



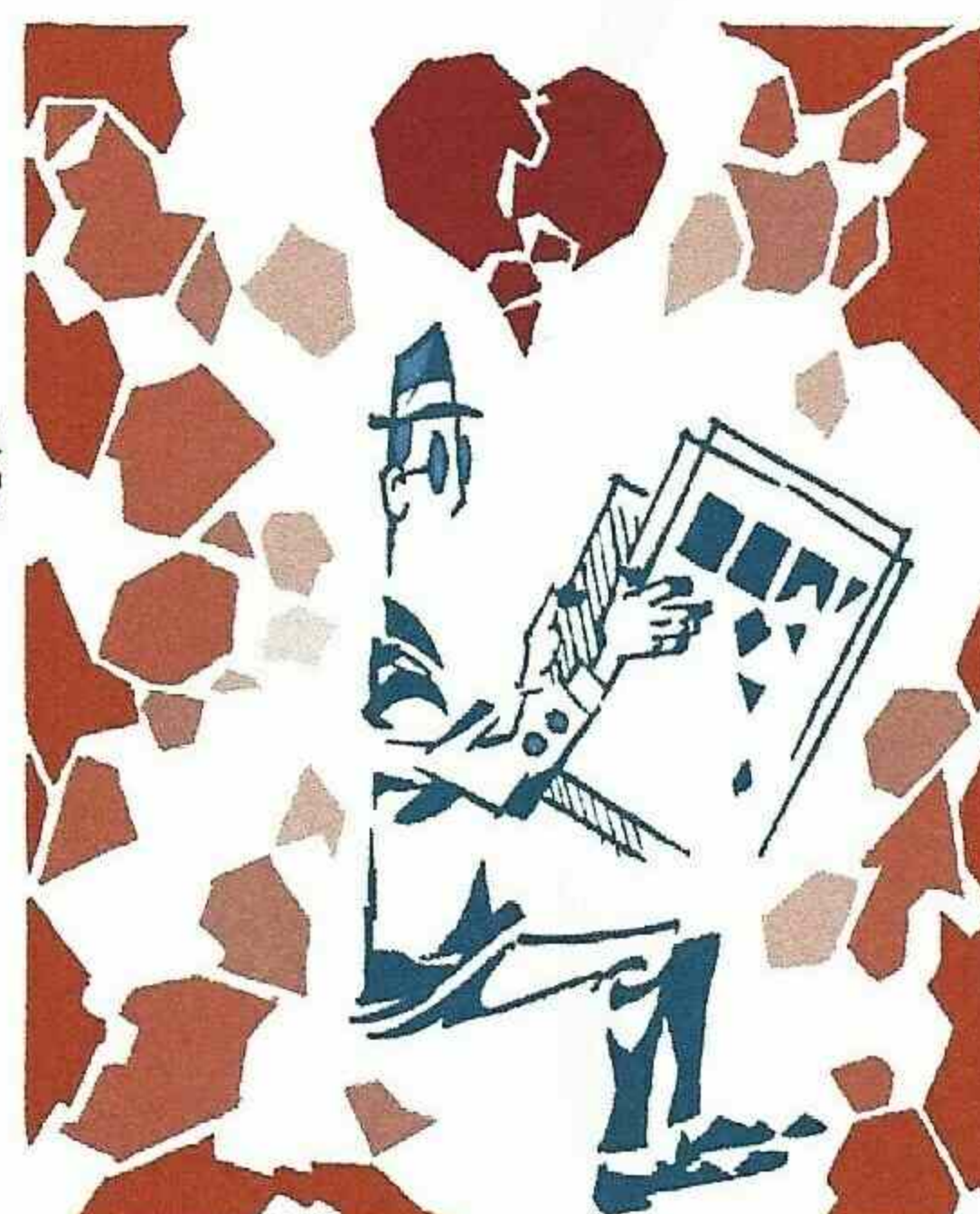
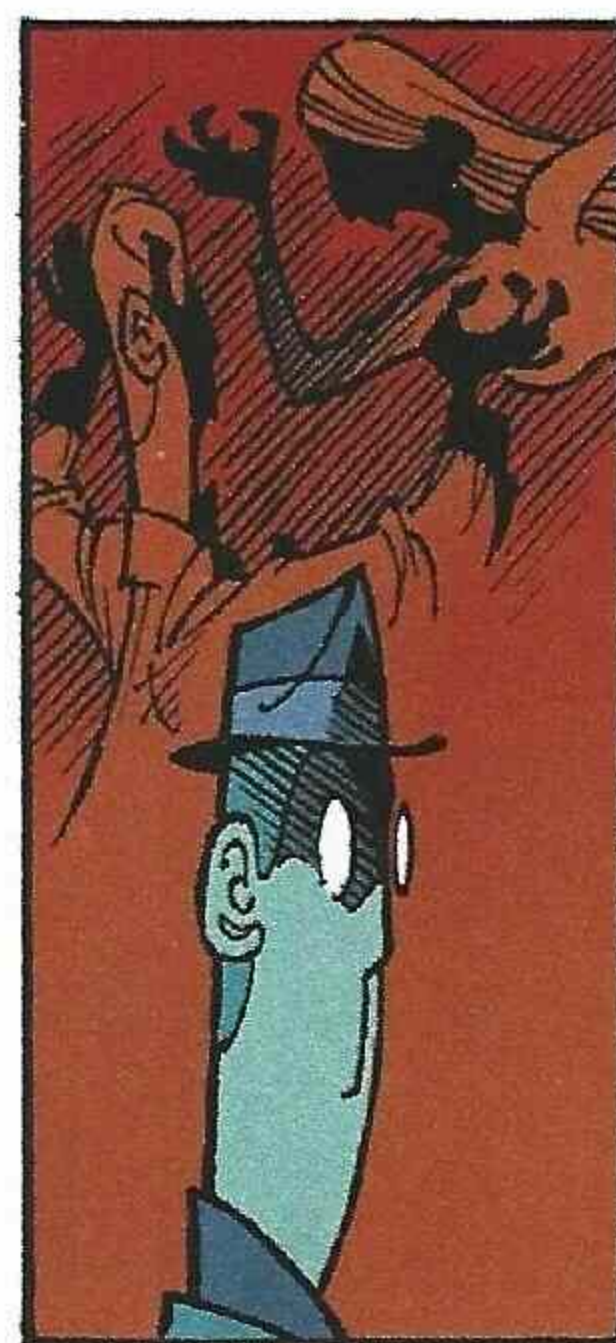
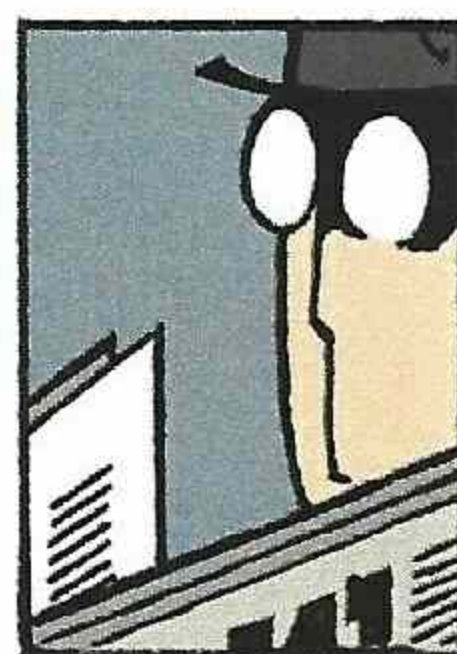
**DEFINITIONS AND  
HOW THEY WORK**

