

## HISTORICAL COMIC'S SUPERPOWERS: THE CREATIVE POWER TO COMMUNICATE VISUALLY HISTORICAL EPICS

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**Abstract.** Comics are an indisputable part of popular culture. But compared to any other audio-visual media products, the production of this form of entertainment is relatively cheap. Thus, on this fact alone comic book artform could be used to fill the demand for local historical genre in popular culture and, in turn, to contribute significantly to the formation of a modern national identity among the youngest generations of the country. However, that is not the only or even the best superpower of the medium when it comes to production of fictional historical epics for entertainment purposes. In this article, the author explores comic medium's creative aspects that could be used to effectively communicate the various visual aspects of the past. Findings suggest that the most important visual medium's communicative tool that creates a unique and immersive experience is stylisation, in tandem with spatial and temporal systems. Additionally, the author discusses the challenges and opportunities for comic media to emerge in an educational context.

**Keywords:** comics, creative industries, historical genre, Lithuanian comics, modern national identity.

### Introduction

The comics medium, like most media belonging to the creative industries, holds great potential power to influence consumers' minds and hearts. In fact, popular arts' ability to kickstart discussions or even social changes, in addition to form a modern national identity is a key reason why most of Europe's states have creative project support mechanisms. The continent recognises that popular culture products have the ability to influence positively a state's cultural and social development, and this potential is far more important than commercial return on financial investment.

It is important to notice that there is quite substantial research on American, Japanese, and even French comic book influence on modern culture (e.g., Pustz, 2012; Park, 2005; Johnson-Woods, 2010; Gabilliet, 2010; Apostolidès, 2010). However, most of this research uses a historical discourse analysis or particular case studies and does not aim to question

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if any of the phenomena could be replicated in other countries. Researchers only ask, “what happened?” but not “could this happen again?” or “how do we best create conditions so that would happen again?”. These questions are really important for more than one reason.

Although today's comics culture is dominant in the landscape of global popular culture, there is considerable gap of comic production and consumption between countries that have old and developed industries and those that started creating their national comics relatively recently. Because of historical, social and economic reasons, countries that did not have the opportunity to develop national comic industries in the last century continue to struggle to develop it today, although the conditions for comic creation and distribution today are objectively the best in history. But one genre of comics offers hope to create success stories for countries that do not have such an industry – the historical genre.

This article will aim to identify how comic media can communicate uniquely visually this genre to the cultural product's consumers. To achieve this aim the author of this article, by employing inductive reasoning, will explore how the comics medium can help countries in their search for historical epics to be portrayed in emotionally impactful ways and also, what specific tools are the best to achieve that. Finally, the author of this article argues that historical comic genre is the perfect creative tool for countries that lack the economic power to produce other types of cultural products such as movies, television series or even video games.

## 1. Historical genre

The historical (historical fiction) genre is a type of fictional narrative in which the plot takes place in a setting located in the past. This genre can be portrayed in various visual media such as theatre, opera, cinema, television, video games and graphic novels<sup>1</sup>. It is hard to imagine any other genre in a context of the audiovisual or visual media that could provide so much national pride and be one of the most potent ways of enabling foreign citizens to discover (or even fall in love with) other nations and cultures. Historical artworks can help viewers come to terms with national history and to find common ground between different cultures. Thus, it can become an extremely attractive educational tool in the school classroom. It can also become an effective instrument to grow a soft power for nations, or even to be a blunt device for propaganda.

Although historical accuracy is an integral part of the audience's desired experience from historical genre (Dukes, 2018–2022), it must be noted that it is not a required form of the artwork (for that purpose there are documentaries or other types or work that require scientific accuracy). Historical artworks portraying fiction have another primary goal – to entertain the audience and, in return, to be rewarded financially.

However, historical accuracy in artwork is a very intriguing topic. In general, there is an understanding that historical accuracy today must be in harmony with the narrative. Thus, in the context of this article the term *historical genre* is used broadly and, although it mainly addresses fictional work, all presented principals can easily be applied to non-fictional

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the terms *comics* and *graphic novels* are used interchangeably.

narratives (for example documentaries or journalistic works). Although there are no specific numbers for how many years in the past the plot may take place, it is considered that historical genre should be no less than 50 years ago, or two generations ago (Dukes, 2018–2022; Britannica, 2021). This means there should be emotional distance towards the portrayed historical past.

