VILNIUS TECH
Vilniaus Gedimino technikos universitetas

Vaida NEDZINSKAITĖ-MITKĖ

REPRESENTING HISTORY IN COMIC BOOKS: THE IMPORTANCE OF TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL COMMUNICATION

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

SOCIAL SCIENCES
COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION (S 008)

Vilnius, 2026

2026-002-M

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The doctoral dissertation was prepared at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University in 2021–2025.

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The dissertation will be defended at the public meeting of the Dissertation Defence Council of the Scientific Field of Communication and Information in the *Aula Doctoralis* Meeting Hall of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University at **10 a.m. on 26 February 2026**.

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A notification on the intended defence of the dissertation was sent on 23 January 2026. A copy of the doctoral dissertation is available for review at the Vilnius Gediminas Technical University repository https://etalpykla.vilniustech.lt, at the Library of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (Saulėtekio al. 14, LT-10223 Vilnius, Lithuania), and the library of Vytautas Magnus University (K. Donelaičio st. 52-215 rm., LT-44244 Kaunas, Lithuania).

Vilnius Gediminas Technical University book No 2026-002-M

https://doi.org/10.20334/2026-002-M

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VILNIAUS GEDIMINO TECHNIKOS UNIVERSITETAS

Vaida NEDZINSKAITĖ-MITKĖ

ISTORIJOS VAIZDAVIMAS KOMIKSUOSE: LAIKO IR ERDVĖS KOMUNIKACIJOS SVARBA

DAKTARO DISERTACIJA

SOCIALINIAI MOKSLAI,
KOMUNIKACIJA IR INFORMACIJA (S 008)

Vilnius, 2026

Disertacija rengta 2021–2025 metais Vilniaus Gedimino technikos universitete.

Vadovas

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Disertacija bus ginama viešame Komunikacijos ir informacijos mokslo krypties disertacijos gynimo tarybos posėdyje **2026 m. vasario 26 d. 10.00 val.** Vilniaus Gedimino technikos universiteto *Aula Doctoralis* posėdžių salėje.

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Pranešimai apie numatomą ginti disertaciją išsiųsti 2026 m. sausio 23 d.

Disertaciją galima peržiūrėti Vilniaus Gedimino Technikos universiteto talpykloje https://etalpykla.vilniustech.lt ir Vilniaus Gedimino technikos universiteto bibliotekoje (Saulėtekio al. 14, LT-10223 Vilnius, Lietuva) bei Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto bibliotekoje (K. Donelaičio g. 52-215 kab., LT-44244 Kaunas, Lietuva).

Abstract

This doctoral dissertation examines how comics employ temporal and spatial, visually based communication solutions to create the illusion of continuous action and sound in an art form that is soundless and motionless. The dissertation argues that the comics medium is exceptionally well-suited to producing historically based storylines because it can provide emotionally impactful experiences through visually stimulating communicative decisions.

This investigation employs several methodological approaches. Comics studies, in general, are very under-researched. Thus, because there is very little research that focuses on the art form's communication aspects, the author of this dissertation had to employ a holistic approach and utilise qualitative methodologies, such as autoethnography, open-ended questionnaires, and case studies, to gather rich data.

The doctoral dissertation begins by examining comics' ability to create the illusion of action and sound, with a focus on the historical genre. Next, the analysis focuses on visually based communicative applications in the medium and its relationship with the target audience. The dissertation then examines specific comics to identify the creative solutions employed in the medium.

Conducted empirical research provided numerous findings. An autoethnographic approach yielded insights into the creative process of producing comics within a historical genre. This experience led to the formulation of rules that should help creatives better plan the creative process and utilise the historians' consultation for the best possible artistic results. As a soundless medium, comics can effectively convey additional meanings, just as sound would. In other words, all (non-diegetic) text has communicative attributes that can provide additional meaning to the provided information and, in turn, produce an immersive experience.

This dissertation concludes with final remarks on communicative challenges and opportunities of the historical genre and possible further research.

Reziumė

Šioje disertacijoje nagrinėjama, kaip komiksuose taikomi vizualumu grįsti laiko ir erdvės komunikacijos sprendimai, siekiant sukurti nuolatinio veiksmo bei garso iliuziją meno formoje, kuri iš prigimties yra begarsė ir statiška. Teigiama, kad komiksų terpė yra ypač tinkama pagrįstoms siužetinėms linijoms plėtoti, nes leidžia kurti emociškai paveikias patirtis pasitelkiant vizualiai stimuliuojančius komunikacijos būdus.

Tyrime taikomos kelios metodologinės prieigos. Komiksai pasižymi mažu ištirtumu – šios meno formos komunikacinius aspektus nagrinėjančių tyrimų yra nedaug, tad disertacijos autorė pasirinko holistinį požiūrį ir taikė kokybinius tyrimų metodus. Duomenims rinkti pasitelkta autoetnografija, atvirų klausimų apklausa ir atvejo analizė.

Daktaro disertacijoje pirmiausia analizuojamas komiksų gebėjimas kurti veiksmo ir garso iliuziją, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant istorinio komiksų žanro analizei. Toliau nagrinėjami vizualumu grindžiami komunikaciniai sprendimai ir jų santykis su tiksline auditorija. Galiausiai tiriami konkretūs komiksų atvejai, siekiant identifikuoti taikomus kūrybinius sprendimus.

