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The Fragmented City and the Everyday Sublime: Multimodal Narratives of Ordinary Lives in *Building Stories* by Chris Ware

Abstract

This article analyses the structural fragmentation of Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) and its implications for the construction of character identity. Delivered as a boxed collection of disparate printed materials, Ware's work exploits intratextuality and collage to challenge conventional storytelling. By so doing, it encourages a non-linear and participatory reading experience, as readers are asked to assemble their own story. Drawing on a multimodal analytical framework, this study aims at analysing how the fragmentation of the graphic narrative functions as a representational strategy that reflects and reinforces the characters' fractured identities and fragmented perceptions of everyday reality, while identifying the *fil rouge* that connects the various pieces that make up the work in its entirety.

Keywords: graphic novel, non-linear narrative, fragmentation, multimodality, paritici-patory reading

1. Introduction

Building Stories, by American cartoonist Chris Ware, is less a book in the traditional sense and more an intricately crafted, boxed collection of printed matter that demands to be explored and assembled in order to constitute a graphic novel. It is an extremely ambitious work, delivered in a 30 x 42 x 5 cm box, which took the author ten years to complete, and which was partially published in Ware's comic book series *Acme Novelty Library* (#18, 2007), to be published as a complete graphic novel in box form in 2012.

It is certainly a work that defies easy categorization, since the narrative is told through a multitude of formats designed for non-sequential reading: newspapers, books, booklets, pamphlets, flipbooks and fold-out boards.

The plot revolves around three characters who live in the same building, and readers are encouraged to create their own narrative by arranging the pieces, constructing a personal journey through the building's history and the intertwined lives of its inhabitants, effectively becoming the architects of their own story. Each piece offers a different perspective on the lives of the residents of the three-story Chicago building: an unnamed woman who in her childhood suffered the loss of the lower half of her left leg in a boating accident (Worden 2012) and who sees herself as a failed artist (Roeder 2012), a couple who constantly argues, and the elderly landlady on the first floor.

Ware's meticulous craftsmanship, coupled with his profound understanding of graphic storytelling, transforms these seemingly ordinary lives into a poignant, multi-layered canvas. *Building Stories* is not simply a collection of narratives: it is a profound meditation on memory, loneliness, loss, and the quiet dramas of everyday existence. In particular, the one-legged female protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the different texts included in the box, introduces the issue of disability (caused by the loss of one limb) and accessibility.

Loss and fragmentation are actually at the heart of this work, and this is also epitomized by the comic originally published by Ware in the *McSweeney's iPad* app in September 2011 as "Touch Sensitive," where glass-helmeted people from the future watch the second-floor residents of *Building Stories*' central apartment building (the couple on the verge of breaking up mentioned above), with the aid of technology that can read, as Worden (2012) maintains:

> "memory fragment[s]" from an "area's consciousness cloud." This is, I think, less a whimsical comment on the future than it is an articulation of *Building Stories*' fundamental worldview – that our lived experiences and habits, understood generally as a sequence of losses, will outlive each of us. Loss remains

> accessible to others, just as buildings do after their current inhabitants move out or pass on.

It is precisely these fragments, and the losses they inevitably imply, that constitute the narrative matter of *Building Stories*.

2. Literary and Non-Literary Resonances

Upon approaching Ware's work, it is impossible not to be reminded of some of the experimental authors who, in both French and British post-war fiction, attempted, through a joyful and playful investigation of the possibilities that language can offer, to break away from conventional realist modes of writing, and encouraged readers to oppose the passivity inherent in Realism in order to participate actively in the construction of the text's meaning. This aspect is certainly pivotal in the work of the group OuLiPo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*), the group founded by Queneau and François le Lionnais in 1960 with the aim of exploring the possibilities not only of language but also of narrative organization.

Ware's work shares other features with the *nouveau roman* that developed in France during the post-war period: for example, the abandonment of the chronological structuring of the narrative, and its subsequent discontinuity – which is implied by the fact that Ware's narrative can be assembled in any order; the desire to wake readers up, to make them actually read the words on the page and the willingness to shatter readers' mode of reading and the passivity implicit in the Realist type of narrative; the replacement of the well-rounded characters of nineteenth-century fiction with anonymous characters, which prevents the name from fulfilling the function it held in Realist fiction – epitomized by the failed artist woman, who remains unnamed throughout *Building Stories*.