# ***Graphic devices and concepts***

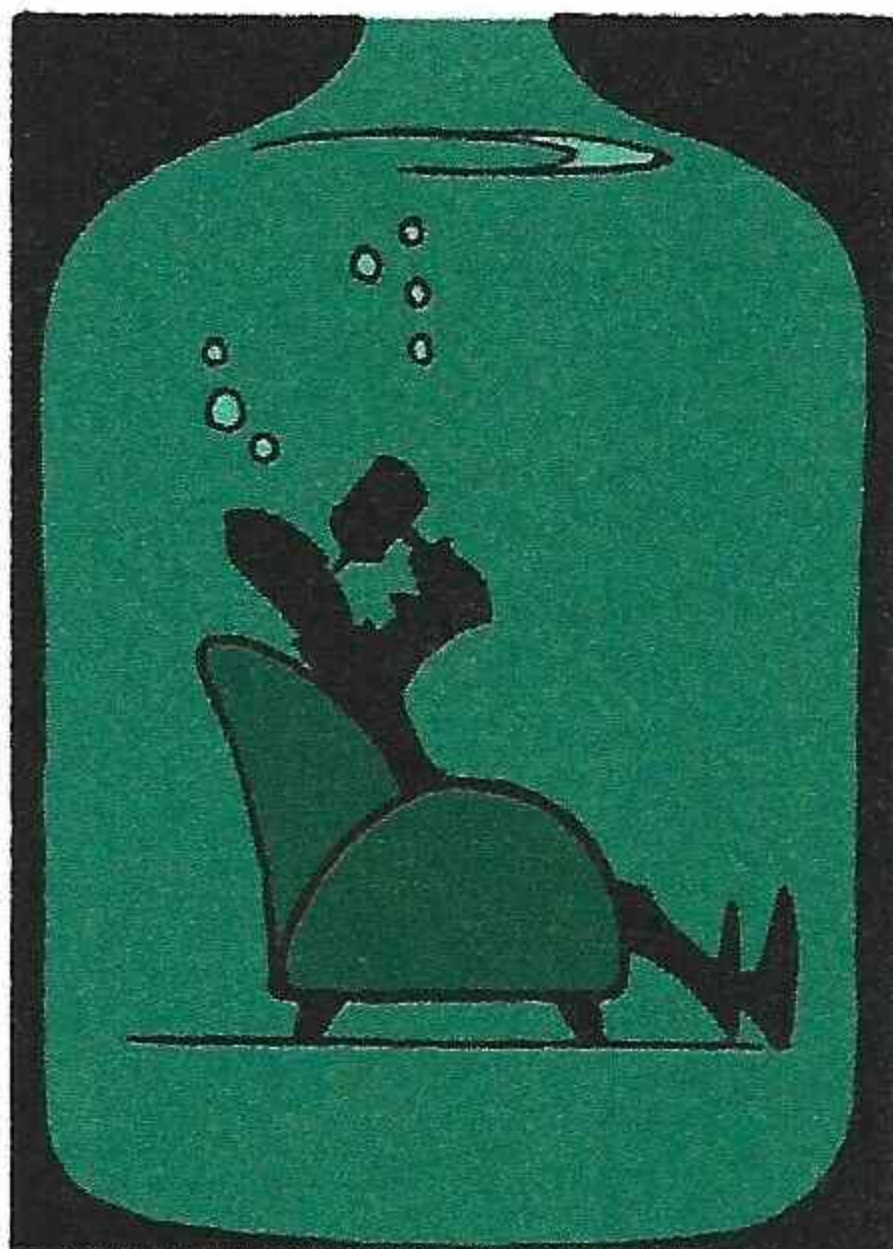
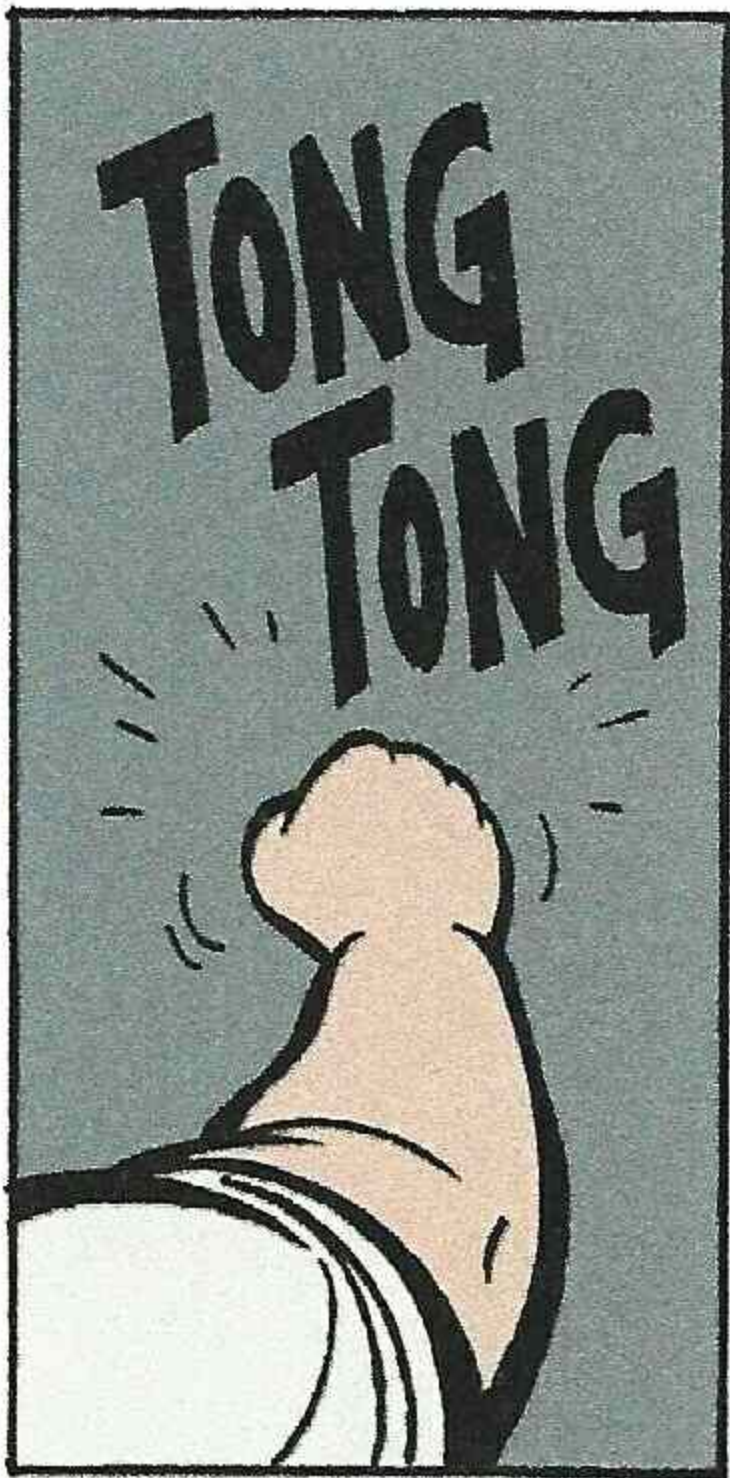
➔ Below you will find a set of graphic devices and terms that will come in handy when dealing with graphic novels. Making yourself familiar with these concepts will allow you to speak more easily, accurately and academically about graphic stories, and it will provide you with useful analytical tools, a visual literacy and most importantly, an idea of how to approach a graphic novel. On the next two pages, you will find a story which illustrates the devices and terms. Some of the graphic devices from this story will reappear individually in the toolbox.

