

# Our Limitless Frontier

Why is Space important in Canadian Comics?

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In the realm of comics, it is easy to mistake space for a mere commodity.

Because comics are a medium chiefly concerned with the marriage of pictures to text, there is a finite amount of room to portray and articulate what needs to be seen and said. Economy of design must be maintained, with space treated at a premium.

The popular preconception of comics as a disposable medium helps to hammer home this misconception, and has led to a history of truncated and cramped work fit only for quick consumption and disposal. At its most extreme, as in the case of some newspaper syndications, this bowdlerization of space can neuter the medium almost completely, confining it to the vaudeville of talking heads and two-bit gags.

But for a comic, space is not a simple measure of quantity, a question of “more” or “less”. It is its very lifeblood, affecting its every dimension.

Space infuses locale with mood and characters with energy and emotion. It allows for the maintenance of pace, creating the illusion of time through juxtaposition and sequence of images. It can heighten the dramatic impression of the depicted events, lending virtual cohesion to the narrative. Finally, when wisely

used, space can present and re-affirm the text’s relevant themes, granting the comic elegance and depth.

Just as rhythm and meter define the cadence and resonance of verse, defining ballad from limerick from haiku, so too does space transform text and picture into poetry.

With such crucial energy hinging on the intelligent use of space, it is a small wonder that Canadians have done so much with it.

We as a people live lives defined by the space we inhabit, and are fascinated with its phenomena: our geographical breadth, our cultural boundaries, the experiences of West, East, North. Our history is of wilderness encroached upon by civilization, of immigrations old and new. We are tied together by the ever-present politic of boundaries. It is the negotiation and exploration of space that framed our origins and now guides our present preoccupations.

In the same fashion that our great works of literature and fine art have explored the variation, grandeur and isolation of the Canadian experience, a new generation of Canadian comic artists have risen to the challenge of addressing this nebulous gulf. The result is a series of works of remarkable range, both innovative in design and wholly Canadian in character.

For Chester Brown, Quebecker and author of the *Yummy Fur* comic series, negative space is often used to cultivate the experience of isolation and confusion.

In his *I Never Liked You* series of 1993, Brown recalls the unhappy time of his teenage childhood living in the Montreal suburb of



Chateauguay. Alienated from his fellow students and living with a mother slowly succumbing to a mental disorder, his teenage years were ones of solitude and disengagement. To emphasize the sensation of isolation, Brown depicts Chateauguay as a veritable ghost town, devoid of figures and faces beyond those that interact with the young Chester on a daily basis. Even in public, surrounded by others, the crowds are hedged out of focus, indistinct and anonymous.

Rather than fill his location with detail or expression, Brown leaves his panels nearly empty, suggesting an incompleteness that seeps out from the characters to the world they inhabit. As well, Brown never draws back the perspective or widens the panels to provide visual context for his locales. By confining the characters to the immediacy of their surroundings, they appear trapped, as insects in amber.

Even the characters themselves bear the visual weight of isolation. While the surroundings are given some level of shading and depth, the characters in *I Never Liked You* are drawn in thin, solid lines that frame unshaded white. Against the barren landscape of Chateauguay they seem frail and insubstantial, further emphasizing the ennui expressed by the text. Even in cases where a page is heavily inked, the characters cannot escape this void. Surrounded by a skin, sketchy 'halo', the heavy ink of the page is drawn away from them, maintaining a bubble of negative space. Never truly in tune with their surroundings, their very presences speak of aimlessness and discomfort.

Brown's final and most subtle technique his use of the negative space of the gutter, the space between panels. Where traditional panels connect in a grid formation, Brown's are separate, disjointed

by inches of gutter-space. By placing only a few panels to a page, the layout allows the images to drift along, with more and less space allotted to control pace and maintain rhythm. At times he leaves pages empty, save for a single panel. This occasional preference for a single panel rather than a full page isolates a significant moment without elaborate visuals.

