PAPER TOWER: AESTHETICS, TASTE, AND THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM IN AMERICAN INDEPENDENT COMICS

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ABSTRACT

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Comics studies, as a relatively new field, is still building a canon. However, its criteria for canon-building has been modeled largely after modernist ideas about formal complexity and criteria for disinterested, detached, “objective” aesthetic judgment derived from one of the major philosophical debates in Western thought: the mind-body problem. This thesis analyzes two American independent comics in order to dissect the aspects of a comic work that allow it to be categorized as “art” in the canonical sense. Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* is a sprawling, Byzantine comic that exhibits characteristically modernist ideas about the subordination of the body to the mind and art’s relationship to mass culture. Rob Schrab’s *Scud: The Disposable Assassin* provides a counterpoint to *Building Stories* in its action-heavy stylistic approach, developing ideas about the merging of the mind and the body and the artistic and the commercial. Ultimately, this thesis advocates for a re-evaluation of comics criticism that values the subjective, emotional, and the popular as much as the “objective” areas of formal complexity and logic.
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“Lately, whenever I’m laying around, waiting for my heart to calm down and catch up with me, I play a dumb game where, simply by concentrating as hard as I can, I try to find just exactly where it is ‘I’ am in my body…and by ‘me’ I mean me…the me who makes it all happen, who watches herself make decisions and make mistakes…it’s no wonder that all those ancient philosophers and doctors had such a hard time with it, because if you really pay attention it’s almost impossible to decide.”

- Protagonist, *Building Stories*

“I’M JESUS WITH A LASER GUN AND YOU’RE ALL GOING TO HELL!”

- Scud, *Scud: The Disposable Assassin*
INTRODUCTION: COMICS, AESTHETICS, AND TASTE

Comics as a medium finds itself in a critical liminal stage of appreciation.¹ No longer considered cultural detritus by academic and critical establishments, the form is slowly but surely ascending to legitimacy through use in college classes and piggybacking on the success of film and television adaptations. However, this is still a stage of liminality in which the form is being taken seriously but not yet without some sense of novelty. Sensing this, champions of comics have sought to highlight the proverbial best that has been thought and drawn. This is a crucial moment in the history of the medium, the phase of canon-building in which the foundation is laid for critical expectations of comics to come.

Perhaps because the cultural memory of comics’ previously dishonorable standing in America stays fresh in the minds of comics enthusiasts, creators, and academics, this effort has taken shape in a pattern familiar to any marginalized form: an intensely conservative set of aesthetic values based in those of more historically legitimate forms, which are in comics’ case fine art and the novel, and attempting to claim a historical relevance which is shaky at best. The most famous example of the latter is Scott McCloud’s ubiquitous Understanding Comics, which is a fine textbook for how comics work (it is ubiquitous for a reason), but makes the dubious claim that historical examples of pictorial stories like the Bayeux Tapestry count as comics (12). This appeal to historical legitimacy carries the implicit logic that comics are somehow more important to our development as a species than we have given them credit for, which is a practically impossible claim to justify and really only serves as an expression of kid-brother syndrome. Rock and roll and film, for example, do not have a claim to several centuries of

¹ I say this and all following observations in relation to comics in America, as the situation is very different in, say, France or Japan.
existence, and these forms are taken seriously on their own terms. Historical relevance by way of a long lineage is ultimately merely an accessory to a media form’s status.

More important and consequently more troubling is the issue of attempting to justify comics as a worthy form. This owes much to comics’ standing as a depreciated art form in America. Comics have been historically considered a bastard cousin to legitimate art due to their situation as mass produced objects with audiences primarily composed of children and adults nostalgic for their childhoods. This has led to a serious case of what Charles Hatfield calls “status anxiety” among creators and fans in the field (Hatfield xii). The work of Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein presented comics panels as fine art, contextualizing them as capable of having artistic merit; in fact, Marvel Comics briefly changed its name to Marvel Pop-Art Productions in the wake of Lichtenstein, though this was more symbolic of Stan Lee’s hucksterism than any real aspiration by the company (Howe 37). Decades after Lichtenstein, the medium saw a greater acceptance as one capable of producing legitimate literature in the 1980s and 90s with the publications of works like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen*, and consequently consideration of comics as a viable form for “serious” work expanded. TIME Magazine named *Watchmen* one of the hundred greatest novels of all time, the only comic on the list. In the art world, museum shows devoted to comics like the Museum of Contemporary Art’s 2004 *Masters of American Comics* and others devoted to specific cartoonists, particularly Robert Crumb, were exhibited, suggesting some level of acceptance of the possibility that comics could be worthy of existing alongside the established conception of art. However, discourses and ideologies within comics works and among enthusiasts supPLICATE the unequal relationship between the form and its more established cousins in literature and visual art.
Whether or not comics are a legitimate form is a quagmire I have no interest in addressing directly (the following content of this entire text hopefully indicates my opinion on the subject), but I believe that I do have an answer to the question of why certain comics are afforded that consideration and canonized. The desire for comics fans and scholars to justify the form has led to an ideological conservatism that sees discourses turning to old conceptualizations of artistic merit for seemingly more stable grounds from which to evangelize. Clement Greenberg wrote that “the essence of Modernism lies […] in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence,” (Greenberg and O’Brian 18) and comics have relied on old structures to create their area of competence, which has seen the form settle into a static group of canonical traits. Bart Beaty’s book Comics Versus Art features an excellent diagnosis of this line of thinking, contending that “in an increasingly postmodern world in which the distinction between high and low culture is often assumed to have been eroded, outmoded biases continue to persist in the shaping of how we understand culture broadly” (7). As I plan to show, the aesthetic and narrative ideas that constitute “artness” for comics are based in Kantian aesthetics and Modernist ideas about what art should be, which are in turn derived from the mind/body problem’s philosophical legacy. Perpetuating modernist ideas in a postmodern age is how comics compensate for their perceived frivolity, and this is effected through a work’s depiction of the bundle of values connected to the philosophical split between the mind and the body.

Thus, I propose a direct aesthetic analysis to reveal how critically elevated comics follow classic patterns of conservative aesthetic taste by exemplifying traits traditionally associated with the mind. The texts I will examine are pre-eminent independent cartoonist Chris Ware’s Building
Stories, a high-art comic par excellence, contrasting it with lesser-known cartoonist Rob Schrab’s Scud: The Disposable Assassin. Beaty throughout his book points to feminine and masculine categories as defining properties of art and not-art in this debate, but I find that in the work itself, rather than the discourse around the work, the related and familiar mind-body dichotomy is present. The values bound up in this dichotomy are the starting point of characteristics which determine the “artness” of a comic work. Through formal, visual, and textual analysis of the aforementioned works, their implementations of the mind/body dichotomy, and the relationships of the works to the popular I hope to delineate the aspects of comics which influence the perception of a comics work as art or not-art based on their exhibition of certain traits which adhere to Modernist values. This thesis will develop a theory of mind-comics, more easily privileged as art and representatives of modernist values, and body-comics, regarded as merely entertainment due to their exhibition of the importance of the body and postmodern characteristics.

A Brief History of the Mind-Body Problem

These things are not self-evidently connected, but they are connected. The philosophical principal known as the Cartesian split forms the basis for a rich system of metonymy that develops the conservative aesthetic of the Modernist canonical comic. While commonly named for Descartes, this line of thought can be found earlier in Plato’s Phaedo:

Socrates: “Would not that man do this most perfectly who approaches each thing, so far as possible, with the reason alone, not introducing sight into his reasoning nor dragging in any of the other senses along with his thinking, but who employs pure, absolute reason in his attempt to search out the pure, absolute essence of things, and who removes himself, so far as possible, from eyes and ears, and, in a word, from his whole body, because he
feels that its companionship disturbs the soul and hinders it from attaining truth and wisdom? Is not this the man, Simmias, if anyone, to attain to the knowledge of reality?"

(Plato and Lamb 66)

Here Socrates (as Plato’s character) introduces the separation of the soul (which for our purposes is analogous to the mind) from the body and the devaluation of bodily perception in relation to the ideal apprehension of eternal forms. Thus, a distinction that plagues the entire history of Western thought is created.

Though Plato does not explicitly assign gendered thought to the mind/body split the gendering of values to construct that ideological framework appears consistently throughout the history of Western thought. Moving on to Descartes, his distinction between the res cogitans and the res extensa codifies and expands the mind/body split in a way that feminist critic and Descartes expert Susan Bordo explains:

The Cartesian reconstruction has two interrelated dimensions. A new model of knowledge is conceived, in which the purity of the intellect is guaranteed through its ability to transcend the body. On the other hand, the [...] spiritual and corporeal are now two distinct substances which share no qualities, permit of interaction but no merging, and are each defined precisely in opposition to each other. (Flight To Objectivity 99)

Now we have mind and body, but also mind and the entire natural world as perceived by the senses as opposites. “By Descartes’ brilliant stroke, nature became defined by its lack of affiliation with divinity, with spirit. All that which is God-like or spiritual [...] belong[s] exclusively to res cogitans. All else – the Earth, the heavens, animals, the body – is merely mechanically interacting matter” (Flight To Objectivity 102). Genevieve Lloyd points out that
this hard delineation in effect creates a justification for the traditional gendered division of intellectual labor: “the sharpness of [Descartes’] separation of the ultimate requirements of truth seeking from the practical affairs of everyday life reinforced already existing distinctions between male and female roles” (Lloyd 50). The work of the male becomes reason and thought, interaction with the world through the lower, bodily senses becomes female.

The cultural construction of the mind/body problem is frustratingly mutable; like any effective cultural directive it is ductile enough to pick and choose associations without adhering to a consistent logic and still remain influential: mind/body is masculine/feminine, but muscular body/soft body is masculine/feminine; one wonders which muscles are masculine and which are feminine. Thus, my critique is concerned about the gender implications of the mind-body problem insofar as it is the language with which the idea is generally discussed: masculine and feminine for my purposes are words that mean a culturally constructed “good” and “bad.” Often this opposition is discussed in gendered terms, but this is really about what Caroline Korsmeyer calls “deep gender,” (3) the bundle of cultural values like mind/body, beautiful/sublime, mental/physical that are subsumed into gender classifications.

Of particular interest in this study is how the mind/body construct contains the opposition between Modernist ideas about art and mass culture. Andreas Huyssen writes:

The traditional dichotomy [is one] in which mass culture appears as monolithic, engulfing, totalitarian, and on the side of regression and the feminine ("Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb," said T. S. Eliot) and modernism as progressive, dynamic, and indicative of male superiority in culture. (Huyssen 58)
This modernist conception leads to what Bart Beaty says is the figuring of “the masculine world of high art and the feminized world of commercialized comic book production” (Beaty 30). One notes from these examples that one of the reasons comics have been historically marginalized is their association with mass production and consumption. From this, it becomes possible to tease out the traditionally hegemonic associations that comics (and other forms that have been historically less-than-legitimate) leverage to achieve some kind of canonical recognition. As we see from Huyssen, modernism claims itself as progressive against mass culture, but I will seek to argue that democratization of culture through mass forms is in fact progressive. The tenets built on the mind/body problem are present in cultural expression, and comics as a cultural expression are no exception. The mind/body relationship has all of these values built into it: the modern versus the postmodern, the popular versus art, detachment versus immersion. This thesis will read these oppositions in a text championed as art, and a text I believe to be just as worthwhile that does not follow the structures that would allow for it to be considered art.

Theories of Taste

In discussing understandings of taste, it is ideal to start at Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Kant claims a distinction between the agreeable and the good, which are for him interested judgments of personal pleasure and moral positivity, and the beautiful, which is a disinterested judgment of feeling. Kant writes: “For, since the delight is not based on any inclination of the subject (or on any other deliberate interest), but the subject feels himself completely free in respect of the liking which he accords to the object, he can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions” (28). Beauty thus subsumes a claim to objectivity, not that something is objectively beautiful but that one believes that others should also understand it as beautiful. This is the object of canonization.
The most important work that Kant does here is to separate orders of enjoyment from each other, in which “the aesthetic judgment refers not merely, as a judgment of taste, to the beautiful, but also, as springing from a higher intellectual feeling, to the sublime,” (58) thus placing the beautiful above the good and the agreeable because of its access to the higher sublime. The sublime in Kant’s terms is

[A]t once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law (58-59).

The sublime both challenges and reaffirms in negative the ideas of reason which, as shown by Lloyd’s and Bordo’s writings on Descartes, have been historically claimed by the spheres of the male and the mind. Thus, in Kant’s framework, the aesthetic judgments of the beautiful and the sublime reinforce the distinction of mind and body, of pure objective intellect against subjectivity and experiential interpretation. Giving primacy to the disinterested judgment of beauty allows personal, practical, and political meaning to be severed from and even disdained by artistic expression. Whether it is even possible to consume art without factoring in one’s subjectivity has been the subject of considerable historical debate, and I would say it is not possible.² A useful example of the splitting of these aspects of reception in action is the “disinterested” discourse around films like *Triumph of the Will* or *Birth of a Nation*, wherein the argument is usually made that these films are still “beautiful” in Kant’s terms because they are

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² See Schopenhauer, Wilde, Adorno, Bourdieu, and Fiske for a post-Kant history of this debate.
well-made formal examples of film, despite the fact that they are morally reprehensible. Arguing that art can be received from a disinterested position is advantageous to maintaining a status quo and a hierarchy which places form above function or feeling, which is conducive also to the maintenance of a canon that represents the most conservative and traditional set of values possible.