**device** virkemiddel  
**literacy** evnen til at kunne læse







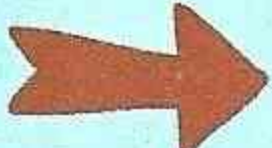




**inevitably** uundgåeligt  
**spread** opslag  
**juxtaposition** sammenstilling  
**consecutive** efterfølgende  
**vertical** lodret  
**column** spalte  
**resemble** ligne  
**grid** gittermønster  
**limitless** uendelig  
**perception of time** tidsopfattelse  
**contemplate** betragte  
**tilt** vippe, dreje

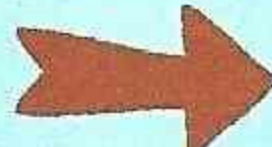
## HOW A PAGE WORKS

Usually a graphic novel is read like a conventional novel in the sense that you read from left to right, top to bottom. However, when you open a graphic novel or turn a page, you will inevitably see all the pictures at once, and it is consequently important to study and understand how the layout allows the pictures to work together.

 **SINGLE PAGE SPREAD:** A page in a graphic novel has been compared to a paragraph in a conventional novel, and we might therefore also refer to it as a **visual paragraph**. This is where you pause in your reading.

A single page spread is considered an artistic whole. On the given page you need to study contrasts, changes, juxtapositions, similarities and the overall symmetry. Sometimes a row of pictures, known as a **strip**, might stand out and form an even smaller visual paragraph or scene by means of a similarity in form or content which sets them apart from the consecutive strips. Try to think of this as stories within the story, chapters or scenes. Once you are done analysing the single page spread, you may begin to consider how the page spread relates to the neighbouring page. The two pages together are called a **double page spread**.

Many experiments have been done on the layout of the page. In Art Spiegelman's graphic stories about 9-11, **IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS**, the panels have been arranged in two vertical columns resembling the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, and shadows are cast across the pages. Traditionally, however, the page is structured in the form of a **grid**. A grid is a set of straight lines that cross each other to form squares. Sometimes the grid is very regular: for instance four rows of four panels in each row (known as **4 by 4**) or three rows of three panels in each (known as **3 by 3**). In other words, the panels are arranged in rows or columns vertically as well as horizontally, and there are limitless variations of grid. Often pages are 3 by 3 or 4 by 4 with slight twists or variations. Although a grid implies straight lines, the regularity is sometimes deliberately broken.

 **PANEL:** The pictures and words in a graphic novel are arranged in frames known as panels. The panels are possibly the most important device in graphic novels as they guide our reading. A way of doing this is to vary the size, orientation and shape of the panels. Changing the panels may, for instance, change our perception of time. A very large panel might break the regularity of the layout and seem to take over the page. It will allow you to pause, really enter into a picture, contemplate and understand the importance of a given moment or aspect. A panel might also be tilted or shaped untraditionally to suggest emotional instability. In other words the shape, size and orientation of the panels are



among the writer's most important tools for guiding our attention to important actions, feelings, etc. on the page.

