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HOUSING CRISIS TIME IN TWO GRAPHIC NARRATIVES: RICHARD MCGUIRE'S *HERE* AND CHRIS WARE'S *BUILDING STORIES*[1]

EWA KOWAL[2]

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to apply crisis studies, housing studies and hauntology to conduct an analysis of Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014) and Chris Ware's *Building stories* (2012a). These two graphic narratives address times of global crises by employing houses and other animate and inanimate characters as spectral figures to visualize both near and deep futures. The paper demonstrates how McGuire's and Ware's spatiotemporal structures, rooted in the local, the personal and even the small-scale, engage with the most pressing topics of our times. *Building stories* responds to the 2008 financial crash and the housing and other homelessness-related crises, while envisioning a mid-22nd-century America affected by climate change. The climate crisis is also imagined in *Here* through depictions of rising ocean levels in the early 22nd century, and of human extinction caused by a nuclear crisis in the early 24th century. Both works express contemporary anxieties about an increasingly inhospitable near future as well as the unthinkable, posthuman deep future. By situating crises within domestic spaces, the authors not only bring global challenges closer to home and raise an alarm, however. The paper argues that, at the same time, both books can be said to domesticate crisis anxiety by providing comic relief, offering not only humor, irony, and play, but also aesthetic pleasure. The aesthetic dimension is derived from the fact that, while addressing global crises, both authors overcome the crisis of form and representation by celebrating the medium of the comic book itself. The authors experiment with the medium's conventions, radically employing its inherently fragmentary nature to construct highly non-linear, interactive works. The texts capture elusive events and present polycentric multispecies histories that involve human, posthuman, more- or other-than-human points of view. Although McGuire and Ware pursue this aim differently, they both engage in metareflection on narrative and time: from the eternal present of art to the planet's deep past and deep future in *Here*, from the near past to near future in *Building stories*, and through constant change in both.

Keywords: Graphic narrative, climate change, 2008 financial crisis, housing crisis, crisis studies, housing studies, hauntology, time.

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2 Ewa Kowal, The Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, e-mail: ewa.kowal@uj.edu.pl; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4876-5323

Introduction

The architectural quality of comic books has long been recognized by authors and scholars of graphic narratives (Lydenberg 2012: 57). In his post-9/11 graphic novel *In the shadow of no towers*, Art Spiegelman self-reflexively observed that "[c]omic pages are architectural structures – the narrative rows of panels are like stories of a building" (2004: n.p.). Due to "graphic narrative's multilayered communication … on several levels simultaneously" (Horstkotte 2015: 36), the arrangement of panels on comic pages has also been described as "an architecture of time" (Smith 2015: 232). Thus, it is no wonder that graphic narratives often dwell on architectural and, especially, domestic spaces (Lydenberg 2012: 57), as the medium is uniquely suited to housing them as well as to housing time.

The aim of this paper is to analyze two works that prove this point particularly well: *Building stories* by Chris Ware (2012a) and *Here* by Richard McGuire (2014). Since both works, and especially *Here*, have been thoroughly academically examined in terms of their engagement with temporality and their universally acclaimed general formal ingenuity,[3] my approach will be to focus on how both comic books represent only specifically selected kinds of time, namely times of crisis. Applying the combined methodology of housing studies and crisis studies from a literary and cultural studies perspective, I will examine how both comic books respond to two major crises: the 2008 financial crisis and the climate crisis, as well as their aftermaths. I will demonstrate how, while concentrating on individual houses in America, both American artists tell much larger, global stories. By locating them within the frameworks of domestic spaces, and especially through the use of ghostly figures, which will require additional references to hauntology theory, they bring the crises closer to home – albeit safely, by domesticating them. In this way, McGuire and Ware express contemporary anxieties about unthinkable (deep) futures.

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[3] The existing research on McGuire's *Here* offers e.g. studies of temporality in itself (Misztal 2020), and in multiple configurations: with spatiality and memory (Balestrino 2018), the print book format (Becavac 2022), phenomenology (Bieber Lake 2019), place and play (Chaney 2017), and even sound (Manis 2023). Smith (2018) offers a thorough examination of the book's origin and form, including a breakdown of all the depicted time periods, while Pintor Iranzo (2019) notices cinematic qualities in *Here*. Research on *Building stories* has addressed, among other topics, its engagement with architecture and time (Worden 2010), its multimodality (Morini 2015), its relation to tradition and innovation (Ball & Kuhlman 2010), multiple temporalities of the urban: the book as plurivocal urban assemblages and its material form (Dittmer 2014), the book's materiality or body (Ghosal 2015), the intersections of comics and games (Eckhoff-Heindl 2021), the book as an archive of serialized fragments (Crucifix 2018), and – in the most interesting and innovative study – Ware's formal experimentation, as well as the connection between time, cybernetics and melancholia (Zetter 2020).

1. Crisis times

According to Sylvia Walby (2015: 117, 167), "[a] crisis can be described as an emergency, an extraordinary situation or an exceptional state;" it is "a point of sudden and potentially major change in a system." Although crises differ in their consequences, and one can lead to a return to pre-crisis conditions or to the renewal of the system along its existing path of development or even to a new type of system (Walby 2015: 34), the outcome is always unknown. As noted by Walby, it is the worst-case scenario that attracts the most attention: "[s]ystem breakdown, meaning catastrophe or disaster, is the threat that lurks behind the concept of crisis" (2015: 34).