Moreover, although British writers did not accomplish the same break with Realism achieved by the *nouveaux romanciers*, many writers of the 1960s, while not dispensing completely with the conventions derived from nineteenth-century modes of writing, began to question them, assuming a different attitude to such established elements of fiction as the plot and the character. Hence, even though they retained an undertow of humanist Realism, they began to inquire into the concepts of history and reality, exploring and evaluating fictionality *per se*.

In this panorama, the work produced by B. S. Johnson is exemplary, and presents elements that make it close to Ware's work. Johnson, who considered the modes of the nineteenth-century novel exhausted and, in the Introduction

to his *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (1973), declared that the contemporary narrative should account for the dramatic and chaotic changes that reality has undergone since the previous century, breaks through conventional ways of structuring narrative by interrupting the fictional illusion dear to the Realists of the previous century and self-reflexively referring to the problems he had to face in his writing. Furthermore, the typographical devices he employed – such as the organization of the text in two columns and the insertion of blank pages within the text (*Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* 1973) or punching holes in his pages (*Albert Angelo* 1964) to let the meaning "flow" – emphasize the very different nature that concepts such as fiction and reality acquire in his works. In particular, he too – in his attempt to make the reader participate in his writing – in *The Unfortunates* (1969), obliged readers to arrange the pages of the novel itself, which he presented in a box containing twenty-seven loose bundles of papers, an aspect which of course reminds of the structure Ware gave to his work.

At the same time, *Building Stories* recalls certain experiments of the French OuBaPo, namely the *Ouvroir de Bande dessinée Potentielle* (roughly translated as "workshop of potential comic book art"), the comics movement founded in 1992 by a group of French cartoonists who often frequented the artists' studio Nawak in Paris in an attempt to push the boundaries of the medium, and who modelled their movement on the literary movement OuLiPo mentioned above.

Despite these influences, Ware's work stands out for its originality, precision and the author's meticulous use of both visual and verbal language, which enable him to produce a profoundly moving reflection on humanity.

As analysed in more detail below, Ware's work – which addresses themes such as memory and parenthood – also recalls, from a stylistic point of view, artists such as the Belgian Hergé and his *Tintin* (1929–1983), as well as what Rapiti (2022) defines "the great masters of American strip cartoons," including Schulz's *Peanuts* (1950–2000). Similarly, the influence of the picture books, in particular the American *Little Golden Books* series published since 1942, is evident both in the binding – one of the small books included in the box has a gold leaf spine – and in the use of natural elements such as bees and flowers, as seen, for instance, in the booklet dedicated to Branford the Bee.

All these suggestions and echoes reverberate in *Building Stories*, where all these varied influences, disparate elements and diverse formats interact and, by doing so, acquire new meanings in order to create something absolutely original.

Of course, as a work belonging to the graphic novel genre (although, as suggested above, of a very special kind), *Building Stories* combines written and visual language in a way that makes the text hybrid and multimodal. Consequently, the following sections provide a focused analysis of the text's visual, paralinguistic and

verbal elements, examining their contribution to the construction of the text and the representation of human struggles.

3. A Multimodal Analysis of *Building Stories*

Due to the inherent interplay of written and visual language in *Building Stories*, any effective analysis must be multimodal. This section therefore offers a focused, if necessarily selective, exploration of the verbal and visual modes. However, this section also recognizes the challenge posed by the fourteen disparate pieces in the work, and the fact that each piece, while sharing visual and typographical features, exhibits unique characters, narrative segments, structural designs and textual approaches, thus making a comprehensive examination in this context impractical.

3.1. Visual Language

The most striking aspect of this product is the gap between the "playful" dimension of the packaging and the dramatic content of the stories it tells: in this monumental work, Ware in fact flatters the readers' childlike nature by offering them a graphic novel disguised as a children's book and a board game, but when they set out to read it, the book betrays their expectations by presenting a harsh view of everyday life.

3.1.1. Colouring

Part of this almost infantile aspect of the work is due to the pastel colours the author uses throughout the different pieces that compose the text. These colours are given in uniform backgrounds, without the use of texture, and create a very neat (if not realistically detailed) representation of the settings and the people who act in them.[1]

The main colour, closely connected to the centrality given to the human body and the people represented in the text (which will be further analyzed in the following subsection) is pale, flesh pink. This colour, or some of its variants – which can be so intense as to approach red – is often picked up in the clothes worn by

1 As the various parts can be assembled in any order, the author has not included page numbers. As a result, the references in this article cannot provide such an indication.

various characters and provides a strong sense of visual cohesion to the work as a whole, since it is present in all the different pieces included in the box. Furthermore, given that often the representation of human figures or parts of their body takes up the whole page, this colour appears preponderant.

