
TOWARDS A PANOPTICAL REPRESENTATION OF TIME AND MEMORY: CHRIS WARE, MARCEL PROUST AND HENRI BERGSON'S "PURE DURATION"

By Roberto Bartual





INTRODUCTION

Time and memory are two of the most recurrent subjects in Chris Ware's work. They are sometimes invoked through a reflection on public history, as is the case of the segments of *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* that deal with the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago (Ware 2000), or the strips about the origins of graphic narrative in *The Acme Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders* (Ware 2005). In other cases, time and memory are directly present in the form of personal recollections: *Acme Novelty Library #19* deals with the memories of youth of Rusty Brown's father (Ware 2008), and *Building Stories Part 2 (Acme Novelty Library #18)* is narrated by a disabled girl who recalls some of the most traumatic experiences of her life (Ware 2007).

The importance of memory in Chris Ware's comics has been acknowledged by many authors, such as Benoît Peeters (2005), who filmed a documentary about his work titling it "Chris Ware: Un art de la mémoire"; Matthias Wivel (2011), who states that the main concern of Ware's comics "is the suggestive description of inner life, of the feeling of time, of memory, of experiencing the world"; and even by Chris Ware himself, who thinks that comics are not images taken from life, but "from memory. You're trying to distill the memory of an experience, not the experience itself" (Heer 2006, 114), linking the whole medium to the act of remembering.

In the article "Past Imperfect: 'Building Stories' and the Art of Memory", Peter R. Sattler (2010, 207) has done a thorough examination of the role of memory in *Building Stories Part 1*, describing Ware's efforts to reproduce memory as an experience. According to Sattler (2010, 210–212), Ware strives to represent different modalities of the act of remembering: "episodic memory", "narrative memory", "observer memory", "field memory" and "experiential memory". The purpose of my article is not to describe and define these types of recollections or modes of remembering, a task Sattler already performs in his article, but rather to relate Chris Ware's work to a general theory of memory, in particular, the one that Henri Bergson developed during the beginning of the 20th century in an attempt to overcome the traditional idea of sequential memory (memory conceived as a linear chain of remembered events), a theory that influenced the whole of modernist literature, reaching its maximum expression with Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. I will argue that Ware uses a general property of comics, the fact that multiple events are shown in a single page at the same time, with the purpose of transcending all the linear notions of the medium submerging the reader into what Bergson (1910, 100) called "pure duration" (*durée pure*). This is an inner feeling of time and memory that he defined as the "ability to grasp time as a whole" (Bergson 1959, 10 ; my translation), melting "past and present in an organic whole"



(Bergson 1910, 100), and standing opposite to the custom of representing time and memory in a quantitative manner by the fixation of meaningful events along a spatial timeline.

SIMULTANEOUS REPRESENTATION AND PURE DURATION

Page composition is one of the most neglected elements of style in comics, in spite of which there are a number of authors who have experimented in this area to a considerable extent. In *Gasoline Alley*, Frank King showed a particular fondness for *raccords*; some of his Sunday pages are an image of a single space (a house, a street, a beach), fragmented by a matrix of panels. Experiments in page layout were not new or rare in American newspapers: Gustave Verbeek's strips were apparently conventional, but if they were turned upside down, the inverted panels would illustrate the second half of the story. Contemporary authors like J. H. Williams, III, Guido Crepax and Will Eisner have also used their page compositions to put to the test a quality that is inherent to comics: the fact that even though the reader needs to decode the panels one by one, the page is always perceived as a single image.

The name of Chris Ware, however, should stand out among these authors. Although Ware's graphic novels always comprise a linear narrative, they are often interrupted by pages with quite unusual layouts, mostly complex patterns of panels connected by arrows that allow us to switch from one sequence to another (fig. 1). Some scholars have used the term "diagram" to refer to these very characteristic compositions (Cates 2010; Samson and Peeters 2010, 115). These diagrams, or diagrammatic compositions, as I prefer to call them here, play a very important role in the narrations they are inserted into, and what is more: they force the readers to break with standard linear panel-processing habits, which, as I will try to argue in this article, can lead to a departure from the concepts of time and memory we have inherited from pre-modernist literature and classic Hollywood film-making.

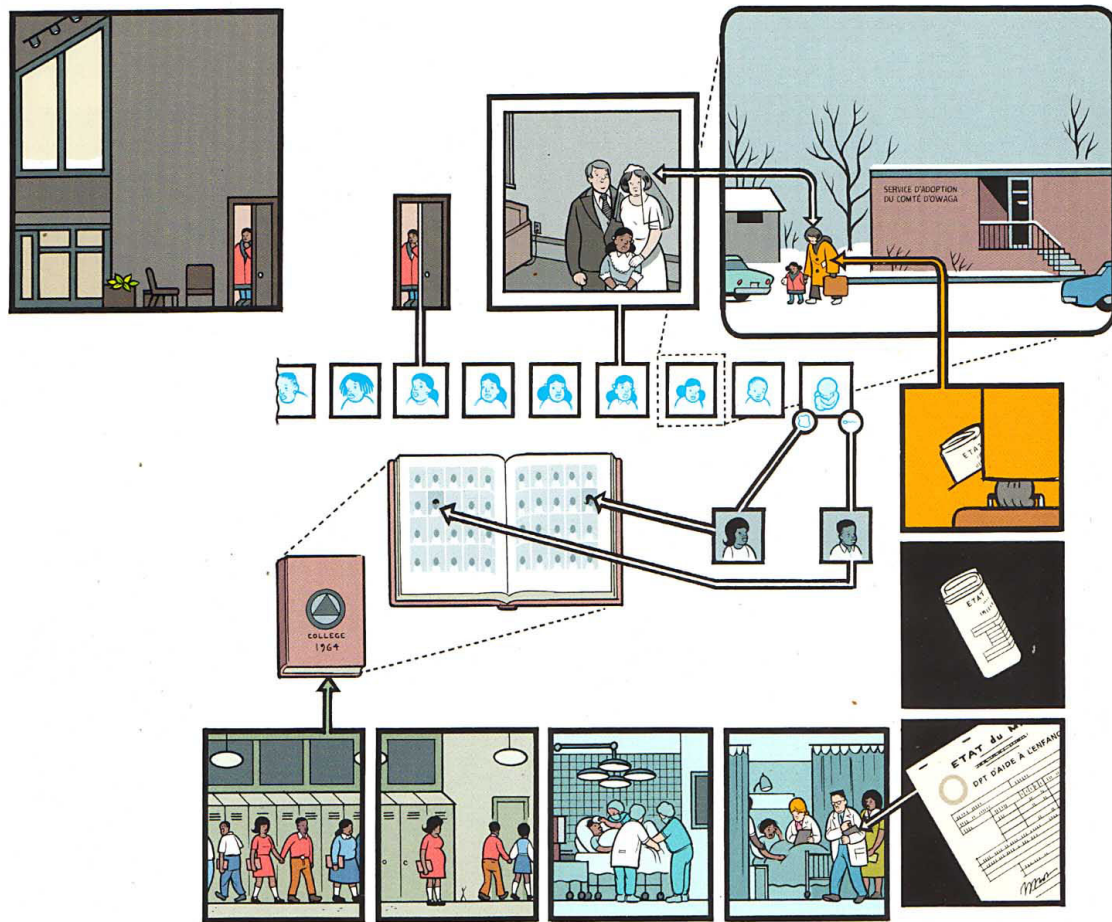


Figure 1. Ware, Chris, *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth*, Pantheon, p. 363. © Chris Ware.