Modernist art critic Clement Greenberg identified Kant as the first Modernist, and his influence appears in Greenberg’s writings.

Western civilization is not the first civilization to turn around and question its own foundations, but it is the one that has gone furthest in doing so. I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist (Greenberg and O’Brian 85)

Self-criticism is a major concern in Greenberg’s analysis, and thus Modernist criticism. Greenberg wrote of the concept of the “purity” (which he always rendered in quotes) of visual art. “It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art,” (Greenberg and O’Brian 86) he wrote, and in this there appears a difficult question for comic books: how is a medium that appears to be the bastard spawn of the novel and visual art to eliminate its borrowed elements? One way of answering this comes from Chris Ware, who writes “Did you know cartooning is not really drawing at all, but a complicated pictographic language intended to be read, not really seen!” (Acme Novelty Library). As I plan to show in this thesis, much of comics’ self-criticism is accomplished by
defining limits of the form, by attempting to push its established boundaries and, in some cases, do things which are actually impossible in comics. Greenberg wrote about art which did its best to call attention to and alter the qualities of form, placing a premium on the purely aesthetic aspects of texts. This aspect of Greenberg’s expansion on Kant’s ideas serves to again place a primacy on the formal over the sentimental (which is practically a dirty word in criticism), the objective-aesthetic over the subjective-hermeneutic, and the mind over the body.

Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the nature of class provides a useful counter to Kant’s ideas. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, he advances the case that “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (6). This is a complete repudiation of the idea of disinterested judgment as taste, and one with which I am more inclined to agree. Bourdieu goes on to write “the denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane” (7) thus encapsulating the high/low cultural dichotomy, which in itself is symptomatic of the mind/body dichotomy: sublime, disinterested and distinguished pleasures being classically associated with the expression of reason and thought, and the lower and vulgar being bodily, sensual, and natural.

Expanding on Bourdieu, John Fiske wrote that critical discrimination’s counterpart is popular discrimination, which uses the criteria of relevance and productivity in opposition to quality and aesthetics (104). “Proletarian tastes are for artworks that are functional – they serve
as reminders of holidays, or family histories, or they help one make sense of, and thus cope with, one’s subordination in society,” (105) writes Fiske; in this thesis I plan to expand this sense of functionality to “high” artworks as well. The universalized, ahistorical sense of aesthetics is a smokescreen to devalue political and personal evaluation of high art; the focus on form actively works against a popular hermeneutic, which should, ideally, always be applied. A guiding assumption of this thesis will be that the function of art is to form relationships between people through relation to its content, and this seems inevitable to me. The sense from Kantian aesthetics in which art is merely pleasing is not enough for me, so as a critic I seek to explain the personal and political importance of the popular.

Ultimately, the ideological stance I’ll be taking here owes much to Bourdieu and Fiske. Bourdieu’s work in Distinction to destabilize the Kantian notion that judgments of taste can be objective assertions by suggesting that taste is determined by class ideas forms the foundation of my disbelief in the message of and critical reaction to Chris Ware’s work. The first two chapters of this thesis will be essays on Ware’s most recent comic, Building Stories, discussing both Ware’s and the work’s representation of the traditional aesthetic values of the mind/body split in the first, and the work’s relationship to the aesthetics of the popular in the second. I do not disagree with the assessment that Ware is a master of the form, but I do think that his technical prowess and ability to accomplish his artistic goals effectively may be keeping critics from making judgments about the messages contained in the work, which I find to be reactionary. Bourdieu’s analysis of taste as a way of replicating class distinction is important here because supporters of Ware’s work, because it is higher class art, are allowed the critical luxury of classifying negative opinions of it as “not getting it.” This thesis will present a dissenting opinion that does “get it.” This is not to say Building Stories is devoid of emotional resonance or
unrelatable, in my opinion it is incredibly affecting. This is what makes it so frustrating and fascinating, as I find its political content to be characteristic of hegemonic and conservative ideas.

The second set of two chapters will be essays on Rob Schrab’s *Scud: The Disposable Assassin*. *Scud* is a work that I believe is antithetical to the conservative aesthetic values *Building Stories* displays, thus it forms a perfect point of contrast for this examination. *Scud* is well-loved by those who have heard of it, but is not a particularly well-known work despite having been made into a video game for the Sega Saturn and being written and drawn by an accomplished television writer and director who is arguably more popular now than ever thanks to his close association with *Community* creator Dan Harmon. Thus, one of my goals in writing about *Scud* is simply to bring attention to it as a valuable work of comics, in addition to using it to make a larger point about the nature of aesthetics. The first chapter will discuss *Scud*’s formal and narrative qualities in relation to values of the body, and the second will examine *Scud*’s immersive and playful relationship to the popular, developing what I will call a theory of body comics from Schrab’s artwork and dialogue. With this thesis, I intend to make a compelling case for a deep consideration of the values in art that we find to be worthwhile, and to correct some old-fashioned and counterproductive critical thought present in comics studies.
CHAPTER ONE: CHRIS WARE AND BUILDING STORIES

Even if you aren’t a “comics person,” there’s a good chance you’ve heard of Chris Ware. His *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid On Earth* has been slowly infiltrating undergraduate English courses, he has illustrated multiple covers for the *New Yorker*, and even the covers of a few Penguin Classics paperbacks (the 2005 edition of Voltaire’s *Candide*, for one). Ware is a pre-eminent independent cartoonist of our time, winner of nineteen of the comics-industry-given Eisner Awards and subject of an edited anthology of essays entitled *Drawing Is A Way of Thinking*. Ware and his work are perfect subjects of analysis for aspects of canon-building in comics. In this chapter, I will show how Ware’s public persona and his work *Building Stories* exemplify values which privilege the mind over the body in both formal and narrative construction, ultimately espousing conservative moral and aesthetic attitudes.

In spite of all his success, Ware’s own public discourse about his work and himself is less than positive. Ware begins many of his interviews with something like “Thank you very much for coming, it’s very nice to be here and I hope I won’t say anything too stupid or inadvertently insulting, and I’ll do my best to not put you to sleep, which I seem to be quite skilled at” (Wivel). To give a further example of Ware’s ever-present self-apologetic, the back cover of *Building Stories*’ box reads:

“A pictographic listing of all 14 items appears below, with suggestions made as to appropriate places to set down, forget, or completely lose any number of its contents within the walls of an average well-appointed home. As seen in the pages of the *New

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3 In comics industry jargon, independent generally means “not published by Marvel or DC.” Ware’s work is predominately published by Pantheon, an imprint of Knopf-Doubleday.
Yorker, New York Times and McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern, Building Stories collects a decade’s worth of work, with dozens of “never before published” pages (i.e., those deemed too obtuse, filthy or just plain incoherent to offer a respectable periodical).”

(Ware, Building Stories “Box”)

Ware’s brand of withering passivity and advancement of the idea that his work is not just unworthy of its praise but not worth reading at all has become a sort of trademark for him. This is not just a minor personality tic; it is doing ideological work. His constant apologies for himself and his work are an effort to distance himself and his readers from appreciation of his work: to suggest ahead of time that his comics are not worthwhile on a basic level begs to have them read without expectation, and more importantly, with more attention to their form than their content. Disassociation from evaluation (as opposed to analysis, good/bad vs. how/why) is inherent in the Kantian model of taste: judgments of beauty are supposedly made absent of influence by personal feeling, that the form of a work of art can be understood and praised without reference to one’s sense of its goodness or agreeableness. This sense of goodness is the primary factor in creating what is usually referred to as “respect,” which in this usage is a kind of appreciation that suggests that works deserve to be admired universally, whether or not any individual reader enjoys them on an emotional level. This works in Ware’s favor, as his comics are generally of great formal complexity and difficulty, thus encouraging this “objective” Modernist assessment of the work. This thesis presents a critical reading of Building Stories which takes into account and corrects for this bias.

4 References to Building Stories individual pieces will be formatted as (Ware, Building Stories name of piece.) The names of the pieces will be derived from the first word or words written on them, or named by their physical appearance in the case of pieces without words.
Building Stories, Modernism, and the Mind

*Building Stories*’ Library of Congress information classifies it as a graphic novel, but the term only applies in the sense that it tells a story in comics; this is not a book. The novel is actually a box containing fourteen separate items. Represented within is nearly every single format comics come in, and a few they usually do not: three standard comic-book size pieces, two folding bands, one flipbook, one hardbound book, one cardboard-bound children’s book, three broadsheets, one smaller newspaper, a mini-comic, and a four-part foldout resembling a game board. Even the inside of the top half of the box lid and the sides of the bottom half count as parts of the text; strips showing moments not featured anywhere else are printed on the latter, and text information related to the story appears on the former.

Each piece of the story takes place at a different moment in the unnamed protagonist’s life, and there is no intended reading order for the pieces included in the box. There is an apparent chronological end of the story, the page which begins with “Browsing,” which takes place farthest along the timeline of the main character’s life, but there is no obvious beginning; many pages take place around the same time or feature flashbacks to the main character’s childhood within a different moment in time. One of the many meanings of the title *Building Stories* is represented here; readers build the story of the main character by choosing the order in which they consume each piece. *Building Stories* can also be read as a reference to the importance of living spaces in the story, most notably the Chicago apartment building in which the protagonist spends her lonely early twenties. It is also worth noting, with reference to Ware’s persistent apologia, that the story’s initials are BS, i.e., bullshit.
The splitting of the story into several pieces without direction seems like a kind of postmodern touch, creating a story that works as what Deleuze and Guattari described as a rhizome, but Ware’s opinions on postmodernism seem to suggest otherwise. For him, postmodernism is a “cool, intellectualized era” which is a “systemic codification of the previous warm or emotional discovery which preceded [it]” and that “this process of revelation and capitulation occurs regularly in every artist’s life, yearly, weekly, even on a daily basis,” an assessment not without some merit (*Acme Novelty Library*). Non-linearity can be claimed as classically postmodern, as a previously-mentioned rhizome, or in this case it can be seen as an attempt to call attention to the formal qualities of the work, a classically modern quality. Ware’s point in the previous quotation is to trouble the idea that postmodernism is actually distinct from modernism, a point which *Building Stories* makes effectively by being a quintessentially modernist work through its utilization of mind/body associations.

“As has often been repeated, [...] modernism is a somewhat arbitrary term that only serves to differentiate some art from before 1900 (realism) and after the 1960s (postmodernism) from much of what came in between,” writes Brad Prager in his essay “Modernism in the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” A coherent definition of modernism is difficult to nail down, so for my purposes it will be negatively defined against postmodernism in the way Frederic Jameson has established. Jameson writes that the “shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation,” marking the major difference between modernist and postmodernist feeling; the modernist story expresses alienation. Jameson describes qualities of the postmodern, writing “As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomic of the
centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling,” (Jameson 14) qualities which in negative describe Building Stories accurately; it is a work fully concerned with anomie, alienation, anxieties, and, as Ware has repeatedly stated, empathy

Reproducing what Prager writes is the modernist anxiety of believing that “there lurks a dangerous side whereby the technologies of liberation themselves become oppressive,” (196) Building Stories’ physical format represents a kind of materialism that mounts a firm attempt to assert what Heidegger called “the thingness” of itself and the importance of that thingness. By packaging the story as multiple elements in a large box that weighs more than a few pounds, Ware is already directing the reading experience. Building Stories is not something that people are likely to take with them: except for the one hardbound book the pieces are flimsy; some are printed on easily-torn newspaper. A few of the pieces are of inconvenient size, such as the broadsheets or the folding game board which, when fully unfolded, is around three feet long. A consequence of its non-portability and relatively high cost for a comic book at $50 US is that it essentially must be an art object rather than a more democratic, disposable comic; Building Stories is not going to be a back-of-the-comics-shop find for anyone. Many of the pieces contain physical formal features that would be lost in digitization, specifically the folding bands’ Mobius Strip-like effect and the visual matches formed by flipping them, and the effect of the game board being a single strip of four huge images juxtaposing four different seasons. It becomes clear that Building Stories is meant as something which demands to be read on its terms and to be appreciated as an art object, something as aesthetically valuable (if not more so) as it is narratively valuable. This makes Building Stories’ material existence an expression of an
anxiety about the future, about the possibility of detachment from materiality that digital
technologies represent.

*Detachment and Clarity*

To connect this to the mind construct, I turn to Susan Bordo, who writes:

the birth of modern science represents a decisive historical moment […] in which the
more feminine, i.e., intuitive, empathic, associational elements were rigorously exorcised
from science and philosophy. The result was a super-masculinized model of knowledge
in which *detachment, clarity, and transcendence of the body* are all key requirements
(Flight To Objectivity 8).

