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# ***Spatial Poetics: Control of Time and Space in Graphic Narratives***

**Nick Dodds**

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# ***Aims***

A focus on the formal attributes and spatial apparatus of the comic book.

a particular focus on;

- i) page layout & spatial orientation
- ii) the potency of negative space
- iii) the page as a multi-frame
- iv) panel co-ordinates

# ***a complex conceptual activity . . .***

- the creation of the comic book page involves *cognitive reasoning* in the selection, arrangement and layering of textual & visual elements that comprise the narrative.
- comic strips rely on the reader to i) decode the linguistic and visual information at hand & ii) to navigate spatial relationships and make meaningful connections between one panel and the next.
- surface efficiency/underlying complexity
- comic books have a reputation for being easy to read yet (in comparison to other narrative forms) are awkward to describe . . .

# ***plurivectorial flow***

- a plurivectorial reading experience?
- to understand the narrative - the reader is constantly *traversing* and *rewinding* across the page.
- *direction* of eye movement can be erratic.
- *deviation* is a common occurrence.

(seasoned comic book artists are aware of these anomalies . . .)

# ***the potency of negative space***

The graphic page represents a partial and unfixed spatial visuality;

- the drawn surface on the page represents only a portion of the narrative content.
- the negative/un-drawn space; functions as a surrogate for the omitted or hidden parts.
- closure: the reader must enter the negative space, in their imagination, to make a coherent whole of the story parts.

# ***other factors affecting readership***

graphic narratives;

- come with a readymade system of graphic icons which are self-referencing . . .
- . . . require the reader to have some prior knowledge.
- consist of a hybrid of verbal and pictorial elements - creates the *tension* on which the narrative is built.

do we *read* or *view* a comic book page?

