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## Indicia

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FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKS, INC.  
Seattle, Washington, USA

ISBN 978-1-60699-589-1  
First Printing: May, 2013  
Printed in Hong Kong

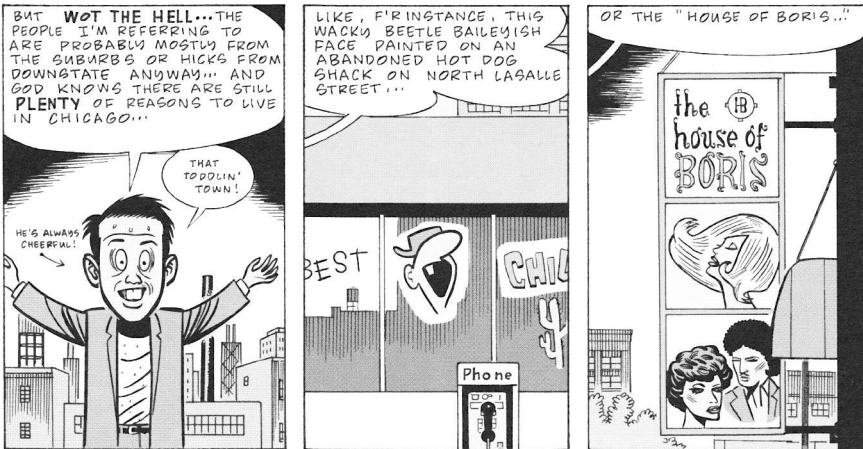
# Urban Romanticism, *Mad* Magazine, and the Aesthetics of Ugly (1986-1998)

by ANNE MALLORY and KEN PARILLE

For me, it's just more personally entertaining to draw these very specific kind of ugly faces as opposed to drawing the same kind of handsome characters over and over. So I tried to keep it to a minimum because I know I can go overboard ... [Laughs.] I try to save it for the right moment, but in my younger days I was not so judicious with that. Every character was a hideous freak in the background. I was living in Chicago ... [where] people are less attractive ... [Laughs.]

— Daniel Clowes<sup>1</sup>

In traditional Western philosophy, *aesthetics* is the study of beauty and taste. In “Chicago,” Clowes’s ode to the city where he was born, we see how the cartoonist’s aesthetic was shaped by the depressed urban environment of his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.<sup>2</sup> He celebrates Chicago as a “beautiful place; a dark and decaying testament to the sad beauty of bleakness and unfulfilled promises” (4.5). Clowes doesn’t see the world quite the way others do — he often finds attractive what many would dismiss as ugly. What’s so beautiful, we might ask, about graffiti on an abandoned hot dog shack?

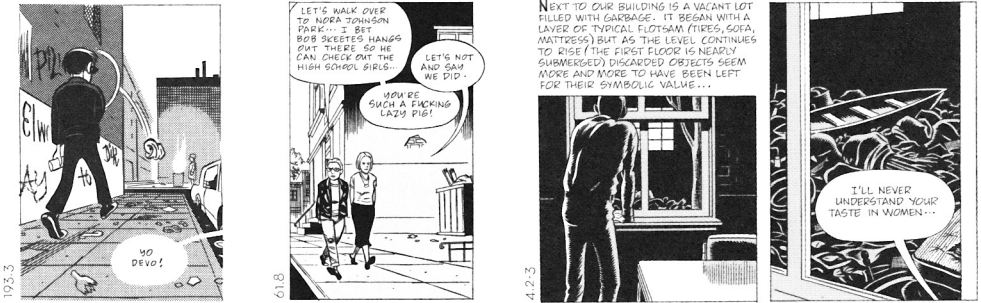


3.6-8

1 Interview by Rudy Lementh our. *PL.G.* #37 (December 2002). *Conversations*, p. 116.

2 “Chicago” first appeared in *Eightball* #7 (November 1991). Clowes was born in Chicago in 1961 and lived there until 1979, when he moved to New York City; in 1986 he left NYC and returned to Chicago. He moved to Los Angeles in 1992, to Berkeley in 1993, and to Oakland in 2000.