In their overview of research on crisis and disaster studies, Wolbers, Kuipers & Boin (2021: 374, 375) observe that the field has proliferated over the past two decades, as multiple crises – from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, through the 2008 financial crisis, various immigration crises, to climate change and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic – have "solidified the relevance of the field and propelled its development." Accordingly, the number of academic articles with "crisis" or "disaster" in the title, as the scholars note further, "have tripled in the main generic public administration journals over the past two decades" (Wolbers, Kuipers & Boin 2021: 375).

A similar increase in academic interest can certainly be noticed in other publications, including within the broad area of the humanities. To better benefit from this potential and the need for collective knowledge it could serve, Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2022: 465) call for "a multi- and interdisciplinary approach to bridge between traditionally separated realms" in the form of "the development of Interdisciplinary Crisis Studies," as its key features "must include (1) temporality, spatiality and scale; (2) multi-layeredness, processuality and contradictions; and (3) gender, intersectionality and social inequalities."

Literary studies, media studies, and cultural studies can make a significant contribution to this joint effort, particularly with respect to the third area listed above. By examining various cultural and artistic responses to crises, these disciplines can help track shifts in discourse on crisis and register changing social moods and attitudes. This is important, as, to quote Walby again,

> [c]rises are both "real," in the sense of actual changes in social processes, and socially constructed, in the sense that different interpretations of the crisis have implications for its outcome. The interpretation of a crisis may under- or over-state its magnitude and impact, as well as attribute blame as to its cause. (2015: 14)

This, in turn, can lead to one type of crisis cascading into another, and another (Walby 2015: 36). Consequently, it is essential to examine relevant narratives

depicting crises, as they shape public views and influence state and international policies, affecting real-life measures taken (or not) to mitigate crises, which then results in concrete aftereffects. When it comes to the role of literary narratives specifically, Perry (2018: 2) provides a summary of academic voices pointing to literature as (*inter alia*) a "scaling" or "focusing" "device" for addressing crises, "whereby the very large can be shown intersecting with the comparatively very small or whereby the imperceptible can be made visceral." It is exactly such a juxtaposition: "assembling and connecting domestic and planetary time scales" (Perry 2018: 17) in the selected comic books that will be the subject of the present analysis.

2. Ghosts of the (deep) future

In the context of the ongoing "permacrisis," which Collins Dictionary declared the word of the year 2022 (s.v. permacrisis, 2022), one more crisis needs to be listed: a "cognitive crisis," which, in their discussion of hauntology, Lorek-Jezińska & Więckowska (2017: 7) recognize as the result of the spectral turn two decades ago. Coinciding with the abovementioned explosion of interest in crisis and disaster studies, caused by an increased sense of unpredictability,

> [t]he beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a number of significant changes in cognitive and symbolic mapping of space and time, accompanied by the emergence of new critical projects questioning the major ways of knowing and exploring the possibilities of knowing differently and knowing otherwise. The general mistrust toward metanarratives identified with postmodernism and the sense that uncertainty was indeed becoming "a permanent condition of life" (Bauman 1994: 36) were exacerbated at the turn of the millennium by *anxieties about the future, in particular about the ways in which the past might influence the world to come*. (Lorek-Jezińska & Więckowska 2017: 8; added emphasis)

One of the most radical critical projects to emerge in response to the current "crisis of knowledge" (Lorek-Jezińska & Więckowska 2017: 9) has been spectrality studies, or hauntology. The approach employs the figure of the specter or ghost to address what lies beyond classification and comprehension, including what has not yet occurred (Lorek-Jezińska & Więckowska 2017: 9). In analyzing the representation of crises in *Here* and *Building stories*, the presence of ghosts becomes apparent through their disruption of linearity (Lorek-Jezińska & Więckowska 2017: 11). A connection will be made between the spectral, which "seems to represent the conceptual and cognitive space between the past and the future," and the examined comic books, as they too "disorganize the chronological order, reframe time reference, dislocate the past from its pastness, and introduce a radical discontinuity into the present" (Lorek-Jezińska & Więckowska 2017: 12). The spectral dimension is especially evident

in the central role of houses – as major characters of both narratives – which not only appear as haunted but also, in turn, seem to haunt the books themselves.

3. Crisis in *Here*: Flood, fluid time, and a future without us

From the moment the reader opens the book, *Here* turns the codex book format, i.e., two sides connected but also divided at the spine, into fragments of architecture, a part of an imaginary larger structure: a house. The exterior of the book covers represents the outside walls; what is inside the covers and the walls is the interior of the house, the spine forming a corner in an imaginary living room. The inside covers and the first and last pages form a frame, echoing the window frame from the front cover. The frame – like the basic concept of the book – is simple and appears orderly: the first and last images of the interior of the house are gray and non-descript, with only the window seen from the inside on the left and a fireplace on the right. These two images are the only ones without a year displayed in the upper left-hand corner of the largest possible panel. As we turn the unnumbered pages onwards from the beginning and also backwards from the ending, the first dates to appear are symmetrically arranged: 2014 and 1957. Two possible meanings of these dates may be easy to establish: 2014, with the images suggesting either moving in or out, is the year when the book was published; while 1957 is the year when the author, Richard McGuire, was born. Then, more differently dated scenes appear and begin to accumulate and overlap, including many with no house at all. They represent a vast spectrum of time from 3,000,500,000 BCE to 22,175 CE, i.e. a span of 3,000,522,175 years in total.