It is true that in the representation of the broadsheet *The Daily Bee*, and in the booklet dedicated to Branford the Bee, we find a strong presence of yellow both in the depiction of the characters (bees) and the background. Yet, also in these pages, insects are often given an anthropomorphic face, which is equally coloured in light pink.

Another colour which is often represented in the book is light blue: in the clothes of different characters, in the background settings, which, both outdoor and indoor, are often painted in this colour, in some of the objects depicted in the text (such as telephones), and in some of the captions and the headlines we find in the various boxed products.

By referring to the colours stereotypically associated with baby girls and baby boys, the presence of these colours becomes important, as it reminds readers of childhood and thereby focuses attention on memory and its workings.

There are a few occasions when the characters are not coloured independently, but blend in – from a chromatic point of view – with the setting: for example, when readers approach the story of Branford the Bee, they encounter his ancestor Benedict B. Bee, and the whole scene is coloured in a light yellow, to mark the reference to the past and memory.

Similarly, in one of the long booklets we find in the box, where the protagonist's life as a mother is represented, we see that her figure blends with the grey of the night, as if she were losing herself, a condition which is associated to her role as a mother.

These colours, and the designs adopted in many of the printed pieces and stapled books included in the box – with their all-over pattern of leaves, flowers, and animals – also evoke children's books, whose design resonates with the themes of parent–child relationships and memory that permeate the work.

As analyzed below, colours also help the author to give emphasis to certain words or expressions which, by being written in red or blue, for example, or being placed in coloured boxes, draw readers' attention, often providing interpretative cues.

3.1.2. The People

The graphic representation of human beings also appears almost infantile. Ware in fact resorts to stylization both in the depiction of the people and the objects he represents in his scenes, including the building that serves as the background

to the story and connects the lives of the characters. His lines are very clean, his pictures extremely neat and rigorous, and, as Rapiti (2022) suggests, he achieves a "geometric synthesis" that aims at perfection in both line and proportion.

As mentioned above, because of the dimensions of the human figures, and the fact that even when the setting is dark and the background can only be identified with some difficulty, the light colour of their skin makes them recognizable, it is evident that the author always places the human being at the centre of the scene. What we see represented in the text is often a human being who is naked, both physically and psychologically: both male and female bodies (or parts of their bodies) are indeed often shown stripped, both full-page size and in smaller panels. Although they are often depicted as portraits, at times they resemble still-natures, through what Comer (2016: 45) describes as an "objective and, at times, scientific portrayal" of the body.

Occasionally, these figures are also represented while engaging in petting and sexual intercourse, thus expressing the author's critical perspective. Indeed, if it is true that *Building Stories* gives us a snapshot of America, it does so by bringing to the fore its innumerable contradictions: puritanical and orderly, of course, but only on the surface. A patriarchal society still plagued by male chauvinism, in which women have their aspirations frustrated because they are only valued if they are considered sexually attractive. The naked body of the protagonist, then, with her amputated leg, becomes a counter discourse which opposes any easy categorization and stereotyping. Thus, it is not simply the case that, as Fink Berman (2010: 191) maintains, "Ware's description strangely elides disability as a characterization of the woman, relegating it to a de-privileged position in his account of the narrative" and that (*ibid*.), the "strange discrepancy between the striking presence of the protagonist's short leg in the visual register of *Building Stories* and the near absence of any acknowledgement of her disability in the textual register creates a perplexing interpretative situation." Indeed, this matter-of-fact portrayal of the character's difference still points to this difference and to the absence of the limb, which naturally points to loss as a central tenet.

At the same time, it also points, as Comer (2016) suggests, to the imbalance and the lack of a centre experienced by the protagonist, who therefore becomes an embodiment of incompletion both physically (because of the missing limb) and psychologically (because of her depression and sense of nonachievement).