In novels and films, representation of time and memory is constrained by linearity. In a book, words and paragraphs must be read in sequence; in a film, frames are projected in sequence as well. The material characteristics of these media limit the ways events are represented. In a novel, events must be narrated one after another, because it is impossible to read about two of them at the same time. Even in cases like Martin Amis' *Experience*, where we can find two simultaneous narrative lines in the same page, the reader must follow a sequence; in the first place, we must read one of the storylines and then, the other one. Film offers more possibilities in simultaneous representation, because theoretically we are able to watch two images at the same time: unlike literature, cinema is not a strictly sequential medium. There are certainly some experimental films, such as Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* and *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, or even more conventional ones like Brian De Palma's *The Phantom of Paradise*, where two actions or



sequences of events are shown simultaneously by means of superimposition (Greenaway) or by means of the split-screen technique (De Palma).¹

However, watching a film is not the same experience as viewing a painting or reading the multi-paneled page of a comic. It is very difficult to focus your attention on two scenes at the same time if they are not completely still. Narrative films like *The Pillow Book* or *The Phantom of Paradise* use simultaneous narration only occasionally; a lengthier or more consistent use of this type of narration would eventually make you lose important narrative data, especially if there were dialogue. The data processing problem the audience faces when watching or hearing lengthy audio-visual discourses is well exemplified by Warhol and Morrissey's *Chelsea Girls*. During three and a half hours, this film shows two different scenes projected simultaneously on the screen. The resulting effect is a chaos of voices and actions, although it is still possible to follow the narrative of each scene if you focus your attention on only one of them at the price of discarding the information contained in the other. Of course, *Chelsea Girls* can be enjoyed as a purely cinematic experience, but in order to understand everything that "happens" in the film, it must be watched at least twice. But in spite of occasional experiments with simultaneous projections, according to Henri Bergson, cinema is destined to represent time as a mere succession of fixed frames, "condemned to itemize time image by image, instead of grasping it as a whole" (Bergson 1959, 10; my translation²).

But what is the precise meaning of "grasping the time as whole", the metaphorical expression used by Bergson? In his work *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, he used an example from real life to illustrate how we really perceive time (Bergson 1959, 95). Bergson was working at his desk when he noticed that a clock was striking its bell. He was so absorbed by his work that he was not conscious of the clock when it began to sound. However, he wanted to know what time it was, so he made a retrospective effort to remember and realised that the clock had struck its bell four times before he became totally aware of the sound. He adds this number to the strokes he is hearing now and he reflects:

If, then, I question myself carefully on what has just taken place, I perceive that the first four sounds had struck my ear and even affected my consciousness, but that the sensations produced by each one of them, instead of being set side by side, had melted into one another

¹ The use of the split-screen technique with the purpose of representing simultaneous events was particularly popular during the second half of the sixties and the first of the seventies in movies like Richard Fleischer's *The Boston Strangler* (1968), George Seaton's *Airport* (1970) or Robert Wise's *The Andromeda Strain* (1971). It is, as well, a very common device in newscasts, showing two reporters in a split-screen frame.

² "[...] condamnée à détailler le temps image par image au lieu de le saisir globalement" (Bergson 1959, 10).



in such a way as to give the whole a peculiar quality, to make a kind of musical phrase out of it. (Bergson 1910, 127)

Therefore, time presents itself to the human conscience as an indivisible whole, a fusion of past moments that are intertwined with the present. Bergson's example was directed against the traditional notion that time "presents itself to our conscience as the distinction between a *before* and an *after* in juxtaposition" (Bergson 1959, 92; my translation³) and also against our usual symbolic representations of time in terms of space (the clock sphere, a historic timeline, etc.). He opposes these notions with what he calls "pure duration" or "real duration" (*durée pure* or *durée reel*; Bergson 1959, 92), which relates to the faculty of the human brain to perceive time as a superposition of moments "melting among themselves".

If the human perception of time coincides with Bergson's concept of pure duration, would it not follow that all narrative systems are basically inadequate to represent time and memory? Narrative systems such as literature and cinema (and comics too) are based on the verbal and/or visual discourse, and these discourses are sequential by nature; they are based on the juxtaposition of a *before* and an *after*. As I have already mentioned, Bergson thought that cinema implicitly forced the traditional notion of time upon the discourse because it represents time as a succession of discreet images. However, there are narrative techniques and modes of narration that allow transcendence of that traditional conception of time Bergson criticised, even if they are based on a sequential discourse. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust used free association of ideas and *achronicity* (the relation of events that cannot be clearly placed in time; Genette 1980, 120) to directly address Bergson's theories about time and memory, as I will argue later.⁴ In *Cinema 2. The time-image*, Gilles Deleuze corrects Bergson's prejudices against cinema referring to film directors and cinematographic movements (Ozu, Godard, Italian neorealism, post-neorealist films like *Viaggio in Italia* or *Blow-Up*) that, by means of "a break in the sensory-motor links" (Deleuze 1989, 167), infuse their images of the present with the past, superposing different moments in a single space. More recent films that Deleuze could not examine in his work, such as Terence Davis' *Distant Voices* or Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, also refer to achronicity to address Bergson's conception of time and memory.

³ "[...] se présente d'abord à notre conscience comme la distinction d'un 'avant' et d'un 'après' juxtaposés" (Bergson 1959, 92).

⁴ Proust was more than familiar with Bergson's theories. In fact, they were distant relatives: Bergson was married to a cousin of Proust, and Proust acted as his best man at his wedding. They wrote letters to each other with a certain frequency, and one character of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Bergotte, was based on the French philosopher (Leighton 1989).



But what about comics? Although, in principle, they share with cinema the limitation of representing time as a discreet succession of images, they have a quality that, as I will argue next, makes it easier for the comics author to overcome the linear succession of fixed images that visual narratives are usually based in. In comics, the reader can watch a considerable number of events at the same time within the frame of the page. A glance to the page is often enough to relate one image to the others without fear of losing any of the information contained in the discourse. In the words of Art Spiegelman:

A comic strip is made up of units of time placed next to each other so that one sees past and present simultaneously, before decoding the moments that are being depicted in any given box. (Tabachnick 1993, 157)

When we read a comic we are not always aware of the fact that we can perceive different temporal units at the same time, but it has very well argued that when we read a panel, we are being influenced by the contents of the panels that precede and succeed it, and also by the way panels are organised on the page (Peeters 1998, 19–24; Groensteen 2007, 30–31). If we are sometimes unaware of this, it is because the use of the sequence in comics is, more often than not, very conventional. Panels are usually lined in strips, like words in a novel; we fix our gaze in one panel and then jump to the next without paying much attention to the panels we have left behind. However, even in strip form, representation of time in comics is not purely sequential as it is in literature or in non-experimental narrative cinema. This may seem more evident if we compare a quite straightforward film, like Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, with its apparently conventional micro-adaptation to comics by Chris Ware: a three-panel vertical strip for the cover of Ozu's screening programme organised by Cinefamily in the Silent Movie Theatre on Fairfax Avenue, Los Angeles (fig. 2).

