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Recommended Citation

Kuhlman, Martha, "In the Comics Workshop: Chris Ware and Oubapo" (2010). *English and Cultural Studies Book Publications*. Paper 13.

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In the Comics Workshop: Chris Ware and Oubapo

Martha Kuhlman

In order to delve into the complexity of Chris Ware's work, I would like to begin by pausing to consider a composition by the Dutch artist Joost Swarte because it demonstrates something fundamental about Ware's structural approach to the medium of comics. This composition, titled "The Comix Factory," appeared in December 1980 as the cover of the second issue of *RAW* magazine, the independent and avant-garde publication edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly.¹ The cover is significant not only because Ware's work would appear in *RAW* ten years later, thus bringing him into the fold of other experimental and international comics artists, but also because this particular image had a lasting influence on the development of his own unique aesthetic.² By representing the comic strip as an elaborate theater set with the characters waiting for their cue, putting on makeup, and learning their lines, Swarte's cover exposes the mechanisms behind the form, and alludes to processes that artists typically conceal. The depiction of the comic strip as a constructed medium invites the viewer to pry it apart by posing some basic questions: How is it put together? According to what rules? And what happens backstage that we do not get to see? <Figure 6-1>

Ware's focus on the formal properties of the medium suggests his affinities with artists in the wider field of French and Belgian comics, although these connections have been largely unrecognized despite the fact that he is relatively well-known among comics scholars and cartoonists from these countries.³ To shed some light on these matters in a comparative context, I will discuss Ware's comics from a perspective informed by the

French literary tradition, specifically Oulipo [*L'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*] and Oubapo [*L'Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle*], which stand for the Workshop of Potential Literature and the Workshop of Potential Comics respectively. For both Ware and Oubapo, the concept of the workshop or factory becomes a key trope as they self-consciously create an avant-garde form of comics.

By indicating parallels between Ware's work in *The ACME Novelty Library* series, *Jimmy Corrigan*, and Oubapo works, I show how formal experimentation *in the medium* and *about the medium* offers another point of entry into the labyrinth of Ware's graphic narratives. Ware and the French artists I discuss deliberately foreground the formal constraints and possibilities of their chosen medium by positing comics as a kind of game, implicitly and explicitly. Moreover, their works share an ironic edge, and specifically critique mass-manufactured comics and consumerism more generally.⁴ I am not suggesting a direct line of influence between Oubapo and Ware; in fact, the French group ultimately claims Ware as an "anticipatory plagiarist" rather than the reverse.⁵ Nonetheless, there are a number of intriguing similarities underlying their respective artistic projects, particularly in their common emphases on craftsmanship and artistic integrity.

Into the Comix Factory

Oubapo has its origins in Oulipo, an organization founded in 1960 by writer and mathematician Raymond Queneau, scientist François Le Lionnais, and others.⁶ The basic premise of Oulipo is that by subjecting literature to different types of constraints and possibilities, the author is able to use these generative devices to create new literary

forms. In their embrace of intersections between mathematics, puzzles, and literature, the group eventually expanded to include such writers as Italo Calvino, Georges Perec, and Jacques Roubaud. The practitioners of Oulipo saw themselves as workers tinkering in a factory of language, much like Swarte's stage set, introducing an air of play and mischief into the literary enterprise. As Georges Perec puts it, "[l]iterary history seems deliberately to ignore writing as practice, as work, as play," all concerns Oulipo would directly address.⁷ To cite just two famous examples of Oulipo texts, Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* [*One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*] consists of ten sonnets whose individual lines can be intermingled to produce 10^{14} possible poems, and Georges Perec's lipogram novel *La Disparition* (translated as *A Void*) incredibly manages to avoid using the letter "e."⁸

Oubapo, founded in 1992 at the instigation of comics theorist Thierry Groensteen, takes the concept of the constraint and applies it to the medium of comics.⁹ From the beginning, the group had literary connections; two introductory essays to the first Oubapo journal were written by Oulipo members.¹⁰ Moreover, adopting Oulipo methods was a strategic bid for artistic credibility, and aligned the movement with the avant-garde in order to make a conscious break from the public perception of mass-market comics and comics as solely "entertainment for children."¹¹ It is also significant that Oubapo arises in the independent Parisian publishing house L'Association, which, as comics historian Bart Beaty notes, "radically restructured the popular conception of the comic book" in France by "[breaking] with both the corporate and generic model of comics production in the 1990s."¹² These books immediately looked different from the colorful, large format comics of the Tintin/Astérix variety, which L'Association member Jean-Christophe