As regards the house's geographical location, we know it is in America thanks to numerous clues.[4] For instance, Benjamin Franklin is shown visiting a neighboring house in 1775. This building is the real historical Proprietary House in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, which at that time was occupied by the Royal Governor of New Jersey, William Franklin – Benjamin Franklin's acknowledged extra-marital son, and his political opponent, a Loyalist throughout the American Revolutionary War ("The Proprietary House" 2023). Thus, *Here* offers a glimpse into American (human) history: from Native Americans seen in 1352, 1402, 1553, 1609, and 1620, through the early European colonization in 1624, to the year before the Declaration of Independence, and finally, the early 20th and the early 21st century. In its own way, McGuire's depiction of this period – strikingly short in the book's timescale – confirms Wai Chee Dimock's observation in *Through other continents: American literature across deep time* that the chronology

[4] In fact, the house was inspired by McGuire's own childhood house (Balestrino 2018: 69, 75; Bieber Lake 2019: 144).

of the United States is inadequate to give justice to all history, as the former is eclipsed by the vastness of the latter (2009: 2).

Similarly, the house at the center of *Here*, seemingly the center of the universe in the book, with pages that could be imagined extending *ad infinitum* – is unstable and short-lived. The house stood for only 204 years: it was built in 1907 and destroyed by a flood in 2111. The latter year is located in *our* present future, while also existing within the book's fluid temporality, where the past, present and future are relative. We learn this because a later panel – positioned within the Western left-to-right reading order, after the flood scene, shows only water, while in 2126, a shark swims where the house's ceiling used to be.

Thus, the 2111 flood manifests the climate crisis as an existential threat already at a point of no return, a forgone conclusion, at least in this geographical location by the Atlantic Ocean. The moment when the flood water breaks the glass in the window and pours inside marks a crisis tipping point in *Here*: "a critical turning point to a new type of system" (Walby 2015: 33), which, however, has been long in the making. Representation of such a crisis poses a challenge that has been repeatedly examined in analyses of *Here*. Paraphrasing Farrier's claim in *Anthropocene poetics*, Olsza (2022: 54) observes that the environmental crisis itself constitutes "a crisis of form," as comics artists must seek "new ways of representing time on the page, often by experimenting with the classic grid structure." Mertens & Craps (2018: 134) recognize the challenge for authors who "try to do justice to the vast temporal and spatial scales and the enormous complexity of climate change," as they face "the problem that the phenomenon exceeds human perception [and] is not dramatic in the traditional sense." Conversely, for Smith (2018: 38), *Here* succeeds in offering "a dramatic visualization of the impact of rising sea levels" and is a "sophisticated intervention in climate change debate," as well as an example of "the broad genre of 'cli-fi'" – science fiction addressing the climate crisis.

In fact, it could be said that the moment of the flooding is both dramatic and not, climactic and – at first glance – underwhelming. Although, from a human perspective, it may appear like the epitome of climate disaster, it is represented in a distinctly modest, yet subtly disquieting way. While two whole pages often feature scenes where apparently "nothing happens," this scene from the year 2111 is reduced to a smaller panel superimposed on a larger panel that shows the familiar room in 1949. The visual effect of the arrangement, as noted by Olsza, is the creation of "time portals" (2022: 63): here between the living room and an unlivable room. The smaller panel, marked with the date 2111, contains little more than the window; the image is dark and monochrome. It is nighttime, and it seems unlikely that any humans are home. Thus, there appears to be no one to witness the disaster – or even to confirm it as a fact. Like time itself, the event acquires a relative status: it becomes a non-event when no house-

dweller is present, but an event – when a human perspective is supplied from the outside, by the reader. In the act of reading, the reader becomes immersed inside *Here*, and cannot help but feel a disturbing sense of threat.

Still, the book's own consistent point of view contributes to the effect of climate disaster being a non-event. This perspective is both pre- and posthuman, non-human or more-than-human – perhaps mechanical like an objective camera on a tripod indifferently recording the same location for billions of years, without any intervention from human agents and beyond the human time. The camera just registers change, the only constant. In Curto's (2020: 6) interpretation, McGuire provides a "new biocentric response to climate change" composed of "biocentric choruses of voices that survive floods" and raising awareness of "the unimportance of human life within [the] vast cosmic scale." According to Rodriguez (2018: 379), who advocates for "an ethic of de-anthropomorphized reading that resists the interpretation of narrators as humanoids in Anthropocene texts," McGuire achieves this outcome through the technique of depersonalized "narratorhood" of "the strange stranger." This narrative agent, adapted by Rodriguez from Timothy Morton, is "an arranger of images" and "an interlocutor, presenting radical indeterminacy" through spatial juxtaposition of different scales of disaster (Rodriguez 2018: 380).

The apposition of scales becomes clear in the analyzed (non-)event, as it is surrounded by countless others: also seemingly ordinary, unremarkable, of equal (un)importance. This is visible both across the book and across the two "present" pages, where the broken window from 2011 is put next to a collage of small everyday domestic mishaps: a plate shattering in the year 1943 and three wine glasses breaking against the floor in 1963, 1982, 1944; a mirror falling off the wall in 1949; and fragments of heated dialogues captured in now meaningless speech bubbles. These insults, dated across the twentieth century (1949, 1955, 1957, two in 1950, 1960, 1961, 1968, 1963, 1967, 1965, 1968, 1977, and 1984) are confined to small panels that echo the sheets of paper flying about in 1949, seemingly out of nowhere. Perhaps the window in 1949 suddenly opened that year causing a draught, but this detail is obscured by the panel with the same window in 2111 through which water pours in. What heightens the impression of simultaneity is the absence of gutters; only a fine line of the panels' frames separates – and connects – all the different points in time eternalized on the book's pages.