Tokyo Story's plot is simple. An elderly couple, who live in a rural area of Japan, visit their children in Tokyo. However, they find themselves neglected by them. The eldest son, a paediatrician, does not have much time for his parents and neither does their daughter, who also has a job and children of her own to take care of. Realising that their offspring have distanced themselves, the couple returns home with a bitter disappointment. A few months later, the wife gets ill and dies. As we see, Chris Ware's adaptation of this plot is extremely minimalistic; he has chosen to represent only three moments of the story: the couple at home, when the wife is still alive; an urban landscape and a railroad, while they are traveling to Tokyo; and a final image of the lonely husband, back at home, after the death of his wife.

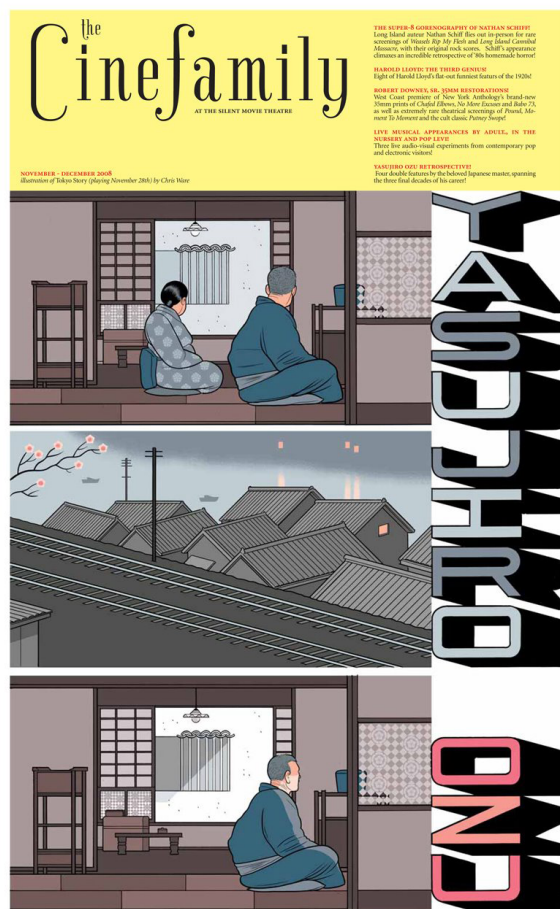


Figure 2. Ware, Chris, cover to the Cinefamily screening program at the Silent Movie Theatre, November–December 2008. © Chris Ware.

Tokyo Story, like many films by Ozu, is a film about time and memory, but in Ware's strip version, the weight of time seems to be greater than in the film for one reason: whereas in movies memory is something virtual, something that can appear or not, in comics, memory is always a factual presence that cannot be avoided. Within a single page, readers are always forced to compare past and present: in this case, the image of the couple and the image of the lonely husband, the good old times and the cheerless present, whereas in the film version, the spectator is not required to confront the past all the time (only when it is directly evoked), leaving him the option of forgetting what he has seen.

The lyricism of this apparently simple page by Chris Ware is based on the fact that when we look at a panel we can also see "the other panels of the page, or even the double page [...]" which inevitably influences the perception of the panel we are looking at" (Peeters 1998, 23; my



translation⁵). This quality of comics, which is as central to the medium as sequentiality, has been given diverse names such “peri-champ” (Peeters 1998, 23), “panopticity” (Samson 2006) or “tabularity” (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976). Ware plays with this quality very often, using the influence of the surrounding panels to show how past times intrude in the present and how that affects human life. We can find a good instance of Ware’s awareness of the panoptical quality of comics in the double page of *ACME Novelty Library*, #18, *Building Stories*, part 2 where its unnamed protagonist gets pregnant (fig. 3). In this ongoing graphic novel, Ware describes the quotidian life of a girl who lost her right leg when she was a teenager, a motive of constant regret and lack of self-confidence for her. But there is another source of anxiety that is very important in the story: she used to date a boyfriend that eventually left her without saying goodbye or giving her an explanation. Of course, she thinks that the reason he left was that he got sick of her physical disability and did not have courage enough to tell her.

The double page that is discussed offers quite an intricate temporal melange. During a visit to her parents’, the protagonist remembers the last time she visited them, a year ago at Christmas. She brought her boyfriend along (fig. 3, upper left corner) to spend the holidays with her. They were both nervous since she never had had a boyfriend before and her parents were very much looking forward to meeting him. They were lying on the bed before dinner and something unexpected happened: he whispered “I love you” in her ear for the first time. The sequence ends with a sad image, a remembrance of the day she arrived home after the amputation of her leg, sitting on the floor with infinite sadness, party balloons floating on the ceiling, only one of them lying on the floor, perhaps a symbol of her missing leg.

Below this panel marked with the number 1, a new sequence begins: in the evening, they all have dinner together and, surprisingly, her boyfriend gets along quite well with her father. She is in heaven, as she states in the captions. Although they have run out of the pill, they make love and she gets pregnant that same night. The moment of conception is marked with # 2 in a panel that is almost a repetition of # 1: same framing, same position of the bed, chest of drawers, etc. The proximity of both panels makes it impossible not to think of her agony as a teen, because whenever we look at panel #2, we can still see panel #1 in the corner of our eye, making the experience of reading similar to the experience of remembering: a superposition of moments. It makes the reader feel that whenever the protagonist tries to remember the night she got

⁵ “Il existe par contre un espace absolument spécifique que l’on pourrait nommer le péri-champ. Constitué par les autres cases de la page et même de la double page, cet espace est à la fois autre et voisin influence inévitablement la perception de la case sur laquelle les yeux se fixent” (Peeters 1998, 23)

pregnant, she always thinks about the day she arrived home after the amputation: for her, the experience of remembering is like looking at these two images together.

But the story goes on. Eleven months later, she repeats the visit without her boyfriend (fig. 3, upper right corner). She arrives in her old room and, when she sees her bed, she cannot find the nerve to sleep on it. Instead of that, she lies on the floor, feeling miserable and lonely. A caption tells us so, but this is not necessary because panel #3 has the same framing as panel #1 and #2, which works as an expressive device; the identical framing makes it obvious that she is thinking about the worst day (#1) and the best day (#2) of her life when she enters the room for the third time. However, there is a fourth visit that takes place some years later. She arrives home again, but she discovers that her mother turned her room into an office. She has to sleep on a couch. The last panel of the page (#4) brings all the past images together within the same space, a superposition of all previous memories.