Panels are interesting to study and analyse one by one, but they must always be seen in relation to their neighbouring panels. We are familiar with **rhymes** from poetry. In graphic novels the term is used about panels which are similar and correspond. For instance, the first and last panels of a page might visually "rhyme" to form a structure, a loop. This underlines the fact that the page forms an artistic whole. Rhyming panels may be achieved by use of repetition of characters, props, etc., by use of contrasts, colour variations and the number and sizes of panels. Sometimes a specific panel takes on a special role on the page in that it acts as a kind of centre which the other panels can spring from. We call this an **organising panel**. Often the organising panel will stand out visually, i.e. it may have another shape, etc.

The sizes of the panels help set the **rhythms** of the story. For instance, a lot of narrow panels tend to increase the pace. A number of very detailed panels with a lot of text or elaborate backgrounds might work the other way and slow down the pace of the story. Another way of forcing the reader to slow down is to use panels without words.

**correspond** svare til hinanden  
**loop** sløjfe  
**prop** rekvisit  
**narrow** smal  
**increase** forøge  
**pace** tempo  
**elaborate** detaljeret  
**mute** stum  
**linger** forblive  
**vastness** udstrakthed



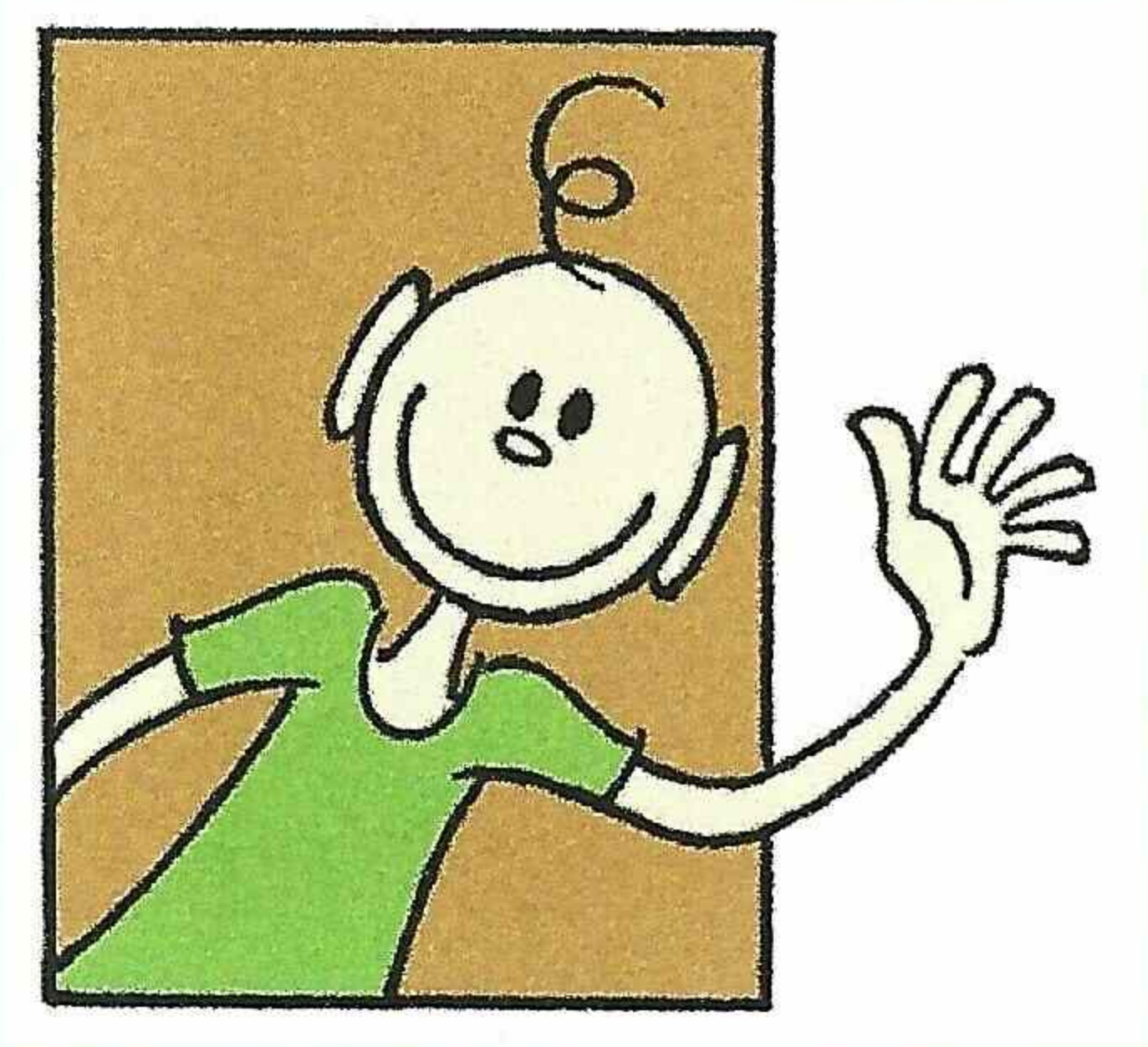
A SILENT PANEL

A panel without any words is called a **silent panel** or a **mute**. Silent panels are relatively rare, and they stand out and tend to linger in the reader's mind. Images without words might strike you as a more primitive form, but it is actually a kind of narrative which requires a lot from the reader as nothing is communicated directly. The lack of words forces you to use your own experience and previous observations to fully understand the characters and the situation in the panel. This slows down your reading and puts you almost on the same level as the character or situation. Often silent panels are used to create a focus on emotions and mood. A lack of background might also be used to create focus or emphasise a mood – for instance emptiness and loneliness.

Another variation of the panel is the **open panel**, which is a panel without a border. Open panels might convey a sense of vastness or timelessness. It is



**seep across** overskride  
**accentuate** betone  
**engaging** engagerende



4TH WALL BREAK

**play havoc** lave ravage  
**defy** trodse  
**tremendous** enorm

“COMICS PLAYED  
HAVOC WITH THE  
LOGIC OF A+B+C+D  
... DEFYING  
THE ORDINARY  
PROCESSES OF  
THOUGHT ...  
I FELT THAT  
COMICS FREED  
ME TO THINK AND  
IMAGINE AND SEE  
DIFFERENTLY.”