As a matter of fact, Ware simultaneously represents the psychological and emotive nakedness of the people included in his work: they all are "difficult" characters, who have suffered various types of loss (of family members, friends, pets, relationships, limbs, sex, weight, jobs, even home equity), and bears their consequences. As Worden (2012) suggests, in *Building Stories*,

> loss is not something that happens to individuals alone. Instead, loss is a kind of collective condition, and it simply exists in the world. Loss isn't a momentary event or unfortunate occasion. We inhabit loss, like it's a building. What this means, of course, is that loss outlasts all of us. If anything remains of our civilization, *Building Stories* seems to claim, it will be loss, a sense of dashed hopes, unhappy romances, missed opportunities, and all-too-fleeting joys.

What Ware shows us in his work is therefore the end of the American dream, since his work, as Rapiti (2012) suggests, points to "a rude awakening, but from the American dream." Yet, this pessimistic vein is counterbalanced by the positive attitude he exhibits towards this very notion of loss: loss is what connects people, who can therefore find a commonality in it, since, suggests the author, it represents a condition of the human being as a human being.

Thus, as Comer (2016: 57) suggests,

> While Ware may be representing a universal norm (that is to say, a tedious, anxiety-ridden picture of day-to-day dissolution), his reliance on disability, his need to highlight an extraordinary body, to tell the tale of the mundane is suspect. Ware's work, so desperately in need of an organizing center, uses disability as a tool to both spur on desire and ultimately as a handy metaphor for depicting the existential crisis that defines humanity. Even while naturalizing disability as a metaphor, *Building Stories* is a deeply denaturalizing comic.

3.1.3. The Objects

The centrality reserved to the people counterbalances the emphasis on the objects depicted in the text, first and foremost the "building," which – besides being the verb that gives Ware's work its title – also points to the physical building where the characters live. This building not only works as the setting of the story, but also becomes the *trait d'union* that connects their lives, mirroring their status, and being forged by their experiences.

The building is drawn with meticulous detail in the first few pages of the book with the gold-leaf spine, which clearly is meant as a reference to the *Little Golden Books* (thus making the relationship with childhood stronger), and it is reproduced on the large game board included in the box, providing readers with the scenario in which they can assemble their story.

As Roeder (2012) maintains, the representations of the building that readers encounter in the various pieces display Ware's facility with art-historical conventions:

> The Renaissance system of linear perspective, use of symmetry, repetition of geometric forms and motifs, along with a resounding clarity of both color and line brings unity to the disparate pieces […] his cutaway views of her apartment building recall the tradition in seventeenth century Dutch genre scenes that depicted domestic interiors from the perspective of an unseen observer.

The frequent depictions of the building as a cross-section and the use of isometric schematics for the interior space therefore serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they suggest that, as Godbey (2012) argues, the spaces in Ware's work "order and provide structure, in direct opposition to the messiness outside," simultaneously emphasizing the "disorganized, circuitous nature of life that takes place outside its walls." On the other hand, because these schematics are physically rendered on or within the various components of the book (which the reader handles and arranges), they ultimately become an intrinsic part of that messiness and fragmentation.

Indeed, this visual orderliness and precision creates a strong contrast with the "inherent messiness of [Ware's] characters' emotional lives" (Roeder 2012), thus turning the building, as Findley and Neveu (2021) maintain, into both a shelter and a space of confinement, an intimate holder of domestic emotional life as well as a rationalized building. At the same time, the organization and orderliness contrasts – above all – with the messy nature of the product itself, which presents several "objects" thrown together in a box and which do not have a predictable order, since it is up to the reader to manipulate both physically and conceptually its contents.

In spying on the dwellings, in depicting them as an architect would – with elevations, sections and axonometric cutaways – the building represented in Ware's work becomes in fact the panels in a comic strip, each panel a room. Thus, the gutters (i.e., the white spaces separating panels) become the walls that cement the distance which separates individuals, condemned to social isolation.

3.1.4. Page Layout

The page layout in Chris Ware's *Building Stories* is highly complex, as each component employs a unique page and grid structure.

In those components that utilize a conventional sequential format, the reader is presented with extremely dense pages, occasionally incorporating over fifty panels. While this high visual density might be interpreted as a representation of rapidly accelerating narrative action, the extensive fragmentation of the grid – and the resulting multiplicity of gutters – produces a counter-intuitive temporal effect. This is achieved by frequently depicting a single moment across multiple panels

with minimal graphic variation, thereby dilating the perception of time and making the pace of events feel markedly slow and meticulously observed.

