that the body becomes palpable, first and foremost, whenever it breaks with normative expectations, when it hurts, looks, or moves differently than expected.

Building Stories simultaneously depends on and challenges medical ideas of the disabled body. Several of its pages resemble anatomy books in that they place bodies center stage, attaching lines to them that lead to individual panels. Also closely linked to medical practice is the act of undressing that the book performs on its protagonist. While several characters are shown naked throughout the comic, three of its splash pages stage the undressing of the protagonist. Each page strips the protagonist of layers of clothing and of protection: On the first page, she is depicted fully dressed; on the next page, she is shown naked, and on the final page, the muscular and skeletal system of the protagonist is all that is left to see. In this

10 Other guiding elements that I see at work are the broad indicators of time given within the overall story and the format of each of the novel's artifacts, with oversized objects and a book in golden cover drawing more attention to themselves than other pieces.

moment, the disabled body is openly marked as a medical spectacle that, at first glance, does not fulfill any narrative function. This is, however, precisely the moment in which the cultural dynamics of narrative liminality are at work. On the one hand, the cultural work done by these images closely follows established medicalized patterns that objectify the disabled body and cast it as deviant. On the other hand, the interplay of spectacle, placed at the center of the page, and the narrative that unfolds at its margins opens up the possibility of questioning and further manifesting these patterns.

While the open display of the protagonist's body does not fulfill a narrative function as such, it provokes narrative, encouraging the reader to piece together a coherent story across the pages. In an ableist world, as Lennard Davis has argued, disability demands a story—it cannot simply be (3-4). If disability always requires a story then the quest of finding out "how the protagonist became disabled" is provoked by the depiction of the protagonist's visible disability and thus inherently part of the reading experience of *Building Stories*. Depending on the individual order of each reading, the book sooner or later satisfies this need to know 'what happened.' Instead of naturalizing disabled embodiment by refusing to give any explanation, the book eventually reveals that the protagonist's impairment was caused by a boating accident around the age of eight or nine. By providing this information, *Building Stories* follows a medical rhetoric that strictly demands a cause as the starting point of any disability narrative.

The spectacle of disability, however, does not only demand a narrative but, considering the larger cultural script, also influences what is perceived and defined as spectacle in the first place. Spectacles of the body require narratives to precede and follow them, making the liminal space between these symbolic forms the basis for their very existence. Put differently, in an ableist world, the presence of disability does not only continue to trigger the question of 'what happened,' but this very question also marks the presence of disability as exceptional. Its use as spectacle is dependent on the fact that the image of a disabled body is experienced as something unexpected. This status as exceptional, in turn, provides the basis for displaying disability as spectacle and helps to uphold an "ideology of ability" as a structuring principle of Western modernity (Siebers 7).

Disability is, in the traditional fashion of a medical book, staged as a spectacle, yet the surrounding panels lead to a narrativization of the disabled body. The narrative that unfolds reveals decisive and unexceptional moments of the protagonist's life alike, thus transforming the body into a person. Contrary to Margaret Fink Berman, though, who claims that *Building Stories* negotiates the ordinariness of disability, I propose that the appeal of *Buildings Stories* lies in its seeming contradiction: Its presentation of disability as spectacle merges with both its medicalized rhetoric and the book's representation of disability as ordinary. The protagonist is mostly shown performing ordinary acts while being surrounded by ordinary things

and people. At the same time, though, it is important to emphasize once more that, while the overall narrative is not overly concerned with the protagonist's disability, the comic's images nevertheless mark it as something highly visible. *Building Stories* negotiates the ambiguousness of difference and normality by visually casting disability as extraordinary while, at the same time, narrativizing it as a part of ordinary everyday life. Doing so, the visual pleasure of spectacle that engages the reader via the disruption of narrative (potentially) functions to keep the reader of *Building Stories* interested in the ordinariness of its story. Spectacle is, in other words, used to balance the ordinariness that is otherwise depicted. It is precisely this liminal space between spectacle and narrative that the disabled body comes to inhabit, that fills acts of staring at disability, as Garland-Thomson has claimed, with a productivity that can lead starers to new insights (*Staring* 6).

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