Atlikti empiriniai tyrimai leido surinkti daugybę duomenų. Autoetnografinis požiūris suteikė įžvalgų apie istorinio žanro komiksų kūrybinį procesą. Ši patirtis paskatino suformuluoti rekomendacijas, galinčias padėti kūrėjams tikslingiau planuoti kūrybinį procesą ir pasitelkti istorikų konsultacijas, siekiant aukštesnės meninės kokybės. Nors komiksai yra begarsė medija, jie gali sėkmingai perduoti reikšmes, analogiškas garsui. Kitaip tariant, visas nediegetinis tekstas pasižymi komunikaciniais atributais, galinčiais suteikti papildomą prasmę pateiktai informacijai ir sukurti įtraukią patirtį.

Disertacija baigiama išvadomis, kuriose aptariami istorinio žanro komunikaciniai iššūkiai ir galimybės bei numatomos galimos tolesnių tyrimų kryptys.

Notations

Definitions

Comics – a visual art medium that expresses meaning through sequential images across at least two panels, in print or digital form (Duncan & Smith, 2009) (liet. *Komiksai – vaizduojamojo meno medija, kuri perteikia prasmę per nuosekliai išdėstytus vaizdus, sudarytus iš mažiausiai dviejų kadrų, spausdintine arba skaitmenine forma*).

Closure (comics) – a reader-driven cognitive process through which fragmented, juxtaposed images are integrated into continuous narrative meaning (Duncan & Smith, 2009) (liet. *Uždarymas – skaitytojo inicijuotas kognityvinis procesas, kurio metu fragmentuoti, greta išdėstyti vaizdai sujungiami į vientisą naratyvinę prasmę*).

Diegetic (comics) – refers to elements that exist within the story world and are perceivable by the characters, such as sounds, text, or objects that are part of the narrative reality (McCloud, 1993) (liet. *Diegetinis – apibrėžia elementus, kurie egzistuoja pasakojimo pasaulio viduje ir yra suvokiami veikėjų, pavyzdžiui, garsus, tekstą ar objektus, kurie yra naratyvinės tikrovės dalis*).

Spatial communication (comics) – the visual construction of space and spatial relationships through layout, composition, and panel interaction (McCloud, 1993) (liet. *Erdvinė komunikacija – erdvės ir erdvinių santykių vizualinis konstravimas per išdėstymą lape, kompoziciją ir kadrų tarpusavio sąveiką*).

Temporal communication (comics) – the visual construction of time and event sequence through panel arrangement and reader interpretation (McCloud, 1993) (liet. *Laiko komunikacija - laiko ir įvykių sekos vizualinis konstravimas per kadrų išdėstymą ir skaitytojo interpretaciją*).

Word balloons (comics) – visual textual devices that convey speech, thought, and sound qualities through form, typography, colour, and symbols in a soundless medium (Duncan & Smith, 2009) (liet. *Komiksų teksto burbulai – vizualiniai tekstiniai elementai, kurie be garso veikiančioje medijoje perteikia kalbą, mintis ir garso savybes per formą, tipografiją, spalvą ir simbolius*).

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Introduction

Formulation of the Problem

Comic books are a visually based entertainment medium with a history spanning over a century. Numerous academic literatures, scientific articles, conferences, and doctoral dissertations have been written about comics (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Bugailiškienė, 2009; Eisner, 1985, 1986, 1996; McCloud, 1993, 2000, 2006; Hess et al., 1996; Wright, 2001; Tabachnick, 2009; Heer & Worcester, 2005, 2008; Smith & Duncan, 2011). Comics have been taken more seriously for some time, and the long-standing stereotype that comics are entertainment exclusively for children is gradually disappearing. However, the medium's communicative aspects lack research. This existing knowledge gap not only highlights the relevance of this research but also shapes its central problem: What visual communicative solutions in comics contribute to a more engaging and impactful entertainment experience? In other words, which specific visual elements of the medium are responsible for creating a lasting impression on the reader?

It is noteworthy that while scholarly works on comic book art have existed since the 1970s (Mambrol, 2017), most research during the subsequent four decades has focused on questions "How to define comics?" and "How to prove that a comic book is a medium and not a genre?" (Mitchell, 2014). In other words, for most of the period in which comics have been professionally studied, it has only

been to prove that it is a medium in its own right. Only in the last few decades have researchers begun to explore the many possible applications of this juxtaposed, explicitly visually-based art form. Furthermore, researchers started seeking to understand what makes comics such a unique and popular entertainment form. However, the exploration of these visual communicative aspects – how specific visual choices contribute to meaning-making, emotional resonance, and reader engagement – remains underdeveloped in academic literature.

This situation poses additional challenges for this doctoral research, as gaps in the existing literature suggest that the author will have to continuously adapt to newly gathered insights and work within an evolving theoretical framework. In other words, this doctoral dissertation will be driven primarily by observation, focusing on empirical analysis and real-world phenomena rather than relying solely on established theoretical models. By focusing on the visual communicative solutions that shape the reader's experience, this dissertation aims to meaningfully fill this gap and advance the understanding of the communicative potential of comics as a medium.