Bordo is writing about a historical moment that takes place before the time of modernism as a
stylistic period, but its influence has not waned in the years since. The emphasized values,
detachment, clarity, and transcendence of the body are all key characteristics of the mind
construct and their expression in Ware’s comics makes up their modernist characteristics. The
workings of these elements in *Building Stories* warrant a deeper discussion.

Jameson seems to suggest that the value of detachment is more postmodern than modern,
but it is really a modern value. Detachment evinces an awareness of being detached, of being
alienated, where Jameson’s postmodern feeling lacks an understanding of being disconnected.

*Building Stories* follows the life of a woman from her lonely twenties in an apartment building in
Chicago to her life as a married mother of one in the Chicago suburbs, while telling the stories of
an unhappy couple, a perpetually emasculated anthropomorphic bee, and an elderly landlady as
well. The common emotional ground all of these stories share is the characters’ sense of
detachment: from the world, from each other, from their own desires, and from the romantic
partners they do, or don’t, or never have. A modernist experience of history and time is presented from Building Stories usage of mind-construct ideas.

In addition to an overall theme of detachment, BS exhibits a pronounced aesthetic of clarity.) Comics critic Douglas Wolk describes Ware’s style as “maniacally precise, composed frostiness,” and it remains on display here. In his standard form, Ware draws meticulously detailed panels which are usually in a consistent size and arrangement (see Fig. 1) (Wolk 347). His figures are anatomically accurate, proportional, and never exaggerated, yet still streamlined and simplified, though he occasionally draws people with even greater detail in situations where a particular facial expression is needed. The majority of panels in the story are either isometric-angled or straight-on shots of the characters; we are always watching them, never seeing through their perspectives. Ware’s closest analogue in this respect is film director Wes Anderson, whose dollhouse walkthrough opening sequences to The Royal Tenenbaums and Moonrise Kingdom find their comics counterparts in Ware’s repeated cross-sections of the apartment building in Building Stories.

The world of Building Stories is a graphically simplified version of our own, buildings that look like buildings but without individual bricks, trees that look like tall bushes without individual branches. It’s colored in predominately muted, pale tones of blue, pink, brown, and yellow. The exceptions to this color scheme are objects in nature like trees and flowers. Ware’s coloring takes on an occasional flourish where bright red is used to indicate a strong emotional response, or the pages where the shade of green on American money dominates the panels during a conversation between the protagonist and her husband about their overdrawn checking account. Ware’s presentational choices are designed for readability, as he says “I try to get my pictures to
Figure 1: a typical page of Building Stories. (Ware, Building Stories “Disconnect”)
read like words, so that when you see them you can’t not read them,” (Raeburn 20) an idea that might seem at odds with Ware’s often complex page designs. He acknowledges that “It takes a lot of effort to read comics, even though it seems like they’re easy,” (Kelley) so the rigid adherence to stylistic consistency places a premium on clarity: there are no panels that could seriously be called impressionistic to be found in *Building Stories*. These formal qualities all contribute to the pervasive, cool mood of melancholy tinged with nostalgia and anxiety in *Building Stories*, something further expanded upon in the narrative. Through the stylistic choices with which he depicts narrative time, Ware renders a feeling of modernist detachment in *Building Stories*.

The way in which the passage of time and movement through space is portrayed in *Building Stories* is in line with the mind construct. Entirely absent from Ware’s visual repertoire is the standard semiotic vocabulary of motion in comics; there are no speed lines, no bodily exaggerations, and no mimicry of filmic techniques commonly used in superhero comics. This certainly makes sense, as *Building Stories* is not a comic about action and dramatic movements. However, interaction with and manipulation of the world is described in panel-to-panel transitions that, through the use of consistent perspective, feels like watching a series of frozen moments rather than fluid motion. In fact, the lack of change and motion over time is used often throughout the story to punctuate the pervading melancholy of the book (see fig. 2). This is not to say Ware does not achieve emotional resonance with his drawings, as one entirely silent chapter is one of the most affecting parts of *Building Stories*, but to suggest that the exterior world is not nearly as important or emphasized as the interior in the story.
Figuring heavily into the way *Building Stories* renders detachment is Ware’s often diagrammatic page design. In the first page of the large folding board, we see the protagonist at multiple different moments throughout a single day (see Fig. 3). The usual top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading order of the comics page is disrupted here by small red clocks in certain panels, representing the points in time at which each panel on the page is occurring. The first panel of the page shows a draft of a personal ad on a legal pad, subsequent panels show the legal pad in a drawer, and the drawer being part of a table, which has a notepad on it that reads “8pm Friday, corner restaurant,” signifying the time of a date at which the protagonist is stood up, waiting an hour before she finally returns home. Isaac Cates writes that Ware’s uses of diagrams “use spatial proximity to denote a wide range of connections – linkages of meaning, and not necessarily of time” (Cates 99). In breaking the traditional structure of the comics page, Ware creates a level of diagrammatic reading which displays and colors narrative reading; informational presentation, reason, takes precedence over narrative structure, which communicates affectively. Placement, geography, and logic become the directors of the action; as omniscient observers of the story we are able to see it without the main character’s judgment,
we are otherwise disinterested. The diagram exercises control over the passage and experience of time that we cannot otherwise achieve. The final panel, breaking the straight vertical and horizontal planes in which the other panels are arranged, punctuates the page with a final sting of melancholy, a single frame of snow outside the protagonist’s window. This is brilliant use of the page to emotional effect, but the diagrammatic composition imposes a desire for logic and clarity even greater than that of linear narrative, meaning must make sense spatially as well as narratively.

Art Spiegelman has written about comics that “What is most interesting about comics [is] in a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present,” (Spiegelman 165) suggesting that they, as a form, impose an order and meaning on the stories that life as described in postmodernist theory does not have. Comics can describe the vantage point of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History:

Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm. (Benjamin 257)

Benjamin’s critique is of the progress narrative, the historical idea that human civilization is continually improving as it advances through time, but this is applicable to forms of narrative as well. That we experience a “chain of events” means that people perceive events and their
Figure 3: A diagrammatic page. Arrows added by the author to show how the page alters spatial reading order. (Folding Board)
relationships to other events as isolated by direct cause-and-effect to each other, whereas the Angel sees one giant pile of rubble, caused by the sum of all events which are actually all-encompassing and interdependent. Through Spiegelman and Benjamin’s ideas, the conventional comics page of consecutive panels in juxtaposition give a perception of personal histories and presents as synchronous, which is ordinarily impossible. The use of this quality of comics in Building Stories is to render the frustration and detachment caused by the passage of time and the weight of history, how the experience of modern life affects interiority and the mind.

The physical design of the pieces serves an experiential purpose as well as a narrative one. There is one design choice common to all but one of the elements in the box: the lack of a cover, or any image which does not play a role that serves the narrative. Even the cardboard-cover book’s covers are actually pages of the story: the front cover is meant to clue the reader in that some of the events inside are short-story exercises being written by the protagonist for a class she is taking, the inside covers serve to reinforce that this is a book within a book by mimicking the insides of cheaply produced children’s storybooks, and the back cover makes clear that the lives of the other three inhabitants of the building will disappear with its demolition, while the protagonist will continue on. Most other pieces begin in medias res; there are ones that mimic standard comics pages by having familiar looking title bars at the top of the page but the titles are actually the first word of dialogue in the story. Eschewing these “barriers” between stories preserves the sense of interconnectedness that Building Stories relies upon to make its point about perception.

There are no episodes in Building Stories with clearly defined, unitary beginnings and endings, just a “chain of events” in the sense in which Benjamin believed people experienced history. The lack of reading order and delineating features like covers and title pages is
calculated to produce this understanding; memories and histories are not lines of progression, but rhizomes in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the word, “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be” (Deleuze and Guattari 7). The pieces can be read in any order and likely do not produce exactly the same effect regardless of the path taken through them, but nonetheless are all continuous and connectable; the physical design of each piece welcomes this use, except for one of them.

The only piece that does have a cover is a hardbound book with a dull, flat-beige-and-gray binding. This one contains the most painful moments of the story for the protagonist: it opens with a dizzying spread conveying a deep depression in which she considers suicide and the possible aftermath of it, followed by an account of the time she is hired by a rich family as an au pair, only to find out that she was hired specifically because the parents believed their young son would not fall in love with her as he had with previous hires because she wears a prosthetic leg from the knee down, and closes with the story of her unintended pregnancy and subsequent abortion in college. The covers to this book serve as barriers to viewing it, and in their unremarkable outward appearance beg to be skipped over and unrealized. Ware reproduces physically here the way memories which people would not like to experience again are repressed.

When the narrative moves away from the protagonist, the same attitudes about time are reinforced, however differently. By making a building into a character, Ware gives another perspective on the story. The titular building is a three-story row house in Chicago’s Humboldt Park, which in the present of the story houses the protagonist, an unhappy married couple, and the landlady who has lived in the building since her birth. The building itself speaks to the
reader at different points in the story, mostly in the cardboard-backed book. On one page, it explains the special perceptions of buildings:

Not to brag, but we buildings are able to – how might you say it? Grope our way around the future a bit, but only insofar as any current occupant inhabits us. Of course, this purview can be quite anxiety provoking for those of us whose lives are measured by the broken leases of fickle renters (how I envy the country estates and the family mansions – they must live lives of such blissful certainty!) but it nonetheless allows for some perspective (however dimly lit) on one’s own prospects for mortality. (Ware Building Stories “September 21·2000”)

Daniel Worden explains the function of buildings in Building Stories, writing that “architecture is a vehicle to convey both the affective possibilities of experiencing the past as a whole and the perpetual frustration of the inability to reconstruct modernity’s ruins seamlessly. Ware’s focus on modernity’s ruins is an attempt, however impossible, to infuse everyday life with history,” (Worden 109) however this appears to be a slight misreading of what the building that Building Stories is about means.

Buildings do form a convenient visual analogue to a comics page, a series of windows provides images readable from top to bottom and right to left, but reading a building and thus allowing the property of comics to produce a viewable past along with the present would still be taking a vantage point which is human, not “building-like.” The building measures its life in a varied series of the stories of its renters and it is jealous of homes built to serve the purposes of a single family. The building, even in its capacity to experience more of the interdependence of human narratives, does not experience history as a whole the way Worden describes above. In Building Stories, the buildings in Chicago that carry history, like people, experience time as an
interconnected associative web, without “blissful certainty.” Bolstering this fact are the rare sardonic “editor’s notes” that appear at the bottom of pages merely to correct minor mistakes the characters make in relating trivial facts. “Well I did just drive five hours* to get here,” remarks the protagonist, the asterisked note reading “four and a half, actually” (Ware, Building Stories "Disconnect"). These omniscient corrections remind us of the imprecise, unclear nature of human memory; they chastise the imperfections of the characters’ recollections.

All of these design choices are ultimately brought to the narrative level in the final chronological piece of the story, “Browsing,” where the protagonist explains a dream in which she finds *Building Stories* in a bookstore. On this page, it is revealed that the entire story exists inside itself, and the symbolic significance of the work in the protagonist’s life is as the fulfillment of her artistic aspirations, but at the same time as attaining control over her life’s narrative, of mastering the past, present and future. Thus, she is able to overcome modernism’s major anxiety about the future through a narrative of objective quality and clarity that is, importantly, a material object. It preserves whatever auratic component of objects is left in the age of mechanical reproduction, yet being a dream it constitutes this idea as seemingly out of reach. The auratic potential of *Building Stories* as a real life object and as an object in the story informs a negotiation of the singular aesthetic object’s status to the mass produced object’s status, seemingly unavoidable as a consequence of changes in ways of production in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

*Transcendence of the Body*

“Sports injury?” asks the plumber, handing the protagonist her crutch. “It’s more of a, uh, life injury,” she responds, knocking on her prosthetic leg. “Oh jeez honey, I didn’t mean to be…” he says, embarrassed. “Hey that’s cool…I actually like it when people don’t
notice…especially guys,” she replies. In this figuratively and literally small interaction, drawn in miniscule tiles that take up about a sixth of a page, Ware encapsulates *Building Stories*’ uniquely sensitive approach to disability (see fig. 4). That it is uniquely sensitive however, is not to say that it avoids falling into traditional patterns of thought about the mind and body. This is one of *Building Stories*’ most frustrating and fascinating aspects: it depicts a character with a disability without resorting to the tired, offensive tactic of making it into a metaphor, but at the same time follows received philosophical tradition regarding the meaning and use of bodies.

The protagonist’s disability, her leg missing below the knee, has a novel narrative function. G. Thomas Couser writing about memoirs of disability, observes, “deviations from bodily norms often provoke a demand for explanatory narrative in everyday life. Whereas the unmarked case—the ‘normal’ body—can pass without narration, the marked case—the scar, the limp, the missing limb, or the obvious prosthesis—calls for a story,” and in *Building Stories* this is mostly evaded: it’s a story with a disability, not about it (Couser 400). In avoiding the use of what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call the materiality of metaphor, when “physical and cognitive anomalies promise to lend a ‘tangible’ body to textual abstractions,” *Building Stories* instead uses the markedness of disability to emphasize the corporeality of its characters (Mitchell and Snyder 205). As the “normal” body is unmarked, the amputee body in this case is marked not just as “amputee” but also as “body,” to foreground the existence of conflicts between the body and the self.