As signaled, the eternalization is relative and paradoxical, as *Here* captures both duration and loss, being and not-being, as well as order and disorder. On the one hand, the book seems to be a random selection – as capturing three billion years of seconds frozen in time would be physically impossible. But what *is* possible thanks to the comics medium is that we can have flashbacks immediately next to foreshadowing (in a myriad of configurations assuming different points of reference), and move in time very fast, instantaneously.

Sometimes years, decades, centuries, millennia go by, but sometimes just seconds pass as we flip through several pages. On the other hand, the book is not random, but bound,[5] solid and organized – as if following the associative logic of a cabinet of curiosities. There are clearly juxtaposed combinations, recurrences, often amusing coincidences, and accumulations of the same kinds of scenes, occasions, dialogues, clichés or surprises that are far too many to list; they certainly show McGuire's subtle sense of humor.

What illustrates this particularly well is the second crisis of humanity in *Here*, for which the first was a preparation. Admittedly, in 2213, humans – and an android – return to where the house once stood, enjoying a tour of what is "now" an archeological site. They are equipped with new technology (an earlier version of which was already available in 2050-51) that allows them to see the past. However, in 2222, ominously, we catch a glimpse of a man frantically looking for his car (reminiscent of many catastrophic films) and can only speculate what individual or collective crisis caused his level of fear. Almost a century later, in the year 2313, comes the second tipping point: it is the last time when we see humans – wearing biohazard suits. It is the only time when the book's perspective coincides with a person's point of view; using video games terminology, Perry calls it "a first-person shooter perspective" (2018: 15).

The adopted perspective allows for the identification with the observer: their location overlaps with that of the reader, as the drawn life-sized gloved hand in the foreground suggests. The image seems to be echoing the hand of the reader holding the book. The person is measuring the level of radioactivity, which appears life-threatening. It seems that the nuclear apocalypse may have finally happened. What indicates the post-disaster temporality is a superimposed small panel from a year later, in which we see most likely an empty hazmat suit (or tarpaulin [Perry 2018: 17]) left behind, carried by the wind and looking like a ghost of the human species. Its enduring presence can be read as a sad indictment of what we are likely to leave behind and what will certainly survive us: plastic waste.[6] Yet, just as

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5 One exception is the Polish print edition of the book, *Tutaj*, which consists of loose pages in a box (McGuire 2016). This more experimental format, clearly approved by the author, echoes both Ware's *Building stories* published four years earlier and B.S. Johnson's *The unfortunates*, a novel in a box (a shoebox with mementos? a symbolic coffin?) published in 1969. (In a conversation with Zadie Smith, Ware stated that he became aware of Johnson's work only after creating his own box set [Ware 2012b].) The Polish edition of *Here* may have been inspired by the appearance on the Polish literary market of the Polish translation of *The unfortunates*, published as *Nieszczęśni* in 2008. The loose pages of *Tutaj* intensify the sense of randomness already present in *Here*, while rendering the book more interactive, heightening the reader's (however fleeting) agency, as in the other two books in boxes. Another exception from the bound book format is *Here*'s e-book edition (Perry 2018).

6 For more on plastics (in relation to capitalism, death, extinction and permanence) in *Here* see Morgan (2019–2020).

the impact of the 2111 flooding is "softened" by a showering of trivia, "now," with his typical sense of humor, McGuire lightens humanity's darkest hour by inserting a little joke even at such a moment: a small "portal" to a better time – a panel showing two people playing mini golf in the living room in 1958.

Thus, the post-apocalyptic ghosts of the future overlap with the humorous ghosts from the past in *Here*. By this point – marked in the chronology of the graphic narrative as the year 2314 – not only all the humans but also the vast majority of all the living creatures depicted on the book's pages are ghosts. The power of their spatiotemporal positioning allows for their double status: they are at once dead and present; all the inanimate human-made objects, including the house, are simultaneously bygone and spectral, too. Yet, life – emptied of human presence – goes on: in 10175 CE a strange small mammal[7] appears, and in 22175 CE, just like in 80,000,000 BCE, dinosaur-like animals roam the earth among lush foliage again. Meanwhile, the speech bubbles in a small panel from 2006, superimposed on the larger image, say, "Riiiiiinng! Click. Hi, we're not home." The accompanying images of giant flowers and hummingbird-like birds suggest a Garden of Eden of thriving species.[8] Ironically, rather than the end of the world, the end of humans looks strikingly like a planetary happy ending: a new beginning.

The few remaining pages, placed towards the end of the book, immediately after the panel showing the last humans, convey a philosophical existential reflection – again, remarkably lightly, through several snippets from popular songs: "It's still the same old story, a fight for love and glory" (1972), "The Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble" (1960), so "Let's break out the booze and have a ball" (1968), since "Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down!!!" (1889). In the very end comes a metatextual closure, as the woman, perhaps the author's mother,[9] shown walking in 1957 early in the book, and uttering

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7 Konstantinou (2015) devotes considerable attention to this "bizarre marsupial" that "stares straight at us, as if it knows we're watching." Due to the "confident gaze" in its "haunted eyes," the animal appears uncanny, "precisely because [it] is so ordinary, so unthreatening." As the critic concludes, "[w]ith this innocuous panel, McGuire opens up a new continent of time" – indeed, "in the eyes of [his] alien animal, we observe the deconstruction of time" since the imaginary creature "helps us enter into something like a relationship of recognition with the vastness of the nonhuman world."