Relevance of the Dissertation

Although systematic research into the comic book phenomenon has been conducted for over a few decades (especially with the emergence of comics-dedicated academic journals such as The Comics Journal, Studies in Comics, and International Journal of Comic Art), it remains a heavily under-researched topic. Furthermore, a considerable number of recently published articles and books on comic subjects still debate the medium's definition or historical development. Especially compared to similar-age media like film or animation, which have far more extensive and established bodies of scholarship with well-defined theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and a broader scope of critical inquiry.

This dissertation aims not only to produce and expand explicit knowledge of temporal and spatial communication in comics but also to identify how communication aspects function within the historical genre.

Finally, it is important to note that a better understanding of how to produce comics of a historical genre can have a positive spill-over effect on the development of modern national identity. This is because while various forms of entertainment media can help strengthen cultural self-confidence, not all of them are acceptable options due to economic reasons. Thus, because comics are among the cheapest media (production-wise) in visual popular culture artworks, they are a perfect communicative tool for countries that can provide limited support for cultural products.

Object of the Research

Visually-based temporal and spatial communication aspects in comics.

Aim of the Dissertation

The main goal of this dissertation is to identify how to visually communicate spatial and temporal aspects in comics of the historical genre.

Tasks of the Dissertation

The following tasks were set to achieve the objective of the dissertation:

1. To explore how comics emerged and evolved into a recognised art form across different cultural and geographical contexts;
2. To explore communicative possibilities of the comic book medium;
3. To identify challenges when producing historically accurate comic book content;
4. To explore how comic book readers perceive action in the medium;
5. To investigate how the representation of sound in comic books evolved.

Research Methodology

The following research methods are chosen to answer the research questions:

- Literature review (monographs, textbooks, academic articles, comic books, etc.);
- Autoethnographic inquiry to address challenges and opportunities of comics of a historical genre production;
- Open-ended questionnaire investigations to explore how comic book readers perceive action in the medium;
- Case study investigation to understand visually based communication solutions employed to create an experience of sound.

Scientific Novelty of the Dissertation

1. While numerous studies focus on the comic book phenomenon, only a few investigate communicative approaches in the historical genre

comics. This doctoral dissertation presents research on how the comics medium, through visually based communicative decisions, can provide readers with an immersive experience. Furthermore, this doctoral dissertation bridges two areas of research: comics as a medium and the representation of history.
2. The focus on aural communication in comics, concentrating on its development over time, provides a new understanding of communicative tools in a soundless medium and adds a new layer of understanding of how aural elements enhance the emotional and sensory experience.
3. An autoethnographic investigation into the historical comics creation process introduced a practitioner-based approach and insights rare in the medium's studies.

Practical Value of Research Findings

1. The autoethnographic approach provided data and insights to produce a set of recommendations for comic book creators, producers, and project managers on how best to cooperate with historians on historical-genre comic book projects.
2. The collected findings strongly suggest that the historical-genre comics can be a powerful educational tool due to the medium's ability to resonate with readers.
3. A case study on *The Amazing Spider-Man* revealed the long-term development of visual sound representations in American comics. The findings demonstrate that a soundless medium can produce engaging and immersive experiences through the closure phenomenon.
4. The findings from the questionnaire investigation into reader engagement confirm that when the historical-genre comics present the protagonist's struggles as the forefront focus of the story, the audience tends to connect with the hero, and the story tends to leave a lasting impression.

Defended Statements

1. The comics of the historical genre offer the unique communicative ability to visually present historical events in such a way that helps readers connect with history emotionally.
2. The comic book medium, through the use of temporal and spatial communicative elements, can produce immersive experiences that require the

reader to participate in the active production of meaning rather than passively observe information.

3. The spatial and temporal communicative decisions in comics are constantly and continually evolving; thus, this medium thrives from experimentation and a creative approach to storytelling.

Approval of the Research Findings

The author of the dissertation published six scientific articles: two in a scientific journal, referenced in *Clarivate Analytics Web of Science* or *Scopus* databases (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2022; 2023; Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė & Stasiulis, 2022; 2023), and four in reviewed international conference proceedings (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2021; 2023; Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė & Mitkus, 2019; 2024).

The research results of the dissertation were presented at two scientific conferences in Lithuania and three abroad:

- International Conference "CONFIA 2021 International Conference on Illustration and Animation", 28 October 2021, Aveiro, Portugal.
- The 6th International Conference "Visuality 2021: "Media and Communication", 22 April 2021, Vilnius, Lithuania.
- The 7th International Conference "Visuality 2023: "Media and Communication in the age of (dis)information", 21 April 2023, Vilnius, Lithuania.
- International Conference "CONFIA 2023 International Conference on Illustration and Animation", 8 July 2023, Caldas Da Rainha, Portugal.
- International Conference "CONFIA 2024 International Conference on Illustration and Animation", 4 July 2024, Barcelos, Portugal.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, general conclusions, a bibliography, a list of the author's publications, and a summary in Lithuanian. The dissertation consists of 152 pages, 33 figures, two tables, and 164 literature sources.