Menu derisively refers to as “48CC” (48 page albums with a cardboard cover).¹³ Instead, the publisher prints on heavy paper, favors black and white comics concerning more complex and sophisticated themes, and uses simple, elegant covers not unlike respected French literary publishers such as Gallimard.¹⁴ Oubapo includes Jean-Christophe Menu, Jochen Gerner, Lewis Trondheim, François Ayroles, and Étienne Lécroart (among others), and L’Association has published four volumes of their journal *Oupus*, in addition to several full-length works and stand-alone projects.¹⁵

Given that the mission of L’Association is to establish an avant-garde pedigree for comics, similar to *RAW* magazine, Oubapo is logically an ideal incubator for experiments in comics. They opted for the word *ouvroir*, which we recall from the full version of the name [*L’Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle*], sounds much more antique than the more conventional *atelier*, and has the connotation of a women’s sewing circle, or a workroom in a convent.¹⁶ This is obviously a somewhat satirical appropriation, since there is only one woman in the group (Anne Baraou), and Oubapo works tend to display a ribald sense of humor. The group retains, however, a sense of collective enterprise in its explorations of the comics medium. Menu, the most outspoken theoretician of the group, argues that “comics already are a kind of constraint, which is why Oubapo is not so different from the comics that we [in L’Association] make.”¹⁷ As is the case with Oulipo, their goal is to “twist or subvert the codes of the traditional bande dessinée.”¹⁸

<Figure 6-2>

Turning now to Ware, we can already discern a number of compelling intersections between his projects, the mission of L’Association generally, and Oubapo specifically.¹⁹ First of all, Ware also distances his work from mainstream comics—most

notably in the American context, superhero comic books—even while he uses this material for his own satirical purposes.²⁰ As an editor for the comics issue of *McSweeney's* and *Best American Comics 2007*, Ware is a key member of a new generation of alternative comics artists including Ben Katchor, Seth, Adrian Tomine, Ivan Brunetti, and Daniel Clowes.²¹ Although these artists work in a diverse range of styles and subjects, they share an interest in bringing a level of artistic seriousness to the medium. Additionally, as with publications by L'Association, there is an emphasis on craftsmanship in Ware's irregularly sized issues of *The ACME Novelty Library*, which span a variety of dimensions and require extraordinary feats of printing.²² In fact, the entire *ACME Novelty Library* project can be understood an expansion of Swarte's "Comix Factory" or the notion of the Oubapo workshop. This connection is especially apparent in the "ACME Novelty Library Freestanding Cardboard Display," intended to hold the variously sized issues of this comic. The cardboard factory represented here is charmingly whimsical and yet unsettlingly grim, bustling with gears, pulleys, and conveyors.²³ In the upper story, mice lasso word "balloons" that float beneath the ceiling, stamp them onto the panels, and add text according to the instructions of a rodent-foreman. Meanwhile, another stream of mice are unceremoniously executed, dumped into carts, then nailed onto panels and assembled into pages—a cruel scenario masked by cheerful colors and an attractive display. <Figure 6-3>

Ware revisits the trope of the factory in *The ACME Report* in a slyly self-referential history of the ACME Novelty Library Company. The author of this document, George Wilson, an excessively pompous researcher, promises to deliver "the first, and probably only true history of the Company, from its surprising beginning with the

Original Letterer, through the cultural revolution, up to the present day's CEO and Chief Draughtsman, F. C. Ware."²⁴ The emphasis on the "Letterer" is noteworthy, since Ware does, in fact, draw all of his fonts by hand, and has won numerous awards for his lettering.²⁵ As Daniel Raeburn relates, Ware "performed the exercises from old hand-lettering manuals and copied fruit, cigar and cosmetics labels in order to attain a proficiency, then a fluency, in the increasingly antique art of hand-lettering."²⁶ In a sharp satire of mass-produced comics, Ware develops an exquisite contrast between the solitary and painstaking work of the individual letterer and the massive, bureaucratic edifice depicted in the comic. An impressive two-page spread offers the viewer a cutaway view of the company rendered in black and white, which is comprised of rooms of draughtsmen, thirty storerooms of comics, a printing machine, an art gallery, numerous dutiful secretaries, a tennis court, and an intimidating waiting room (where the unfortunate researcher has paced for hours, unable to gain admittance to the secrets inside).²⁷ This representation reinforces the impact of the "history" as a wry, self-reflexive gesture because the researcher is ultimately excluded from the "secret" comics experiments within, although the reader has access to them in the pages of the book. But how these experiments "work," or what they might mean, is another question entirely.