Another important aspect that is usually automatically attributed to this genre is epic scale. This attribution is not technically correct because epic is a separate genre that

“often takes an historical or imagined event, mythic, legendary, or heroic figure, and adds an extravagant setting and lavish costumes, accompanied by grandeur and spectacle and a sweeping musical score” (Dirks, 1996–2022a)

and “often cover a large expanse of time set against a vast, panoramic backdrop” (Dirks, 1996–2022a). So, an epic story can be created without the historical element in it. That does not mean that artwork has to be one or the other, but one of biggest appeals of historical genre is the large-scale events and places in tandem with incredible spectacle and extravagant settings. Interestingly, historical movie epics are often called costume dramas, since they usually put focus on visual elements of architectural and costume design (Dirks, 1996–2022b). Therefore, in this article, the term historical genre is always regarded as of epic scale unless specified otherwise.

It is important to note that, while this article explores the historical genre’s phenomena in the comics medium, its cultural and social applications are mainly focused on small<sup>2</sup> countries. While the benefits of the comic book genre are applicable to all countries, the author argues that its true potential lies in countries that do not have the economic means to employ other popular culture expressions such as film, television or video game media. Therefore, all further arguments or statements for this genre will be provided in the context of small countries.

Another aspect that needs to be discussed is the historical genre’s ability to be used for the purposes of propaganda. The term *propaganda* in this article is used broadly and simply means there is an additional communicational agenda beyond entertainment. It could be simply to boost the population’s morale (patriotism), or to claim specific historical narrative that may not be in line with proven knowledge of events, or anything in between these two. To illustrate this ability with modern examples, consider modern Russian movies such as *Viking* (director Andrei Kravchuk, 2016), *Baltic Tango* (originally: *Holodnoe Tango*, director Pavel Chukhray, 2017), *Crimea* (originally: *Krym*, director Aleksey Pimanov, 2017) that, as Shlapentokh (2009) argues, are presenting the past with the aim to retro-integrate it into one historical continuum that is in line with the current regime.

Finally, this article needs to address the prestige of historical artwork. The author will briefly discuss the Lithuanian case – in over three decades of independence, the nation still does not have a movie that would depict the nation’s past in the historical epic genre. The reason for that is highly pragmatic – the country simply cannot produce an audiovisual artwork and hope that it will be commercially viable. Thus, this national desire can be brought to life

<sup>2</sup> As Brito (2015) noticed, there are various definitions for what constitutes a small country, with population size criteria ranging from 5 million to 1.5 million. In this paper, the term *small country* is defined as states that have a population under 5 million. However, as Brito noticed, the small size does not imply lower economic development.

only with state backing. Yet, filmmakers, the population and even policymakers do not discuss a need for any other genre. No-one feels a need for a Western, science fiction, religious, sports, action or even an animation on any genre – everyone simply wants a historical epic.

Historical genres have universal appeal. Of course, the artwork will be the most popular among the cultural group that directly relates to the events portrayed, but the evidence from Hollywood productions such as *Gladiator* (director Ridley Scott, 2000), *The Last Emperor* (originally: *L'ultimo imperatore*, director Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987), *The Last Samurai* (director Edward Zwick, 2003), *Braveheart* (director Mel Gibson, 1995) and *300* (director Zack Snyder, 2006) suggests that there is just something very attractive in seeing how great events transpired and were influenced by extraordinary men and women. As Hussain et al. (2019) argue, historical artwork (in this case, movies) has the power not only to entertain and move the audience emotionally, but the impact from the artwork is everlasting. Thus, when it comes to historical genre in popular culture it is never about “is there a demand for this genre?” but “how do we provide all that the audience wants from this genre?”. In the latter case, the demands are always high.

## 2. Historical genre comics

The first and most important aspect that needs to be addressed is that comics are a medium and not a genre. Although for a reader of this academic article this statement might sound redundant at best, the fact that a considerable portion of the population still address comic books as a genre cannot be ignored, not in the context of comic studies, nor in this particular case regarding potential of a historical genre. Quite the opposite – the author of this article argues that the lack of recognition of the genre's potential within the medium is firmly linked to the medium-as-a-genre misconception.