As Will Eisner put it in his *Comics and Sequential Art*,

*".. the frame's outline becomes part of the apparatus for suggesting dimension. The use of the panel border as a structural element, when so employed, serves to involve the reader and encompasses far more than a simple container-panel. The sheer novelty of the interplay between the contained space and the 'non-space' (the gutter) between the panels also conveys a sense of heightened significance within the narrative structure."* (Eisner, 49)

This final technique of Brown's is perhaps the most dramatic, emphasizing the weight of these moments simply through a re-configuration of conventional space. Beyond this, it suggests, there is nothing.

Space, of course, deals with the full as well as the empty.

An opposite example of the effects of controlled space can be found in the work of Julie Doucette, another Montrealer and author of the *Dirty Plotte* series. Doucette's *My New York Diary*, a collection of shorts written throughout the '90's, best illustrates her spatial technique. Chronicling Doucette's life following her graduation from an all-girls convent in Quebec, *New York Diary*



depicts Julie's attempt to gain ground in the independent comic book scene of New York City. Suffering a string of abusive and manipulative boyfriends, a rash of drug abuse, and a string of health issues culminating in a miscarried pregnancy, Doucette's New York experience is jarring and raw, one of constant motion.

Doucette's visual style befits this turbulence perfectly. She opted for a heavily-inked technique that meshes texture and pattern into a rich blend of shapes and images. Just as Brown's sparse backgrounds speak of desolation and abandonment, Doucette's vistas are full and fleshy, teeming with life.

In all her locales, but especially in New York, Doucette fills the page with minutia. From the filthy apartments to garbage-strewn streets, this constant stream of mundane items suggests the busy, seedy tack that Julie's life has taken. But this is not haphazard clutter, solely present to fill up otherwise empty space. Doucette crafts each item with a surprising degree of care and detail, constructing a miniature world from the constant mess.

Observing this phenomenon, Paul Gravett comments in his *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* that Doucette's miniaturist care grants her strip a "tawdry beauty" that elevates it above and beyond the norm. In providing much more than the standard visual backdrops that accompany many comics, Doucette's locales seem all the more plausible and her characters more genuinely attuned to the world they inhabit. (Gravett, 47)

Ultimately this spatial technique lends itself to two separate readings, with radically different paces: a textual focus that pushes the constant clutter to the background in return for a quick, crisp

read, and a visual focus that slows to the point that each item gains shape, substance and meaning.

Just as Brown's drifting panels speak of aimlessness and despair, Doucette's panels similarly affect the mood of the text, albeit from a different source. Drawn in a standard boxcar formation with little variation, it is not the panels themselves that affect the text, but rather how they contain the visuals.

Doucette's characters are not fully anatomically scaled. They possess overlarge heads with expressive faces, to better portray emotion. Proportionally large in relation to their locales and the panels themselves, these characters often appear crowded, both by the text and by Doucette's trademark milieu of stray objects. They are often hunched, crouching or sitting rather than erect. It is as though they have outgrown the bounds of the comic and are straining against it. By further affirming the frenzy and discomfort that Julie experiences, and providing a cramped, restrictive atmosphere, this technique perfectly suits her tale of disintegrating relationships and loss of control.

It is only in the epilogue, when she has escaped her boyfriend and is living alone, that the clutter and heavy ink lessen to provide a comfortable place where Julie can recover.

The debate on space is by no means over. As long as comics are published and printed, there will be those who misunderstand this crucial dynamic of the medium, understanding only the commodities of ink and paper versus profit. In newspapers, strip comics continue to be shrunk or edited to better suit the economy of space, and many ambitious comic projects go unsupported because publishers fear they are too unwieldy.



However, the major revolutions within the comic industry and medium have been as much about space as content: From the independent publishing emergence of the 1960s to the current trend of comic ‘zines, part of the allure of do-it-yourself projects is an unlimited access to the page. Other comic theorists such as Scott McCloud have voiced their interest in moving to the Internet, a medium of limitless space, where otherwise impossible works can be created and enjoyed. As McCloud argues in his *Reinventing Comics*, the page is an artificial construct and its possibilities for graphic media are limited. By migrating to the “infinite canvas” of digital information, one might re-invent the very nature of what space provides a comic, and what it may do. (McCloud, 201-2)

Regardless of the politics of the page, no matter where comic theory and practice takes us, Canadians will continue to push the boundaries of the medium, experimenting with what space does and how it can be used.

When our only horizon is the blank page, our frontier is limitless.

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