3.1.5. Multimodality and Visual Intertextuality

Ware's work employs various forms of visual intertextuality, primarily through allusions, homage, and pastiche. As noted, some of the boxed components allude to (and simultaneously pay tribute to) texts like the *Little Golden Books* series, evident in the binding design and the depiction of elements such as flowers and animals.

Moreover, Chris Ware's *Building Stories* employs pastiche as a core structural element, integrating diverse textual forms. These range from physical reproductions, such as newspaper inserts, to depicted artifacts like banknotes, property advertisements, notebooks, sketchbooks, etc. Functioning as realia, these elements anchor the narrative within a tangible, everyday reality. However, within the context of Ware's monumental work, they transcend their ordinary function, acquiring themselves a monumental quality. This elevation underscores the enduring nature of printed matter, mirroring the building itself, which outlasts its inhabitants and remains at the disposal of other tenants. These textual and object components, like the building itself, persist beyond individual readers' engagement, ensuring not only the story's existence, but also its perpetual reinterpretation and renewal across generations.

3.2. Visual Paralanguage

The expression "visual paralanguage" encompasses all those non-verbal elements that enhance verbal communication by providing context, emotion, tone, etc. The crucial role of body language, facial expressions, and gestures in Ware's character depictions, works in synergy with other visual paralinguistic features, such as speech balloons, captions, lettering, and punctuation. These elements function as visual equivalents of prosodic features, such as intonation, stress, pace, pauses, etc., and by translating vocal nuances into visual forms, they significantly enhance both communication and meaning construction, adding layers of meaning that extend beyond the literal text.

3.2.1. Speech Balloons and Captions

What is immediately striking upon reading any of the pieces that compose *Building Stories* is the sporadic presence of dialogue. Some interactions occur in the scenes depicting the young woman's roles as a mother and a lover. In these

instances, the speech balloons are rectangles with filleted (smoothed) corners, and their tails often zigzag to indicate either joy or anger.

Despite these rare occurrences, most of the time readers are confronted with interior monologues. In this case, the rectangle's shape remains identical, but the tail is composed of small circles. However, these interior monologues very often appear outside any balloon and seem to float on the page, interrupting or commenting on the flow of images and panels.

Quite often, though, the narration is left to the images alone: the elongated rectangular booklets, for instance, are completely devoid of verbal language, and the narrative is conveyed solely through the visual elements.

On occasion, we find onomatopoeias used as captions to describe the sounds made by certain equipment – such as the telephone ("ring ring") and the doorbell ("ding dong") – or actions performed by the characters, like opening the door ("k-klk"), shutting the door ("slam"), walking around the house ("squeak squeak"), and opening a bottle of cola ("tsssht"). At other times, these captions simply describe the actions visually represented, such as climbing the stairs ("step step") or closing the door ("shut").

In a narrative where dialogue is minimal, these captions serve to interrupt the silence that seems to envelop the characters and the building they inhabit most of the time. However, while providing some background noise, these captions paradoxically further emphasize the profound silence that reigns in the characters' lives, and highlights their utter loneliness.

The sense of loneliness which is suggested by the metaphorical interpretation of the gutter, then, is further emphasized by the way speech balloons and captions are exploited in the graphic novel and ultimately point to the sense of loss and loneliness that often permeates *Building Stories*.

3.2.2. Punctuation

As is typical in comic art, the punctuation in *Building Stories* transcends mere grammatical function, becoming a dynamic tool for conveying emotion, rhythm, and sound. However, perhaps due to the scarcity of dialogue scenes, the author is notably sparing in his use of punctuation.

While readers encounter the occasional full stop at the end of a sentence, or a question mark – used in dialogue for legitimate questions, or in interior monologues to highlight the main character's self-doubt and insecurity – and the occasional exclamation mark to signal anger, punctuation is frequently absent, particularly in captions.

Equally important is the fact that the only punctuation mark used extensively is the ellipsis (three dots). Beyond its traditional role of indicating an omission

in the text, its frequent use here represents an intentional silence. Depending on the context, it can signify an unfinished thought, a leading statement, a slight pause, an echoing voice, or a nervous or awkward silence.

In Chris Ware's work, the ellipsis often functions as an aposiopesis – a figure of speech where a sentence is deliberately broken off and left unfinished, giving an impression of unwillingness or inability to continue. Within the text, the ellipsis frequently highlights the characters' uncertainty, confusion, and inability to fully comprehend their surroundings.