The Mechanism of the Constraint

In 1997, Jean-Christophe Menu declared Ware an honorary member of Oubapo on the strength of his experimental work in *ACME Novelty Library*: "Ware emphasizes the possibilities of the medium with as much brio as playfulness. In a sense, he is an Oubapien who, against all expectations, does not know it, because constraints (narrative

or formal) seem always very present in the functioning of Ware's work."²⁸ Jan Baetens, a renowned Belgian critic, has also drawn attention to the importance of constraints in Ware's comics, and describes his work as a form of "multi-layered poly-sequential writing and reading in which the reader has no right to play freely with the author's arrangement of material, but must scrupulously follow it to slowly discover the myriad relationships on the page itself."²⁹ To understand how these relationships are structured, we need to understand the principle of the constraint and how it applies to the experimental aspect of Ware's comics.

The innovation of Oulipo is that by inventing specific rules and limitations, or constraints, practitioners could open up new vistas in language and literature. As Marcel Bénabou writes, the constraint "forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources."³⁰ One can make a parallel claim for comics as well, although the fundamental building blocks of the medium are different. For Oulipo, constraints operate at the level of an individual letter (the lipogram excludes a letter), a word, a line (in Queneau's sonnets), or a larger semantic unit such as a stanza, paragraph, or chapter. Since one of the defining features of comics is sequentiality, individual panels on the comics page can be reconceived as pieces of a puzzle that the artist can manipulate; thus, reshuffling the panels according to specific patterns is one method of creating Oubapo constraints.³¹ The other main difference from Oulipo is that we must consider the interplay between words and images in comics; these two semantic tracks can work in accord with each other, or, as is often the case in Oubapo experiments, they are deliberately contrasted to create ironic or jarring effects.³²

In Groensteen's introductory essay to *Oupus 1*, "The first bouquet of constraints," the first work to discuss the operations of Oubapo in detail, he identifies two classes of constraints: one is *generative*, that is to say, a comic is created from scratch based upon specific limitations; the second is *transformative* and alters existing material according to a given rule.³³ Within the generative category, *iconic restriction* refers to comics that suppress one integral element in order to produce the graphic equivalent of a lipogram. Ayroles, an Oubapien, deftly employs this rule to humorous effect. The first episode of his comic "Faux Trinity" [*Feinte Trinité*] consists entirely of a simple three by three grid of panels, each with one word balloon oriented in a different direction depending upon the speaker. The exercise includes the caption: "To counterbalance the numerous examples of mute comics, François Ayroles proposes a blind comic, 'in anticipation of comics without words or pictures,' he explains."³⁴ Ayroles's highly self-referential example of iconic restriction excludes what we normally expect to find in comics: images. Instead, the comic is reduced to a series of word balloons that are pointed in different directions, depending on the speaker: "Papa! Papa!" "What is it, boy?" "Does God exist?" "Ask your mother" "Mama, Mama!" "Yes, what is it?" "Does God exist, mama?" "I don't know, dear." A speech balloon directed from the heavens concludes the metaphysical discussion: "What about me? No one is asking me?"³⁵

Menu cites an example of iconic restriction in *The ACME Novelty Library* that is a comic composed of a six-by-six grid of identically sized panels with the same blue lamp stand in the center.³⁶ The comic never directly represents the speakers; instead, the dialogue takes place outside of the frame and the lamp becomes a symbol of the tumultuous changes that one family experiences over a number of generations as they

move from house to house, and the children move into their own apartment.³⁷ Ware uses iconic restriction to connote loss and alienation, especially in a number of comics collected in *Quimby the Mouse* that concern Ware's ailing grandmother. Only empty interiors are represented while the dialogues between Ware and his grandmother, or Ware's own narration, are extra-diegetic.³⁸ In *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware uses this same technique to conceal the faces of female characters (with a few exceptions), in order to convey Jimmy's lack of rapport with women.³⁹ While Ayroles uses the device to playfully question the existence of God, Ware, whose direct inspiration in this case is Richard McGuire's comic strip "Here," uses this absence to emphasize his characters' sense of loss, alienation, and melancholy.⁴⁰