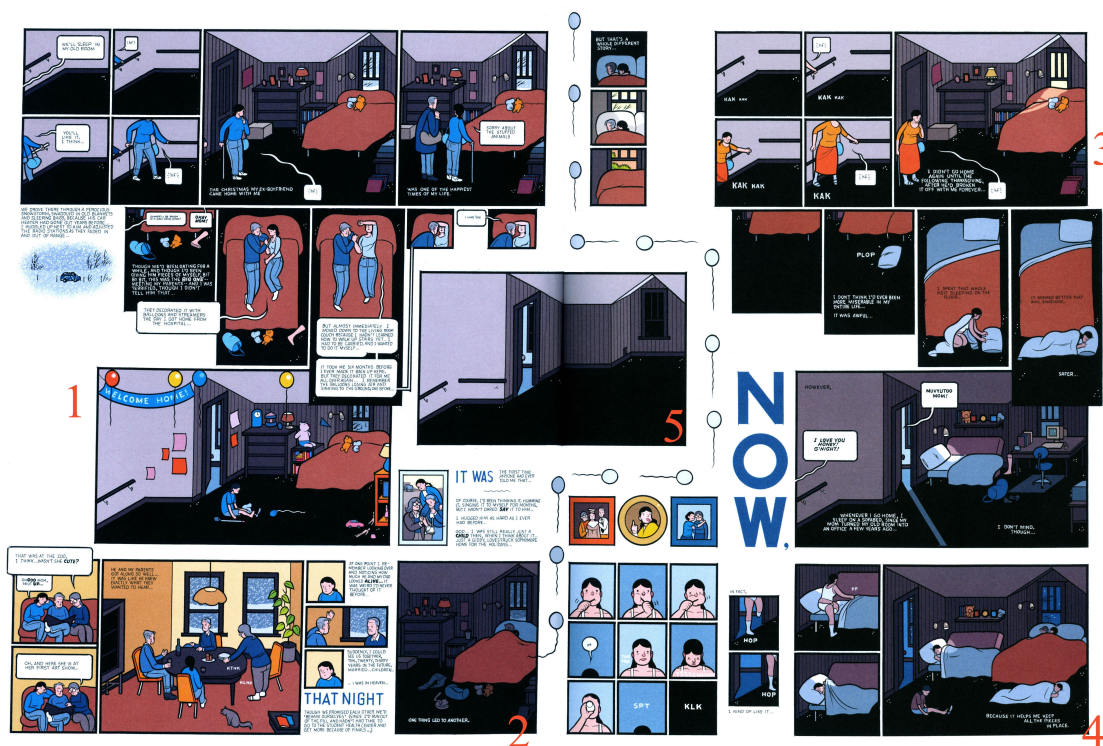


Figure 3. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library #18*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007, pp. 33–34. © Chris Ware.

This final superposition of panels #1–3 on #4 constitutes a clever metaphor of memory, that in fact, works as a perfect illustration of Bergson's definition of memory. According to him:

Memory, as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. [...] In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically.



fact, the past conserves itself automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the doors of consciousness that would fain leave it [the past] outside. (Bergson 1922, 5)

In Ware's page, the sad memories of its unnamed protagonist "enter" the door of her bedroom, occupying the same space of the present, as it happens in Bergson's definition. Memory is therefore conceptualised as several moments of time in the same space. Even though memory can present events in a sequential manner, when memory is triggered by a geographical space (the house we used to live in, a street we used to walk to go to work, a town we used to spend our holidays in) we see and feel in a simultaneous manner the images we associate to that place, merging all of them together. The conception of memory implicit in figure 3 is very similar to the one Marcel Proust, an author who has been frequently read in the light of Bergson's theories (Jansen 2003, 30), made explicit in his description of Saint Hillaire, Combray's church, in *Du côté de chez Swann*.⁶ Each part of the church dates from a different period: its walls were built in the 11th century, the arcade of the tower-stair is gothic (mid-12th century to 15th century) and the crypt, Merovingian (8th century). Proust reflects upon this:

[The cathedral was] a building which occupied, so to speak, four dimensions of space – the name of the fourth being Time – which had sailed the centuries with that old nave, where bay after bay, chapel after chapel, seemed to stretch across and hold down and conquer not merely a few yards of soil, but each successive epoch from which the whole building had emerged triumphant. (Proust 1957, 74)

Here, Proust is not considering personal memory like Ware, but collective memory and history; the image is, nevertheless, similar: diverse moments of the past, represented by the different areas of the temple, "lean over the present" (to use Bergson's words) coming together in the present space of the church. The experience of the protagonist of *Acme Novelty Library*, #18 when entering her bedroom is not unlike the impressions described by Proust's narrator above, who, by walking into the building, instead of perceiving time as a succession of events, gets a grasp of the past as a whole in a single space, attaining a sudden comprehension of the concept of time Bergson defended. Combray's church, as well as Ware's bedroom, are metaphors of the human mind, which uses the faculty of memory to blend several moments of time in a single space and, in doing so, gives us a sense of continuous and coherent existence.

⁶ The descriptions of Combray are inspired by the town of Illiers (that changed its name to Illiers-Combray after Proust), and Saint-Hillaire, Combray's church, is also obviously inspired by Saint-Jacques, the church in Illiers.

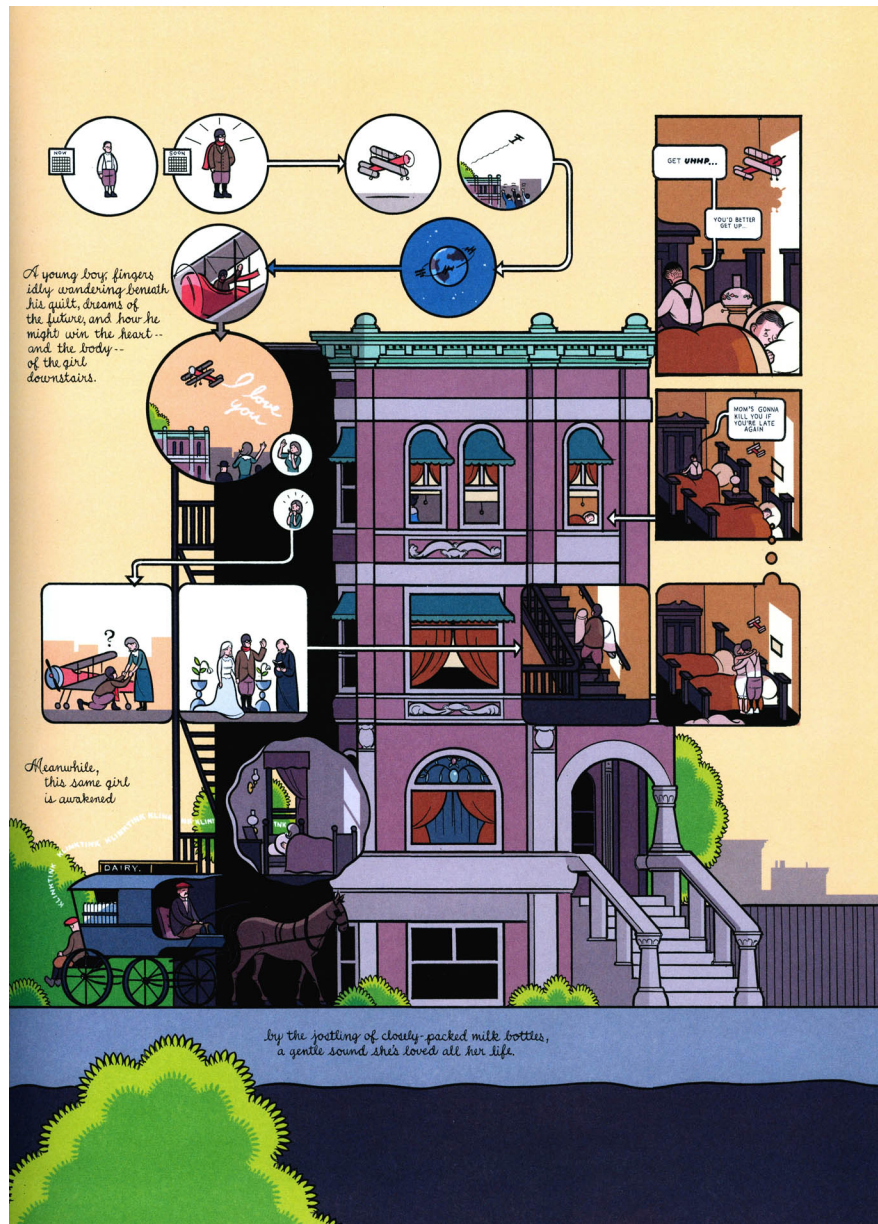


Figure 4. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library*, #18, Chicago, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007, p. 22. © Chris Ware.