Of course, the dire situation arose where comics were associated with children and the subliterature (Bongco, 2000), and a cheap pastime may be thing of the past (Tatalovic, 2009), but the fact that the comics-as-a-genre perception is still strong even today can be identified from various types of sources – interviews with comic book authors where they address this challenge (see Nobel, 2020; Ramirez, 2015), literature industry events that promote comic books and at the same time reference them as a genre (see Critchley, 2017; LRT.lt, 2022), and professional journalism works where authors in various contexts refer to comics as a genre (see Alfa.lt, 2020; Jačėnaitė, 2017; Skamarakaitė, 2017). The author of this article even found one academic article in the field of literature studies that analysed text as image phenomena in the comic book medium (see Pekūnas, 2019) that referenced comics as a genre. However, the most interesting part of the latter example is that it is quoting the article that argues that the comics book medium cannot flourish while it is perceived as a genre that is targeted only to an audience of children (see Mitkus, 2013). Thus, it is safe to say that the comic medium has a big public relations problem.

Interestingly, today, comics – as a product of modern mass media culture – are experiencing a new golden age, but unlike at the beginning of the 20th century not because of quantity, but because of quality (Mitkus, 2013; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2018; Terror, 2018; CBR Staff, 2016; Mitchell, 2014). With the rise of mature topics in comic books there

is a hope that this damaging misconception will fade away, or at the very least, will not be as challenging for more mature comic topics. However, relatively recent research by the author into the Lithuanian comic book industry provided insight that even positive changes in the industry do not automatically transfer to better conditions for local comic book artists (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2019).

It is important to note that historical comics are not an unknown or rare phenomenon. In the United States (US), quasi-historical comics were often depicting Western, and later World War II settings. The same can be said about Japanese comics that popularly depict the Samurai era and French comic readers could see narrative settings that go back as far as Roman times. Thus, the comic medium has successfully transported its readers to the past from the very start of this artistic expression.

However, it is necessary to address the challenges of depicting historical settings in popular culture products. As Pustz (2012) noticed, there is danger involving casual learning (*i.e.* through entertainment works) when the original text is flawed or inaccurate. Thus, it is important to address the difference between quasi-historical and historical works of fiction. Quasi-historical (or historical fantasy) artworks, although they can draw heavily from past settings, do not claim to be truthful to historically accurate events, causes or outcomes. The historical genre, although still fictional, usually claims that works portray realistic detail and fidelity for the time (Britannica, 2021). Thus, although the author of this article mainly focuses on historical artworks, quasi-historical in no shape or form is inferior to the historical genre, as long as historical fantasy does not claim to be truthful. Thus, as Walker Vadillo puts it “history is a conceptual construct that can be used or abused depending on comic book creator” (2010, p. 157).

Nevertheless, as Pustz (2012) argues, fictional historical work (that primary aims to entertain and not educate) can be a great additional tool for teaching history – given that the teacher can help to identify fictional and historical elements, these works’ primary usefulness is their ability to illustrate that life in the past was considerably different. In turn, this can help to develop historical thinking, so the comic medium is an effective tool to re-elaborate and renegotiate the meanings of the concepts studied (Weber et al., 2013).

This general notion that comics can be an effective secondary pedagogical tool is supported by quite a few studies (*e.g.*, Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Tatalovic, 2009; Araya et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is research that tested comics as a means of communication in scientific and cultural institutions (*e.g.*, museums; Tatalovic, 2009), in primary schools (Farinella, 2018; Herbst et al., 2011) and secondary schools (Roussou et al., 2019; Wallner & Eriksson Barajas, 2020) and higher education institutions, or even in individual science publications (*e.g.*, Green & Myers, 2010; Arroio, 2011; Weber et al., 2013). Thus, although comics in scientific and cultural communication and education are not only a new concept but have actually been proved to be an effective tool, to this day they still have not found their footing in mainstream applications.

There are several special factors that determine such an overwhelmingly positive result for the use of the comics medium in the context of communication and education studies. The first factor is the perception of comic books as more entertaining compared to textbooks, especially among school-age readers. Thus, information provided in comic book

format has greater potential to capture and maintain the student's interest (Weber et al., 2013; Huska, 2014).