To further this point, Ware makes use of a series of pages with one large central image. In a style recalling a medical transparency, three consecutive pages show the protagonist with her clothes on, her nude body, and then her skeleton with organs. Again, the use of the diagrammatic format appears, this time linking disparate moments in time through the usage of
body parts as contingencies. The final page of this series contrasts the most stripped-down image, the skeleton, with this passage:

“Lately, whenever I’m laying around, waiting for my heart to calm down and catch up with me, I play a dumb game where, simply by concentrating as hard as I can, I try to find just exactly where it is ’I’ am in my body…and by ’me’ I mean me…the me who makes it all happen, who watches herself make decisions and make mistakes…it’s no wonder that all those ancient philosophers and doctors had such a hard time with it, because if you really pay attention it’s almost impossible to decide. When I really think about it, when I really, really, concentrate, and try to clear my mind, and find where I am, living in my own body, I feel…the most me…in the…tingling…between my eyebrows, just behind my eyes…right at the top of my nose.” (Ware, *Building Stories* “I Just Want To Fall Asleep”)

The protagonist locates her “self” in the head, ostensibly where the brain is, the seat of the mind. She does not experience selfhood as a monistic body, but as a self inhabiting one place in the mind. The separation of the mind from the body informs the work’s treatment of the body. *Building Stories* features an inconsistent approach to the meaning and use of the body that ultimately reveals an aspiration to transcend the body with a compensatory caveat that certain uses of the body are better than others. In contrast to the historical precedent in comics of superhero bodies as tools of action, Ware uses bodies, and the sense of touch in particular, primarily as a method of communication.
Figure 4: detail of conversation between plumber and protagonist. This series of panels takes up a small portion of the full page on which it appears. (Ware, Building Stories “September 21, 2000”)
The long, textless flipbook-style element is entirely about this concept. The piece is bookended by scenes of the protagonist in bed in which the basics of the image – her, in bed – stay the same but the moment in the story’s chronology shifts frequently. She is in her bed in her apartment alone, and then she is in bed with her husband, pregnant, then in a hospital bed with an incubator by her side. The middle of the book is about the protagonist’s experiences with her daughter as a child, but one incident resonates. Lucy climbs onto a table, and when her mother tries to stop her, she hits her parent in the face. There is a beat where they stare at each other, both start crying, and then embrace. This single scene spans a full range of meanings of touches: first, maternal caution, then violence, then apology and love. The final scene of the flipbook has an older version of the protagonist watch the silhouette of her grown-up daughter walk past her open doorway. As this entire experience is framed by scenes of the protagonist sleeping, most in relation to her daughter, the bed is the area where she constructs and catalogues her memories of raising Lucy, thus the haptic aura of the bed is significant to her as an object representing a relationship.

This association is troubled again in the piece entitled *Touch Sensitive*, in reference to its original release as a tablet-only download through McSweeney’s iPad app. *Touch Sensitive* focuses on the unhappy couple that lives upstairs from the protagonist in the apartment building, and in particular the woman’s feelings towards the man. She describes the last time her partner touched her while they were sleeping, “I took it as an optimistic sign, but even then I think I was fooling myself. I mean, if all we are is bundles of energy, what is a hug anyway? And how can we ever really touch each other?” She expresses a desire for relief from the constraints of the body, figuring people as “bundles of energy;” as though physical closeness is not really close,
and somehow “really” touching each other requires something beyond the capabilities of the senses: the abstract realm of the mind.

Note that this directly claims touch as part of the realm of the mental through memory and emotion, while elsewhere sensuous response, touching for the sake of touching as manifested in sexual activity, is figured as a problem. Nowhere is this more present than the two pieces that focus on Branford Bee, a character who exists in the story as a children’s storybook character and also as a real bee who is killed by the man of the Upstairs Couple when he steps on him. Branford is a perpetually emasculated bee who, much like the other characters in the piece, finds himself in a relationship which is not completely fulfilling for him. He is married to Betty, a female bee whose failing vision causes household mishaps like her knocking over a vase or burning dinner. Branford finds himself consistently ashamed as his love for Betty conflicts with his seemingly constant instinctual desire to fertilize the queen bee, which he dreams of at night and thinks about during dinner as well (Ware, Building Stories “Branford: The Best Bee In The World”). Later, Branford discovers that he has pollen-gathering hairs on his legs; the narration mentions “it should be noted that NO male bees have such collecting hairs,” and this sends Branford into a dysphoria: “And now this…this…this abomination of my corpus…what does it mean? It is so awful I’d rather sever my limb forever than to gaze upon’t again!” The signification of Branford’s body, that he possesses some female characteristics, does not match his socialized gender; his bodily desires do not match his social aspirations to a happy marriage. The body drags down the noble wishes of Branford’s mind.

Women’s bodies are similarly sites of strife. The affective structure of Building Stories relies on a great deal of intimacy. The narration is generally first person stream-of-consciousness from whoever (or whatever) is the focus of the action, but more importantly, the
bodies, specifically the naked bodies, of the characters are fairly common sights throughout the narrative. Sexual activity is devoid of any titillating value, rendered as it is in Ware’s cold, perfect lines; one page in the gray book contains what might be the least pornographic rendering of ejaculation in history. The women in the story admonish themselves constantly for their bodies’ shapes, which do not conform to hegemonic beauty standards. In “Touch Sensitive,” the upstairs woman thinks, struggling to fit into a pair of jeans “I don’t think he ever really loved me that much…really. How long has it been since he touched me in a way that didn’t betray the obvious repulsion he feels, anyway? Then again, maybe I am repulsive. At least in these jeans I am,” she says, taking the jeans off to try a different pair. In the large newspaper, the protagonist and her husband are naked in their bedroom, and she looks like she’s about to cry. “Are you okay?” he asks; “Uh, yeah, just feeling a little self-conscious is all,” her head in her hands, looking like she’s about to cry. Obviously, this is representative of the systemic issue of women’s body standards, but those standards have reproduced the line of thought that suggests the body is an unreliable depiction of the inner self and even an adversary in the battle for self-expression.

*Building Stories* draws its gender lines in a rather baldly hegemonic and traditional manner. Ware uses the rather obvious and age-old association of women with the natural world by way of flowers: along with the previously mentioned sequence in which Branford’s ability to collect pollen is the marker of his emasculation, a three page sequence revolves around central images of a Benday-dot rendering of a vulva, then a painted vulva with the spray-painted words “FUCK ME HARDER” around it, and finally a pink flower. The one job we see the protagonist have before she marries her husband Phil is in a flower shop, while Phil himself is an architect, something Ware compares himself to when the protagonist describes the real-world *Building*
*Stories* by saying “all of the illustrations were so precise and clean it was like an architect had
drawn them” (“Disconnect”). In one particularly telling moment, the protagonist’s daughter
Lucy asks her mother if she “will be the most important thing you ever do,” to which she does
not reply, but just seems stunned (“It All Happened So Fast”). Considering the piece where the
protagonist is finally fulfilled by the existence of her life story as a book, we see that having
children, a biological process, is probably not the most meaningful thing in her life; rather, it is
the self-expression and artistic creation of her story that is more valued. These classically
Modernist traits make *Building Stories* a work which, while emotionally resonant and
masterfully crafted, is frustratingly conservative in attitudes regarding the body and the concrete.
A hope for transcendence from bodily desires and limitations pervades the text, which is left
unfulfilled in favor of championing artistic expression as a worthy pursuit which avoids the dregs
of human instinct.
CHAPTER TWO: SCUD: THE DISPOSABLE ASSASSIN, BODY COMICS, AND THE POPULAR

The independent comics publishing climate in the early-to-mid-90s had been energized by the improbable success of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, which was in its original form a cheaply-produced black-and-white comic self-published by Eastman and Laird (Groth 1). At the same time, the mainstream comics industry was reeling from the slow collapse of a speculation bubble that eventually led to Marvel Comics declaring bankruptcy in 1997 and the exodus of many of the biggest-selling comics artists of the time from Marvel and DC to begin their own publisher, Image (Howe 181). With the paradigm temporarily shifted away from market domination by big-name superhero comics, independent books experienced a small renaissance of visionary original work like Sam Kieth’s *The Maxx*, Jhonen Vasquez’s *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac*, and of course, *Scud: The Disposable Assassin*.

*Scud: The Disposable Assassin* was a comic written and drawn by Rob Schrab for twenty-four issues from 1994-1998, with the final four issues coming after a ten year break in 2008. It was one of many creative ventures Schrab was involved in at the time; early issues of the series contain advertisements for his improv comedy group The Dead Alewives’ weekly show. *Scud* was independently produced by FireMan Press, a four-person operation run out of a house in Milwaukee and later Los Angeles by Schrab and friends. *Scud* follows the adventures of the titular character, a robot purchased from a vending machine whose purpose is to assassinate his target (a female monster named Jeff with a plug for a face, mouths for knees, arms for legs, mousetraps for hands, and a squid strapped to her body; she speaks only in “samples” from films and television) and then self-destruct upon on the task’s completion. Scud
sees the label explaining this on his back in a mirror, and decides that, instead of dying, he will mortally wound Jeff, keep her on life support in a hospital, and become a mercenary to fund Jeff’s medical care and his own affairs. Thus begin the adventures of Scud, which see him working with a gang of mobsters who also pilot a Voltron-esque giant robot, battling a replacement werewolf arm, and ultimately defeating the alliance of Jeff, an army of evil angels, a perfect organizational robot, and Benjamin Franklin for the life of his girlfriend, Sussudio.

Rob Schrab is not a career cartoonist. *Scud* and its few spinoffs (*La Cosa Nostroid*, the longest running of them, went for only 10 issues) are the only comics work Schrab has done; he has otherwise accrued a much longer resume in film and television as a writer/director on *The Sarah Silverman Program*, co-writer of the Dreamworks film *Monster House* with *Scud* writing partner Dan Harmon, and director of multiple episodes of Harmon’s NBC sitcom *Community*. In 2002, Harmon and Schrab also launched Channel 101 together, one of the earliest platforms for independent short films and television shows on the internet; eventual Saturday Night Live writers and cast members The Lonely Island’s first gained attention with their sitcom *The ‘Bu*, which was aired originally on Channel 101. Schrab’s media savvy and willingness to embrace multiple formats shows through in *Scud*, which besides bearing obvious filmic influences in its comic form was adapted into two videogames and optioned for a never-produced film by Oliver Stone. *Scud* itself stands as a relic of the early internet age, with an in-comic parody of Compuserv and an official website last updated in 2003 that features an Earthlink email address proudly displayed at the bottom.

All of this is to say that Schrab is something of an outsider to the “comics world,” as the creator of a single self-published cult comic which as of this writing has warranted no serious
critical consideration. Nonetheless, *Scud* is by far his most personal work. His wife Kate Freund writes in the foreword to the collected edition:

The truth is *Scud’s* creation was born from rejection. There’s no coincidence that the protagonist adorns a broken heart on his chest. Rob was dumped by a girl he dated for less than a month. Instead of wallowing in his own pity, he decided to draw a comic to impress her. For the next five years Rob kicked out twenty issues until he met someone new who broke his heart again. This time the rejection was too painful to work through, and *Scud* was abandoned on a gut-wrenching cliffhanger. (Schrab, Carter, and Harmon)

*Scud* took ten years to return for the final four issues, for which Schrab created a series of videos detailing his creative process. One of these, “Scud Vlog #7” shows the monomaniacal dedication Schrab put into this comic. It’s a time lapse video of Schrab sitting at his drawing table over several days, barely moving to get up from it, as he pencils, inks, letters, and zip-a-tones every page of the first of the last four issues by himself. *Scud* is an intensely personal, sometimes nakedly autobiographical comic at the same time as it’s a genre-hopping comedy-action story. I’ve chosen to write about it here in juxtaposition to *Building Stories* because it accomplishes the same level of observation and emotional significance in a manner completely different from Ware’s elaborate and intricate comics; *Scud* is chaotic, joyful, violent, silly, and yet still weighty on a personal level. Ware’s orchestral brilliance forms an excellent contrast to Schrab’s Ramones-esque directness and professional amateurism; the difference between being a master at the form of comics and a master at what one is doing with comics. It achieves its message through a “body-focused” narrative, a necessary consequence of the action genre, which utilizes a series of discourses which fall outside the conventions used to evaluate comics as “art” which I established in the previous chapter. The following is a critical appraisal of *Scud* which
examines its formal and narrative qualities as they exemplify a subversion of mind-dominant logics and understandings of the body.

