THE SCHOLAR AND THE FAN

by Øyvind Vågnes

Ball, David M. and Kuhlman, Martha B., eds. *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*. University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 2010. 238 pages.

The most immediately striking aspect of David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman's *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* – the first but definitely not the last anthology on Chris Ware's work – is its impressively multidisciplinary breadth and solid scholarship. The book's fourteen articles clearly demonstrate how comics studies is stimulated and invigorated by its encounters and engagements with cultural theory more broadly. Furthermore, the anthology serves well as an introduction to what have been the central academic perspectives on Ware over the years, and provides an excellent overview and summary of how these have been developed. For the many readers who have been systematically assembling whatever has come to the surface since Gene Kannenberg's first academic essay on Ware was published in 2001, it is gratifying to finally be able to read a book length collection such as this and to peruse its extensive bibliography. For anyone interested in contributing to the rapidly increasing amount of scholarship being done on Ware, the book is simply unmissable.

There is hardly anything surprising to be found here. Among the topics are: Ware's contested engagement with art history; the complexity of the narrative structure of his work and its challenges to conventional conceptions of relationships between spatiality and temporality; the interaesthetic impulse in Ware's comics, and especially his deep concern with architecture; what we can call the consistently nostalgic component in Ware's work; and the place of race, ethnicity and disability in his comics – the ideological and political dimension of the artist's comprehensive output. Whether the articles are deeply informed by individual prominent thinkers such as Walter Benjamin or Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, or draw more broadly from the theoretical and critical perspectives that come with, say, a historical or formalistic approach, the methodological strategies are well-argued and executed. What will interest you the most depends on what inclination you have as a scholar, on what you are looking for in your own critical engagement with comics. To this reader the challenges put forward by Ware's use of various formats make for stimulating reflections – what Isaac Cates in his article refers to as the artist's "non-narrative devices": "fake catalog advertisements and coupons, collectible trading cards, fold-up paper-craft projects, souvenir calendars, essays and indicia in a painfully minute text, and multi-part diagrams of almost inevitably discouraging complexity" (p. 90). Cates takes issue with the diagrams in *Jimmy Corrigan* and I learned a lot about how these "expand the fictional world" (p. 93) of the book from reading his article. I also particularly enjoyed Daniel Worden and Matt Godbey's articles on the *Building Stories* project, not least in the light of the recent publication of

the 14-piece box set. Both articles quite brilliantly demonstrate how Ware's representations of architecture do much more than accommodate fictional stories; rather, they enter into and intervene in cultural debates concerning the past and future of very real urban landscapes. Godbey's reading of how Ware's work can represent a critique of what Michael Sorkin has termed the "departicularizing" of the contemporary city is splendid (p. 130).

Instead of rehashing the arguments of every single article in the collection I would like to use this opportunity to reflect a little bit on how the anthology seems to be a reflection of certain tendencies that pertain to the field of comics studies a couple of years after its publication. Certainly several readers of this journal will be aware of Bart Beaty's comparison between comics studies and film studies in a 2011 issue of the *Cinema Journal*. There Beaty suggests that the state of affairs in the former is similar to the state of affairs of the latter in the 1960s. Early film theory was not exactly theory in the sense that we have come to think of the term, but consisted, rather, of reflections by practitioners, by filmmakers such as Eisenstein. The equivalent of comics studies would be the theoretical work of artists such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud in the 1980s and the 1990s. More recently, however, we have begun to see sustained critical work being done by scholars on a small group of comics artists, Beaty points out – listing Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco, Marjane Satrapi, Posy Simmonds, Adrian Tomine, and Chris Ware – "the Antonionis, Bergmans, Fellinis, and Godards of the graphic novel age" (Beaty 2011, 108). When Beaty compares contemporary comics studies with sixties film studies, he suggests that we are presently in a moment not unlike the one that saw the transition of auteur theory from its French origins (André Bazin and the environment surrounding the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*) to its Americanization, and the turn towards structuralism (as in the work by Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen). The French critics were "reverential" in their viewing of films, in the words of Dudley Andrew, whereas the structuralists "came to study systematically the textual knot and to suppress the search for its human source" (Andrew 2000, 20–21). As Beaty points out, it is in the aftermath of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* that we have seen the rise of the comics artist as *auteur*, and the possibility of doing scholarship on comics that "are justifiable to tenure committees as aesthetically meritorious" (Beaty 2000, 107). Matthew J. Smith's (2012) recent reading of Alan Moore in the ambitious critical companion *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (out on Routledge), which explicitly draws on auteur theory, seems to confirm the validity of Beaty's comparison.

So does *The Comics of Chris Ware*. It is both an expression of and contributes to the moment of canonization, as will undoubtedly be the case with several anthologies and presumably monographs on the artists Beaty lists over the next few years. Although Ball and Kuhlman's anthology shows an awareness of this fact, it does not dwell much on its implications. Beaty does,

however, in his recent book *Comics vs. Art*, where he dedicates his final chapter to what he describes as "[t]he rush towards Ware's canonization," suggesting that the artist's rise to fame "serves as an important forerunner of the processes that are likely to govern the comics-art intersection in years to come" (Beaty 2012, 225). Beaty's tone in writing about Ware in *Comics vs. Art* is irreverent compared to the predominant tone of *The Comics of Chris Ware*.

Perhaps it is at this point that I should come clean and confess that this reviewer is one of those who might be said to contribute to Ware's canonization. Not only did I get hold of his recent *Building Stories* as soon as I could, practically salivating over its box set format and its contents, I also visited the Adam Baumgold gallery on the Upper East side in Manhattan to see the exhibition which revolved around its publication, spending much time and finding much joy in perusing Ware's pages-in-progress – and it was not my first visit to the gallery, where Ware has been exhibited on earlier occasions. Indeed, I even brought home the multi-story building model that has been produced in the event of the publication for a considerable amount of money, along with the signed exhibition poster, a true sign of the fan turned fetishist. I admire Ware's work, and enjoy thinking and writing about it – as do most of the contributors to *The Comics of Chris Ware.* Reva Wolf suggests, in a 2008 essay titled "The Scholar and the Fan", that the distinction between the two terms is not as watertight as we would like to think (Wolf 2008). Perhaps my concluding remarks should be that *The Comics of Chris Ware* confirms this, as it enters into and contributes to a system of canonization without disturbing it much. That job is left to other scholars, such as Bart Beaty.

REFERENCES

Andrew, Dudley. 2000. "The Unauthorized Auteur Today." In *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, 20–30. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell.

Beaty, Bart. "Introduction. In Focus: Comics Studies Fifty Years After Film Studies." *Cinema Journal* 50 (3), Spring 2011: 106–110.

———. 2012. *Comics vs. Art*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kannenberg Jr., Gene. 2001. "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image and Visual Narrative Strategies." In *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, edited by Robert Varnum and Christina Gibbons Jackson, 174–197. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.

Smith, Matthew J. 2012. "Auteur Criticism: The Re-Visionary Works of Alan Moore". In *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, edited by Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, 178–188. New York and London: Routledge.

Ware, Chris. 2012. *Building Stories*. New York: Pantheon.

Wolf, Reva. 2008. "The Scholar and the Fan". In *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, edited by Michael Ann Holly and Marquard Smith, 158–167. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.