However, Farinella (2018) noticed that a lot of this research is done in the classroom by teachers who are also comic book authors with a small and possibly biased sample size. Therefore, Farinella argues,

“while comics have been studied as a tool for classroom education, their application to the specific challenges of science communication remain largely unexplored” (2018, p. 1).

There are still no empirically proven clear models on how comics can be successfully integrated in the classroom and overall curriculum.

However, Farinella admits that there is strong empirical evidence that when scientific comics are presented through personal narratives (which are easier for readers to identify with) it significantly improves understanding and recollection of instructions and data. Interestingly, when Secretariat of Public Education (Mexico) sponsored the creation of two historical comic books series (*México: Historia de un Pueblo*. 1980–1982. México, D.F.: Secretaria de Educacion Publica/Editorial Nueva Imagen S.A. and *Episodios Mexicanos*. 1981. Mexico: Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo) one of the creative team's goal was to “humanize history – to present protagonists (real and fictitious) as human beings, with doubts, with successes and failures, with weaknesses and strengths” (Huska, 2014, p. 77). And, as de Syon (2014) suggests, when historical comic takes too little distance from textbooks and becomes just a shell for key historical events and phrases it loses the element that fictional stories set in the past have in order to mesmerize the youth.

This leads to the second factor of why comics provide such positive results as a supportive pedagogical tool – by necessity comic books employ narrative to convey the message, and thus, they emotionally involve the audience. And, as Buhle (2007, p. 318) notices “social changes, seen within personal life, offer the student a textured sense that frequently and necessarily escapes the textbooks”. Interestingly, this effect was indicated even when comics had been used to transfer scientific (chemistry) information (Weber et al., 2013). Boer (2020) argues that the comic book medium fosters pauses and ambiguities that heighten emotional impact and educational value.

Another aspect that is a very an important element of the comics medium is stylisation. Thus, that means that 2D computer graphics characters' appearances “are generally more accepted by the audiences, as the demands of reality are diminished” (O'Neill, 2016, p. 7). Writer and comic book theorist McCloud (1993, p. 30) argue that by reducing character detail, readers are motivated to focus on the specific features of the design, and thus to amplify remaining visual information “in a way that realistic art can't”. Therefore, because of two-dimensional rendering of the world and its inhabitants, the comics medium provides an effective means to connect with characters.

Furthermore, because comic book artists employ – at least at some level – stylisation, or abstraction, this allows for some design aspects to be emphasised (Medley, 2010), thus providing an effective tool for the cartoonist to focus reader attention without breaking the suspense of disbelieve. The comics medium uses directing (communicating) tools that realistic media cannot use without risking losing the audience's immersion.

The last aspect that is unique to comics’ artistic expression is its spatial and temporal systems. As Cohn (2010) points out, the juxtaposition of two images often produces the illusory sense of time passing. McCloud (2000, p. 1) argues that “the heart of comics lies in the space between the panels – where the reader’s imagination makes still pictures come alive”. Thus, the reader not only mentally constructs a continuation of events depicted between the panels but also asserts the most logical timing to every single action. As to what is arguably the most interesting aspect, while time-based media (live-action and animation) provide “continuous, largely involuntary and virtually imperceptible” experience, comics provide experience that is “far from continuous and anything but involuntary” (McCloud, 1993, p. 68). While the audience’s relationship with time-based media has a *blink and you miss it* aspect, with comics the reader has complete control over the pacing of the story. Even if the reader decides to examine one or more panels more closely, it has absolutely no negative effect on immersion.

In addition, comic medium has an ability to graphically portray simultaneous events in multiple locations without destroying the suspense of disbelief. Visual storytelling ability is extremely hard to express in audio-visual media. Furthermore, as Goldstein (2014, p. 134) argues comic medium provides tools to present simultaneously happening events “into a neat temporal/spatial package that does not diminish the emotional impact” (by using the example of Jacobson and Colón (2006) graphic novel *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*). Example of how comic medium allows to portray simultaneous events in multiple locations without disturbing spatial and temporal flow can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. An example of a comic page that shows an action taking place almost simultaneously in multiple locations (source: *Studio Mitkus*)

To summarise this section, the author points out that there is overwhelming academic research that showcases how effectively comics can be used to effectively communicate the widest variety of messages. The medium has all the strengths that come from being a visually based artistic expression, in addition to some unique properties. However, its application outside entertainment purposes is still very limited. Reasons for that can only be speculated, but this author's educated guess would be the general population's biased view of the medium.