*Scud’s Mind: Robot-Animal-Dinosaur-Monster-Human Products*

“"I'm a big fan of robots, not a fan of drawing human characters at all. I find it very, very boring and difficult to make a human character iconic,” said Schrab in a 2008 interview. It makes sense then, that very few of the characters in *Scud* are recognizable as human beings. Discussions of the body in general carry a parenthetical “human” before body, but in discussing a work where so few of the characters are humans, it is important to acknowledge and discuss the implications of the non-human bodies on display. The world of *Scud* is dominated by bizarre combinations of humans and animals, dinosaurs, robots, angels, sentient storage systems, and the aforementioned unclassifiable Jeff. The characters Mess, Drywall, and System are brothers who are all designed as organizational tools: Mess as a series of boxes is not particularly effective at it, Drywall contains a storage dimension inside of himself that contains all manner of objects from weapons to sporting goods, and System is a highly efficient computer who ultimately takes over the management of Hell. Since examples of humanity are few and far between, it’s important to spotlight the aspects of the story which differentiate between biological humanity and conscious subjectivity, which is what “humanity” as a construct tends to mean.

Scud himself is a robot, *not* an android or a cyborg, as he does not resemble a human being outside of his humanoid shape or contain any human parts. As an action hero, he is particularly novel in this regard. Unlike similar tech-heroes like The Terminator or Robocop, Scud does not resemble the masculine action hero body. He has no semblance of musculature, instead cutting a lithe figure; he is not gunmetal grey or leather-clad, but bright yellow and red. Where cyborg action heroes are often used to create a discussion about what qualities make
someone/something human by way of familial protection or commitment to justice in the previously mentioned cases, Scud’s motivations are survival and eventually romantic love.

These discrepancies between the general model for robot protagonists and Scud position him as an unassumingly excellent personification of postmodern subjectivity. The world of Scud is a hyper media-dominated reflection of our own, influenced contemporarily by the rapidly expanding field of television broadcasting in the 90s and the early internet. Consumerism is taken to a logical extreme by the premise of the disposable assassin. Scud is a product by design, created to make money for ScudCo and sold through a venue as mundane as a vending machine. The point in the first issue at which he realizes the completion of his task will mean his death is an important turn; here he becomes an object given subjectivity, given awareness of his own status as a product. Scud’s condition is comparable to an aspect of postmodern subjectivity. Frederic Jameson writes in Postmodernism:

here I think a profound modification of the public sphere needs to be theorized: the emergence of a new realm of image reality that is both fictional (narrative) and factual (even the characters in the serials are grasped as real "named" stars with external histories to read about), and which now -- like the former classical "sphere of culture" -- becomes semiautonomous and floats above reality, with this fundamental historical difference that in the classical period reality persisted independently of that sentimental and romantic "cultural sphere," whereas today it seems to have lost that separate mode of existence.

Today, culture impacts back on reality in ways that make any independent and, as it were, non- or extracultural form of it problematical. (Jameson 277)

Here Jameson is discussing the inability to distinguish any difference between advertisement, fiction, and reality. A consequence of this condition is, conscious or not, a feeling of being an
advertisement, a person-product whose actions are all performative advertisements in some manner. Scott Bukatman writes “The positioning of the subject as a consumer of illusions recurs in science fiction, and the more revealing critiques of spectacular culture are based in voluntarism. There is, after all, no need to force the citizenry to do what they are already doing quite willingly (‘One could not respond, or talk back, or intervene, but one did not want to,’)” (Bukatman 38) which handily describes Scud’s universe, where all people are complicit in being an action hero as they are compelled to by the existence of an economy designed exclusively to encourage that behavior, where there are even designer guns by Vivienne Westworld. Scud and several other characters literalize this concern by being product-objects given subjectivity; where the concern of the modern was to find meaning where there seemed to be none obvious, our postmodern protagonists have meaning ingrained into their existence, and choose to cast it off in favor of a seemingly directionless, chaotic experience.

Schrab’s design for the series, visual and otherwise, contributes to this image-dominant environment. In defiance of Greenberg’s “purity” suggestion, rather than attempt to make comics that are examples of comics’ unique attributes, much of Scud involves attempting to introduce aspects of other media into comics. Jeff’s dialogue is all supposed to be “sampled” bits of audio from television and movies. Each of the single issues (sadly, this feature is not reproduced in the collected edition) begins with a page of “suggested voice talent” for each character in the book, who are generally film and television stars: John Malkovich is cast as Scud; Drywall, who speaks in a language only intelligible to beings without souls, is to be voiced by Woodstock from Peanuts. Mid-run issues also contain suggested soundtracks to each scene of the book, generally pop songs with a few thematically appropriate classical selections. Schrab even credits himself as “director” rather than artist on the series, completing the film analogy. In
its own way, this still serves comics as a medium by defining what it can do through attempting something that is by definition impossible for it to reproduce. *Scud* questions the boundaries of a comics as a medium by introducing audio components into the “closure” aspect of reading comics, as it also expects a proficient media literacy to identify the voices and songs it suggests and their additional layers of meaning to the text. It constitutes the reading of *Scud* as a totality of sensual experiences rather than simply as a textual event.

Visually, *Scud* can be understood as a DIY 90s cousin to Howard Chaykin’s innovative late-80s *American Flagg!* Chaykin’s unconventional approach to page design, which often eschewed traditional panel borders in favor of multiple contingent images that suggested a chronology rather than prescribing it, brilliantly executed a story in which media corporations were governments reigning over megacities that were literally giant shopping malls. Scott Bukatman writes that

Chaykin’s unorthodox pictorials establish a distance from the standard syntagmatic organization of panels on the page, while the deployment of texts as visual objects replaces the traditional emphasis on phonetic language (what Robert Smithson has called “language to be looked at”). Synchrony replaces diachrony as the sign (image and text) is stripped of its transparency and becomes a material form: a commodity (Bukatman 59).

This introduces a novel way of thinking about the comics page, in which it becomes a finite resource of possible meaning; the use of pieces of the page to transmit empty non-narrative (which is not to say meaningless, as certainly emptiness carries a meaning important to the work) information plays out a parody of advertising. Further, Daniel Yezbik says of Chaykin’s pages that:
the page space itself and the spatio-topical framework it supports seem to seethe or leak with chaotic, randomly subversive meanings. In a way, we are asked to contemplate the beauty or profundity of a kind of Deriddean comics differance that posits a random inevitably meaningless counter-continuity within busily interwoven panels that surprise and interrupt each other through a number of unexpected or over-determined "adjacencies" (Yezbik paragraph 11)

One page in the final issue of Scud displays the clearest influence of Chaykin on the “visual overload” aspect of the work. Drywall and Hank Gritt are battling an army of angels while Mess stops to look at God, who has been imprisoned and restrained by the angels. Behind the image of Mess looking at God are a series of panels eclipsed by the central image of Mess and God, contrasting a moment of chaotic battle with a stark moment of understanding and discovery. The reader feels the battle continuing just from the suggestion of the panels behind the still image, creating a uniquely comic experience in which time is and is not moving simultaneously (see Fig. 5). While Scud implements the same torrent-of-images approach, the major difference between Flagg and itself comes in the design economy of their worlds: in Flagg there was the complex media-entertainment-industry economy, where in Scud the entire economy revolves around one thing: fighting.

*Scud and the Body: The Combat Economy*

To develop a theory of body comics, a deep analysis of Scud on a formal level is necessary. Recalling the important Modernist conceit of clarity in comics, Scud goes in another direction. Schrab’s pages are generally crammed full of visual information with a considerable number of panels, which keeps the pace of the book anywhere from nervous to frenetic.
Figure 5: Time stops and moves at the same time. (Schrab, Scud #24)
His figures vary wildly based on what the action calls for, Scud and others stretch and bend around the landscape. This is not a comic book drawn by a consummate perfectionist, its strength and its charm lie in its anarchic sensibility of rough-edged, constant movement and action. One telling example is the second page of Scud #1: Schrab uses three repeated panels of coins going into a vending machine, with smaller reverse angle panels of Hershel, the corporate manager tasked with removing Jeff from the basement of Marvin’s Manikans, pressing the button on the machine below them. This sequence could easily be accomplished in two panels, but Schrab uses this to create suspense around the first appearance of Scud, despite its relatively mundane action. Also contained here is an improvised joke that signifies Scud’s straight-to-the-page production: below the first coin panel, the text reads “use correct change,” and in the second “use correct spelling,” and finally “use correct change,” as Schrab hand-lettered every issue of this series and left his mistakes unaltered. These pages are not in any sense measured or diagrammatic or logical, they privilege motion and energy as they evince the \textit{practice of drawing}, the ability to see that this is the product of a person’s work.

The visual focus on action grows organically from the story’s aims. Earlier I mentioned that \textit{Scud’s} world has an economy of violence, which is literally true in the story. Every aspect of the book’s world revolves around combat: the only corporations are ones that exist to produce assassin-robots and ComKilServ, an internet-based hitman hiring company; the only organizations are the Mafia, The Grittites (worshippers of manliness and unnecessary explosions), and Voodoo Ben Franklin’s apocalyptic zombie army. This creates a baseline expectation familiar to superhero comics where no one asks with any real seriousness why anyone is a superhero, in this case it’s understood that the world operates entirely on combat. Thus, violence is reduced to work, a compulsory action for economic survival in the world. Rob
Schrab describes the plot of the book by saying “the biggest thing is that it’s a robot that you’re supposed to sympathize with, and you’re supposed to care about. But his main want and need is incredibly selfish and evil, ‘the thing is a monster, but I’m going to take away its life and put it on life support, and kill other people for money to save my own ass,’” (Maddox) however this is practically impossible to judge morally given the baseline amount of violence in the universe of the story. Much like *Robocop*, this allows *Scud* to satirize violence and the military industrial complex while getting considerable mileage out of it, no surprise from a comic named after a ballistic missile. This is summed up perfectly in an image from issue 2: A mascot gun wearing sunglasses with cartoon hands presents a Scud in front of a giant American flag with a screeching eagle at its side as the Scud jingle plays: “it can kill at will or be maniacal, it’s Scud!” (see Fig. 6). The preference for guns — or in Drywall’s case any mundane object from cereal boxes to hockey sticks — as weapons speaks to this case further, a world where mass-produced simple killing solutions like the gun are readily available at all times, in stark contrast to the swords favored by pre-capitalist fantasy heroes.

The suggestion that violence is a marker of masculinity is also routinely mocked through character design. The leader of the Grittites (again, worshippers of manliness and unnecessary explosions), Chuck, is a massive muscular male body with a metal beak for a face and happy face buttons for nipples whom Scud dispatches by tossing into a helicopter. The prototype Scud, Oswald (named after Lee Harvey Oswald and suggested to be voiced by Sean Connery) looks like a robotic cartoon rabbit, and due to his position as a public relations mascot and predilection for sex and murder has his contempt levels lowered into the negatives by ScudCo. He is killed near the end of the series when he stops to pick up a pornographic magazine in the middle of a fight. In the five-issue genre-hopping sequence entitled “HORSE,” Scud visits a generic fantasy
Figure 6: The Scud commercial. (Schrab, Scud #2)
world with a competing hero and a Top Gun-parody beach party (that also turns out to be a slasher film), the participants of which all have comically large muscles. Scud bests them at slaying a dragon and volleyball, respectively. The violent world in which *Scud* takes place allows for satire of itself while also dictating its attitudes toward gender and the body.

Since so much of the series revolves around fight scenes, it necessarily privileges the action of the body. Far from transcending the body, modifications to Scud’s body, intentional or otherwise, directly affect his mental state, showing a closer linkage between the corporeal and the conscious than the Cartesian lineage of Modernist thought is willing to concede. After assassinating a prisoner in issue 3, Scud battles the prison guards who manage to shoot a hole through his hand, causing his Contempt Meter to malfunction and go up to 15 on a scale of 10. This drives Scud into a religious murderous rage, fashioning a barbed wire crown of thorns and declaring himself “Jesus with a laser gun.” Schrab uses religious imagery often as an ironic juxtaposition with violence: he mimics medieval religious art in the Scud commercial mentioned earlier and one of the ultimate villains of the story is an army of angels who imprison God. The importance of the body is furthered later when Scud loses an arm and has it replaced with a muscular human arm that has a tattoo of an eagle on it. Scud discovers that this arm was taken from a werewolf, and when a full moon rises the arm takes over Scud’s brain, again making him ultra-violent and causing him to speak in faux-poetic prose. Again, this endangers Scud’s intactness and his existence as a robot, where the human body is a signifier within the action genre that carries the baggage of what Yvonne Tasker calls “muscular action movies.” The interference with Scud’s body by a clichéd symbol of action heroism reinforces Scud’s separation from traditional action heroes while suggesting an immediate connection between the bodily and the mental. This is a commentary on something I’ll call *genre biology*, the physical
expectations of types of stories. Afflictions of the body are inextricable from afflictions of the mind, reflecting a monadic understanding of being.