EDWARD SAID, AUTHOR  
OF “ORIENTALISM” AND  
FORMER PROFESSOR OF  
ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF  
COLUMBIA

a means to make the image linger in the reader’s mind. Generally the panels are closed (i.e. surrounded by frames) but words or characters may still be able to break through the frame, creating so-called **4th wall breaks** in which the words or characters seep across the frame and enter the reader’s space outside the frame. This is also called a **bleed**, and it often adds a sense of drama or action as the world of the graphic novel “bleeds into” your world. An even more effective device to create drama is to use a full-page drawing (usually) on the left-hand page. This device is known as a **splash page**. The author hopes to create a powerful, surprising or shocking effect when the reader turns the page.

The location of the individual panel on the page must also be considered as this is one way for the graphic novelist to accentuate particular aspects and draw attention to what she considers most important. Here you might think back on your initial reaction to the single page spread. What caught your attention first when you turned the page? How did you react?

A final aspect of the page layout that is important when analysing a graphic story is the space between two panels. This blank space is called the **gutter**. Often it is not clear how you get from one panel to the other, or rather what exactly happened in between. This is one of the ways in which graphic novels become very engaging as the reader is forced to imagine what happens in the gutters and then perform closure (see p. 19). Readers are likely to imagine this in different ways, and therefore it can be interesting to discuss the gutters in class.

As you have most likely concluded by now, the layout is of great importance in graphic novels, and changing it consequently becomes a very powerful graphic device.

## WHAT THE GRAPHIC STORY LOOKS LIKE

The way we see things in a graphic novel is of course closely connected to the layout and all the things you have just learned. Although a lot is shown directly, the reader’s role and participation is still critical. There is a lot of “show, don’t tell”, a lot of blanks where we rely on our imagination and analytical skills, and our way of reading and perceiving things is constantly challenged.

The first thing you notice when you open a graphic novel is most likely whether it is in colour or in black and white. This is likely to have a tremendous influence on our reading experience, and the graphic novelist must consider her use of colours carefully.

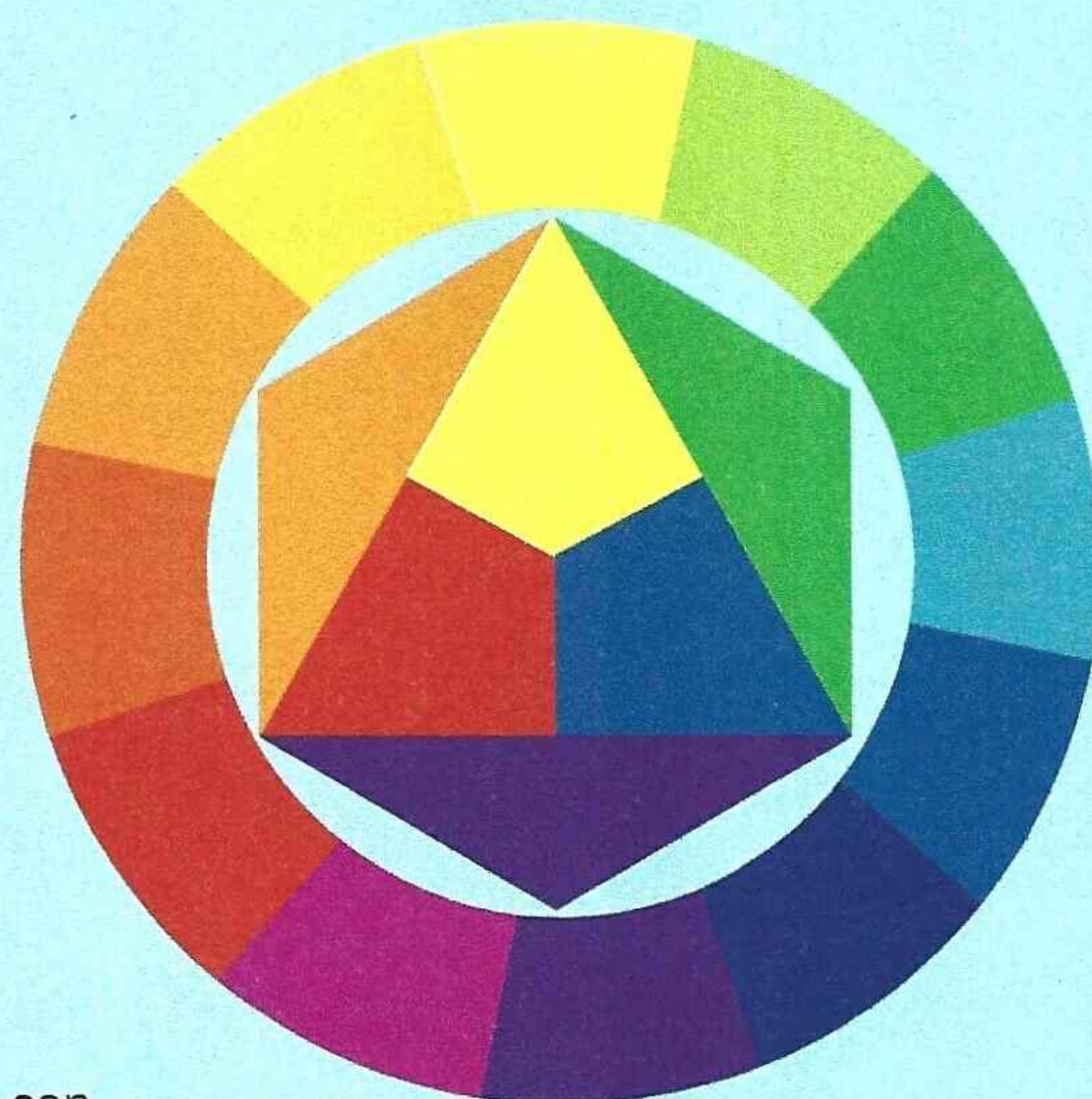


➔ **COLOUR:** Since we live in a world of colours, not black and white, colour often adds more realism, and it also conveys emotions or moods in a different way than black and white. Colours tend to make us more aware of an object or a character's shape than black and white does. Certain colours also trigger certain emotions, create effects and have connotations. We all associate the colour red with anger or love, blue with something calm or cold, etc. Dark colours conjure up a gloomy atmosphere, whereas bright hues help set a light tone. Colours can be pleasant or unpleasant to look at and can also be used to emphasise important aspects by making them stand out from their surroundings.