Finally, the comic medium historical (epic) genre is as perfect as the one of superheroes. This argument is based on the spatial and temporal systems being employed in comics; the reader can set their own pace, thus invest more time and effort into details without invoking the feeling that the narrative tempo is dragging. With additional tools (in comparison to live-action media) that comes with comics stylisation, it is the medium that allows extremely effective control over the reader's attention. Thus, research and industrial text analysis support the notion that comics as a medium is extremely effective to tell stories of the historical genre.

## Discussion

It is important to state that the author of this article does not argue that historical comics are better than any other comics genre, or even that comics are better than any other medium. Each medium has its own strengths, and each genre has its own loyal fans. Thus, this article only aims to discuss the comics medium's potential to fill the general public's demand for the historical genre.

As presented in the previous section of this article, the historical movie genre stands above all others when it comes to prestige. Furthermore, with its ability to educate, boost national pride and morale (propaganda element), historical comics can be used as a nation's soft power instrument. The comics medium (in the context of historical genre) can also do and achieve everything that the film medium can – but for a fraction of the price.

This strength of the medium in the context of portraying epic scale events was already identified by Mitkus (2013, p. 25) where he argued that based on the US comic book average price range, a 120-page historical comic book would cost from \$40.8K to \$120K to produce. This equates to around 3%–9% of the most expensive Lithuanian national movie at the time (*Tadas Blinda. The Beginning* (originally: *Tadas Blinda. Pradžia*, director: Donatas Ulvydas, 2011; budget – almost €1 million). However, a closer look into comics projects supported by the Ministry of Culture (Lithuania) (Lietuvos kultūros taryba, 2022) in 2020 and 2021 revealed that comic book project budgets are considerably lower:

- comic book *Jonas Šliūpas Otherwise* (originally: *Jonas Šliūpas kitaip*) – €5000;
- graphic novel *War Aviators* (originally: *Karo aviatoriai*) – €12 500;
- graphic novel *A Guide to Shanghai* (originally: *Gidas po Šanchajų*) – €1800;
- graphic novel *The Bees* (originally: *Bitės*) – €6000.

Thus, in today's market, a 120-page graphic novel would cost just over one per cent of the most expensive Lithuanian movie from a decade ago. Therefore, although this financial argument is not new in the academic context it still holds ground. However, just because comics are cheaper should not be the only or even the key argument to produce historical comics.



Furthermore, the author does not believe there should be a choice or even a discussion about what we need more – (historic) national comics or movies. Ideally, we, as an audience, should get both. Thus, the argument here is more about the strengths of the comics medium, especially for small countries. The comics medium should not be perceived as a cheaper version of movies, but an alternative that has its own unique set of strengths.

Those strengths are the reason why cultural policymakers and various cultural event organisers should turn their attention towards this medium when there is a desire to promote or further educate about the specific events of the past outside the educational curriculum. For example, Mathias (2007) argues that while popular culture's artwork mostly falls short with any articulation of why war events happen, the visual representation and experience of the battlefield is communicated to the audience in much more effective manner than in any possible academic text. Thus comics, as a visual medium, are a very effective means for that.

This also applies to movies, television series and even video games. The power of the comics medium (besides cost) is its ability to direct audience attention to detail, pacing and even a greater ability to connect emotionally with the characters that comes through stylisation. There is research, which argues that for the audience, it is easier to connect to stylised characters than to living actors. Additionally, it is worth addressing the fact that comics require a significantly smaller creative team (as opposed to audiovisual media) which means that comic authors can fully control the final look of the comic. This means not only to visualise the story, but give to give each story unique aesthetic solutions. Therefore, they have the possibility to contribute even further to unique artistic expressions, and thus formulate a modern cultural identity.