Dissecting individual fight scenes allows for an understanding of bodily expression. Where things generally considered literature are logocentric, privileging dialogue and interior expression, the fight scene actually allows for aesthetic expression of meaning, and should not be written off as mere crowd-pleasing spectacle. Yvonne Tasker writes in *Spectacular Bodies*: Sensuous experience is too often neglected. Features such as the breathtaking nature of visual spectacle, or the feelings of exhilaration at the expansive landscapes in which the hero operates, are fundamental to the action cinema. Such features are also, inevitably, rather difficult to render in academic prose. The model I’m working from here is not an opposition between form and content. Certainly within this particular mode, and probably within other modes of popular cinema, the two are bound up together so that the “action” of action cinema refers to the enactment of spectacle as narrative. (Tasker 6)

Obviously, cinema and comics are vastly different, but this understanding of reliance on spectacle for sensuous and narrative content applies to action as a genre regardless of medium. What I intend here is a close reading of an issue of *Scud* that argues for the significance and meaning of spectacle, which is disdained in the mind-body framework for favoring the body and the popular. The use of spectacle in a narrative sense is often derided for its seemingly untruthful or distractive nature, much of this attitude relies on having little faith in the audience and writing these stories off through what Tasker calls “the critical construction of muscular cinema as ‘Dumb Movies for Dumb People,’” so part of the goal here is to extract the complexities of comics action choreography as integral to its narrative (Tasker 5).
Writing about martial arts film, Aaron Anderson suggests the concept of metakinesis, the transferring of emotional or psychic meaning through movement, as a valuable tool for understanding the expressive purpose of fights:

Because the genre itself implies a visualizing of the concept of power, it is significant that the characters' relative empowerment can be discerned only through their movement. Ironically, both empowerment and negating class distinction are implied by practiced movement. Thus the process of metakinesis in martial arts films transfers a range of concepts in addition to narration. The genre always relies on aspects of practiced movement which are seldom considered part of movement itself, but which are also not easily articulated except through movement. (Anderson, “Violent Dances” 2)

Specific martial arts movements carry a historical and cultural relevance; the same is true for comic book fight scenes. In America, the comic book’s bread and butter has been action-based stories since the superhero takeover in the wake of the self-censorship the industry imposed in the 1950s, thus every entry into the fight scene corpus carries the metakinetic tradition of how combat is rendered, primarily between superheroes and supervillains. The superhero in general represents order, the status quo, and ultimately logic and systems. as scholars like Richard Reynolds and films like The Dark Knight have described. Scud upends this situation by having a protagonist who is not designated immediately as a representation of the public good but instead only individual interest in romantic love and continuing life, who is pitted against figures that represent order and systemic control. This makes one large set piece near the end of the series particularly important for analysis.

Scud #22-24 form a representative sample for the entire series, communicating the values of the body, the postmodern, and the metakinetic in one continuous story that is essentially one
massive fight scene fraught with metaphorical implications. At this point in the story, Scud has agreed to take on a mission that will destroy the Earth in exchange for the life of his recently-dismembered girlfriend Sussudio. To do this, he has to take Jeff to the center of the Earth and kill her, which will cause an explosion that destroys the whole planet. Issue #22 begins with Scud and Drywall (now capable of speaking English and wearing a leather jacket with a Dead Kennedys patch) on their way to Voodoo Ben Franklin’s lair in the center of the earth. Voodoo Ben Franklin, the series’ paternalistic evil mastermind by way of his Founding Father status and association with the hundred dollar bill, is rendered as a suit-and-shades wearing businessman in an occult underground mansion, complete with all-seeing eye, upside-down cross, and kites flying outside the windows. Ben has brought Jeff to Scud because Ben is in league with Drywall’s brother System, a perfect organizational robot who is currently king of Hell, and the end of the world that would ensue from Scud and Jeff’s death would feed System as he “eats chaos” and free him from Hell. Drywall discovers that Scud has agreed to kill the Earth in exchange for Sussudio’s life and begins trying to kill both Scud and Jeff, but he is interrupted when Jeff activates a small army of fresh-from-the-vending-machine Scuds to battle the original one.

When the Scuds attack, Schrab renders the ensuing fight as a single page with an absurd thirty-four panels wherein Scud dispatches the entire army of Scuds in a series of gunshots and punches. This is the first of several important battles. Scud combats reflections of himself to highlight the difference between himself at the beginning of the story and now: Scud is rejecting his original purpose as a disposable assassin, rejecting the metanarrative of Scud-ness. Anderson writes:
Rhythmic understanding clearly has some basis in physical and bodily “memory.” Created rhythmic patterns are inherently referential to bodily rhythmic patterns, and therefore these created patterns quite naturally assist in the recall of bodily feelings. In fact, rhythm itself is a privileged mechanism of emotional recall, in part because “our physical understanding of rhythm enlists the co-operation of a whole series of bodily motor reflexes in the work of remembrance” (Connerton 76). Rhythmic patterns can increase or decrease an aesthetic appreciation and understanding of movement, which can in turn affect one’s subjective definition of movement’s artistic nature. (Anderson, “Kinesthesia in Martial Arts Films”)

The short panels of this page and its basis around series of four images with no dialogue lend itself to the quickest reading possible, establishing an intense rhythm to heighten the drama of the battle (see Fig. 7). Scud is not about power like most action heroes, he is not displaying strength but quickness and marksmanship. Another factor to consider here is the typical production scheme of the comic book; like most comics, Scud was produced on a monthly basis: for Schrab to complete a page of thirty-four detailed panels and still draw the rest of the book in time evidences a maniacal dedication to the work, as supported by the previously mentioned Scud Vlogs. The pace and intensity with which this fight is rendered serve this point: it’s minor in the larger scheme, which is why it is given a single page, but given so many panels to establish how Scud has been elevated above his original existence to handily dispatch several doppelgangers.

Scud defeats the other Scuds, but Jeff manages to open the Hell Window which allows System into the world, who captures Drywall and returns to Hell, telling Scud “Finish it, we’ll be waiting.” Alone at the end of the world, Scud decides that he will finally kill Jeff, because he
has nothing left to live for. “Every time we’ve fought, I’ve had to hold back so I wouldn’t die! Well, now I want to die, so get ready to feel 100% of my pain!” he says, before dismembering and mutilating Jeff (and also making it obvious that this comic’s creation was greatly motivated by multiple break-ups on the author’s part). He stabs her in the heart, but the heart does not die. Jeff explains that the heart was created by God and cannot be killed, so Scud can never fulfill his task. System appears, saying he will destroy the Earth himself and that “I for one do not believe Angels, Gods or Devils. I trust only Continuity, Logic, and Mathematics.” After saying this, Drywall and Mess (who is a giant robot made out of cabinets and drawers) explode out of System, destroying him. Then, Scud, Drywall, and Mess return to Heaven to battle the angels who created Jeff. Mess frees God from the restraints the angels have placed on him, leaving God free to eat all of the angels. Scud puts Jeff’s heart into Sussudio’s corpse, resurrecting her, and Drywall and Mess return to their juvenile forms as their Mom, who had been absorbed into System as well, returns.

The positioning of System and Ben Franklin as villains makes the prescription of order, purpose, paternity, law, and logic the enemies of the piece, traditionally mind-associated values. That they are pitted against God is an unconventional twist, but the God of Scud is an unconventional depiction. He never says anything, only grunts, and is rendered as a giant barbarian. That it’s Mess who frees him from his chains is again telling if not obvious, a character named Mess freeing God from the actions of a hierarchical structure, the angels. All of the victories are won through actions of the body, killing the angels and swapping the heart into Sussudio, and the resolution of the story has a physical effect on every character including Scud, whose broken-heart logo is filled in with a full heart. Scud’s world, which was designed for and
Figure 7: 34 panels of fighting. (Schrab, Scud #24)
motivated by constant violence, no longer has motivations for unending combat now that the
systems which motivated evil have been conquered.

Ultimately, *Scud* is an allegory for the creative process and the conditions it requires.
Jeff, as a monstrous being who must be kept alive to keep Scud alive, and whose heart is later
transferred into Scud’s love, is a metaphor for using negative emotion as creative fuel. Schrab
explains in an interview in the last issue: “Depression was the fuel I used to make my art and
after 24 issues, that sadness became an Over-Used Muse. That’s why this issue is the Death of
the Over Used Muse. It’s not the death of Scud, but the death of heartbreak” (Schrab, *Scud* #24)
Jeff’s dialogue, a series of media samples, constitutes the concept of artistic influence, of trying
not to repeat the things one enjoys while keeping them in mind. Systems and economies seek to
destroy or pervert the artistic impulse, with System and Ben Franklin as the villains who compel
Scud to kill himself and the rest of the world. In one issue called “Movie Wars,” where Scud
engages in a war between two rival societies who vie for dominance of their planet’s movie
industry, a scriptwriting robot called Producer tells Scud about his screenplay, which is about “a
robot, he fights monsters, jumps around a lot. And in the end, he becomes a hero and is rewarded
by changing into a human!” Scud replies “changing a guy into something he’s not isn’t much of
a reward. I once said ‘it’s cool to be a robot,’ that’s been my motto ever since. Don’t turn that
poor guy into Pinocchio, that’s been done. Make him proud of who he is and you’ve got my
7.50.” Scud’s continued insistence on remaining a robot repudiates the classic resolution of
stories with non-human protagonists in which they become human. This position is considerably
metatextual on Schrab’s part, as a reaction against studio meddling with the film adaptation of
*Scud*, but it also evidences a belief in the reliability of the corporeal and the unexceptional nature
of human flesh, that being embodied is the essence of being rather than the capacity for abstract
thought. While the Modern mind looks for knowable answers and justification, the postmodern body-product disregards this for experience and personal sensation. *Scud* is not a search for abstract, meaningful purpose, but a search for *feeling* accomplished through the use of physical spectacle and embodiment of metaphor.
CHAPTER THREE: BUILDING STORIES, SCUD, AND THE EVERYDAY

The works discussed in this thesis were chosen specifically to illustrate points around the issues caught up in the mind-body dichotomy, and one of the most important and politically fraught of these is the concept of high and low culture. This is perhaps most prominent in forms which are still emerging into legitimacy like comic books, the critical establishment of which, as I’ve stated previously, is relying on conservative attitudes to decide what should be regarded as a great work in the medium. One of the ways in which conservative attitudes operate most powerfully in fiction in general is in the distinction between genre fiction and literature. Between the two works here, it hardly requires pointing out that Scud is genre and Building Stories is literature, but hopefully the attendant implications of those labels have been effectively deconstructed in the previous chapters. The way works position themselves in regards to this distinction is in their depiction and attitudes toward the mundane, the everyday, the popular. The popular is often constituted as a category exclusive from the elite, but in fiction the case is quite different. How a story reflects our world seems to suggest its relevance to our lives in the genre vs. literature framework, but I intend to show that this line of thought is counter-intuitive: in fiction, the everyday is the domain of the elite-literature, and the extraordinary the domain of popular-genres.

Building Stories relationship to the popular can be described by discussing its portrayal of the quotidian. The work develops an aesthetic and narrative schema of ordinariness, which, despite the apparently obvious, is in fact aligned with the traditional values of elite culture rather than popular culture. As the previous chapter established, mind vs. body is one of the central conflicts of the work, uniquely suited to the exegetical strengths of a hybrid, textual and visual medium like comics. The elite/popular dichotomy and the opposition between nostalgic
materialism and technological advancement are linked directly to this debate within *Building Stories*.

Ware grounds this aspect of the work in an aesthetic of the ordinary, of which Margaret Fink Berman writes, “In our attempts to conceive of, to notice, or to name the ordinary, we are singling it out and focusing on it, thus rendering it in some sense extraordinary. In these attempts, we see the fleeting nature of the ordinary, the way in which it must be laboriously unconcealed” (Imagining An Idiosyncratic Belonging 197). The world of *Building Stories* is designed to be as unremarkable and quotidian as possible, as this is a story that is, at heart, a simultaneous lament for and celebration of the ordinary American life. “FUCK! Why does every great book always have to be about criminals or perverts? Can't I just find one that's about regular people living everyday life?” wonders the protagonist of the story as she searches for a book to read on a plane, passing over the likes of Joyce and Dostoyevsky (Ware, *Building Stories* “It All Happened So Fast”). This is a reflexive comment on the story itself, which features neither criminals nor perverts and is a paean to the ordinary. While this seemingly positions *Building Stories* in contrast to those vaunted members of the realist and modernist canon, the ordinary is much more the domain of high literature. Novelist Michael Chabon writes in his essay “Trickster In A Suit Of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story” that “the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story” is, in the popular zeitgeist, something that stands apart from genre fiction or entertainment, the latter of which Chabon sardonically claims “gives off a whiff of Coppertone and dripping Creamsicle, the fake-butter miasma of a movie-house lobby, of karaoke and Jägermeister, Jerry Bruckheimer movies, a Street Fighter machine grunting solipsistically in a corner of an ice-rink arcade” (Chabon 3).
One of the identifying characteristics of this ordinary aesthetic is the avoidance of spectacle, which was introduced as a prudent practice in drama by Aristotle in *Poetics*:

> Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the Oedipus. But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids. Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy; for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents. (Aristotle and Butcher)

*Building Stories* is, of course, not a Greek tragedy, but much of what Aristotle writes still applies in a fashion. In representing the ordinary, *Building Stories* avoids even the aspects of its story which lend themselves to spectacle: all that we see of the protagonist losing her leg below the knee is a few panels of the boat that caused it, no bloody aftermath, no life-and-death hospital situations. Sex is rendered clinically in frozen still images, and there are no fights to be found.