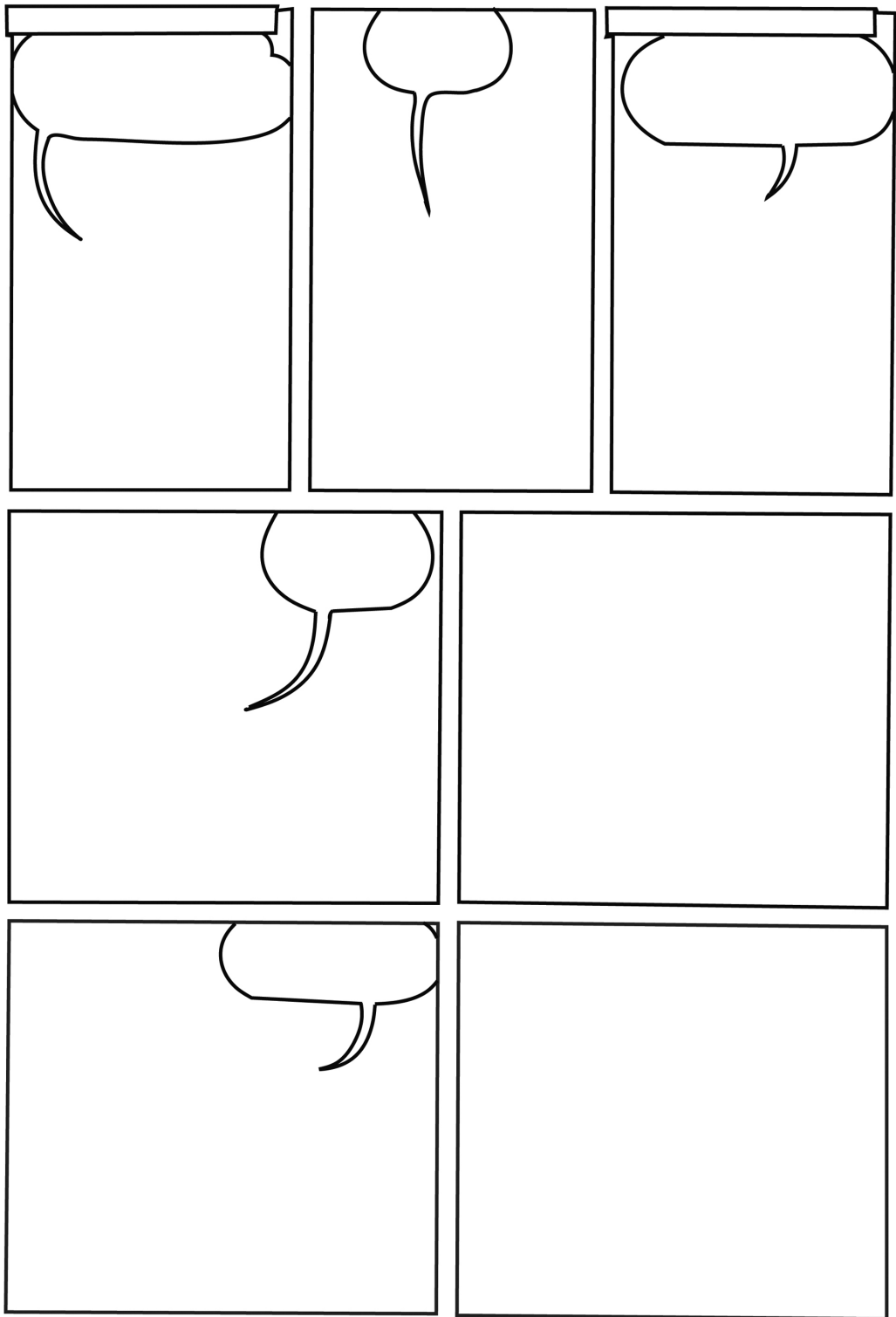
# ***the architecture of the page***

in regard to the arrangement of space in a comic book it is useful to start with . . .

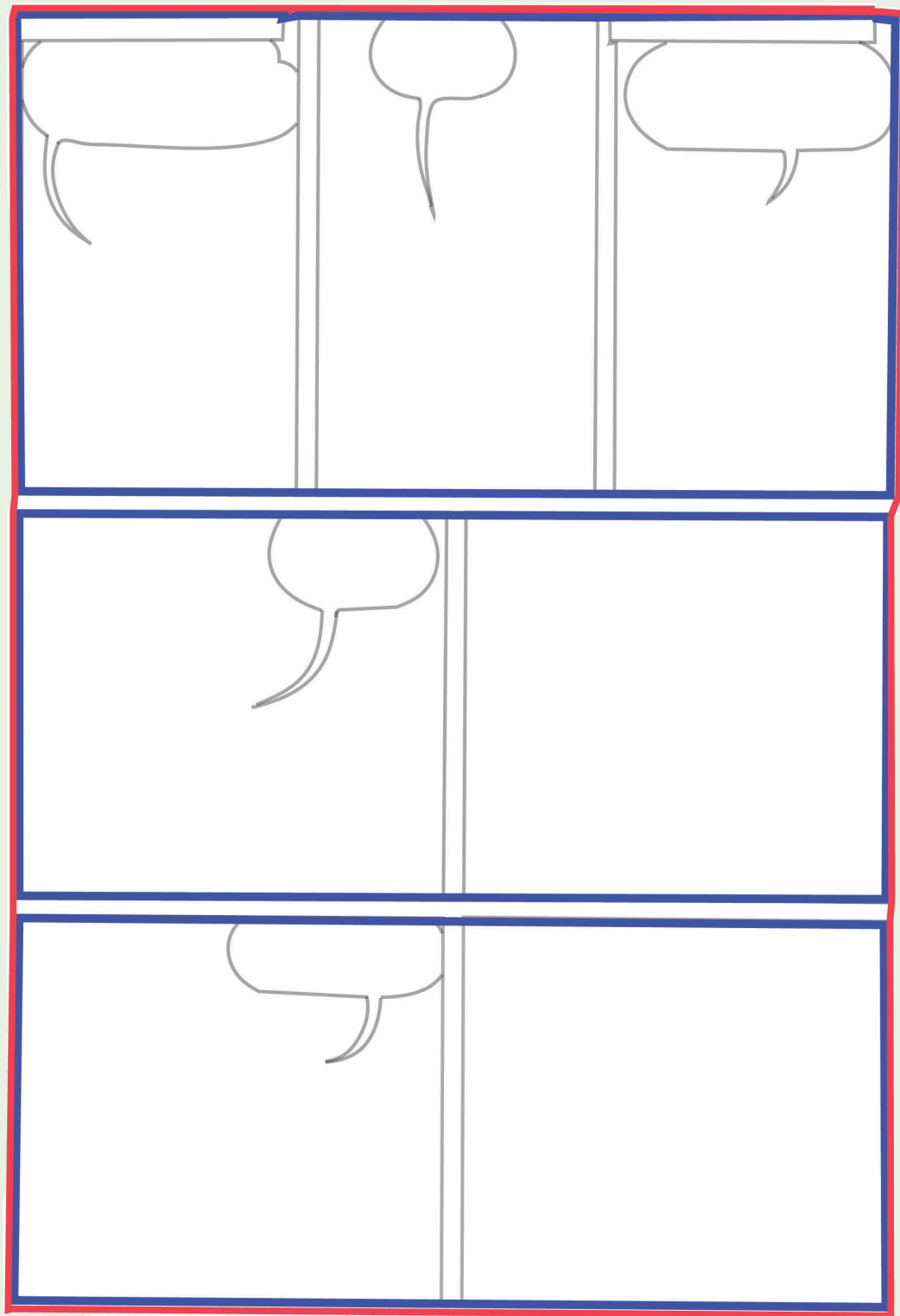
- . . . a consideration of the grid structure that governs the page layout.