1

Comics as a Visual Communication Tool: History, Theory, and Historical Genre

Today, comics, as a product of modern mass media culture, are experiencing a new golden age. However, unlike in the 20th century, this new golden age is driven by comic book quality rather than quantity. Furthermore, comics generate enormous cultural, economic, and educational value in the West and the Far East. More than one generation has grown up with their favourite comic characters. Comics are translated into other languages and successfully transformed into other media, such as movies, TV series, or video games. Thus, it is very common for the first time to meet comic book characters in another (non-comic) media. Over the past decade, comic book characters have enjoyed tremendous success in other media. As a result, comics are becoming an ever-increasing part of global culture and a form of entertainment.

This chapter reviews key concepts and terms in comics relevant to the research questions. It then provides an in-depth analysis of the modern comic book medium, focusing on context to identify key moments that guided the art form's development. Next, it investigates visual communication applications in the medium to create an experience of action and sound for the reader in an art form that has neither. Finally, the chapter will explore the concept of historical genres and

their execution in comic books. The chapter concludes with a discussion of why comic books are extremely suitable for historical genre storytelling.

Scientific articles have been written and published on the topic presented in this chapter (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2022; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2019, 2024; Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė & Nerijus, 2022, 2023).

1.1. Complex Nature of the Medium

Interestingly, most of the most popular entertainment forms today (e.g., animation, comics, and video games) have long struggled with the perception that they are artistic media and can't be used to provide mature experiences. In other words, there is an easily recognisable pattern that most modern popular entertainment forms must earn the right to be taken seriously. Although the aforementioned struggle among these art forms is repetitive, each medium's path to its recognition is unique. Thus, it is necessary to examine how the comics medium evolved over the century. And what is arguably even more important – how the relationship between the medium, the creators, and the audience evolved over the years.

This section has four aims. First, it explores key concepts and terms of a comic book and, by setting boundaries, clearly defines it. Second, it investigates the medium's concepts, genesis, and development in North America, Europe, Japan, and Lithuania. Third, it overviews the comic book creation process. The final aim of this section is to explore the comic medium's cultural impact in the modern world.

1.1.1. Defining the Comics Medium

This section aims to define what comics are and how they differ from other forms of visually based entertainment. Although the word *comic* is used in English to describe the medium, it certainly does not mean that all content is in the humorous genre. Around the world, comics are called by very different names, naming their purpose (Madden & Abel, 2008). In France, comics are called *bandes dessinées*, which means *drawn stripes*; in Spain, comics are called *historietas – short stories*; in Italy, the term *fumetti* is used, which can be translated as a *small ball of smoke*. And finally, in Japanese, the term for the comic medium *manga* can be translated in the broadest sense as the *carefree, frivolous picture*. It is safe to say that comics, as a medium, have long surpassed most of the meanings of these given names for artistic expression.

The term *graphic novel* (a specific term to describe a larger comic book) is now very popular in North America (Kavanagh, 2000). In the 1970s, marketers decided to introduce a new term to the comic book market that would be more

attractive to bookstores and libraries and would allow adult comic book lovers to spend money on buying a "serious" literary work rather than a comic book that is produced specifically for a younger audience (Lawrence & Santos, 2025). Today, we can already say that this approach worked, and graphic novels – larger-scale comic books – have established themselves in solid literary outlets (Duncan & Smith, 2009). However, behind this new "graphic novel" label is the same comic book, only a more expensive version (Kavanagh, 2000). Thus, in this doctoral dissertation, the researcher will interchangeably use both terms – comics (or comic book) and graphic novel.

Interestingly, even today, there is still no universally accepted definition of comic. In other words, most scholarly works will use one of the few most popular proposed definitions that emphasise slightly different aspects of the art form. Will Eisner was one of the first to attempt to provide a descriptive definition of the entire comics medium (1996). He called comics "the printed arrangement of art and balloons in sequence, particularly in comic books".

However, Scott McCloud, one of the most famous comic book theorists, has challenged this scientific description of comics (1993, 2000, 2006). He pointed out that in the early 1990s, with the advent of the now very popular digital version of the comics medium – *webcomics* – the word "printed" had to be removed from the description. McCloud suggested describing the uniqueness of the comic book medium as follows: images in an organised sequence. However, later in his books, McCloud expanded the proposed definition of comics by saying that it is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer". It is important to note that this medium's definition is most popularly used in scholarly works.

However, McCloud's proposed definition is criticised because, although accurate in its broadest sense, it encompasses other visual arts under its "umbrella". In other words, "juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence" can be found in historical cave drawings, ancient Egyptian reliefs, Greek urns, stained glass in churches, tapestries, etc. Thus, while McCloud provides a detailed definition, it does not clearly separate traditional comic books from other visual art forms.

For this reason, several scholars who studied the phenomenon of comics a few decades ago hypothesised that the roots of comics as media are the aforementioned paintings of Stone Age artists on the walls of caves or Greek urns. According to Duncan and Smith, this is an unnecessary attempt by scientists to provide comics with "prestige" associated with other artistic media (2009). In other words, while there may have been a need to present comics as related to "higher culture" media in the past for political reasons, today this practice is not only unnecessary but also harmful to comics studies.