Jacques Samson has pointed out Proust's influence in Chris Ware without detailing which specific points these two authors have in common (Samson 2006). I would say that Proust's main influence is felt when it comes to represent memory as something attached to a geographic and architectural space, especially in some passages of *Building Stories*, part 2 (fig. 4). In the case of the double page analysed above, Ware extends the metaphor of memory to the very essence of the medium: it is the page and not the building that works as the human mind, showing several moments of time simultaneously and organising the images of memory in space. However, if we compare Proust with Ware, we must take notice of an important difference: in spite of Proust's



nostalgic mood, memory always “emerges triumphant” in his work, as his narrator states in the passage above (triumphant in the sense that memory is presented as a conquest of the past, an affluence of rich images of youth triggered by simple, quotidian acts like eating a muffin); whereas Ware’s representations of memory never come across as a conquest of time, since he substitutes detachment for nostalgia, and the operation of remembering always becomes part of a process of emotional decay. When Bergson says that the door of consciousness presses to leave the past outside, he is describing a cerebral mechanism that

[...] is arranged just so as to drive back into the unconscious almost the whole of this past, and to admit beyond the threshold [of consciousness] only that which can cast light on the present situation or further the action now being prepared — in short, only that which can give useful work. (Bergson 1922, 5)

Of course, if that mechanism of repression does indeed exist, most of Ware’s characters suffer from a severe malfunction more often than not. The past images that enter their bedrooms are not an aid for their actions at all, but just the opposite: their sad memories are usually the cause of their vital paralysis, especially in the case of the protagonist of *Acme Novelty Library*, #18, whose mobility impairment is, in fact, both spiritual and physical.

CHRIS WARE’S DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATIONS AND PARALYSIS

Some of the most remarkable representations of memory in the work of Chris Ware are presented in the form of diagrams, which almost invariably deal with an accumulation of past images that, in some way or another, paralyse the character who remembers. One of Ware’s (1994) most representative memory diagrams can be found in *ACME Novelty Library* # 2 (fig. 5), where a two-headed Quimby the Mouse, remembers his past while his twin Siamese brother is dying in bed. Quimby’s memories are represented in diagrammatic form with arrows that end in five different points: a well near an old house (upper left corner), a wooden hovel far in the horizon, the twin brothers sitting under a tree, a garbage bin (center) and Quimby’s house (upper right corner). We can start reading the diagram from one of these five endpoints going back into the past of the characters. Each object introduces a different memory: the brothers throwing a coin inside the well, killing an ant inside the hovel, taking a picture of themselves near the tree, Quimby hitting his brother in the head with a gas lamp and putting the gas lamp in the garbage bin. There is also a non-narrative sequence: it presents the interior of the house where Quimby spent his youth and some objects contained inside a drawer in his room. Since these five sequences have some intersection points, it is easy to jump from one to another; the well sequence can lead us to the day Quimby threw the coin into the well, or to the drawer where Quimby found that coin. The



drawer, in its turn, leads to a description of its contents, among them a photo, which is the beginning of a new sequence that describes the events that happened the day the photo was taken and the first symptoms of Quimby's brother's illness.

This page constitutes a panoptical representation of memory, like the one in figure 3. Both of them make explicit the common relation the human mind establishes between memories and geographical places, but this page takes into account two properties of memory that are not reflected in figure 3: free association of ideas and chronological ambiguity. Memory does not work in a linear manner, presenting remembrances and places in a chronological order, like the double page of *Acme Novelty Library*, #18 does. When we remember something, one memory leads to the next following a thematic or an emotional link. The diagrammatic form allows Ware to represent these links between memories, landmarks of the spiritual life of his characters, which are more often than not, trivial objects: a coin, a photo, an ant, a broken lamp, a tree, a drawer, etc. A well can become a landmark of memory if you have seen it day after day from your window during a certain period of your life. If after a long time away from home, you return and find the well in the same place, as happens in figure 5, it will suddenly acquire an extraordinary significance because it will become a sign or a reminder of everything that has changed; something permanent, like a lighthouse amidst an ever changing sea guiding you among the memories you associate with that place.

The other essential property of memory Ware takes into account in his diagrams is chronological ambiguity. Memory never works chronologically: since the process of memory is based in free association of ideas, it is frequently difficult to establish if a particular event happened *before* or *after* another. The diagram layout of figure 5 shows evident signs of this chronological ambiguity; many of the sequences are not connected in a linear manner, and consequently their place in the chronological succession of events becomes uncertain. Which memory is older: the killing of the ant or the photographic episode? Some other events, on the other hand, can be dated more easily. The sequence where Quimby's brother coughs in the street must have taken place after the sequence where Quimby takes a photograph of his brother and himself, because Quimby's brother is wearing a white beard in the former and looks younger in the latter. In cases like this, the chronologic order of memory can be reconstructed, but it is always by means of a deductive process. Chronology is not given by the order of the panels or the position of each sequence in the page; chronology is established by the active participation of the reader.

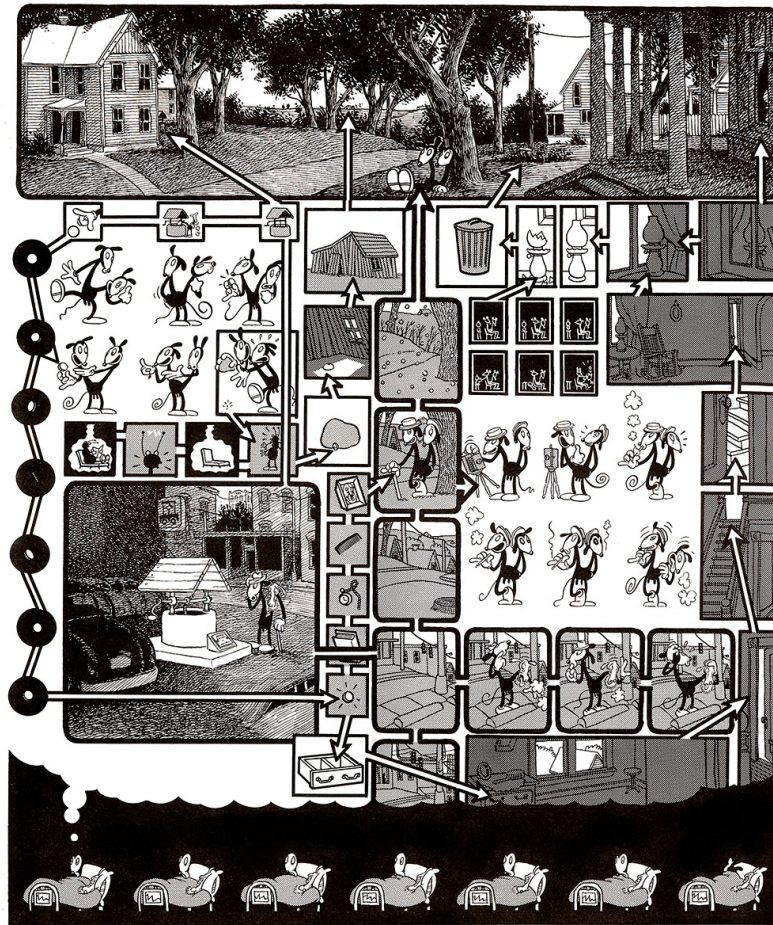


Figure 5. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library #2*, Fantagraphics, 1994, p. 8. © Chris Ware.