Colours work on their own because of our associations, but colours also interact with other colours, for instance in the creation of contrasts between cold and warm colours or between so-called complementary colours (red and green are complementary colours, and so are yellow and purple and blue and orange). Colours may be used for the sake of realism. Trees are green in the real world, so green trees in a graphic novel are realistic. Colours may also be used for symbolic or dramatic purposes, however. An angry character may be drawn with a red face, a freezing character may be completely blue. This is not realistic. It is a symbolic or dramatic choice that underlines an aspect of the character. Traditional superhero stories with lots of action were often depicted in primary colours. But any type of story may acquire dramatic effects from bright primary colours such as red, yellow and green.

However, many readers still associate these primary colours with comic book stories or superhero stories. Perhaps this is why many underground and independent graphic novelists today choose to work in black and white. Earlier the choice had partially to do with money because colour printing was expensive. Nowadays it is fairly cheap to print in colour, but black and white nevertheless remains an artistically interesting way to express stories because the lack of colour creates a different mood.

The author of a graphic story may choose black and white or colour. However, she may also choose to use a limited range of colours instead of the full spectrum. Of course, this will not be to increase the level of realism, but rather to create a certain mood or to emphasise certain aspects. Chris Ware's **JIMMY CORRIGAN – THE SMARTEST KID ON EARTH** uses a lot of bleak colours that reflect the protagonist's dull life and state of mind. Daniel Clowes's **GHOST WORLD** is in black and white – and a pale blue.



THE COLOUR WHEEL SHOWS THE PRIMARY COLOURS BLUE, RED AND YELLOW AS WELL AS A NUMBER OF SECONDARY AND TERTIARY COLOURS MIXED FROM THE PRIMARY COLOURS. TWO COLOURS PLACED DIRECTLY OPPOSITE EACH OTHER ARE CALLED COMPLEMENTARY COLOURS. THEY CREATE MAXIMUM CONTRAST AND STABILITY AT THE SAME TIME.

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**connotation** konnotation, bibetydning  
**conjure up** frembringe  
**gloomy** dyster  
**hue** nuance  
**complementary colour** komplementærfarve  
**bleak** trist  
**dull** kedelig



When you read a graphic novel therefore, pay attention to the author's use of black and white or colour. The use of colour, or lack thereof, probably has an effect on the way you understand the tone of the text.

➔ **PERSPECTIVE:** The term **perspective** is used about the angle from which something is seen. Think of a video camera. Is the camera held at your **eye-level**, above your head (the so-called **bird's eye view**) or near to the ground (the so-called **worm's eye view**)? The most common angle is of course eye-level, which puts us on the same level as the characters. This angle also increases the sense of realism as this is the way we are used to seeing things. In contrast, if you see someone from a worm's eye view, that character will inevitably appear larger and more powerful, and consequently it might create more involvement in the action. If, on the other hand, you see a scene from a high angle, characters seem smaller and less powerful, but it also gives a sense of orientation and detachment as we become observers rather than participants. Among other things, perspective therefore has to do with reader involvement and power relations in a story. When reading graphic novels it is a good idea to pay close attention to shifts in perspective and consider the effect.



BIRD'S EYE VIEW



WORM'S EYE VIEW

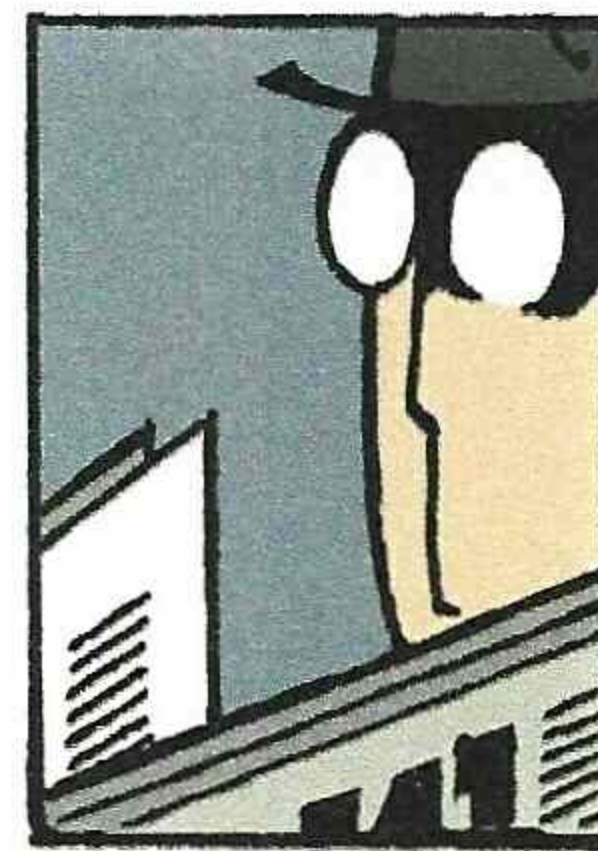


It will also be worth your while to pay attention to another “camera effect”, namely **zoom**. Are we zooming in or out? Zoom is of course a close-up which captures emotions and/or puts emphasis on specific elements. The opposite of zoom is called **long shot**. A long shot puts the character or object into a context. The important thing here is the relationship to the surroundings. When using a long shot, the author is not trying to give you specific, detailed information, but she is trying to give you information about the context. This might be information about a group of characters, the setting or something/-one moving. A long shot (or frequently a splash page) is therefore often used as an **establishing shot**, which tells the reader where the story takes place. In addition to that, it might set the mood and tone of the story.