Professors of Communication Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith agree with McClaud's description of the comic. However, they are also arguing that the

comic does not exist as a distinct medium (2009). It is just a phenomenon of juxtaposing images in a sequence. This approach to defining comics, although not very popular, is indeed very intriguing. Duncan and Smith propose that comics, as artistic expression, are not linked to any particular mode and can be expressed in any shape or form as long as there are two connected illustrations. In other words, comics could be printed literature, a digital file formatted for a mobile phone viewing, two paintings, or even graffiti on the walls of two houses.

Today, comics in the Western cultural sphere (and in East Asia) are recognised as a form of art, culture, and communication. Numerous academic literatures, scientific articles, conferences, and doctoral dissertations have been written about comics (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Bugailiškienė, 2009; Eisner, 1985, 1986, 1996; McCloud, 1993, 2000, 2006; Hess et al., 1996; Wright, 2001; Tabachnick, 2009; Heer & Worcester, 2005, 2008; Smith & Duncan, 2011; Gordon et al., 2001; Ndalianis, 2008). Comics have been taken more seriously for some time, and the long-standing stereotype that comics are entertainment exclusively for children is gradually disappearing.

It is important to remember that comics are a medium, not a genre. The term "medium" is derived from the Latin and can be translated into "the middle, between something". Today, the term is used to emphasise that it is a communication platform or a channel (such as a cinema or television screen, a radio, or even a picture or a book) through which information is transmitted and can be of different genres. The same situation is with comics. It is not surprising that, in the introduction to his book, Harvard addresses the reader with the warning that this book on comics is not about children's literature (1996: ix). The reality is that today, comics are an art form that can express any story (narrative) by choosing one or more genres.

In the West, comics, freed from the stereotype of being exclusively for children, have quickly become a tamed genre for older readers. Most importantly, comics, the popular art form of entertainment, may have begun to address sensitive societal issues such as drug use among young people (*Green Lantern #85* 1971; *Amazing Spider-Man #96-98* 1971), racism (*X -Men #1-52* 1975), sexism (*Wimmen's Comix* series 1972), political scandals (*Mad* 1972), war-related problems in society (*EC* 1950), visions of the future of a utopian and dystopian society, and the right of society to implement or resist them (*Watchmen #1–126* 1986), environmental pollution and conservation issues (*Concrete Celebrates Earth Day* Series 1990), immigration and the concept of citizenship (*Superman # 900* 2001), homosexual issues in different regions of the United States (*Stuck Rubber Baby* 1995; *The Power Within* 2011), and many other problems that continue to arise in U.S. society from the 1940s to the present day.

Thus, summarising the thoughts of comic book theorists, the author will provide the simplest possible definition of comics that will be used in this doctoral

dissertation. Following the arguments of scholars and comic book critics, the simplified definition of a comic in this dissertation is that it is the medium through which the art presented in sequence is expressed. Also, this visual art medium can function in printed and digital forms. Finally, comics must consist of at least two separate panels, which do not necessarily contain text.

1.1.2. Comics History: Genesis

Up to this point, we reviewed the situation that led to the emergence of the comic book medium in North America, Europe, and Japan. However, comics – as an independent medium – do not yet exist. Thus, it is necessary to review how the comic book medium was born and developed. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, comic book theorists have been at odds over the question of what should be considered the beginning of the comic medium. There are weak attempts to suggest that the beginnings of comics can be traced back to the works of ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Aztec art, arguing that they present narrative in a graphic sequence. There is art produced in the Middle Ages that can also be considered an early form of comics – stained glass in churches, for example, often features episodes from the Bible in chronological order. The *Bayeux Tapestry* is among the most often presented examples. This 70-meter-long and 50-centimetre-wide tapestry was created in the 11th century and depicted successive (sequential) events beginning with the Norman conquest of England and the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

This list of examples could go on, but the question arises: Is this necessary today when studying the comics medium? Most modern comics scholars agree that in the 1980s, when the first organised academic studies of the medium began, researchers were motivated to find all possible connections between ancient arts and comics. In other words, it was a strategic decision to look for a connection between comics and ancient art because there were fears that comics, as an independent medium, would not be accepted as a serious object of study in academia. Furthermore, there was fear that the aim of analysing comics in an academic environment would be simply despised and ridiculed (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Horn, 1996). For this reason, in this segment, the author of this doctoral dissertation will not address further the subject of the comics medium's potential prehistory. Of course, other art forms most definitely influenced and inspired the formation of the modern comics medium, but from this point forward, only the key events and milestones of the medium that occurred in the United States, Europe, and Japan will be discussed below.

Comics (the form) slowly developed and evolved into what we see today in traditional or virtual bookstores. It is worth noting that the development of not only the comic book industry but also the content and form of comics differed



Fig. 1.1. *The Yellow Kid* (Source: Outcault, 1897)

between Americans, Europeans, and Japanese. The first proto comics can be found as early as the 19th century. The first author to agree on the influence of most comic book theorists on the formation of modern comics is the Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846).

Richard F. Outcault, who created comic strips for the *New York World* and *New York Journal* newspapers, greatly influenced the emergence of comics in the United States. These strips were later named *The Yellow Kid* (1895–1898; Fig. 1.1). Due to its immense popularity, *The Yellow Kid* comic strips were collected into one publication in March 1897 and began to be sold successfully as a stand-alone comic book rather than as part of a newspaper (Benton, 1993).