All in all, Ware uses his diagrammatic compositions to build an intricate maze of images where the reader must wander, if not looking for a way out, at least trying to make the images cohere. The act of reading becomes, thus, a mirror image of the act of remembering. It implies the same mental processes: connecting temporal events with geographical spaces and objects, jumping freely from one event to another and then going back to previous events, making inferences about chronology in base to visual and contextual data, etc. This should be enough to explain *how* memory is represented in Ware's diagrammatic layouts. However, these memory mazes have another characteristic that determines *what* kind of memory can be represented through them. Ware's diagrams are usually one-page interludes in the midst of long narrations like *Jimmy Corrigan* or *Building Stories*, or one-page gags in the tradition of the Sunday page. Each diagram is an autonomous narrative unit that begins and ends within the page. In a conventional page layout, there is always a panel at the bottom right corner that leads us to the next page, but in Ware's diagrammatic compositions there is no such panel: their reading patterns are always

circular, implying a recursive notion of memory. In other words, memory is not a linear narrative system; it endlessly revises and recycles old materials.

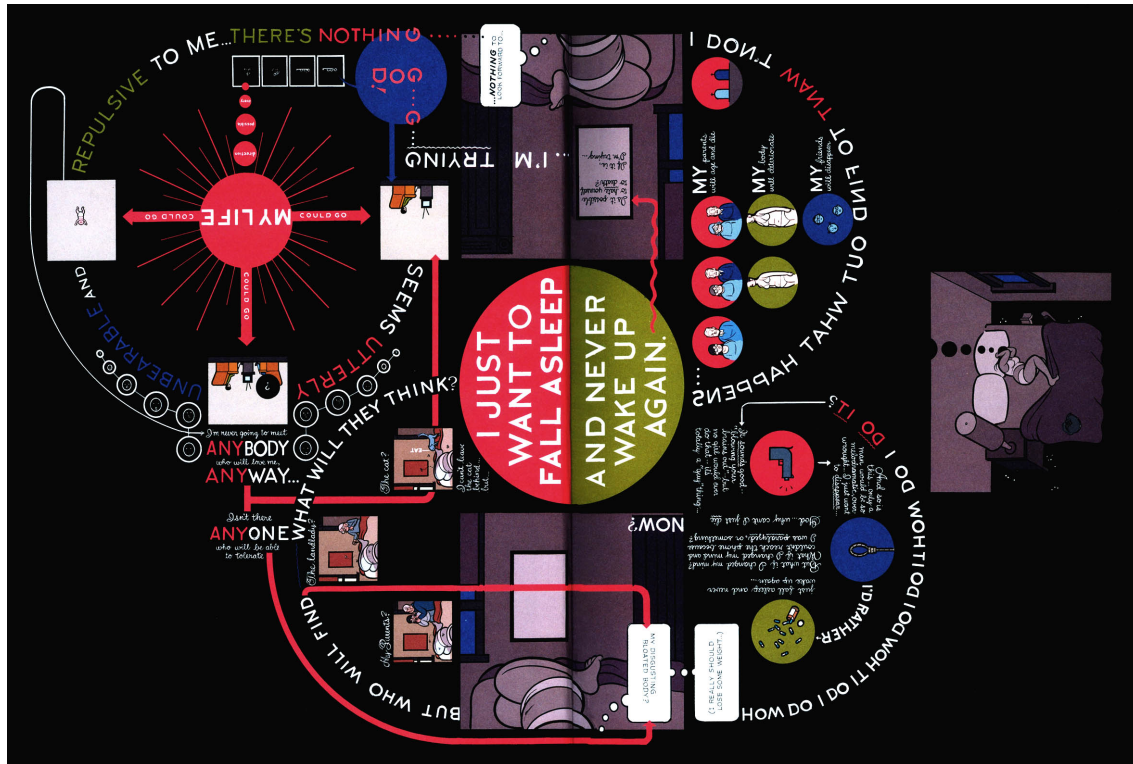


Figure 6. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library*, #18, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007, first end-sheet. © Chris Ware.

Ware's characters are lost in their memories, constantly going back to the same obsessive thoughts. The complexity of their circular thought patterns can be excruciating and probably reaches its climax in the diagram printed on the first end sheet of *ACME Novelty Library*, #18 (fig. 6), where the lonely one-legged protagonist of *Building Stories* gives rein to her suicidal thoughts. This inside cover spread goes beyond the act of remembering, because it mixes memories and imagined events, presenting them as alternatives. The starting premise of this thought diagram is a desire: "I just want to fall asleep, and never wake up again", which leads to several possible trains of thought. In the first place, above and to the right of the starting premise, we find one of her arguments for committing suicide: "I don't want to find out what happens [if I go on living]". She does not want to see her parents, her friends and herself grow old: memories of her body and the faces of her parents emerge in her mind along with future projections of their decaying bodies. In the second place, we can find the opposite train of thought, the reason why she is afraid of killing herself, descending from the central premise: "What will they think?", "But who will find [me]?" She goes on living because she is afraid of hurting the people she loves, as well as her cat. So then, if she *must* live, there are two basic options: either she finds a partner, or she



does not (at the upper left corner of figure 6). If she has to stay alone, there is no point in living; “I’m never going to meet anybody who will love me, anyway...”, then an arrow leads back again to the panels where she imagines her dead body with flies hovering around her. Of course, there is also the possibility of meeting somebody. But who would that be? Who will accept her? Who will find her attractive enough? The face of her future partner is hidden by a question mark.

We can spend as much time as we want reading this page, going from one thought to another and then back to the central premise of suicide over and over again. No reading path can lead us out of the page and the same applies for the protagonist: every train of thought she follows takes her back to the same obsessive ideas. It is interesting to note that the diagrammatic patterns Ware uses are almost always circular, not only when they represent memory processes, but also when they represent a mixture of memory, thoughts and projections of the future, as in fig. 6. In Ware’s diagrams, memory, thought, imagination and every other mental activity become neurotic processes. Certainly, it has to do with the obsessive character of his protagonists, but also with the fact that Ware uses the page as a metaphor of the human mind, just as Proust used Combray’s church. The page is a container of images and thoughts, but we must bear in mind that containers are physical objects that are constrained by their physical limits. The space of the page is not boundless: no matter how big the page is, the thoughts, the sequences and the memories it contains are like fish inside a bowl, they can move, twisting and going in circles endlessly, but they cannot trespass the limits of the bowl.

The page, our head, and our body are limits for our desire of remembering and thinking, for our desire of expansion, and nowhere in the work of Ware is this more evident than in *ACME Novelty Library*, #18. Some of its pages are anatomic “maps”, where sequences of panels are linked to several parts of the human body (fig. 7). They are not only graphic metaphors for the obstacles and limitations that a disabled girl like the protagonist of *Building Stories* finds in her life, but also a reflection on the medium of comics. Ware is constantly testing the limits of the medium in an attempt to expand his diagrammatic representations of memory. On the one hand, he has used pages of huge dimensions in *ACME Novelty Library*, #2, #4, #7, #15 and, especially, *Jimmy Corrigan*’s dust jacket, where we can read, in its obverse and reverse side, a condensed version of the contents of the graphic novel, a whole human life embodied in a single page (fig. 8). On the other hand, Ware has also tried the inverse operation: reducing the size of the panels in order to prolong his diagrams and sequences over the surface of the book; on the edge of the cover of *The Acme Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book*⁷ (Ware 2005), we can find a minute strip sequence that summarises the origin and evolution of the

⁷ It collects *ACME Novelty Library* #7 and #15 with additional material.

universe using the smallest physical space we can find in a book, an act which gives graphic expression to Hamlet's bluff: "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space" (Shakespeare 1998, 39.)