8 Even more so than the indescribable, miasmic landscape of 3,000,500,000 BCE, these images are particularly uncanny – because we, humans, are not yet to come, but are already bygone. They bring to mind Mark Fisher's comments on the "eerie space" in the Zone in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979): it is "an overgrown space" "overcome by resurgent foliage" – "a dream geography" (2016: 130).

9 McGuire dedicated the book to his family and thanked them in Acknowledgements – some of the listed names are mentioned in one of the repeated scenes of a family photo being taken in the living room. McGuire used his own family photographs for his design of *Here* (Manis 2023: 879).

the book's first words, finally remembers what she entered the room for: to pick up a book that looks like *Here*. This inner loop literally depicting an act of recollection via a frame – memory lost and recovered – on a small scale demonstrates the book's function as a vehicle for human memory. The book as a heterotemporal archive strikingly resembles the futuristic devices for perceptual "time travel" from 2050–51 and 2213, shown to be used for seeing only the past, however. Remarkably, while the book's technology is not new (as McGuire created the first version of *Here* in 1989[10]), and it is not high-tech, it still allows us to see more: the past *and* the future – both before and after humans.

4. *Building stories*: Crisis at home and a tragicomic future

Here's sense of humor, reflection on memory, the moving fragility of the book's spectral animate and inanimate characters, as well as the complex potential of a paper medium,[11] are qualities which – even if achieved through different forms – are shared by *Building stories* by Chris Ware, who was greatly influenced by Richard McGuire's early work (Ware 2014).

Building stories is a book in a box[12] consisting of fourteen individual pamphlets, booklets and foldouts that can be read in any order and have no assigned beginning and end. For Ware, this format optimally matches the way humans experience and remember life (Ware 2023), and comics in general are "fundamentally an art form for memory" (Ware 2013). In his view, it is also "the most interactive art form or medium there is" (Ware 2018). Similarly to *Here*, *Building stories* often consists of panels with no text, silent strips, where only pictures are read, and sound is made in the reader's mind (Ware 2012b). On the other hand, other parts of the book feature a lot of text, dialogues, and especially interior monologues.

Most of the book's focalization derives from the main character, a nameless dark-haired white woman with a disability,[13] whom we see at several stages

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10 A six-page black-and-white strip for the comics anthology magazine *Raw* (Richard McGuire n.d.).

11 Kashtan has observed that "one of the key ironies of *Building stories* [is that] it is more hypertextual than actual hypertext," because it "takes the fragmentary, multilinear structure that hypertext borrowed from the codex book and feeds that structure back into the codex" (qtd. in Zetter 2020: 455).

12 For Zetter (2020) the structure resembles the box of a board game: "There is no suggested reading order for these pieces. Instead, the reader must choose each subsequent piece, unguided, upon finishing the last, thereby selecting one of the more than eighty-seven billion different sequences in which the elements that make up *Building stories* can be read" (444). The book perfectly proves Konstantinou's (2015) claim that "comics is an art of touching" – "a finger-obsessed medium" whose best examples "activate our awareness of their haptic materiality."

13 For analyses of this topic see Fink Berman (2010) and Wegner (2022). Both scholars stress how Ware narrativizes disability as a part of ordinary, everyday life.

of her life: as a child, a student in an art school, and after she gives up on art[14] and becomes a wife and mother in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, where Chris Ware himself lives with his family (Ware 2023). In addition, there are three other prominent human characters; all are nameless white people who at one point live in the same house in Chicago: an unhappy heterosexual couple, and an elderly lady who owns the house. The house[15] itself is a major character, as well, and so is a bee who lives – and dies – in the area. The book offers these multiple and varied points of view: the four humans', the house's and the bee's.[16] In addition, plants, namely flowers, play a prominent symbolic role in the book, and Ware has even called them "a sub-theme of the book," representing "the idea of hybridization and of marriage" (Ware 2012b). Overall, we are looking at an urban ecosystem and its inhabitants changing over time. In this sense, like *Here*, *Building stories* is also a meditation on time and space, although the timespan embodied by the house is much shorter: from the early 20th century (the old lady's and the house's perspective), through the early 21st century (the young woman's and the unhappy couple's perspectives), to a brief vision of the future in 2156, which is particularly comical – at first glance.

Just a page away from the panels representing contemporary times, a lot has changed in Ware's vision of this relatively distant future. The futuristic people in Chicago wear clothes looking like space suits, with transparent glass helmets on their heads instead of smartphones in their palms. Similarly to the radioactivity scene in *Here*, we briefly see a first-person perspective of someone looking at their helmet screen and navigating it with their left hand. On the positive side, people still read literature: the focalizer, a young woman, studying for her English class (still being held), "reads" a "memory fragment" that was "pulled from this area's consciousness cloud"[17] (Ware 2012a: n.p.). It comes from 150 years earlier and originated in one of our main characters – the blond married woman

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[14] Like *Here*, *Building stories* also has an analogous metatextual moment – involving this character. In a section titled "Browsing," she describes her dream, which symbolized her desire to become an artist, which was never fulfilled. In the dream, while browsing in a bookstore, she picked up a book that caught her eye: to her amazement, it turned out to be a book she authored, and it looked exactly like *Building stories*. Another instance of metatextuality appears on the back cover of the bottom part of the box: it provides a table-of-contents in the form of a map for the whole work, while placing all the items inside the book's main building.