Out of Sequence

Perhaps most intriguing are the constraints that disrupt sequentiality, since these rules radically transform our basic perception of the ground rules of the comics medium. Two further subcategories under the general rubric of generative experiments are *multilinearity* [*la plurilecturabilité*] and *random sequence* [*la consécution aléatoire*], both of which are applicable to Oubapo's and Ware's comics. Groensteen describes "acrostic" strips which can be read as one vertical strip in connection with several horizontal ones; more complex versions of this model, realized for the Oubapo project *Oubapo Vacations* [*Les vacances de Oubapo*], can be read both left to right, and top to bottom, in a grid.⁴¹ Due to the exigencies of the constraint, however, the narrative possibilities of these experiments are relatively limited. Longer, more elaborate projects include Lécroart's *Vicious Circle* [*Cercle Vicieux*], which is a thirty-page palindrome

comic about a mad scientist and his assistant who construct a time machine in their laboratory. Exactly halfway through the book, one unique panel signals the shift to a narrative sequence that is the mirror opposite of the preceding section.⁴² At the farthest end of sequential experimentation is the Oubapo game *Scroubabble*, an example of *random sequence*, in which the pieces are individual panels from five narratives in different styles; the object of the game, as in Scrabble, is to devise comprehensible sequences on a grid rather like a crossword puzzle.⁴³

Ware has been consistently interested in comics that violate the reader's expectations of sequentiality from his early *The ACME Novelty Library* strips in the 1990s to his most recent productions. In *Quimby the Mouse*, a collection of strips from 1990 to 1993, the aforementioned strips concerning Ware's grandmother do not at all follow a left-to-right, top-to-bottom logic; arrows lead around the pages to pursue different tangents of thought and memory. Other strips resemble a rampant assembly line or Rube Goldberg device gone wrong, again evoking the metaphor of a comics factory. The famous Oulipo quote that states Oulipians are "rats who must build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape" seems especially applicable to Quimby's antics.⁴⁴ In one strip, Quimby is sucked up into a pipe, deposited in a car, dumped onto a conveyer belt, assembled and disassembled, and hit repeatedly by a mallet; it is difficult to discern, in the midst of this chaos, in which direction Quimby is traveling.⁴⁵

Thomas Bredehoft, Isaac Cates, and other critics have drawn attention to how Ware's comics do not follow left to right, top to bottom conventions of the Western reader; one can approach the multilinear pages in *Jimmy Corrigan* from several directions.⁴⁶ When read in conjunction with Oubapo, it seems significant that these

particular examples function as puzzles that must be solved if one is to understand the full intricacies of the plot. Readers have to make a concerted effort to realize, for instance, that Amy and Jimmy are related by blood through Jimmy's great grandfather and his African American servant.⁴⁷ Another manifestation of multilinear comics, "Once Upon a Time," published in Spiegelman and Mouly's first *Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies* collection, presents four variations on the story of an unfortunate frog who falls in love with a princess.⁴⁸ None of these endings can really be construed as "happy": in one, the wolf steals frog's Banjo; in the second, the wolf brings the banjo to the grandmother's antique store; the third story ends with the wolf selling the frog's banjo; and in the fourth story the princess regrets that she married the wolf rather than the frog. Each story is oriented at a ninety-degree angle from the next such that the reader must rotate the book to get the full effect.⁴⁹

Little Lit also contains the *random sequence* constraint in a children's game devised by Ware called "Fairy Tale Road Rage," which includes a game board, "chits" in eight colors, four "storyboards," four playing pieces, and a die, all of which can be cut out and assembled by the diligent child. It's notable that the game board is missing a space for a "happy ending;" instead, the players accumulate colored "chits" on their "story board," which looks like a bingo-card version of "Mad Libs," (each space is a specific grammatical category or attribute), until they have completed a coherent storyline. Of the eight possible denouements, only two are positive: "acquired superpowers," and "lived happily ever after;" it is up to the child to supply the "moral of the story." Ware includes the following disclaimer at the end of several detailed paragraphs of instructions in minute type: "No insurance is made against potential

alteration in moral constitution, world outlook, or temperament, nor is any child guaranteed a ‘good time,’ or even mild amusement.”⁵⁰ As is the case with his versions of the comics factory, Ware manipulates the ironic dissonance between the playful structural games with comics form and the melancholy content of the story. This is especially true of the last comparison between Oubapo and Ware’s comics in which the text is deliberately contrasted with the corresponding images.