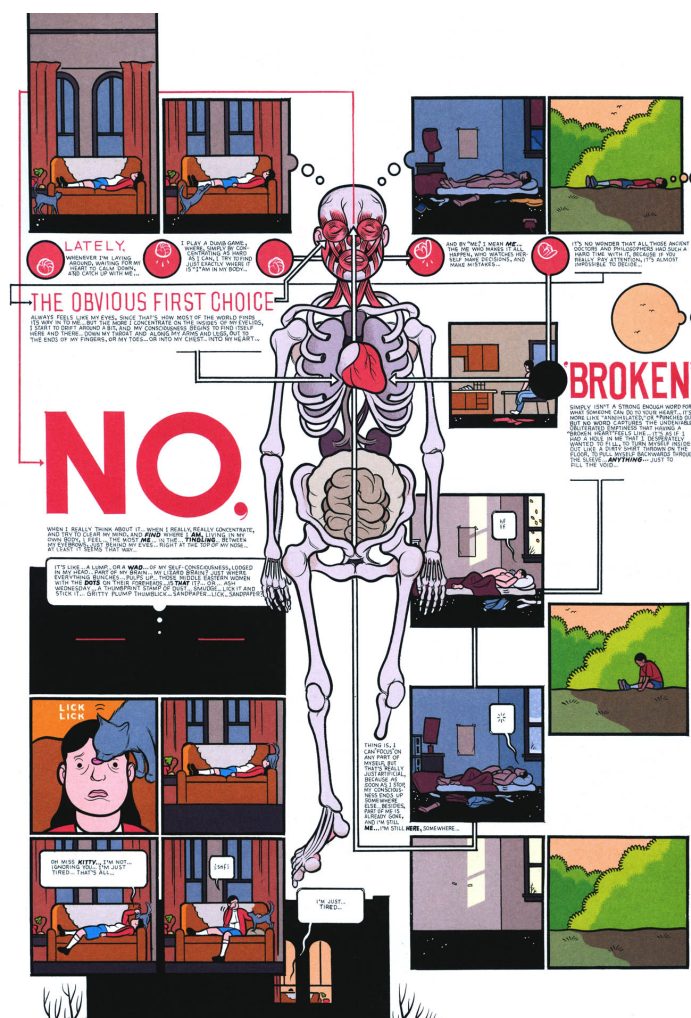


Figure 7. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library #18*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007, p. 42. © Chris Ware.

But there is an irony in Ware's attempt of conquering the space of the page. Either by printing books of uncanny dimensions or by inserting diagrams in every available space in the book, Ware's desire for expansion becomes paralysed, like his characters under the weight of memory. No matter how big a page is, the space it offers is never boundless: it limits the expansion of the diagrams forcing them to follow cyclic patterns; the characters often find themselves going back once and again to the same thoughts and past images in a continuous loop that makes them unable to act (fig. 5 and 6). In *Jimmy Corrigan's* dust jacket (fig. 8), for instance, every sequence converges in and starts from the central image of the earth globe; even in an enormous space like this dust jacket, Jimmy's memories are as recursive and obsessive as Quimby's.

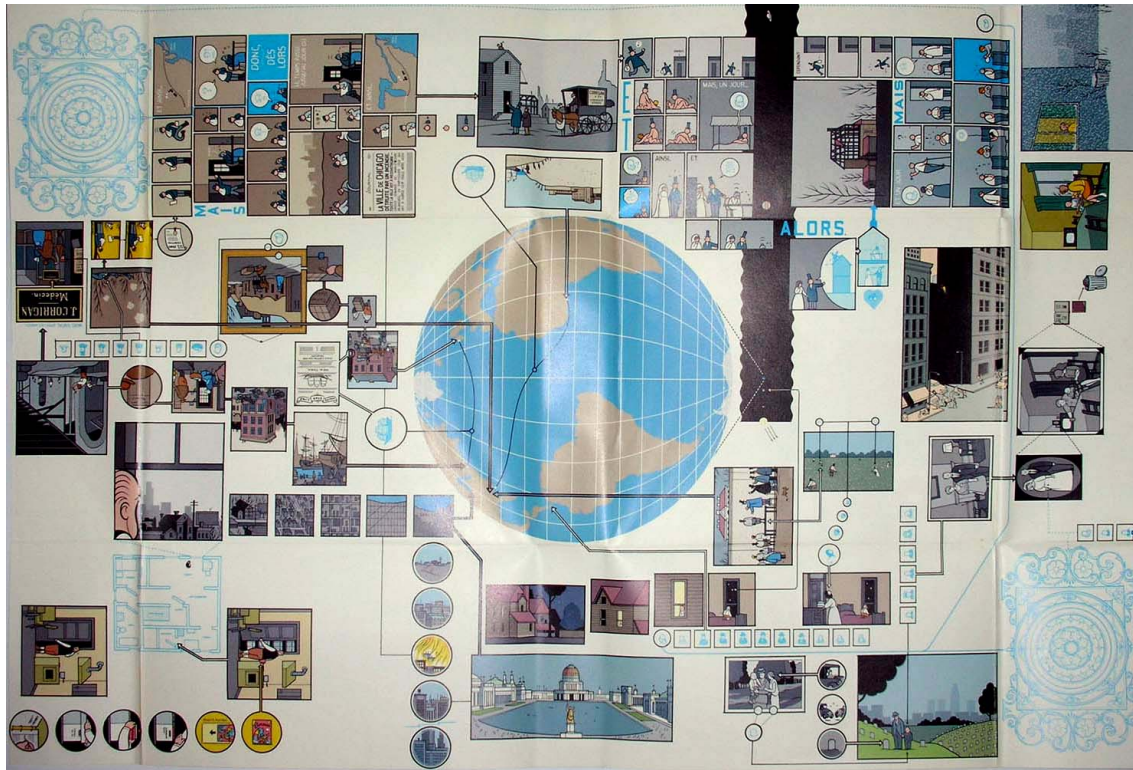


Figure 8. Ware, Chris, *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth*, Pantheon, 2000, dust jacket, reverse. © Chris Ware.

CONCLUSIONS: ADDING A SECOND DIMENSION TO PROUST

Comparing Chris Ware with modernist authors such as James Joyce or William Faulkner has already become commonplace, especially in non-academic comics criticism, without specifying in what particular manner these authors are related (Knut 2010; Thompson 2001; Mautner 2010). This comparison is well grounded, however, if we consider the interest Faulkner and Joyce (and Proust as well) had in the relation between geographical space and memory. In the first chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*, a single space evokes different superposed times in Benji's mind. Like Ware, some modernist writers used free association of ideas as a way to organise narrative materials: whole chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses* are written in a free flowing stream of consciousness, especially the second chapter in which a description of a beach is intertwined with every idea, experience or knowledge, suggested by every object Stephen Dedalus sees on the beach. And, finally, it is common in modernist literature to resort to chronological ambiguity when it comes to connect one memory to another; Gerard Genette, for instance, identified many passages in *À la recherche du temps perdu* where "the order of succession owes nothing to the temporal connection between the events composing it" (Genette 1980, 84). There is a passage at the end of *Sodom et Gomorre* where the itinerary of a train and its sequence of stops gives rise to a narrative



sequence of memories whose order of succession does not correspond with the fact that “the little train goes first to Maineville, then to, Grattevast, and that these stations evoke in the narrator's mind, in that order, anecdotes connected to them” (Genette 1980, 84). With the same disregard towards the actual chronology of the events, Ware arranges Quimby's memories following a free association of ideas, making it very difficult to say which one precedes the other in a time line. This *achronic* mood is completely Proustian, but whereas Proust is forced to present memories in a linear manner, Ware has a second dimension to play with.