[15] For an analysis of Ware's depiction of housing in the context of gentrification see Godbey (2010); for housing in connection with loss and nostalgia see Worden (2010).

[16] Admittedly, the bee is not a real insect; instead, it is heavily and comically anthropomorphized as a middle-aged middle-class husband and father who suffers a crisis of faith (resembling Christianity).

[17] According to Dittmer (2014: 494), "Ware seems to imagine memory as a movement between a material context (a place or a thing) and the imagination of the individual"– and presents memory as "a material element of place" (Dittmer 2014: 496).

who is unhappy in her toxic relationship, but at this very moment – a tipping point in her own personal crisis – may decide to change her future. We never learn what happens next. By 2156, the woman, similarly to the characters in *Here* – is a ghost. It can be inferred that the futuristic technology causes the whole place – perhaps the entire country or the whole planet – to be haunted by such specters. They coexist with contemporary consciousnesses, much as all the animate and inanimate entities do in *Here*. They are not separated by any significant "gutters," but, instead, are available right at one's fingertips, "ready" to be accessed after only a brief moment of "loading." This development disrupts any chronological order, even invalidating the concept of chronology, by placing parallel timelines seamlessly side by side. Yet not everyone's attention appears to be drawn to this abundance of awarenesses, which by now has most likely become mundane through habituation.

There is also a negative side to the futuristic situation: most people are busy with only one kind of monosyllabic communication. All the visible messages on the focalizer's glass helmet-screen show a simple choice of options: "accept" or "decline." They read: "I want 2 fuk u. u want 2 fuk me?", "I wnt fuk u," "du u wnt 2 fuk?" and "will u fuk me?" The first four messages were sent to the female student, while the last message is shown from the perspective of her male companion composing it. The future people, dressed in identical grayish white uniforms, are all wearing devices called "inter-couplers" (perhaps enabling sex without direct physical contact), which are being advertised on their screens promising them more pleasure, right next to another advert, for "Endofux" which offers to help them "learn to feel again" (Ware 2012a: n.p.).

This single scene suggests both a rejection and loss of key aspects of the biological-physical human condition, accompanied by a deep emotional disfunction, and even a form of debilitating sensory deprivation – whether through numbing or overstimulation – at both individual and societal level. The partly transhuman bodies appear almost disembodied, and therefore ghostly. All in off-white, with translucent orbs around their heads like halos, with their heads literally in the clouds, these future humans are barely present. They scarcely speak to one another, instead chasing voices from other times, substituting artificial sensations for authentic feelings, which now belong to the past. As Shaw points out, hauntology "draw[s] attention to the structuring role of absence" (2018: 7) – and absence features prominently in this scene, aligning with Mark Fisher's idea of (a) lost or preempted future(s) (2022b).

Worst of all among these future losses, the landscape looks gray, and the air appears polluted. While in the same place a century and a half earlier, two birds are visible perched on rooftops, now no birds are to be found; also, there are far fewer trees left among even more concrete structures. What is more, it becomes clear that the glass helmets serve more than one type of function: they are not

only the future "internet" interface, mediating human contact, but also serve as a breathing device, a respirator helmet, as part of an air-conditioned suit. This must be because the (somewhat cryptic) data displayed on the main focalizer's helmet's screen about the present day and the weather seem to show that, on May 20th in 2156, at 8:24 am, in Chicago, the outside temperature is 122.1°F (50°C), and it is forecast to rise to 140°F (60°C). Therefore, in Ware's projection, the climate crisis is fully under way; no pro-environmental solutions have been successfully implemented to reverse or lessen it. Instead, (at least) Americans have invested only in technological solutions that make life physiologically bearable, while distracting the population from their unlivable surrounding as well as from reflecting on their unimaginable, but clearly inevitable, even darker future.

As Fisher observes in *Capitalist realism*, "environmental catastrophe features in late capitalist culture only as a kind of simulacra" (2022a: 18): while "capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment," "[c]limate change [… is] not being repressed so much as incorporated into advertising and marketing." Evidently, Ware's grim prognosis corresponds with Fisher's: as the livable human world is ending, masses are reduced to "depressive hedonia" – "an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure" (Fisher 2022a: 22; original emphasis), while capitalism is going strong, and someone is making money out of Endofux.

This prediction – depicted seemingly humorously – also corresponds with the social diagnoses put forward by Binkley (2014) and Cabanas & Illouz (2021) regarding neoliberal consumerism in the service of hyperindividualized, autotherapeutic endocrinal self-optimization, as well as the bleakest prophecies proclaimed by Chris Hedges (2009) about America's decline and the triumph of a stupefying pornified culture. In this light, Ware's ironic take on America, if not the entire human world in the next century, must be read as, in fact, bitterly tragicomic.

But signs of America's decline are noted and recorded by Ware much earlier – in quite recent years (as of this writing in 2024), represented on the pages devoted to the build-up to and the follow-up of the 2008 financial crisis. In addition, the most central character's monologues can supply a human perspective to some of the images in *Here* and their broader context of what came before the climate disaster (for instance, the panel with a man in the year 2222 desperately looking for his car). For this reason, they are worth quoting in full.