Pastiche and Détournement

Under the general class of “transformative” experiments that Groensteen describes, the most obvious is *verbal substitution* in which the original text of an existing comic is subversively altered. Oubapo member François Ayroles transforms seven pages from *13 est au départ* [*The 13 is Leaving*] by Jean Graton by substituting the original text with “a historical dialogue on the ontology of the bande dessinée.”⁵¹ A young man jauntily slides down the banister to regale his parents with a song, but the sedately bourgeois couple is only annoyed by his exuberance. Read with the textual substitutions, however, this bourgeois scene becomes a statement about comics as an art form. In the French context, Ayroles’s Oubapo experiment recalls the tactic of *détournement*, which appropriates images from advertising and popular culture and transforms them into subversive messages. Employed by the Situationists in the 1960s, *détournement* in the form of verbal substitution in comics was frequently used as a critique of consumer culture.⁵²

<Figure 6-4>

Menu cites one of Ware’s early strips from *RAW*, “Thrilling Adventure Stories/I Guess” to support his claim that Ware is Oubapien, stating that the comic also operates

on the principle of verbal substitution.⁵³ Although Ware's comic is different in that he creates a pastiche of an older comic rather than appropriating an existing strip, the claim is worth revisiting.⁵⁴ Ware combines uncomfortable recollections of his grandfather and stepfather's racist comments and a memory of a slumber party at the house of a black friend. At first, this story appears entirely separate from the accompanying images that narrate a battle between a mad scientist and a superhero in a style reminiscent of "golden age" comics; however, the textual and visual tracks occasionally coincide.

<**Figure 6-5**> On the third page, for example, a young reporter clearly modeled on Lois Lane looks perplexed and the speech balloon above her reads: "I said that I thought that everyone was 'colored,' but he said that I didn't understand." The last panel of the comic depicts the superhero saving the woman reporter, which concludes both the adventure story and Ware's autobiographical narrative with the caption "It was just my mom and me, anyway." By exploiting the discrepancy between the superhero story and the autobiographical episode, the comic exposes the structural divide between word and image, once again subverting the reader's expectations to ironic effect.⁵⁵

This tension between form and content pervades the advertising in *The ACME Novelty Library* series as well, which at first glance seems to promise wealth, fame, and happiness, but in fact provides no such consolation despite the appearance of Sears Catalog entries, coupons, or self-help offers. One notice reprinted in *The ACME Report* advertises simply the "new thing": "fresh from the mysterious plastic asshole of 'popular culture.' All shiny and ready for you to put in your home, video cassette player, or mouth. Wow! [. . .] Some people think that this is what it's all about, anyway. Maybe you could even spend your life making this stuff, the stuff that people seem to want. What could be

better? Happiness awaits.”⁵⁶ Like the French examples of *détournement* found in Situationism and Oubapo, beneath the reassuring fonts and clip-art style graphics lurk incisive critiques of consumerism, the bourgeois family, self-help, American foreign policy, and race relations—to name just a few reoccurring subjects—for anyone who takes the time to read the small print.

The Writerly Text, or Art as Technique

In a conversation with Raeburn, Ware comments “I rarely ever did a comic just for the sake of experimentation,” and it would be anachronistic to suggest that Oubapo constitutes an influence upon Ware’s work since his earliest comics predate the formation of the group in 1993.⁵⁷ At best, Oubapo can only appropriate Ware through the playful title of anticipatory plagiarist. Moreover, the wry wit of Oubapo seems far removed from the quiet anguish of *Jimmy Corrigan* or *Quimby the Mouse*. Some have reproached the work of Oubapo for being too “gimmicky,” and even Oubapo members admit that constraints are at best a source of inspiration rather than a straightjacket.⁵⁸ Killoffer, one of the group, explains his attitude towards Oubapo as follows, “Through a constraint, one can discover and reproduce a pleasing aesthetic without its systematic application.”⁵⁹ Ultimately, what is illuminating about juxtaposing Oubapo to Ware’s comics is the way in which these comparisons reveal how Ware’s work is founded upon a range of formal mechanisms and constraints, (even if these mechanisms are less overt or deliberate), much like the machinery in Swarte’s “Comix Factory.”⁶⁰

The purpose of Oubapo, according to Groensteen, is to “invite a more vigilant kind of reading, a reading that would be more investigative and more reflexive [. . .]