However, the most important aspect of *The Yellow Kid* comic strip phenomenon was that it showed that comic strips could improve newspaper sales performance. Very soon, other publishers began developing their own comic strip characters whose adventures could be followed by purchasing their newspapers. As new comic strips became popular, they were also collected and published as stand-alone comic books.

The popularity of comic strips led to further innovations: comic strips became full-colour and took up an entire newspaper page. Text bubbles were introduced (up until then, text was written on characters' clothes or the like; Fig. 1.2). The transition from comic strips to comic books, which would be

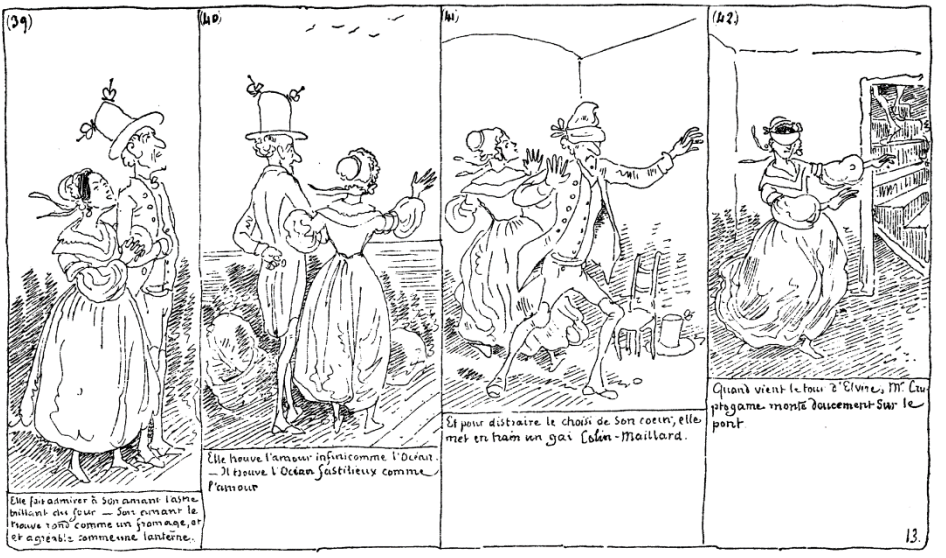

Fig.1.2. *Histoire de Monsieur Cryptogame* (Source: Töpffer, 1830)

produced to be sold as a stand-alone form of entertainment rather than part of a newspaper, took another couple of decades, but the new medium was already ready to be born.

1.1.3. Comics History: North America

A review of how the comic book medium was born and developed will start with the USA, as this nation's comic book industry (and the form of comic book itself) had a significant influence on the rest of the world.

In the United States, it all started in 1929, in New York, with the publication of a full-colour 16-page magazine called *The Funnies*. However, it was still sold as part of a newspaper (Harvey, 1996; Wright, 2003; American Treasures of the Library of Congress, 2015). *The Funnies* became a critical moment in comic book history for several reasons. First, it was the first magazine explicitly designed and marketed as a comic book, while following the newspaper and magazine tradition of presenting the story in short, one-page comic strips. In other words, it was a magazine where comic stories were the main draw for consumers. Second, according to Duncan and Smits, this event inspired several publishing house employees to take further steps (2009).

One of those workers, Harry Wildenberg, concluded that if comics can boost sales of newspapers and magazines so much, then selling a stand-alone comic

book should be even easier. This Wildenberg's idea was supported by his colleague Maxwell Charlie Gaines. Thus, further steps and experiments by these two men gradually led to *Famous Funnies #1*, which was published in 1934. Comics theorists and historians consider it the first American comic book (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Harvey, 1996; Krensky, 2007; Wright, 2003). This book became a commercial hit, so a second issue was published a month later (a total of 218 books in the series). Thus, the second book, made by Gaines and Wildenberg, marks the birth of the American comic book industry.

While *Famous Funnies #1* marks the start of the comic book phenomenon, it was not until 1938 that the comic book cemented the future of this medium with *Action Comics #1* (Fig. 1.3), which introduced readers to the orphaned alien for the first time. This character's name is Clark Kent, but he is better known to the world as *Superman*. No other comic book has had a greater impact on the development of the comic book industry in the United States and in many countries worldwide.

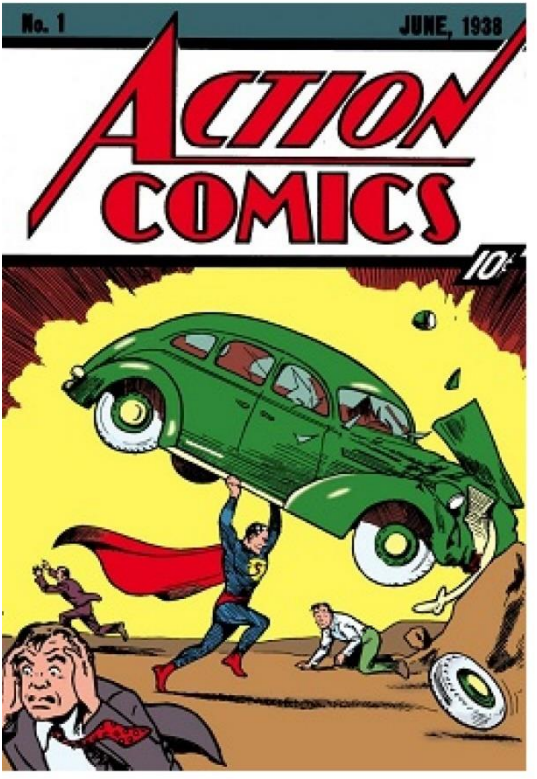

Fig. 1.3. *Action Comics* (Source: DC Comics, 1938)

Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, is a comic book character that eventually became so popular that it even formed a stereotype that the superhero genre defines the entire American comic book industry. Therefore, *Superman* was a triumph and a tragedy for the American comic book industry.

Although the adventure comics of this protagonist reached a million copies and sales peaks, they also became the reason why comics were later identified with children's fantasy about costumed heroes (Duncan & Smith, 2009). Other comic book publishers quickly refocused and also began marketing superhero characters, hoping to repeat the success story of the *Superman* comic. The period from 1938 to about 1950 is now often referred to as America's Golden Age of Comics, with more than 150 different comics in print and monthly circulations reaching several hundred thousand copies (Committee on the Judiciary, 1954; Quattro, 2004).

The comic book sales have led publishers to search for the most efficient way to manage the creative process to publish as many comics as possible. According to Harvey, the Second World War also contributed to the sudden popularity of comics (1996). US troops would continuously receive several hundred thousand comic books for light and low-key entertainment between military operations. Comics allowed civilians to escape from the dreary everyday life and immerse themselves in a world where good fights evil (Krensky, 2007). After the end of the Second World War, there was a sharp decline in the demand for comics. Sales of all comics began to decline steadily, and several smaller publishers withdrew from the market. However, this decline in the popularity of comics also brought about changes.

The major comic book publishers of the period began experimenting with the comics medium and offered readers more genres, such as Westerns and science fiction. A selection of non-children's genres – crime, war, and horror – appeared in American comics (Hajdu, 2009). Since comics began using graphic depictions of violence intended only for adult readers, the book quickly caught the public's attention. In 1954, psychiatrist Frederick Wertham published the book *Seduction of the Innocent*. This book became a catalyst that incited some parents to demand action against, in their opinion, the psychological mutilation of the younger generation.

Today, it may seem strange that parents are shifting the responsibility for their children's upbringing and the potential influence of media on content creators. However, a great deal of this movement against comics arose because a section of society was convinced that comics were exclusively a form of entertainment for children, and no amount of labelling on comic books that informed about adult content could change their beliefs. Educators also contributed significantly, with many holding the view that comics harm young people's ability to choose "valuable" literature (Nyberg, 2015). Therefore, in the public's opinion, the most



Fig. 1.4. Ritualistic comic book burning organised by a small-town community in Binghamton, New York, 1948 (Source: Williams, 2017)

effective solution to the problem was to ban comics that did not meet their value standards. This gradually led to the formation of a social movement against comics, spearheaded by government officials, social science academics, journalists, and political leaders (Leopold, 2008).

At the beginning of the 1950s, dissatisfaction with comics for adults reached a critical mass. In the United States, there was a growing call to crack down on the comic book industry, and in some places, even public burnings of comic books were organised (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Leopold, 2008; Hajdu, 2009; Fig. 1.4). Therefore, in 1954, the USA Senate subcommittee decided to investigate the potential harm of comic books to America's youth.

Wertham revealed the horrifying "truth" to a gasping American audience: after conducting research published in the aforementioned *Seduction of the Innocents*, he claimed that the stories and characters in comic books not only corrupted children but also caused nightmares or even subliminally encouraged homosexual relationships (Committee on the Judiciary, 1954).

Later studies showed that Wertham distorted and falsified research results (Itzkoff, 2013). However, a US Senate subcommittee decided that the majority of comic books were "unequivocally rubbish" and "any action by publishers, distributors, stockholders or dealers to eliminate the sale of these comics would be most welcome" (Committee on the Judiciary, 1954:310). Considering the situation, the publishers in 1954 founded an association to which most publishers joined and

strongly agreed to adhere to a rating system standard called the *Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America* (CCMAA).

This rating system stipulated that "the presentation of crimes will never create sympathy for the criminal (...)" (CCMAA, 1959; Part A, Clause 1), "love stories will always emphasize the values of family, home and marriage" (CCMAA, 1959; Part C, Marriage and Sex Section, Clause 4) and "all hideous, unpleasant and disgusting illustrations will be eliminated" (CCMAA, 1959; Part B, Clause 3). For comics that met the aforementioned standard, a stamp-like sign with jagged edges was printed with the text "Approved by the Comics Code Authority". This mark on American comic book covers guaranteed that the book's content met all CCMAA censorship requirements. The last comic with this mark appeared in 2011.

The code dealt a fatal blow to several publishers, and the public's anti-comics sentiment caused lasting damage to the comic book industry, consequences still being felt today. At the time, comic book creators were embarrassed to admit they worked in the industry. This reluctance of talented people to become part of this industry, along with the aggressively defended notion that comics should remain an exclusive children's platform, were important assumptions that continued to shape US comics media.