In a section titled "Disconnect," the nameless former art student, now a mom in the suburbs, expresses a general feeling shortly before the 2008 financial crash. She feels growing anxiety while spending a great deal of time on the internet. In fact, many panels show her alone or accompanied by her child, immersed in her laptop screen, sometimes in front of her husband – equally absent while

present, which clearly foreshadows the future Chicagoans with glass helmets on their heads. In this way, Ware represents a typical contemporary American or more broadly Western household, highlighting its transformation into digital domesticity (Kennedy et al. 2020), where, according to Zetter, "information systems are an epistemic ubiquity" and the "prevalent affective register" is "cybernetic melancholia" (2020: 437). As Zetter (2020: 451) continues, "Ware renders a world in which the experience of the everyday contains an intimate confluence between affective resonance and the ubiquity of information technologies. Consequently,

> Ware's narrative is not that of the global, of large-scale social and political change. Instead, it is through an attentiveness to the quotidian aspects of characters' lived experience that such concerns emerge; an attentiveness which Margaret Fink Berman has called an "aesthetic of ordinariness" focused upon "living moment-by-moment" and "dwelling on the micro-gestures that narratives usually elide." (Zetter 2020: 454)

Nonetheless, the micro scale, as in *Here*, reflects the macro scale. The ordinariness of a suburban housewife's quotidian browsing of the internet only confirms the enormous influence of high-tech corporations that mine users' data to predict and shape their behavior, which Zuboff warns us against in *Surveillance capitalism* (2019). As a result of innocent routine practices, the protagonist becomes obsessed with apocalyptic predictions, especially about the looming energy crisis and oil crash. The internet, and streaming platforms with their algorithmic logic, serve both as a source of fear and of comfort – alleviating and aggravating that fear in an endless self-reinforcing loop. Moreover, they are clearly addictive. A series of narrative sequences in "Disconnect" add up to the following interior monologues:

> Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the end of the world... […] It just seems like things have been going in the wrong direction for a long time now, and they need to change... I think it all started when I Netflixed a TV movie about nuclear war I'd remembered from when I was a kid... […] From there it was just one of those "If you liked X, you'll love Y" things, where Netflix's computer tried to guess what movie I'd want next based on my recent choices, and it recommended something called "Crude Awakening," about the inevitable petroleum crisis*... *Actually, "A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash," 2006. – ed. (Ware 2012a: n.p.)

The character becomes addicted to the news, too:

> For so many years I just really didn't pay much attention to the news at all... I'd have it on as background noise when I lived alone but that was about it... *Now*, though, I can't get enough of it, and the reasons our government does anything seem crystal clear to me... It's all about *oil* […] ... Without it, our society will literally quit working... Just today I read that some analysts expect the airlines to go bankrupt by the end of the year… (Ware 2012a: n.p., original emphasis)

The woman's panic becomes quite acute, as home – penetrated by the mediated sense of constant threat – turns into a site of fear, in accordance with the analysis by Atkinson & Blandy (2017):

> Mostly, I genuinely worry how this is all going to affect our daily lives... It's like everything is coming crashing down at the same time, from energy to climate to the economy... It's all so delicately interrelated... What if something like last month's trucking strikes in Spain and the UK happened *here*? What if the grocery store shelves suddenly *did* go bare? Are any Americans really ready for that? (Ware 2012a: n.p.; original emphasis)

"Thing is," the protagonist goes on, "we live right next to one of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago, and the last time there was a blackout it was truly scary... Dark figures roaming the streets..." (Ware 2012a: n.p.). As the word "BOOM" in capital letters is repeated across two pages, it becomes clear that the housing market bubble is bursting in 2007 and is followed by the 2008 global financial crash. The protagonist mentions "skyrocketing foreclosures" and "the cost of fuel oil going up" (Ware 2012a: n.p.). Her husband's initial response is ironic: "Still reading about the end of the world, I see...," but soon he has to calm his wife down, "Honey, honey, honey... I know you're under a lot of stress lately... But the world is an extremely complicated place, and though things may not always look so great, it's not all going to come crashing down at once, okay?" (Ware 2012a: n.p.). However, the wife prefers being "prepared," as she puts it; she is among growing numbers of people, particularly in the US, who for at least a decade and a half have been "doing their own research" online. She imagines planting a garden and buying a portable generator to ensure her family's survival; she fantasizes about near-apocalyptic scenes. As she admits,

> it's a little hard to stay calm after reading a blog about how many days it will take for riots to break out if the food supply is cut off... One guy said he wouldn't hesitate to kill someone for a bottle of water if he knew his own child was dying of thirst... I mean what am I supposed to think about *that*? (Ware 2012a: n.p.; original emphasis).

The panels above these words show her looking fearfully at her own child.

The height of this bout of anxiety happens when the protagonist sees a white homeless man in front of her door. Her sense of precarity – even in a lush suburb – is confirmed, and she calls the police. Of course, the homeless man's precarity is incomparably greater than her own. Also his agency is incomparably smaller: even his speech bubble is cropped, partly obscured by the doorframe; all we can read are the barely "audible" syllables: "try get som eat" (Ware 2012a: n.p.). Since the 2008 crisis, Western countries have faced a worsening housing

and cost-of-living crisis. Homelessness and economic inequality are generally on the rise globally (Madden & Marcuse 2016: 1; Clark 2021: 170); housing has become increasingly unaffordable (Desmond 2017; Madden & Marcuse 2016); and millennials and now the early Gen Z are known as "generation rent" (Dorling 2015: 6; Clark 2021: 139).[18] However, consistent with the book's micro scale and the first-person subjective point of view, the protagonist only focuses on her own emotions. She dwells on how much the homeless man's whiteness frightens her. She does not openly admit this, but it is made clear that, as a white middle-class woman, she feels such a fate should not happen to white people in America – the fact that it does is particularly disruptive to her assumed world order and therefore terrifying.