➔ **CLOSURE:** In the panels of graphic novels we often have a close-up of something, or we see only a part of something. Due to our experience from the real world, we are, however, able to grasp it and perceive the whole. This is what is called **closure**. As readers we fill in the blanks. A famous example of this is the large metaphoric panel in Art Spiegelman's Holocaust story **MAUS** in which the characters walk on a forked road. On closer inspection the road is actually eerily shaped like a swastika. You only see a part of it, though, and because it is only hinted at, and because it slowly dawns on you, it lingers as a horrifying shadow. A visual detail which is not immediately visible but appears when you look closely is called an **Easter egg**. The artist Don Rosa, who has created more than 90 stories about Donald Duck, often included a small Mickey Mouse head or a tiny Mickey figure in his stories. You don't notice them right off, but they are there when you look for them. These “hidden Mickeys” are examples of Easter eggs.

Closure is also essential when it comes to understanding the roles of gutters (explained on p. 16).



**ZOOM**

**long shot** totalbillede  
**grasp** forstå  
**forked** forgrenet  
**eerily** uhyggeligt  
**swastika** hagekors  
**dawn on** gå op for  
**linger** forblive

**LONG SHOT**



**CLOSURE**



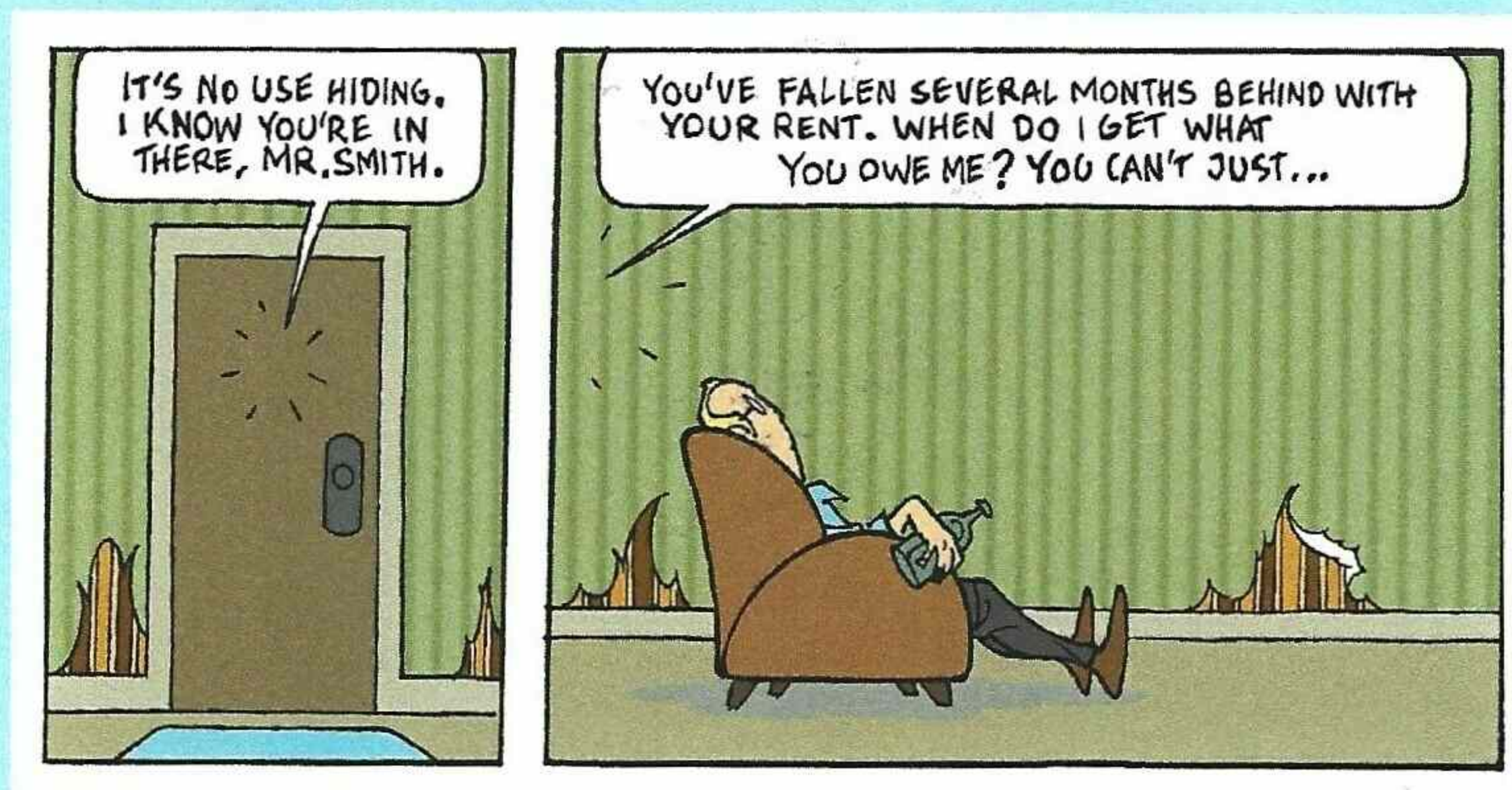
**EASTER EGG**



## SOUND AND MOVEMENT

Graphic novels are visual, and their pictures are static. We will now take a closer look at how graphic stories, in spite of this, manage to create sound, let us listen to the voices of the characters and give an impression of movement.

### SPEECH BALLOON



**font** skrifttype

**distorted** forvrænget

**vague** uklar

**pronounced** tydelig

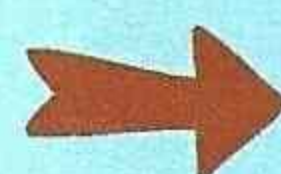
**capitalized** med store bogstaver, majuskler

**lower case** små bogstaver, minuskler

**immediacy** umiddelbarhed

**gaze** blik

**relay** viderebringe



**SPEECH BALLOON:** In order to convey a conversation, graphic novels use a circle around the words spoken by a cartoon character. This is called a speech balloon. The shape may vary to indicate whether a person is speaking, thinking (unspoken thought) or whether the sound is coming from, for instance, a radio or TV. Note also that the choice of font might play a part. The letters might be distorted, vague or pronounced, capitalized or lower case. They may even be shaped to imitate sounds. Often the font, size and shape of the letters indicate mood, characters' emotions, personality, sound level, emphasis, etc. In Spiegelman's Holocaust story, **MAUS**, the letter "s" is often made to look like the SS-logo, thus showing how the totalitarian ideology of Nazism becomes a part of everything. As in conventional literature, the author has to carefully consider the balance between dialogue and narration as they have different effects. For instance dialogue is a more indirect way of getting to know the characters. In graphic literature, speech balloons have an immediacy and a directness and are part of the scene we are witnessing. The distribution of speech balloons also helps set the rhythm of the text as they make the reader's gaze pause. However, they often relay the information faster than caption boxes.