In some fashion, this is a reaction to the baggage of the cultural memory of comic books, dominated by superheroes as it is; a comic that disdains spectacle still has a faint hint of protest about it. However, the extraordinary and the sensual and thus the bodily remain the domain of genre fiction despite the ostensible link between the everyday and the popular. James Harold writes in “Literature, Genre Fiction, and Standards of Criticism”:
the formulae or rules that guide our evaluations of literature are not quite the same as those that guide us in reading genre fiction. First, as noted earlier, the expectations and purposes of genre fiction are strongly plot driven, and are tied closely to (more or less) standard emotional responses to the events in the plot: e.g., pity, satisfaction, surprise. Second, adherence to these formulae and expectations is much less common in literature than in genre fiction. Contra-standard cases like Christie’s Roger Ackroyd are remarkable in genre fiction because they are so rare. Literature is much more apt to ignore or subvert the standard features of the type than Romances or Fantasy fiction is. (Harold)

This argument essentially amounts to a tautology that amounts to “literature is not genre fiction because it is different from genre fiction.” Presumably all fiction intends to produce an emotional response of some kind, whether or not it comes from the plot seems irrelevant. Further, this relies on a conception where something can escape being genre fiction even if it is part of a genre. For example, to suggest that *The Wire*, consistently vaunted as the greatest television show of all time, is a cop show seems blasphemous, even though *The Wire* is a phenomenally good cop show which incorporates the tropes of the genre (gratuitous sex and violence) into a story that is about all of the political aspects of policing an American city. While television has managed to construct a critical canon which does not ignore genre texts like *The Wire, The Sopranos, or Breaking Bad*, comics studies has chosen to mimic literary studies’ shortsightedness in this regard. The claim to “realism” or accurate representation of the everyday life on the part of elite literature is often formed on suspect, selective grounds like this, and analyzing a work like *Building Stories*’ imperfect mimicry of the popular provides a clear example.
Building Stories’ unconventional formal construction makes for a fragmentary narrative experience, and the symbolic, performative aspects of the actual objects themselves function in an equally fragmentary way. Ultimately, the fractured mimesis of different comics media leads to an effect opposite from what they seem to have been intended to produce. The variation of formats and sizes is supposed to make up a sort of museum in miniature, having examples of every way comics have been traditionally presented: newspaper broadsheets, standard comic-book size pamphlets, Branford’s mini-comic, flip-book style long books, and hardbound “graphic novels.” The back of Building Stories’ box contains small images of each piece in the box next to a map of a house, which the box says is “a pictographic listing of all 14 items […] with suggestions made as to appropriate places to set down, forget, or completely lose any number of its contents within the walls of an average well-appointed home.” Building Stories seems to aspire to the ephemerality and even triviality of the forms it is taking on, but by definition it cannot accomplish this nor does it truly suggest that it should. It comes in a large, ornate, shrink-wrapped box that contains several high-quality printings of comics on various surfaces. The broadsheet-style newspaper pieces present an interesting paradox which ultimately uncovers the imperfect mimicry of popular objects in the set. Broadsheets were the original venue for comics in the American tradition; Richard F. Outcault’s Sunday strip The Yellow Kid, generally credited as the first color newspaper comic strip, appeared in Joseph Pulitzer’s broadsheet The New York World in 1895. However, the major difference here is these items are not disposable; newspapers are easy to read and discard and fold, but the broadsheets are not really newspapers, they are three pieces of a graphic novel which retails for fifty dollars American. They are printed on paper of a much higher quality than standard newsprint, and beautifully colored. The affectation of ephemerality here is an attempt to reconcile Ware’s
position as an eminently literary cartoonist, but ultimately it falls in on itself through both the
design of the work and through the text.

*Building Stories*’ treatment of practical objects evinces a kind of anti-technological
materialism that suggests that new schemas of interpersonal relationships are somehow removing
an essential quality of humanity. Ware says in an interview with the *LA Review of Books*:

I do think that when it comes to art, books offer a sort of reassuring physical certainty for
the ineffable uncertainties of life, but then again I'm 44 and don't tweet or have a
Facebook page or participate in most of the things that blunt the textures of experience in
favor of delivering them up more quickly to your friends, so maybe that's just me. I find it
very telling that the regular selling point of this or that new version of technology is that
it's "higher resolution." What does that mean, exactly? It's like admitting the inherent
superiority of life while still trying to sell some sort of living death instead. I am
absolutely convinced that sitting in front of a screen for long periods of time damages the
brain and alters one's brain chemistry. You can feel it happening — you start
surrendering more and more of yourself until, eventually, you recoil and think, "Ugh. I
feel gross." I think it's colloquially known as "Swearing off Facebook for a While.” It's so
incredibly difficult to voluntarily remove oneself from these reassurances that our lives
are significant that sometimes we forget that life, actually, isn't very significant — which
is sort of reassuring, too. (quoted in Burchby)

Thus, technological objects and systems, long targets of scorn in Ware's work as in his Man Of
Tomorrow strips – where a lone, doughy man in a retro-futurist spacesuit encounters a series of
touch-screen computers which constantly attempt to sell him pornography and other products
claiming to offer happiness to the people of the future – receive a cruel treatment in *Building*
Building Stories. The back of the box contains the suggestion that “With the increasing electronic incorporeality of existence, sometimes it’s reassuring—perhaps even necessary—to have something to hold on to.” Heidegger once asked “What is nearness if it fails to come about despite the reduction of the longest distances to its shortest intervals?  What is nearness if it is even repelled by the restless abolition of distances?  What is nearness if, along with its failure to appear, remoteness also remains absent,” all important considerations regarding technological advancement (Heidegger 165). In keeping with its materialist bent, Building Stories suggests technology is slowly but consistently evaporating emotional nearness to others, and eliminating the very concept of distance by allowing people to self-select all of their stimuli.

Older forms of technology do not draw as much of Building Stories ire as smart phones, Netflix, and Facebook do, but they’re still written off. There is a radio playing in the background of many of the scenes that take place in the protagonist’s apartment, which take place in a time period that seems to be before home access to the internet. Its speech balloons are usually halfway out of panels to represent that the main character is not really listening to it, but has it on in the background of her otherwise empty apartment. It serves a function similar to the one the protagonist describes her cat as having, the voice of the radio suggesting another person around, staving off loneliness. More recent inventions bear the full brunt of Ware’s scorn. The protagonist and Phil, her husband, are often rendered sitting in chairs opposite each other, staring into their laptops, occasionally with Lucy illuminated by the television screen. At one point in the narrative, the protagonist explains that she has watched a movie on Netflix explaining the dangers of peak oil, and she is deeply distressed by what she learns:

for so many years I just really didn’t pay much attention to the news at all…I’d have it on as background noise when I lived alone but that was about it. Now, though, I can’t get
enough of it, and the reasons our government does anything all seem crystal clear to me…from the excesses of the Reagan years up to the Iraq War. Without it our society will literally quit working, just today I read that some analysts expect the airlines to go bankrupt by the end of the year. (Ware, Building Stories “Disconnect”)

Her concern for peak oil reappears throughout the story, and it is always sloughed off as a silly concern by Phil, which serves to create more distance and tension between them. In another scene, she sends him an email containing information about peak oil to which he replies “oh yeah…pretty funny,” which sets the protagonist off: “Everything I say or suggest is immediately dis-.” Phil tells her “I know you’re under a lot of stress lately, but the world is an extremely complicated place and though things may not always look so great, it’s not all going to come crashing down at once, okay?” Building Stories suggests that greater access to information through media and services like Netflix cause people undue worry about political happenings, which ultimately harms the thing BS seems to find most important, family. This advocates an isolated, insular view of the world in which the immediate and local takes precedence over the global, despite large-scale relevance.

Cell phones draw the protagonist’s ire in one scene while grocery shopping: “Disconnect these people from their cell phones and I swear they’d all starve to death…doesn’t anyone look inside the fridge before they leave the house anymore? I’m sorry, but I relish the time I get alone, even if it is just spent shopping…I’m not going to waste it talking or texting,” she says (Ware, Building Stories "Disconnect"). She goes on to explain that she’s mad at her husband, but is stopped in her tracks when he calls her (on what is rendered as an iPhone, Apple logo included) and delivers a heartfelt apology. The cell phone is excepted from judgment here because it collapses distance between one person and another, rather than eliminating the concept
of distance altogether. In another instance of cell phone use, however, Phil sends the protagonist a long apology for not being able to make it to her mother’s house for the weekend as a text message. At least phones allow the simulated nearness of vocal conversation, but the text is a prime mode for delivering bad news without emotion, for avoiding feeling.

Printed on the lid of Building Stories is a quote from Ware’s mother that reads “Don’t forget to go out of the house every once in a while or you’ll lose your sense of pollination,” again emphasizing the importance of not only social connection but physical connection, as pollination is of course done by bees making contact with flowers. The sole depiction of the far future that appears in Building Stories is a place devoid entirely of physical contact, occurring, naturally, in “Touch Sensitive”. People wear retro-futuristic spacesuits, complete with glass bubble helmets to keep them from touching each other. Placed on the crotch of every person is a serial port, in the payoff to a joke made by Phil in another part of the story. A woman stands on a train platform trying to watch a video of what had happened on the previous page, while on the side we can see the helmet-display of her email inbox consisting entirely of messages that are variations on “do u wnt 2 fuk me” with an unsent outbox message entitled “happy bday mom.” At the bottom of the display is a banner ad for something called Endofux which promises to help one “LEARN to feel again.” This sequence is as ham-fisted and crotchety as Ware’s New Yorker cover that features a family in the past eating Thanksgiving dinner at a table juxtaposed with an image of a family in the present all watching television while eating Thanksgiving dinner.

Ware’s curmudgeonly, maudlin nostalgia produces the low point of the book here, in its steadfast refusal to find anything rewarding in the changing schemas of feeling. It is a quintessentially modern characteristic to lament dissolution, but Ware here has made that lamentation feel like clinging to relevance. In this future, sex, ultimately the driving force behind this entire book in
its focus on pollination and touching, has been reduced to a technological exchange. *Building Stories* imagines a world in which dependence on technology is eroding human communication despite the fact that it encourages and develops more communication than ever before.

Though Ware’s criticism of technology here also seems to carry an expression of longing for sensations of the body that technology has replaced, this is actually part of a tradition of logic that positions technology as detracting from the mind. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells a story about the creation of writing, and says:

> It will introduce forgetfulness into the souls of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide you students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. (Phaedrus 78-79)

Discursive technology is thus claimed as an enemy of the soul, the internal, and the mind. Ware is not really lamenting the loss of bodily experience but the distancing of thought from its internal origin. In this understanding, advances in technology continually distance us from the integrity of thought and erode the importance of the mind. Ware is exemplifying the twenty-first century version of the argument for the primacy of speech, which has shifted far enough away to become the primacy of the physical over the digital. This is decidedly at odds with the “cyborg” conceptualization of the self that Donna Haraway advanced: “For us, in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves. We don't
need organic holism to give impermeable whole-ness, the total woman and her feminist variants (mutants?)” (Haraway 533). Haraway argues that our use of technology can be considered part of our selves; rather than replacing our bodies, it changes the way we use them.

Though *Building Stories* is concerned with the everyday and the quotidian, it ultimately fails as a popular work in its construction and its attitudes toward technology. It is difficult for a fifty-dollar comic book to attain any kind of democratic status from the outset, but by demonizing the evolution of technology and our relationships to it, it advocates a distinctly conservative point of view. Expansion of access to information is sloughed off as causing unnecessary worry over legitimate political concerns and the future is depicted as a march toward an openly (rather than secretly, which we apparently already exist in) sex-obsessed society. There is no suggestion of how the internet helps to form communities among the isolated and disenfranchised, that it enables connections where there were none. These positions on technology, along with its attitudes on the mind-body split, are what allow it to be considered “literature” and exist in a more vaunted group of texts.

*Scud*

*Scud: The Disposable Assassin* is effective as a work of popular art by relating the ordinary through extraordinary means. The story is solidly in the action genre, with the occasional affectation of subgenres like the Western or the spy film. *Scud* continually uses violent, large-scale battle scenes which could be called spectacle, however I have previously argued that they are not merely for the sake of image or “cheap thrills.” The construction of “cheap thrills” is descended from the culture industry lineage of thought, which does not credit consumers of popular art with much intelligence. Yvonne Tasker discusses this issue:
The critical view that self-reflexivity functions within popular culture only when it is unmistakable is a familiar one, complementing the more general unease expressed by liberal and left-wing critics when dealing with the action, indeed the popular cinema. To take an example, Derek Malcolm’s review of RoboCop (1987) distinguishes between his own ability to discern the subtleties of director Verhoeven’s grim vision, from that of an audience of young people who disturbingly ‘delighted in every bit of violence’ at the screening he attended (Guardian, 4 February 1988). What is significant about this comment, and about more general critical attitudes to the action cinema, is the reworking of an old notion, that narrative content is somehow simply separable from form. RoboCop is often picked up as an ‘interesting’ film precisely for those moments which overtly seek to ironise the dystopic future that the film imagines.” (Tasker 65)

I have mentioned repeatedly Scud’s relationship to Robocop as a simultaneous satire and celebration of gratuitous violence, and the usage of spectacle here has another point. Action and science fiction’s preoccupation with extraordinary circumstances allow for an imaginary that is a metaphor to our world.