The ellipsis thus becomes a paralinguistic representation of fragmentation, often marking parts of an unfinished sentence. Furthermore, the prevalence of the ellipsis aligns with the fact that *Building Stories* provides no single, definitive conclusion for readers. Depending on how the various components are assembled, the book yields a different story with a different ending. Once readers finish one of the available narratives, they can start over to create an entirely new one, mirroring the unresolved, open-ended nature suggested by the frequent pauses.

3.2.3. Lettering

The various products included in the box often present different fonts, styles and colours, which are meant to communicate something to readers, thereby helping them making sense of the work in its entirety.

For example, the little book dedicated to *Branford: The Best Bee in the World* employs visual elements to evoke history and memory. On the page dedicated to the ancestor, Benedict B. Bee, the text not only uses the recurring light yellow colour – which signifies the past – but also features the ancestor's name rendered in a Gothic calligraphy. This specific font choice, which acts as the title for the segment, is characterized by its dense, angular strokes, visually creating an immediate and strong connection to bygone eras, like historical manuscripts. Indeed, the style is strongly associated with medieval European manuscripts and the earliest printed books (like the *Gutenberg Bible*), and this direct link to the Middle Ages immediately signals a very deep, distant past – much older and more formal than a simple sepia photograph would suggest, thus giving the ancestor's history the texture of antiquity.

Not only this, but Gothic calligraphy, or Blackletter, visually creates a dense field of black text on the page, giving the words substantial visual weight. For an ancestor like Benedict B. Bee, this design choice gives his name *gravitas*, suggesting he is a foundational figure with a serious, weighty legacy. Hence, the formal, rigid structure of the calligraphy contrasts sharply with the main book's typography, and this contrast visually separates the ancestor's chapter from the main narrative, elevating it to the status of a historical record or an official inscription, rather than just

a narrative aside, suggesting not only that it is "old," but also that it is important, and foundational.

Similarly, typography is used to signal shifts in voice or perspective. At the very beginning of the smaller bounded-book, for example, a font that imitates handwriting is introduced to represent the perspective of the building, immediately establishing a personal, almost intimate, mode of address.

The adoption of a font that imitates human handwriting is crucial, because the building is identified as one of the work's main characters. This aging structure is in fact humanized and personified, and it is given the ability to think and a voice. By granting the building a voice – often viewed as the expression of the true human "I" – it is transformed into a central figure in the narrative: the building is thus not only closely connected to its inhabitants but becomes an expression of their selves, partially determining their lives with which its own existence is intertwined.

Other interesting uses of lettering involve capital letters, which appear both in black and in various colours. Sometimes these capitalized words function as headlines, immediately attracting the reader's attention. At other times, capitalized and often coloured words are inserted directly into sentences written in lowercase. Most of the time, these visually distinct words can be found at the beginning of a sentence. As such, they act as cohesive clues, guiding readers to interpret captions or speech balloons by signalling causal chains, logical relations, or temporal connections. Through this visual and chromatic contrast, the reader is guided to focus on important information and construct meaning.

3.3. Verbal Language

3.3.1. Register

The register adopted throughout the various documents that comprise *Building Stories* is overwhelmingly informal. Readers frequently encounter non-standard language and a writing style that heavily borrows from spoken discourse, thus often presenting the use of non-finite clauses, abbreviated grammar, and contractions.

Also from a prosodic perspective, the text often features elements characteristic of speech, such as pauses, hesitations, false starts, and interrupted sentences. Furthermore, the lexicon includes abbreviations and colloquialisms (sometimes bordering on vulgarity), such as "man," "dude," "jerk," "jeez," "goddam," as well as vague lexical items such as "stuff," all the features that Halliday (1985) identifies as typical of spoken language.

Of course, the register shifts depending on the characters involved. For example, when depicting the speech or the thoughts of the elderly lady living on the first floor, the written text becomes more standardized and less informal.

It is therefore evident that the choice of register in the different parts of *Building Stories* aligns with the artist's graphical and representational choices. The goal is to depict the authentic lives of the characters, with all their doubts, inconsistencies, and fragmentations, which can only be conveyed through a language that is frequently marked by the same inconsistencies, fragmented style, and hesitations that characterize their lived experience.