Clowes treats graffiti and garbage as loving forms of ornamentation, decorating panels with all kinds of detritus, such as the broken bottles, abandoned car, and graffiti of “Blue Italian Shit,” the overflowing dumpster and decaying buildings of *Ghost World*, and the vacant lot turned dumping ground of *David Boring*:



Beauty, Clowes suggests, is a by-product of decay, failure, and ruin. Nineteenth-century romantic poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge found beauty in the natural world, yet were also attracted to built objects, especially those in a state of decay. Old statues or decrepit buildings carried with them a sense of history, pathos, and mystery akin to the “sad beauty of bleakness and unfulfilled promises” Clowes finds in Chicago and its architecture. But while Coleridge meditates “On a Ruined House in a Romantic Country” and Wordsworth on “The Ruined Cottage,” Clowes, wandering alone à la the romantic poet, muses on a dilapidated hot dog shack in Chicago, a once “toddlin’ town” now in a state of semi-ruin.

When the poet Lord Byron praised Rome as “my country! City of the soul!” he expressed his profound identification with the aura of the city and its ruins.<sup>3</sup> While Rome was a center of classical art and learning, the city of *Clowes’s* soul is far less august: “America’s hog slaughtering capital” and, as poet Carl Sandburg would pronounce it in 1916, “Hog Butcher for the World.” In “Chicago,” Clowes depicts the once-glorious city as rife with “obnoxious” idiots who drink bad beer in fake old-timey restaurants. He identifies not with the city’s inhabitants (the faux-working-class yobs who love everything he hates), but with the downbeat aura generated by gloomy, dilapidated buildings and their genuinely odd and old (not fake-old) signs. In this way, the city molded and mirrored Clowes’s late-twentieth-century urban romanticism.



Beauty and the fallen world: *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (1993), 16.3

3 Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818), Canto 4, line 78.

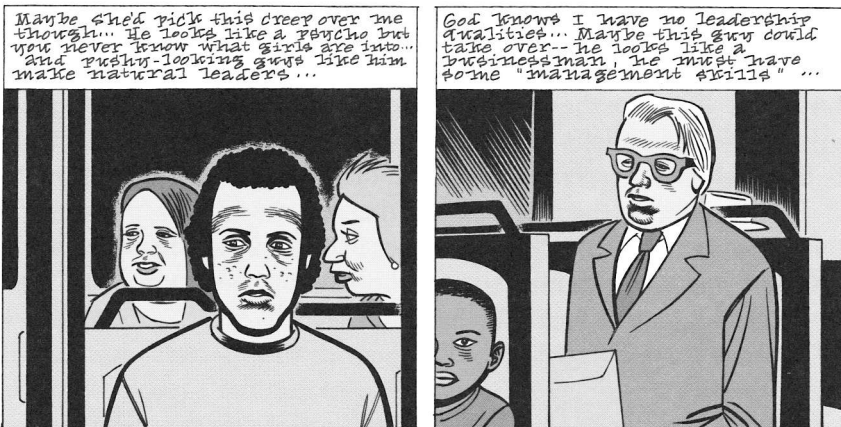
Clowes has another nineteenth-century precursor in Charles Baudelaire, a French romantic poet and influential theorist of urban environments. For Baudelaire, it isn't nature (as it is for Wordsworth) that overwhelms and transforms structures, but progress, and specifically progress associated with modernity — Baudelaire's Paris was being renovated in the name of efficiency and social control. In "The Swan," the poet muses about the city:

—Old Paris is no more (the form of a city  
Changes more quickly, alas! than the human heart);  
I see only in memory that camp of stalls,  
Those piles of shafts, of rough hewn cornices, the grass,  
The huge stone blocks stained green in puddles of water,  
And in the windows shine the jumbled bric-a-brac.

...

Paris changes! but naught in my melancholy  
Has stirred! New palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone,  
Old quarters, all become for me an allegory,  
And my dear memories are heavier than rocks. (7-12; 29-32)<sup>4</sup>

As they exist both in reality and memory, urban structures and building materials become an allegory of the poet's psychic architecture as he ruminates on ruination. Like Clowes, who rambles around Chicago in "The Stroll," Baudelaire's *flâneur* (from *flâner* — "to stroll") traipses through the city, at once a participant in and a seemingly detached (but often distressed) observer of its material life.



Each face on a Chicago subway tells a story: "Marooned on a Desert Island with the People on the Subway" (1991), 2:1-2

The *flâneur* critiques changes produced by the ceaseless engine of capitalism, yet, like Clowes, sees something emotionally compelling in the decay that progress leaves in its wake, and in personal and collective memory.

<sup>4</sup> Translated by William Aggeler, from *The Flowers of Evil* (Academy Library Guild, 1954).