One of the reasons the extraordinary is closer to the popular than the ordinary is that its lack of reflection of the real world make it more open to personal relatability. Building Stories is realistic certainly, but it is realistic only towards the lives of urban middle-class American thirty-something parents. That is not to suggest it is entirely unrelatable to people outside of those groups, but in Bourdieu’s sense it is coded to them. Much of popular art attempts to be classless by avoiding the concerns of class entirely; television dramas like Revenge and Pretty Little Liars operate with the assumption that their characters can be fully involved in their interpersonal problems because they have no economic worries. Scud evades this problem by combining its
use of violent spectacle into its class concern, Scud must kill to survive economically. John Fiske writes “The two key characteristics of popular discrimination are […] those of relevance and productivity, and even though we may separate them for analytical purposes, in practice they are almost indistinguishable.” The extraordinary circumstances of “genre fiction” flatten the particulars of a story to increase its relevance, to create broad appeal.

*Scud* is also highly referential and metatextual. Along with the aforementioned voice casts and soundtracks, the story frequently shifts into direct parodies of multiple genres, sometimes creating mashups between two completely unrelated types of story. One instance of this is the sequence which takes place on a space station inhabited by immortal werewolves, which ends with a Prometheus-aping sequence of one of the werewolves exploding and reconstituting in space for the rest of eternity. There is also *La Cosa Nostroid*, a group of Mafia gangsters who pilot a Voltron-esque robot. By playing with genres in this fashion, *Scud* questions the adherence to types that stories in “genre fiction” appear to have. There is also a considerable amount of references to classic science fiction film, specifically *Star Wars*, *The Terminator*, and *Robocop*, which like all intertextual signals are to declare an influence and strengthen a knowing audience’s bond to the work.

As Fiske mentions relevance and productivity, woven into the fabric of *Scud* is a practical purpose for its existence. Kate Freund writes in the introduction to the collected edition: “I was first introduced to *Scud* in 2005 when Rob gave me a copy of *Scud: The Disposable Assassin* on our first date. I know you are thinking, what? He brought his own comic book from ten years ago? What a dork” (Schrab, Harmon, and Carter). *Scud* was first undertaken as a venture to impress one of Schrab’s girlfriends, and its original run ceased at issue #20 when another of Schrab’s girlfriends left him. Finally, #24 ends with a dedication, “for Kate.” The thinly-veiled
autobiographical content of the comic, especially the “Movie Wars” issue, which is clearly about Schrab’s troubles with breaking into Hollywood, make *Scud* a kind of guide to the trials of creative production at the same time as it is an exorcism of personal romantic troubles. The front-matter of each issue also contains advertisements for Scud merchandise and 70improve comedy shows in which Schrab appeared. *Scud* does not attempt to hide the circumstances of its production or mimic other objects, it embraces its own existence as a product much like its characters do.

One character in particular who warrants deep analysis in this respect is Drywall. Drywall, like his brothers Mess and System, is a “stuff collector,” a living organizational unit who collects and organizes items into cubicles contained in an alternate dimension inside his body. Drywall was invented by a scientist named Percy Season, who, we find out in Drywall: Unzipped! is trapped in purgatory, which looks exactly like the suburban Midwest. She is commissioned to do this by Hadi, who is ostensibly the ruler of Hell before System takes over. Hadi reveals that the “life matter” Percy used to make Mess and Drywall was actually the soul of her dead child. Then, System appears and swallows Hadi, Mess, and Percy, but Drywall escapes purgatory to Earth. He meets Scud when he’s sent to help Scud fight a gang of gunslingers led by the floating head of Jayne Mansfield. Jeff appears soon after, and Scud and Jeff battle each other inside of Drywall. The inside of Drywall is an infinite series of cubbies that collects every kind of mundane item: puppets, bungie cords, trash cans, shoes, batarangs, skeletons, skunk tails, and pipes, among others. Yuriko Saito says that the goal of organization is to give ourselves control over natural decay:

The task of arresting the aging appearance, of renewing, repairing, restoring, cleaning, tidying, organizing, therefore, is a way of combating the natural course of events and it is
a way of showing that we are in control, exerting our stamp and power over the way things naturally become. Thus, the clean, orderly, and tidy appearance, whether it be our hairdo or room, both exudes and instills confidence that we are in charge and we are not simply letting nature take its course or allowing things to happen. (Saito 163)

Yet, while this appears to be Drywall’s purpose as a stuff collector, his ability to implement “stuff” is completely random. In *Scud #8*, Drywall reaches for a gun inside of himself but comes up with a bottle of Whisk, Bill Cosby’s *Why Is There Air* LP, and a Styrofoam airplane. That Drywall has all of the world’s organized stuff at his disposal yet it still does not help him very much provides a leveling of the hyper-consumerist society in which *Scud* takes place.

Along with this, the hero of the story is a piece of advanced technology, a sentient robot with the ability to feel pain and love. His nemesis Voodoo Ben Franklin combines magic and the representation of pre-Industrial Revolution history, controlling an army of the dead. Voodoo Ben later becomes subservient to System, but the ultimate triumph of Scud is this: a science fiction story which suggests that the maintenance of an understanding of the chaotic nature of postmodern consumer society is the only way in which to survive it, rather than lamenting the loss of what existed before. Scott Bukatman writes:

> Within the matrices of consumer culture, science fiction offers a new complexity of form to replace the absolutism and transparency of most writing. The polemic is rendered spectacular in an avoidance of any assumption of an uncontaminated discourse and in a diegetic and textual acknowledgment of an already existent complicity. The simultaneous technologism and reflexivity of the text permits a deeper engagement with the issues raised by the spectacle while maintaining the distance of the writerly, the ambivalent, the self-aware. Whether used by Toffler to evoke an era of technological promise and
prophecy or by Baudrillard to construct a labyrinthine discourse of technocratic control, science fiction functions as a dominant language within the society of the spectacle. As J. G. Ballard wrote, “Science and technology multiply around us. To an increasing extent they dictate the languages in which we speak and think. Either we use those languages, or we remain mute.” (Bukatman 31)

This is the advantage of modern science fiction like *Scud*, and why the genre is, when implemented well, more effective than the “plotless, quotidian, moment-of-truth revelatory story” at relating truths about modern life; it is a discourse which assumes and understands the proliferation of media and technology, and can make sense of the world this has brought about, rather than simply throwing its hands up at it. It is not about surrendering to the post-human ideal of the uploaded brain (*cogito ergo sum* on a hard drive), but navigating the advancement of technology and its mediation of the body, incorporation rather than replacement.
CONCLUSION

My goal in writing this thesis was to expose cultural biases that operate in criticism, specifically as they pertained to comics. In the position of a popular culture scholar, it feels necessary to expose the arbitrary nature of tastemaking and the inherent conservatism and disdain for new ideas that a critical establishment can create without proper tempering by iconoclasts. The original motivation in this case was to deal with aspects of comics work that are key to elevation of a text as canonical. Comics criticism is relatively newly-established, and as such it tends to have a very conservative idea of what is allowed to be exemplary for the form. It favors works which comment on the history of the form in some intelligent way like Watchmen, historical memoir like Maus or Palestine, or complex but eminently readable fiction like the work of Chris Ware or the Hernandez Brothers. As a discipline, we are perhaps reluctant to devote serious study to things considered genre fiction simply because the form was, and for some still is, synonymous with the superhero genre. I have not chosen to study a superhero text here because I am simply not interested in superhero comics in general, especially as their study is bound up in years of continuity and endless theorizing about the meaning of the superhero as a figure rather than analysis of the actual stories. As a child of punk rock, independent comics work suits me better.

I chose Chris Ware’s Building Stories as a text that I find is masterfully produced and brilliantly executed yet ultimately very frustrating, as its advocating for outmoded attitudes about the body and its apparent fear of technology put it in an ideological position I stand against. I’ve made a concentrated effort here to show that the ideas associated with the mind are also the ideas of the literary, of canonization. The continuous weltschmerz that permeates Chris Ware’s comics is emblematic of this; the world never turns out to be as good as the characters can
imagine. In its depiction of disability, *BS* seems to have accomplished something unique in having a main character who has, but is not defined by, a physical disability, though eventually the story figures having a body at all as a disability in itself. *Building Stories* forms an incredibly affecting picture of urban loneliness and melancholy, and while it is to be applauded for its skill in this it remains solidly in the domain of reflecting the tastes of canon-makers back to them. The sleight-of-hand involved in its broken mimicry of popular forms makes performative something which just as easily could have been actually accomplished by releasing it as several individual pieces, had Ware not seemingly been insistent on *Building Stories* being read as a single experience and as an art object. In the interest of full disclosure, I do not have a child nor have I ever been married, so there are certainly aspects of *Building Stories* that I feel as though I do not understand, but it also reads like the work of someone having a hard time getting older, with its aggressive dissatisfaction with the advance of technology. Ware’s previous works often contained biting and lucid satires of consumerism, but he seems to have lost that in favor of a simple anti-technology view.

*Scud* was chosen because it is wildly entertaining first and foremost, but within its entertainment value is a great deal of intelligent commentary on life in what J.G. Ballard called “the mediascape.” These two texts for me formed a valuable dichotomy from which to examine the massive pile of occasionally contradictory ideas bound up in the mind-body split. *Scud* as a fight comic provides an excellent point of discussion for how the body operates in comics, to analyze the construction and meaning of fight scenes and the constant presence of violence. Its cartoonish, satirical rendition of proliferated media and violence gives a viewpoint that still feels fresh twenty years after its original publication. It is a comic that does all of the things that are supposed to exclude a work from serious consideration: violence, humor, pastiche, and having an
art style that might appeal to children. But it works because it contains social commentary and personal expression in the metaphor that Scud and Jeff’s symbiotic relationship contains. Most importantly though, it is fun. Fun is a thing that there is no real critical vocabulary to describe. I have made an attempt to backdoor in some kind of understanding through the language of spectacle, but there seems to be no convincing advocate for simple enjoyment of popular art.

Comics critic Sean Witzke wrote of Scud:

Scud is something different though, it is a comic that shows, time and time again how much Rob Schrab loved drawing it. And in the land of comics academia, “important” works of art, “significance”, and “objectivity”, the easiest thing in the world to lose is that comics are first and foremost about how much fun it is to draw. SCUD isn’t this important significant work of art I can objectively argue a place for next to Watchmen and Peanuts and Love and Rockets. Why would you want to? What is the point of any kind of objectivity if it seeks to judge art on a basis which had no element in its creation? SCUD is a comic so full of ideas, drawn with a commitment verging on psychosis, all secretly covering up that Schrab created it to distract himself from a break-up, and left the series on an incredibly brutal years-long cliffhanger on another breakup. […] it’s ridiculously genre-specific because it is a cover for the work’s personal nature. If I had one book I could magically have re-assessed by whatever critical press that we might have it would be this one. I don’t think it would change any minds, but I think that SCUD says more about what comics should be than any of the official canon. This is comics, anyone writing a canon with literary or academic merit (or I don’t know, cinematic? architectural?) is playing with the wrong set of rules. (Witzke)
And this, ultimately, is the goal. To establish a method of evaluating comics that values the qualities unique to comics, not beholden to the old standards of literary Modernism that suggest only Byzantine works of watch-like complexity can be considered shining examples of the form. I recognize that much of this is based on a claim to objectivity; structure seems more concrete, whereas emotional response is a matter of taste. But since emotional response is a matter of taste, and the “right” taste is constituted by that appeal to objectivity, criticism in this manner invalidates work that produces visceral response. If other forms’ critical establishments worked this way, King Crimson might be widely considered the greatest rock and roll band of all time. As fans of comics, scholars have to be able to keep the critical field open to allow new perceptions of the form to flourish, like the work published by now sadly-defunct Picturebox, Inc. The continued privileging of form over sentiment only serves to narrow the kinds of comics that make it into the mainstream: how many more slice-of-life stories about middle-class white people are there to tell?

Finally, I hope these insights have come to light in the preceding words. Spectacle is not a dirty word, it is not meaningless or empty. The imperfect mimicry of the popular is a tactic used by the high to attempt to claim a democratic meaning, and the injection of the popular into the extraordinary is a much more effective tactic for relating the world through metaphor. Modernism is a negative and regressive ideology on which to base a discipline of study, and comics should be evaluated on their own basis, not on outmoded ideas about literary structure and complexity. And: comics are fun, and there’s nothing wrong with that.
WORKS CITED


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