Free association of ideas as a sequencing device is characteristic of Proust's narrative voice, as we have already noted. The famous madeleine cake evokes the image of Combray, where the narrator spent his summer holidays. He and his parents used to stay at his aunt's and she gave him a madeleine with his tea whenever he entered her room to visit her (Proust 1957, 63). The image of his ill aunt, who never steps out of her room, makes the narrator remember his aunt's maid, Françoise, who used to entertain her with the latest gossip when the rest of the family went to church (Proust 1957, 66). Françoise makes him think about Combray's church (Proust 1957, 74) and its steeple “inscribing its unforgettable form upon a horizon beneath which Combray had not yet appeared” (Proust 1957, 77), and so on. Although the succession is not chronologic, all these events and anecdotes are presented in a straight line: if we forget what particular image linked one memory to the next, we must go back and re-read that specific passage. Thanks to the panoptical property of comics, Ware is not forced to link the sequences in direct line but does it in a two-dimensional space, making explicit how they are connected and what visual motifs lead from one to another. With a single gaze to the page we can see the muffin, the aunt, the maid, the church, the steeple and every train stop in *Sodome et Gomorre*. Whereas Proust presents the train itinerary from the point of view of the railroad, Ware presents it from a bird's eye view, outlining the routes of the mind on the page, with all their meanders and turns, like on a railroad map.

What Ware proves with this is, that comics seem to have certain advantages when it comes to representing memory and circular thought processes because, as a medium, it can rise above the linear limitations of a purely sequential narration system such as literature. A novel is like Proust's train: it is always going forward and it is difficult for the traveller to perceive anything else but the forward motion. Novels depend exclusively on the verbal discourse, which is forcefully linear: words, sentences and chapters are always apprehended in a straight sequence. Comics, however, add a new dimension: they can give us a broader picture of memory, making explicit its very structure. Comics can represent life very easily as a complex system of possibilities and interconnections.



Memory serves a practical purpose because it is the basis of action, as Bergson stated. Without remembrances of what is good and what is bad, remembrances of how we have reacted to past events or what gives us pleasure and pain, we simply could not be able to act and make decisions. But this function of memory is only one side of the problem. It is true that memory supports our animal survival instinct allowing us to act, but on the other hand (and this is the reason why it is so easy to identify with Ware's characters), memory can also produce a state of paralysis. Nostalgia and neurosis are paralysing mental processes associated to circular "trains of memory". Our faculty of imagination – that is, our desire to relive once and again the same images for the mere pleasure of reliving them, if we are nostalgic, or our desire to relive images because we are afraid of them, if we are neurotic – frequently makes us go against our survival instincts, neutralising our power of action, and becoming dwellers of our own remembrances.

Ware's diagrammatic compositions are one of the most complex and intelligent representations of the pathology of nostalgia and neurosis because they try to represent the structure of these mental processes thanks to a quality unique to comics: panopticity. Many novels and films, like *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Alain Resnais' *Je t'aime, je t'aime*, or more recently, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, by Michel Gondry, have also tried to represent the inner workings of memory and its pathologies. But Chris Ware's diagrams go beyond these titles at least in one aspect: his diagrammatic compositions represent how memory works in the same manner a flux diagram represents how a complex and non-linear social system, such as a factory or a company, works. They give us a complete picture of those pathologies, allowing us to check with just one glance what is the function of every one of its images in relation to the whole, and hopefully help us to understand the complexities of these pathologies better.



REFERENCES

- Bergson, Henri. 1910. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Translated by F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Bergson, Henri. 1922. *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell. London : McMillan and Co.
- Bergson, Henri. 1959. *La pensée et le mouvant*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Cates, Isaac. 2010. "Comics and the Grammar of Diagrams." In *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, edited by David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman, 90–104. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1989. *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fresnault-Deruelle, Pierre. 1976. "Du linéaire au tabulaire." *Communications* 24: 7–23.
- Genette, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Groensteen, Thierry. 2007. *The System of Comics*. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Heer, Jeet. 2006. "Little Nemo in Comicsland." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 82 (2): 104–121.
- Jansen, Yolande. 2003. "The Red Shoes: Walter Benjamin's Reading of Memory in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in the Light of the Dreyfuss Affair." *Journal of Romance Studies* 3 (1): 29–43.
- Knut, Wilson. 2010. "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth by Chris Ware." *Wilson Knut's Witticisms*. Accessed November 8, 2011. <http://wilsonknut.com/2010/12/28/jimmy-corrigan-the-smartest-kid-on-earth-by-chris-ware>.
- Leighton, Hodson. 1989. *Marcel Proust*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Mautner, Chris. 2010. "Editing is Thinking: An Interview with David Ball." *Comic Book Resources*. Accessed November 8, 2011. <http://robot6.comicbookresources.com/2010/05/editing-is-thinking-an-interview-with-david-ball>.
- Peeters, Benoît. 1998. *Lire la bande dessinée*. Brussels: Casterman.



- Peeters, Benoît. 2005. "Chris Ware: Un art de la mémoire." Documentary Film. Arte France, January 26, 2005.
- Proust, Marcel. 1957. *Remembrance of Things Past, Volume One. Swann's Way*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Penguin.
- Samson, Jacques. 2006. "Écriture modale de la bande dessinée: l'apport de Chris Ware." Text read at the *Colloque sur la bande dessinée, Festival BD d'Amiens*.
- Samson, Jacques, and Benoît Peeters. 2010. *Chris Ware. La Bande dessinée reinventée*. Montréal: Les Impressions Nouvelles.
- Sattler, Peter R. 2010. "Past Imperfect: 'Building Stories' and the Art of Memory." In *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, edited by David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman, 206–222. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Shakespeare, William. 1998. *Hamlet*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Tabachnick, Stephen E. 1993. "Of Maus and Memory: The Structure of Art Spiegelman's Graphic Novel of the Holocaust." *Word & Image* 9 (2):154–62.
- Thompson, David. 2001. "Density, Magic, Genius and Loss." *Eye Magazine* 40. Accessed November 8, 2011. <http://www.eyemagazine.com/review.php?id=4&rid=29>.
- Ware, Chris. 1994. *ACME Novelty Library, #2*. Seattle: Fantagraphics.
- Ware, Chris. 2000. *Jimmy Corrigan. The Smartest Kid on Earth*. New York: Pantheon.
- Ware, Chris. 2005. *The Acme Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book*. New York: Pantheon.
- Ware, Chris. 2007. *Acme Novelty Library #18*. Chicago: The Acme Novelty Library.
- Ware, Chris. 2008. *Acme Novelty Library #19*. Chicago: The Acme Novelty Library.
- Wivel, Matthias. 2011. "Interview with Chris Ware, Part 2 of 2." *The Comics Journal*. Accessed November 10, 2011. <http://classic.tcj.com/alternative/interview-with-chris-ware-part-2-of-2/2>.