The cartoonist has often suggested that Chicago, a city both victimized and overlooked by progress, suffers from an inferiority complex: “Growing up [there] in the ’70s, you very much felt like an underdog.” The city’s inhabitants believed they could never equal the standard set by America’s greatest and ever-advancing metropolis, New York City. Chicago’s second-class status helped foster Clowes’s hostility toward whatever was marketed as “the newest” or “the best.” Reflecting on his bleak South Side youth, he describes himself as an outsider with a stridently oppositional approach to culture. Like those romantic poets who searched for beauty “among . . . untrodden ways,” Clowes cultivated a taste for things he knew that insiders — who eagerly glommed onto mass culture’s shiny newness — would ignore or reject, such as the shoddy “Barnum Bros. Big-Top” circus that Rodger Young attends in the semi-autobiographical “Like a Weed, Joe.” Like the circus’s name, a rip-off of the famous “Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus,” the ringmaster’s clothes — worn, torn, and ill-fitting — signal that this rag-tag carnival is the Chicago to Ringling Bros.’s New York.



Rodger Young on the authenticity of a failed scam: “Like a Weed, Joe” (1995), 208.3.5

Lacking any humility, Ringling bills its polished production as “The Greatest Show on Earth.” But from the cartoonist’s perspective, it’s precisely this slick grandiosity that makes such affairs predictable and boring. Clowes dislikes commercial projects that reek of a “corporate committee that . . . figured out every angle and made it . . . palatable” to the masses, preferring places and objects that convey a “sense of humanity in [their] failure.” It’s the circus’s “threadbare earnestness” that moves Rodger — its unpretentious melancholy beauty. “Barnum Bros. Big-Top” tries to be something more than it is, but fails. Like Chicago, it’s a “beautiful tragedy” and “real art.”



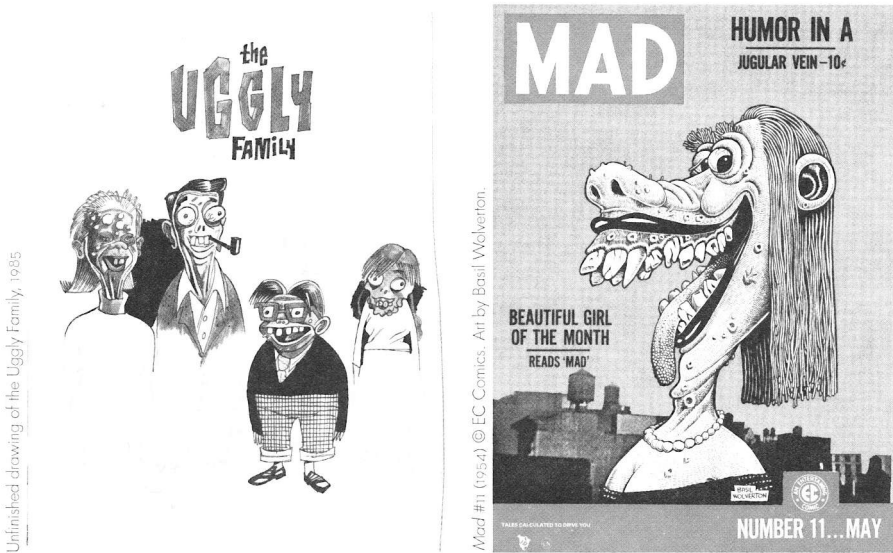
While Clowes shares the melancholy sensibility of many nineteenth-century romantic poets, he is equally and more directly indebted to a range of less-lofty twen-

5 Lou Fancher, “Oakland Cartoonist Daniel Clowes Goes From Underdog To Top Dog,” *The Oakland Tribune*, 04/19/2012.

6 William Wordsworth, “She dwelt among th’untrodden ways” (1800).

7 Interview by Joshua Glenn reprinted in this collection.

tieth-century American forbears. An offspring of *Mad*, perhaps the century's most influential humor magazine, Clowes was raised on the zany — and rarely melancholy — art of *Mad* cartoonists such as Harvey Kurtzman, Basil Wolverton, Jack Davis, Will Elder, and Al Jaffee. These satirists, with their decidedly urban sensibilities, made ugliness compelling to the young cartoonist. Unattractive people had long been a target of humorists, who freely ridiculed hags and misfits. But in *Mad*'s low humor, Clowes saw something profound: Ugliness presented as Truth, as the way things are. *Mad* scraped the shiny veneer off of mass culture. By comically exposing the hidden side of American values, it turned Ugly into a philosophical and artistic ideal.