There is another unique benefit that comes with comics. Translating comic books into different languages is not only cheaper and quicker (compared to movies or video games), but it also does not cause the “uncanny valley” effect when actors' lips do not match the spoken dialogue. Thus, comics are a medium that is very convenient to export to other cultures.

Of course, there are some challenges that need to be addressed in this article. First, for historical reasons, regions such as Eastern Europe and Central Europe have for a very long time not produced comics and have fostered negative associations towards the artistic expression. Therefore, not only is the market for comic books still relatively small (although growing, see Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2018), but also the cartoonists do not have an industry and traditions to lean on (Bugailiškienė, 2007). Thus, even if the reason to use the medium to portray events of the past is sound, that does not mean that the local talent has all the necessary professional skills and knowledge.

Also, there is a challenge regarding financing. Being a considerably cheaper medium compared to film, television and video games does not automatically make comics a sound financial investment. This is especially the case in smaller countries or countries that for historic reasons actively ignored this artistic expression. Thus, for countries where comics culture is still developing, the production of historical comics without state support may not be feasible. Furthermore, even if suddenly there was additional funding for historical comic books, without the specific challenges of the genre considered, the result would simply be a higher number of low-value comic book works.

There is also a question about stylisation of historical visual settings and details. Existing research on comics does not address this aspect in any capacity, thus there may be a level of stylisation when it stops providing information about the past necessary to perceive the past as a different timeframe from today. Of course, it is not a flaw for a cultural product with the primary goal of entertainment, but if the comic has additional goals to provide the feeling of the past, some styles may be less suitable.

In addition, there are unanswered questions about cooperation between comic artists and historians – from “is this type of cooperation necessary to produce high-quality historical artwork?” to “how do we carry out that type of cooperation to achieve the best results?”. Another question is “would the need for historical accuracy increase (on account of the entertainment factor) if the comic book project is supported by the state?”. Finally, if historical comic books should be used in education (in the classroom), “what methodologies are best for us to employ?”. It is possible that methodologies already used with film medium might be applied and tested.

All these questions need to be answered before anyone can claim with certainty that the comics book medium is the best way to tell a particular story that is set in the past. However, this exploration laid some firm ground to support that the comics book medium, when it comes to historic genre, has some special superpowers.

## Conclusions

In this article the author argues that historical comics have creative powers that are extremely well suited to visually tell narratives of epic scale, and they can be an incredibly potent tool to contribute significantly to the formation of a modern national identity among the youngest generations of the state. Although it is easy to focus on the economical factor as a key argument for the comics medium with regard to the historical genre, that is not the medium's only, or even main, strength of the artistic expression. Findings suggest that the most important creative communication tools that comics employ to tell visually compelling stories is stylisation, and spatial and temporal systems. It is important to note that the latter aspects are also responsible for the unique comic book experience. Importantly in the context of this research, stylisation and spatial and temporal systems are also the medium's aspects that enhance the reading experience of the historical genre comic. Furthermore, the comics medium is an effective tool to re-elaborate and renegotiate the meanings of the studied historical concepts.

Therefore, the comics medium, as an artistic expression, has unique tools that can very effectively provide entertainment by visually depicting events of the past (at an epic scale) and has parallel potential to not only invoke patriotism and national pride, but also shape a modern national identity and in turn, become part of a nation's soft power. For countries where creation of historical movie epics is an investment that cannot be produced without special state support, comics could be a great alternative.

However, the author does not argue that historical comics are the medicine that can cure all culturally-related diseases. Simply, that comics are an integral part of popular culture and thus, if successfully utilised it can be a very effective tool to visually communicate past events to the

general population. However, further studies are needed to identify methodologies on how best to approach historical comics creation and application in supplementary education curricula.

Finally, it is important to address the limitations of this article. Because the author employs inductive reasoning as a key method of research, this article does not provide any empirically collected data that would directly support key findings and insights. Thus, this article provides only theoretical grounds for further carefully designed empirical studies to fully understand how the historical genre can be best executed in the comics medium. Furthermore, to establish how this genre can best be utilised to help shape a modern national identity. Both these lines of investigation seem promising to help the medium gain a foothold in countries with underdeveloped comics industries, and for economically weaker countries to successfully utilise comics expressions for cultural purposes.

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