Oubapo pages require the active participation of the reader.”⁶¹ In this respect, Oubapo corresponds to what Roland Barthes would term a “writerly” text, as opposed to a “readerly” one; the former demands an active reader who “produces” the text, while the latter only reinforces passivity and consumption. “Reading is not a parasitical act,” writes Barthes, “it is a form of work.”⁶² Ware’s description of comics reception is not far from this notion of a “writerly” text: “It’s not in any way a passive medium. The material is inert unless you’re regarding it. A film can be a very potent, emotional, thought provoking experience, or you can just sit there with your mouth open and watch cars explode if you want to [. . .] [but] [i]t takes a certain amount of effort to read even the most vacuous comic strip. It doesn’t do anything unless you’re reading it. It involves the reader in a similar way that literature does.”⁶³

By thinking of Ware’s work as a factory for comics experiments, we gain another level of appreciation for what he seeks to accomplish in reinventing the medium. Readers must slow down and read his comics with a degree of attentiveness normally reserved for literature if they are to grasp the patterns and games that bind the narrative together through an elaborate interlacing of forms.⁶⁴ Spiegelman, whose longstanding interest in experimental comics led to the creation of *RAW* magazine, quotes Viktor Shklovsky in his introduction to *Breakdowns*, a reissue of his comics from the 1970s: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult. Because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged, art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object.”⁶⁵ For Ware, Spiegelman, and Oubapo artists, testing the limits of the medium is a way of both continuing an avant-garde tradition and asserting that comics are a vibrant form of art.

Special thanks to Cécile Daheny and Geert Mesters for their helpful comments. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the French are mine.

¹ See *Read Yourself RAW*, ed. Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly (New York: Pantheon, 1987) 31. The original cover was for *RAW* 1.2, Raw Books, 1980.

² Chris Ware published his first strip in *RAW* 2.2 in 1990, followed by “Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess” in *RAW* 2.3 in 1991. For a detailed history of *RAW* magazine, see Bill Kartalopoulos’s “A RAW History: The Magazine,” *Indy Magazine*, Winter 2005. 21 Jan. 2009 <http://64.23.98.142/indy/winter_2005/raw_02/index.html>.

In an interview with Todd Hignite, Ware specifically mentions Joost Swarte’s artwork as having special importance for him: “I should mention that Joost Swarte’s amazing cover of *RAW* [2.2] taught me everything I know about coloring using printing tints, and it was only years later that I found out that Françoise had colored it herself.” Todd Hignite, *In the Studio: Visits with Contemporary Cartoonists* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006) 256. Moreover, Ware especially admires the “conceptual” quality of Swarte’s comics; see his interview with Gary Groth, “Understanding (Chris Ware’s) Comics,” *The Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 131.

³ For an overview of Ware’s place in American comics, see Jeet Heer’s chapter in this volume. Ware has received significant acclaim from French critics, winning both the “Alph Art” award for the best graphic novel and the critics’ prize for *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* at the famed comics festival in Angoulême in 2003. See the translation of his interview with Gary Groth, “Chris Ware: le plus astucieux dessinateur de la planète” *Bang!* 2 (2003): 10. See also Benoît Peeters’s documentary, “Chris Ware, un art de mémoire” Arte television: 2005. Available on Youtube. 21 Jan 2009.

⁴ For an analysis of Ware’s ambivalence toward comics’ mass-cultural associations, see David Ball’s chapter in this volume.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Mercier, “Confidences oubapiennes,” *9e Art* 10 (2004): 80. Gilles Clement, one of the Oubapo theorists, comments: “The number of oubapiens by anticipation proves that, by their very structure, comics have led a good number of people to push the limits of the intrinsic constraints of comics to make something different” [*Le nombre d’oubapiens par anticipation prouve que, par ses structures même, la bande dessinée a amené beaucoup de gens à pousser à l’extrême une des contraintes intrinsèques de la bande dessinée pour en faire autre chose*].

⁶ The initial group also includes Jacques Bens, Claude Berge, Jacques Duchateau, Latis, Jean Lescure, Jean Queval, and Albert-Marie Schmidt. See Hervé Le Tellier, *Esthétique de L’Oulipo* (Bordeaux: Le Castor Astral, 2006) 7-8.

⁷ Georges Perec, qtd. in Warren Motte, ed. and trans. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998) 5.

⁸ See Queneau’s exponential sonnet in the *Oulipo Compendium*, ed. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998) 14-33, and Georges Perec, *A Void*, trans. Gilbert Adair (Jaffrey, New Hampshire: David Godine, 2005). As of the writing of this essay, Oulipo is still an active group, and published a selection of works under the title “The State of Constraint: New Work from Oulipo” in *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* 22:1 (2006).