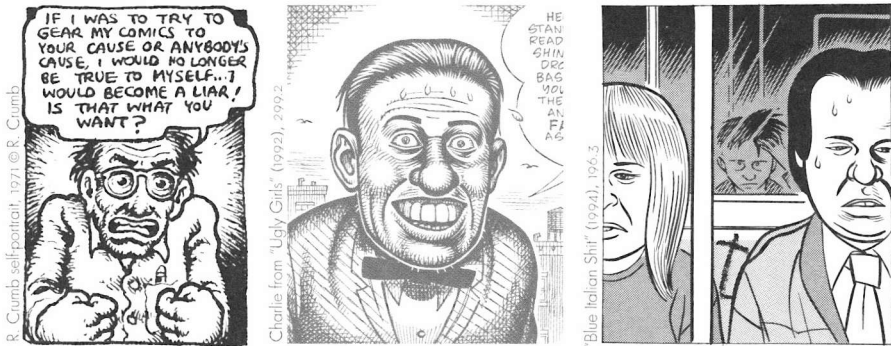
It should come as no surprise, then, that when Clowes drew stories in the mid-'80s for *Cracked*, a third-rate *Mad* imitator (*Cracked* is the Chicago to *Mad*'s NYC), his art reveled in angular comedic ugliness. His long-running feature was even titled "The Ugly Family." (The extra *g* makes the word a little uglier.) *Mad* satirized all that the Average American held dear, turning mainstream values upside down as it attacked movies, television, advertising, celebrity, and conventional assumptions about beauty. In the comic "Ugly Girls," Clowes creates a *Mad*-esque counter-aesthetic, a saturnalian philosophy that aggressively upends conventional wisdom: "when I see a 'beautiful' woman," the Clowesian narrator says, "I'm usually bowled over by a kind of existential *boredom*" (300.7). Within traditional Aristotelian aesthetics, beauty is an effect of order, symmetry, and proportion — values the satirical cartoonist seeks to desecrate. *Mad*'s aesthetic of disorder and disproportion is funny . . . 'cause it's true. And it's never boring.

As a teenager, Clowes fell under the spell of the *Mad*-like ugly ethos of seminal underground cartoonist R. Crumb, a devotee of the magazine in its early years.



*Mad* reveals how Hollywood movies (represented by black and white images) distort the truth: "Cowboy," *Mad* #20 (February 1955), 5.3-6. © EC Comics. Written by Harvey Kurtzman. Art by Jack Davis.

Crumb's overwrought males dripping with sweat, his unconventionally "thick" females, and his claustrophobic cross-hatched drawing style surface throughout "Ugly Girls." The story demonstrates the profound influence that Crumb's aesthetic had on Clowes's way of looking at the world. Perhaps more importantly, the elder cartoonist inspired Clowes to confront his own ugliness. "Crumb," he observed, "always tried to struggle with his inner demons in an honest way." What psychic issues do both of these artists confront as they ink black line after line, slash after slash on pristine white paper in order to create something ugly?



The world's ugliness speaks to something within Clowes. Exactly what it says *about him*, however, may be hard to define. In a flashback panel from "Caricature" (see below), the caricaturist's mother asks him, "Why are your people so ugly?" — a question Clowes's story never quite answers. In an interview, the cartoonist offers a clue when he acknowledges a connection between his art and "inner demons": "As a kid I was obsessed with drawing grotesquely detailed faces, which is basically an act of aggression against humanity."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Interview by Andrea Juno. *Dangerous Drawings*, 1997. *Conversations*, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Interview by Darcy Sullivan reprinted in this collection.

In Clowes's view, only an active and engaged critic — a contemporary *flâneur* — can find beauty in ugliness. When a careful observer sees a boarded-up building or a worn-out toy, for example, he or she looks closely in order to discover its story and to imagine (perhaps) a narrative about its creator. In the early '90s, Clowes

I STARTED TO THINK ABOUT THAT RIPPED-UP DRAWING AND WHAT A MISTAKE THAT HAD BEEN... AND THEN I THOUGHT OF ALL THE CUSTOMERS I HAD DRAWN AND HOW THEY ALL SEEMED LIKE THE SAME PERSON OVER AND OVER... AND THEN ABOUT HOW I DEEP DOWN, YOU KNOW WHEN SOMEONE IS TELLING THE TRUTH OR NOT.