### CAPTION BOX





➔ **CAPTION BOX:** Words printed over, under or on a picture that explain something about the picture are called caption boxes. In graphic novels this often works as a kind of voice-over, the voice of the narrator. Compared to speech balloons, caption boxes create some distance to the scene and might come across as more literary, having the authority of real prose. It varies whether the words or pictures take the lead, whether they basically say the same thing, whether one elaborates on the other, or whether they relay different information or even contradict each other. See pp. 24-26 for McCloud's illustrations. The letters in caption boxes may be handwritten or in set-type. The latter is of course less personal and more mechanical but it might be used to achieve a certain effect.

**elaborate** uddybe  
**relay** videregive  
**set-type** trykte bogstaver  
**villain** skurk  
**jagged** hakket, takket  
**screeching** hylende  
**cacophonic** disharmonisk  
**motion** bevægelse  
**blur** sløre, udtvære

➔ **SOUND: Onomatopoeia** are words such as "buzz" that produce the sound which they refer to. Other examples closely related to the world of comics are "wham", "bang" and "kapow". These were frequently used in early comic books with superheroes which involved a lot of fighting between the heroes and villains. In recent and more artistically ambitious graphic novels these words are not used as much, but it remains the best way to express sound in a printed medium. Onomatopoeia are often not placed in speech balloons or caption boxes but are often more integrated in the background of the panel. As with letters in balloons and caption boxes, the size can be used to show loudness, and the shape of words and typography ("fonts") may indicate how something sounds. For instance, sharply outlined, jagged letters may indicate screeching or cacophonic sounds. Pretty handwritten letters with soft curves might, on the other hand, suggest a pleasant sound.



ONOMATOPOEIA

➔ **MOVEMENT AND MOTION LINES:** From the very beginning, comics struggled with the problem of showing motion in a static medium. Within the panels, the solution was to use **motion lines** – or **zip-ribbons** as some call them. These could, for instance, be three horizontal lines behind a running character to indicate his speed, or lines close to his hand to show whether it is moving up or down. Another way for the artist to show speed is by blurring the moving object, or if the "camera" moves with the moving object, you can make the background blurred as Japanese cartoonists often do. Otherwise movement is mainly shown by means of a sequence of panels in which the gutter (see p. 16) represents the time that has passed.



MOTION LINES  
 – OR ZIP-RIBBONS



## CHARACTERS

**generic** generisk, ikke  
specifik, arketypisk  
**depict** skildre  
**trait** træk  
**gesture** håndbevægelse,  
gestus  
**facial expression**  
ansigtsudtryk  
**amplify** forstærke  
**opt for** vælge  
**tube-like** røragtig

➔ **CHARACTER:** As in conventional literature, graphic characters might be flat, round or generic, and the study of their developments and relationships is interesting and central. The difference between the two genres lies in the way characters are depicted and how we get to know them. As we have already seen, we might learn a lot about a character through a study of the text in speech balloons and caption boxes. But we will now turn our attention to the visual aspect.

A character in a graphic novel has a **visual design** (looks and clothing) that sets that character apart from other characters and a set of **expressive traits** – gestures, facial expressions, etc. characterising him/her. Comics and graphic novels often employ **stereotypes** in character design in order to “**amplify through simplicity**”. Sometimes less is more because eliminating details creates focus and emphasis. This effect is often reached through a level of **abstraction**. If a face is less detailed and less realistic, it allows identification more easily. Levels of abstraction and **realism** vary greatly in graphic novels, however, and a good starting point when you want to make characterisations in graphic novels is to determine to what extent the characters look like real people. How simple are they? How realistic? How abstract?

ABSTRACTION  
(SIMPLIFICATION) AND  
REALISM



While many graphic novelists opt for relatively realistic character designs, others use more symbolic character designs which give us an insight into the personality of their characters. In a famous scene in **ASTERIOS POLYP**, David Mazzuchelli draws the protagonist and his wife using different colours and different lines. The wife is drawn in red with soft curves, whereas the protagonist, who is an architect, is depicted in blue with hard, tube-like features that resemble his architectural designs. These features combined make him come across as cold, purely rational and completely obsessed with his work.



The study of a character's **body language**, i.e. facial expressions, body posture and gestures, is often more important than the text because a character's body language may add to, define or even contradict the words on the page. Body language is universal, and the readers' own experiences allow them to read a character's body language and interpret it. It is often interesting to look at a character's eyes or hand gestures. Are they friendly, threatening, aggressive, powerful, weak, etc.? Sometimes this is obvious, like when the author uses zoom, sometimes it is more subtle and you need to pay close attention.

The number of words in a graphic novel is of course far smaller than in a conventional novel. However, this does not mean that a graphic novel is fast to read. It is critical that you follow the pace suggested by the panels and the other factors you have just learned about. Graphic novels have a language of their own which is not purely visual but a complex interplay between words and pictures. Your visual proficiency and your awareness of graphic devices will help you stay alert and notice intriguing details and significant developments. If you are lucky, you might even find your first Easter egg. Enjoy your comic books and graphic novels, let yourself be seduced by the pictures, but reflect on your perception and emotional responses.

**posture** holdning  
**subtle** subtil, raffineret  
**proficiency** færdighed  
**alert** opmærksom  
**intriguing** fængslende  
**seduce** forføre



**BODY LANGUAGE**