Other shifts in the register can be observed in other parts of the text, notably the broadsheet *The Daily Bee* and the booklet chronicling the story of Branford the Bee. The broadsheet fully adopts the typical style of newspapers, characterized by sensationalist headlines and a frequent hyperbolic use of adjectives. Indeed, despite its very distinct layout compared to actual newspapers, the font choices for the title of the broadsheet itself, and the constructions of the headlines as well as their wording – such as "Humorous events as the males emerge – our colony in pictures revealed" – closely mimic real-world journalistic conventions, since the main verb, in a style common to news headlines, is placed at the end of the clause.

The booklet *Branford: The Best Bee in the World*, uses a wholly different approach. Especially during the stylized representation of the flashback episode – which seems to echo a 19th-century comic strip – the visual is paired with a heavy reliance on alliteration, and this alliterative language effectively heightens the tragicomic nature of the protagonist's existential crisis, thereby reinforcing the overall message conveyed by the visual elements of the text.

3.3.2. Intratextuality

As mentioned above, the various narratives in *Building Stories* are interwoven, creating a rich network of intratextual resonances that result in an extremely visually cohesive text. For instance, initially, the small book *Branford: The Best Bee in the World* might appear to be an oddity. As Gardner (2012) suggests, in fact, it seems to lack recognizable characters from the main storyline, with the exception of the Chicago house that serves as the backdrop for Branford's adventures.

However, a closer examination reveals that Branford's existential meditations on faith, duty, and desire are, in fact, narrative fragments created by the main female protagonist – pieces she has left for the reader, much like the pollen which Branford carries back to the hive. The protagonist and her daughter created Branford's adventures as bedtime tales and kitchen table drawings, and attentive reading shows that Branford appears elsewhere in the box as well: notably, in the broadsheet *The Daily Bee* and in isolated corners of other components. For instance, on the oversized fold-out game board, Branford is seen exploring the flowers outside the basement windows. Once readers begin to notice the flowers and the bee, they are prompted to "pick up" the different pieces again, starting a process of

re-reading and looking for other "cross-pollinations," so as to find small moments of beauty within an otherwise bleak and bitter tale.

These internal intratextual references, then, provide a strong sense of cohesion to the entire *oeuvre*, with each part echoing and reverberating throughout the others. By encouraging readers to physically handle, pick up, read, and re-read the different components, *Building Stories* actively opposes the dematerialization inherent in many new technological devices used to access written content. Instead, it fosters a unique and active interaction with the text as a physical object.

4. Conclusion

As suggested in the preceding analysis of individual components, Ware's *Building Stories* explores the core modernist tension between fragmentation and connection. The work's physical structure – a box containing over a dozen disparate booklets, pamphlets, and mini-comics – directly embodies fragmentation, mirroring the disjointed and often isolated lives of the characters within the titular building. These scattered components trace the non-linear experiences of the main protagonist, the couple, and the elderly landlady, emphasizing their profound sense of emotional and temporal separation.

Simultaneously, Ware suggests that a unifying thread exists that roots us all in a shared reality. This connection is not always apparent to the characters themselves, but it is made explicit to the reader, who is forced to physically gather, organize, and read the pieces, thereby stitching the fragmented lives together into a coherent, overarching narrative tapestry.

The deliberate incorporation of almost every form which the comic medium takes – comic books, mini-comics, newspaper strips, and picture books – celebrates the vast range of the comic art form, which Ware reclaims from both the museum pedestal and the digital screen, offering the reader something concrete and intimate to interact with.

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Abstract

Questo articolo analizza la frammentazione strutturale di *Building Stories* (2012) di Chris Ware e le sue implicazioni per la costruzione dell'identità dei personaggi. Presentato come una raccolta in scatola di materiali stampati disparati, l'opera di Ware fa largo uso dell'intratestualità e il collage per sfidare la narrazione convenzionale. Così facendo, il testo incoraggia un'esperienza di lettura non lineare e partecipativa, in quanto ai lettori viene chiesto di assemblare la propria storia. Attraverso un'analisi multimodale, questo studio si propone di analizzare come la frammentazione della narrazione grafica funzioni come una strategia rappresentativa che riflette e rafforza le identità frammentate dei personaggi e la percezione frammentata della realtà quotidiana, al contempo identificando il *fil rouge* che collega i vari pezzi che costituiscono il lavoro nel suo complesso.

Parole chiave: romanzo grafico, narrazione non lineare, frammentazione, multimodalità, lettura partecipativa