"Caricature" (1995).13.8

bought from a junk shop a battered Popsie toy, a wooden figure of Napoleon Bonaparte — Romantic anti-hero *par excellence*. When the toy's head is pushed, a hidden sign pops up: "MAD FOR YOU!" "He's this glowering downbeat google-eyed guy," Clowes has said of the figure, "and it's not even the real Napoleon. It's some impostor madman." Behind this ugly geegaw, Clowes sees a story: "There's some kind of distorted screwed-up anger, some post-atomic angst that got blunted over the years, like the artist was trying his best to be cute, but underneath something crawls out

that's inappropriate and angry and truthful in some odd way. . . . The thought of presenting this angry symbol of insanity to someone. . . . There's nothing about it that's an expression of love, and yet there's something about it that says it all."<sup>10</sup>

Even as Clowes's comics celebrate the appreciation of ugliness as an act of contrarian insight, the cartoonist views this mode of perception as a creative coping mechanism — a means of transforming the repulsive environment around us into something interesting and worth engaging. In an interview published in this collection, Joshua Glenn describes Clowes's outlook in "Chicago" as "a positive way of looking at the world that many people would not be able to recognize as positive." And Clowes agrees:

*Chicago's great because it's bleak and horrible. Yes, that's exactly how I feel. You have to try to find a way to live, that's what Ghost World is about. Enid finds a way to get up every morning, and she always finds something to do. That's all you can hope for.*



In his post-2000 graphic novels, Clowes continues to blend romantic melancholy with *Mad*-esque cartoon satire. This dual sensibility haunts 2010's *Wilson* and generates its laughs. A peripatetic soliloquist, the title character wanders around Oakland, musing on its urban landscape:

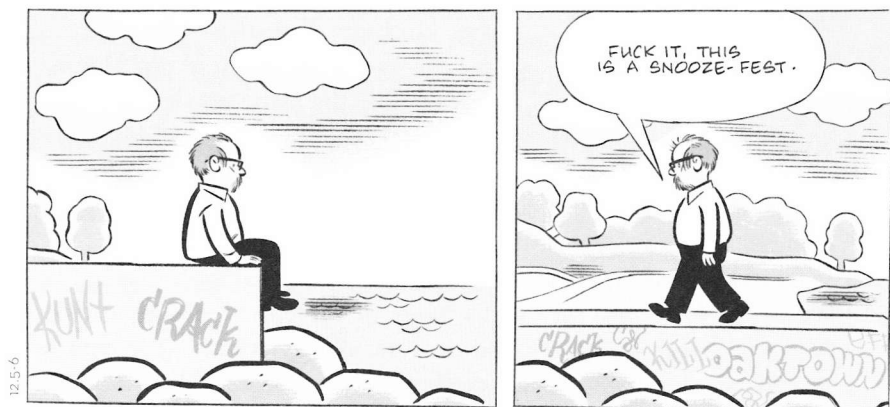


The urban setting of "Ugly Girls" (1992), 299.2

10 David Colman. "A Cartoonist Fixates on His Inner Napoleon." *The New York Times*, 5/7/2006.



“It’s kind of a beautiful place” (7.5).<sup>11</sup> Yet he viciously mocks contemporary movies, beauty trends, technological progress, and the sacrosanct American value of ambition. Wilson lacks will: he doesn’t care about “getting ahead” or “making something” of himself. While his behavior toward others is often reprehensible, he’s an idealist who yearns for a deep connection: “How tragic that we’ve lost all sense of community with our fellow man!” (7.3). In an early scene, Wilson ponders the San Francisco Bay, believing he has achieved a spiritual epiphany by recognizing our profound interconnectedness with nature and each other. Like Wordsworth, he embraces the mystical unity of all life, or what the poet describes in “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” as “a motion and a spirit” that “rolls through all things” (101, 103). But shortly after, bored with his own romanticism, our hero unleashes a *Mad*-like zinger:



That’s just like Wilson, and a lot like Clowes.

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<sup>11</sup> Clowes: “I find Oakland very beautiful, but in a way that would be hard to sell to tourists. It has an old-movie, lonely quality that seems filled with some kind of emotion.” Lou Fancher. *The Oakland Tribune*, 04/19/2012.