By this point, her family, although not homeless and destitute, is financially challenged. Their checking account is overdrawn; their house is worth $100,000 less than what they paid for it five years earlier (Ware 2012a: n.p.). Two or three years later, the Great Recession begins to truly affect them: the couple are shown poring over bills, their heads in their hands.[19] The woman's husband, Phil, an architect, starts to worry about losing his job... "as a single-earner family, we were especially at risk" (Ware 2012a: n.p.). "Listen to me – I sound like a newspaper..." (Ware 2012a: n.p.), the woman says, adding with paradoxical satisfaction, "I've been saying for years that everything was going to come crashing down!" Thus, *Building stories* represents the time of crisis by capturing the Zeitgeist of the recent past, the present moment, and at least the near future, combining reflection on capitalism with a concern for the environment, in accordance with Moore's critique of the Capitalocene (2016).

Conclusion: Dead seriousness and comic relief

Richard McGuire's *Here* and Chris Ware's *Building stories* have been read jointly in this study as two graphic narratives addressing times of global crises, using houses and other animate and inanimate characters as spectral figures whose function is to challenge the conventional conceptualizations of the human and ecological *chronos* through the books' time-bending formats.

Both authors experiment with the comic book medium, exploiting its inherently fragmentary puzzle-like form, to create highly non-linear, interactive works. These capture elusive events and offer polycentric multispecies histories involving human, posthuman, more- or other-than-human points

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[18] For an exact estimation of the monetary cost of the 2008 financial crisis see Walby (2015) and Tooze (2018). For analyses of other cultural representations of the 2008 financial crisis and housing crisis, see Kowal (2019) and Kowal (2022).

[19] This image was used as a cover for the 11 October, 2010 issue of *The New Yorker*.

of view. Although they approach this differently, McGuire and Ware both engage in metareflection on narrative and time: *Here* ranges from the eternal present of art to the planet's deep past and deep future, while *Building stories* focuses on the near past and near future, yet both foreground the constancy of change. While representing time through the lens of housing, each situates human dwelling within a larger ecosystem, where homes are habitats shared by humans, other animals, plants, the elements, and even inanimate objects.

The present paper has demonstrated how McGuire's and Ware's spatiotemporal structures rooted in the local, the personal and even the small-scale undertake the most pressing topics of our times by commenting on or imagining global crises experienced at different scales. *Building stories* responds to the 2008 financial crash and the consequently exacerbated housing and homelessness crises, as well as envisions America in the mid-22nd century as poorly adjusting to the effects of climate change. *Here* offers us a few glimpses into a single American dwelling: affected by flooding in the early 22nd century, due to the rising ocean levels, and then, in the early 24th century, by humanity's disappearance (or possible extinction[20]) due to radiation – possibly the result of a nuclear disaster, nuclear war, or both. In this way, McGuire and Ware express contemporary anxieties about an increasingly inhospitable near future, as well as about the unthinkable posthuman deep future in which humanity itself has become spectral.

The unthinkable is visualized in both books: ghosts haunt their pages, the books house haunted houses that in turn haunt the books. Human and non-human animals appear now alive, now dead in fluid, relative time. Crises happen, yet they do not constitute final endings within the interactive, non-chronological book structures. In this way, the topic of global crises both is and is not treated with dead seriousness. It can even be argued that both graphic narratives domesticate the fears of crisis that increasingly haunt contemporary generations. Placing crises in houses brings them closer to home, making them a little more familiar and small-scale, while admittedly raising alarm. However, *Here's* vision of the deep future without humans is softened by the return of human presence on another (or the same) page, making the confrontation less overwhelming psychologically. Similarly, Ware's parody of human folly invites us to accept that this species deserves everything that is coming its way, while also implying that the planet deserves to thrive without it (as in *Here*'s vision of posthuman paradise in 22175 CE). Thus, both books can be said to domesticate crisis anxiety and combine warning with comic relief, providing black humor, irony, and play, alongside aesthetic pleasure. All of these strategies can fulfil a therapeutic role, serving as antidotes to the paralyzing fear and a sense of hopelessness.

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20 Unless some humans have escaped to (an)other planet(s) or star(s) by then, which alternative is not included in this book.

At the same time, there is no danger of lulling us to complacent sleep with such "cli-fi," as gallows humor, after all, always recalls the gallows.

Addressing the most existential of crises, climate change and intensifying environmental disasters, neither author gives us optimistic narrative closures or encourages a great deal of faith in humanity's ability to solve the problems we have caused, not even with the promise of Silicon Valley technological "solutionism" (Morozov 2013). Yet without recourse to pathos, both authors evoke some of the best human qualities, such as imagination, creativity, innovation, memory, emotional depth and connection, inspiring a sense of mutual compassion for our shared, consciously mortal human condition. What is more, they reaffirm the value of a community, including with the more-than-human world, that – we are reminded – is worth saving. While they cannot alter the material outcome, McGuire and Ware achieve one crucial victory: they overcome at least one crisis – the crisis of form and representation. They do so through a celebration of the medium of the comic book itself, allowing us to find solace in art and its capacity for transcendence, perhaps among the best achievements that humans have created during their brief time on Earth.

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