⁹ According to Jean-Christophe Menu, the idea of Oubapo was first raised in 1987 in Cerisy-la-Salle, the same place where Oulipo began, when Thierry Groensteen and Lewis Trondheim met at a “workshop of Oulipo comics” [*atelier de bandes dessinées oulipiennes*] that Groensteen had organized. But the group did not become official until 1992. See the interview conducted by Jean-Pierre Mercier with Oubapo members, “Confidences oubapiennes,” *9e Art* 10 (2004): 76-80. There is also an American section of Oubapo, although they do not have a journal. They do, however, have a website that cites many of the French examples and offers a place for American cartoonists to experiment as well. Matt Madden’s *99 Ways to Tell a Story* is inspired by Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style*. See <<http://www.tomhart.net/oubapo/>> 23 Jan. 2009.

¹⁰ Marcel Bénabou, “Oulipo: Présentation,” and Noël Arnaud, “La potentialité absolue,” in *Oupus* 1 (1997): 3-7.

¹¹ Jean-Christophe Menu, “Ouvre-Boîte-Po,” *Oupus* 1 (1997): 9.

¹² Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007) 9-10.

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- ¹³ Jean-Christophe Menu, “Plates-bandes (extension 1)” *l’Éprouvette* 1 (2006): 197-98.
- ¹⁴ Beaty 30.
- ¹⁵ See the inaugural edition, *Oupus* 1, January 1997, and the deliberately non-chronological issues that follow: *Oupus* 2 (2003); *Oupus* 3 (2000); and *Oupus* 4 (2005), all published by L’Association.
- ¹⁶ See Motte’s discussion of “ouvrir” 9.
- ¹⁷ [L]a bande dessinée est déjà une contrainte sur ce plan, c’est pourquoi l’Oubapo n’est pas si différent de la bande dessinée que l’on fait les uns et les autres. See “Confidences oubapiennes” 80.
- ¹⁸ The purpose of Oubapo is to [tordre ou détourner les codes de la bande dessinée traditionnelle]. Thierry Groensteen, “Un premier bouquet de contraintes,” *Oupus* 1 (1997): 13.
- ¹⁹ Ware first met the artists at L’Association in 1998 when he went to the comics festival in Angoulême, France. But he was not familiar with the work of Oubapo specifically. Chris Ware, e-mail to the author, 11 Jan. 2009.
- ²⁰ See Jacob Brogan’s chapter in this volume.
- ²¹ For a critical view of Ware’s editorial role in *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* 13 (2004) and *Best American Comics* (2007), see Marc Singer’s chapter in this volume.
- ²² L’Association wanted to publish the French edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*, but the editors balked when they realized how exacting Ware can be about the colors and the printing process. See Barbara Lambert, “Au nom du père, du fils et du croquis,” *Livres Hebdo* 15 Nov 2002: 18-19.
- ²³ Raeburn 80.
- ²⁴ Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005) 18.
- ²⁵ Ware won the Harvey Award for best lettering in 1996, 2000, 2002, and 2006. See <www.harveyawards.com>.
- ²⁶ Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004) 19.
- ²⁷ Ware, *The ACME Report* 20-21.
- ²⁸ Jean-Christophe Menu, “Le prodigieux travail de Chris Ware,” *9e Art: Les cahiers du Musée de la bande dessinée* 2 (1997): 53.
- ²⁹ Jan Baetens, “New = Old, Old = New: Digital and Other Comics following Scott McCloud and Chris Ware,” 23 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr11/11ware.htm>>.
- ³⁰ Qtd. in Motte 41.
- ³¹ In the context of comics, Beaty argues, sequentiality is *the* defining feature of the medium: “Thus, for the modernist project of comics to be fully engaged, artists must turn to comics that explore the formal limits of that sequentiality. This is a project that has been most clearly articulated by OuBaPo” (77).
- ³² Groensteen, “Un premier bouquet” 16.
- ³³ *Ibid.* 13-58.
- ³⁴ François Ayroles, “Feinte Trinité,” *Oupus* 2 (2003): 24.
- ³⁵ Ware also enjoys tinkering with metaphysical humor; See his various “God” comics, especially the cover of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* 13.
- ³⁶ Menu, “Le prodigieux travail de Chris Ware” 53.
- ³⁷ Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003) 33.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* 28-31.
- ³⁹ In an interview with Gary Groth, Ware explains that this is a deliberate choice: “I wanted to be sure [...] that the ‘empathies’ of the reader were clearly with the main character. And I felt that anytime I showed another character’s face, that feeling or tone was ruined” (141). It is true that grandmother’s face appears, and the mother’s face is represented once, but these instances are rare. See Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000) 153, 154, 264 (grandmother), 371 (mother).
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Gary Groth, 135-36.
- ⁴¹ See *Oupus* 3 (2000). These strips originally appeared in the newspaper *Libération* over the summer of 2000.
- ⁴² Étienne Lécroart, *Circle vicieux* (Paris: L’Association, 2005).
- ⁴³ Étienne Lécroart, François Ayroles, Jochen Gerner, Killoffer, Jean-Christophe Menu, *Scroubabbble* (Paris: L’Association, 2005). Each player starts with seven pieces, as in Scrabble, and attempts to create a viable narrative. According to the instructions on the box, “the coherence of the strips are judged by the participants over the course of the game.” Who has “won” the game is left to the individual discretion of the players.