## *The System of Comics* [Thierry Groensteen]

- encourages the reader to imagine the 'contentless' comic
- page emptied of its visual, iconic and textual innards . . .
- . . . leaving only a series of interrelated frames within frames [page multiframe]



**the page multiframe:** text box & balloon > panel frame >



text box & balloon > panel frame > strip > hyperframe >  
page margin > single page etc

# ***the page as a multiframe***

- an appreciation of the complexity of the creative process.
- reception is not bound by a measure from page surface to readers gaze . . .
- . . . just as the eye can move erratically *across* a page, it may also telescope in and out.

It is possible to identify at least 3 levels at which the page can be approached;

- 1) level of the page
- 2) level of the strip
- 3) level of the panel



LATER, AT TONY'S HOUSE...

I DON'T WANT TO HEAR  
ANOTHER WORD OUT OF YOU...  
JUST SETTLE DOWN AND  
GO TO SLEEP.



O.K...  
GOODNIGHT  
MOM.



THIRTY SECONDS LATER...

WOW, I WONDER  
WHAT KIND OF TREASURE  
MONSTERS WOULD BURY...  
I WISH I COULD...



HEY!  
SOMETHING'S  
MOVING DOWN  
THERE!

at the level of the strip;

- the reader becomes more conscious of the style and aesthetic of the artwork
- reader function - routing sequences left to right etc
- correlations between panels will begin to motion the narrative
- artists will often utilise the strip as a intermediate unit [ellipse] in the narrative or shift in location.



at the level of the panel;

- the reader is most engaged in the visual and textual content . . .
- . . . and the transition between one panel and the next.
- importance of the gutter/negative space.

# ***panel co-ordinates***

- a panel occupies a designated site & area on the page . . . directly affecting the "the range of possibilities" [Groensteen] for surrounding frames.
- has a relation not only to abutting panels, but to other frames in the *multiframe*.

significant coordinates on the page grid;

- entry/exit points and the geographical centre
- used to punctuate the narrative
- seen over a number of pages - instils a formulaic orderliness



# ***‘Curse of the Molemen’ analysis***

- throughout the *Curse of the Molemen* story, Burns opts for a *functional* page layout with consistent geometrical panel framing.
- little deviation from the three-strip structure, the majority of pages containing between five and seven panels.
- For Burns, neutrality equals readability . . .
- encourages the reader to bypass the homogeneous grid structure and focus in at the level of the panel.
- alternative approaches to page layout?

# ***Conclusion***

The graphic page represents a partial and unfixed spatial visuality.

This presentation/paper has highlighted some of the formal methods by which strip artists counteract *or* subvert the receptive instability of the medium, namely;

- the demarcation of the multiframe
- strip ellipses
- utilizing key panel co-ordinates
- motioning panel rhythm
- image specific/text specific layouts
- plurivectorial design

The conceptualization of the comic book page is a complex multi-modal activity, with symbolic depth, that requires an acute spatial awareness of visual forms.

the comic book page is  
"the organized space  
that cheats between the  
two dimensions of the  
format and the  
perceptive suggestion  
of the world"

(Alain Rey 1978)

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