⁴⁴ Motte 22.

⁴⁵ Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* 16.

⁴⁶ Thomas Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 869-90.

⁴⁷ See *Jimmy Corrigan* 250, 357-58. See also Isaac Cates's chapter in this volume.

⁴⁸ Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, eds. *Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies* (New York: Raw Junior Books, 2000). Oubapien Lewis Trondheim contributed an excellent example of a multilinear comic, "A-maze-ing Adventure," in the second edition, *Little Lit: Strange Stories for Strange Kids* (New York: Raw Junior Books, 2001) 52-53.

⁴⁹ For an even more melancholy version of this story, see *McSweeney's* 6, in which the frog sells his legs to buy a diamond ring to win the love of the princess. The frog's plans go awry, however, when the ring is stolen by the wolf, who then marries the princess. Ware's initial contribution was considered too pessimistic to be included in a children's book. See Chris Ware, "A Very Sad Story about a Frog and a Banjo, Not at All Appropriate for Children," *We Now Know Who: McSweeney's* 6 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2001) 131-35.

⁵⁰ *Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies* endpapers.

⁵¹ François Ayroles, "Le 9 est au Départ," *Oupus* 2 (2003): 43. Ayroles is mocking the tremendously popular French comic *Michel Vaillant* created by Jean Graton in 1957, a strip devoted to the adventures of a F1 race-car driver. As of the writing of this chapter, Graton's son Philippe is continuing the series. See <www.michelvaillant.com> 23 Jan. 2009.

⁵² There are some examples of Situationist comics in chapter three of Simon Ford's *The Situationist International: A User's Guide* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005) 101-30.

⁵³ Menu, "Le prodigieux travail de Chris Ware" 54.

⁵⁴ The strip "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," originally published in *RAW* 2.3, is reprinted in *Quimby the Mouse* 39-41.

⁵⁵ Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2007) 74.

⁵⁶ *The ACME Report* 66.

⁵⁷ Raeburn 11.

⁵⁸ Interview with Jean-Christophe Menu conducted by Matt Wivel, *The Comics Journal* 277 (2006): 164-65.

⁵⁹ [*À travers une contrainte, on peut découvrir une esthétique qui nous plaît, et la reproduire sans le côté systématique de la contrainte.*] Jean-Pierre Mercier, "Confidences oubapiennes" 78.

⁶⁰ I am not arguing that these constraints are necessarily deployed as consciously or as deliberately as they are in the case of Oubapo. Rather, it seems that Ware begins with the story, and then finds various patterns and structures for expressing his ideas.

⁶¹ Oubapo [*inviter à une lecture plus vigilante, plus investigatrice et plus reflexive... les pages oubapiennes nécessitent la participation active du lecteur*] Thierry Groensteen, "Ce que L'Oubapo révèle de la bande dessinée," *9e Art* 10 (2004): 72-75.

⁶² Roland Barthes, trans. and intro Richard Howard. *S/Z* (New York: Noonday Press, 1974) 10.

⁶³ See the interview with Andrea Juno, "Chris Ware," *Dangerous Drawings: Interviews with Comix and Graphix Artists* (New York: Juno Books, 1997) 53.

⁶⁴ Groensteen uses the term *tressage*, or "braiding," to discuss Oubapo and formally complex comics, in "Ce que L'Oubapo révèle de la bande dessinée" 74. For a discussion of how *tressage* applies to Ware's work, see Shawn Gilmore's chapter in this volume.

⁶⁵ Art Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) n.p.