In the USA, the Golden Age of the comics industry ended with strict censorship. However, comic book publishers have found that superheroes, who are portrayed as a reflection of society's values, protecting society from absolute evil, are incredibly well designed to pass through the censorship grasp. Because of this, the superhero genre continued to dominate American comics for many decades. However, with almost all publishers focusing solely on superhero comics, there was a danger that costumed heroes would fail to hold the readers' interest for long.

The so-called *Silver Age* of comics (from 1956 to around the 1970s) is associated with several major changes. First, it is important to mention the initiative of Julius Shvarts to reintroduce comic book readers to the previous and less popular characters of the *DC* comics studio, giving them new personalities and/or new costumes. Thus, in 1956, when *The Flash*, a new generation superhero, was introduced to readers, it became a huge success. Therefore, many comics theorists and fans consider this event to be the formal beginning of the Silver Age (Cereno, 2015). But the arguably most important aspect of the Silver Age is this revolutionary idea that comic book characters must constantly evolve and adapt to a new period and readership. Another important initiative of Shvarts is to help form and develop comics fan communities. He personally sought to make fans feel that their needs were considered and understood by publishers and comics creators (Krensky, 2007; Harvey, 1996).

Marvel comics studio also introduced several new innovations in the comic book industry that greatly affected the medium's development. Arguably, the

most important changes were initiated by the writer and creator of comic heroes, Stan Ly. Inspired by the changes in DC, he decided to go even further. His first revolutionary work was *Fantastic Four* (1961). Unlike other superheroes in the comic book market, these characters were very human, having everyday problems with finances, communication or even self-confidence. These superheroes were very different from what *DC* or anyone else was offering. Readers really liked this new portrayal of the heroes. Encouraged by this success, Stan Ly, together with comic book illustrator Jack Kirby, offered readers more superheroes: *Hulk* (1962), *X-Men* (1963), and *Spider-Man* (created by Stan Ly & Steve Ditko; 1963). These new *Marvel* characters, with whom readers could identify, allowed Marvel Studios to sell more than just comic books. Comics were selling a way of life (Pustz, 1999).

The new generation of comics creators grew up with this artistic expression and loved it. Therefore, unlike the big publishing companies, which had to follow censorship rules strictly, the young creators didn't think these rules were appropriate or necessary. In fact, deliberate rule-breaking has even been seen as a form of resistance to genre formulas in comics, publisher policies, and the comics rating system itself (Estren, 1993; Duncan & Smith, 2009). This movement evolved into what is now known as *underground comix*. Therefore, publishers of traditional comics have started to be called *mainstream*. These then-not-quite-legal underground experiments with the comics medium were successful because their narrative and visual format were aimed at an older audience that the major publishing studios had little to offer.

Among the most famous underground comics was the magazine *Mad* (1952), which, although it did not always comply with censorship, was published because it formally changed its format from a *comic book* to a *magazine*. Which, interestingly, was not subject to censorship. Another underground comic book that needs to be mentioned is *Zap Comix* (1968), whose first issue was sold on the street from a baby carriage (Heller, 2014). It has also been noted that because comics with uncensored content were popular with older audiences, this led to the creation of alternative channels for selling comics.

Around 1970, the Bronze Age of American comics began and lasted until 1985. During this period, comics creators began to be perceived more positively in the US society. Furthermore, in 1971, *Marvel* even received an offer to collaborate with the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare to present the problem of drugs among youth to the public (Sergi, 2012). Although the *CCMAA* expressly forbade the depiction of any drugs, Stan Ly convinced the publishers to allow him to create and publish a 3-part story in which *Spider-Man* goes through a major shock when he discovers his best friend has overdosed on drugs (*The Amazing Spider-Man #96-98*, 1971).

These comic books did not have a censorship compliance badge, marking the first time since the introduction of self-censorship that a major comic book publisher had released a comic book without a symbol indicating compliance with the established rules of the *CCMAA*. Although such misconduct seemed impossible among publishers, as this experiment showed, only a few outlets noticed or were concerned about this change. The *CCMAA* commission, having assessed the public support and positive evaluation of this move by *Marvel*, decided to change the rules for the first time and introduce an exception that the depiction of drugs in comics is allowed as long as it is presented as a harmful habit (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Wrigh, 2003; Sergi, 2012; Deforest, 2014; Hajdu, 2009).

This precedent inspired other comic book creators to reconsider the CCMAA's influence. A couple of months later, on the cover of *DC Comics*, the superhero *Green Arrow*'s sidekick *Speedy* was depicted as a drug addict (*Green Lantern #85*, 1971). This cover, which features syringes and *Green Arrow* yelling at his sidekick about being a drug addict, shocked many readers.

However, according to Duncan and Smith, the real shocker and the event that forever changed the perception of the superhero genre was the story of the attempt to rescue *Spider-Man*'s lover from the clutches of the antagonist (*Amazing Spider-Man #121*, 1973). In every way, it was a typical rescue of the hero's beloved, with the *Green Goblin* pushing *Spider-Man*'s love interest off the bridge and *Spider-Man* flying onto his webs and catching her just before she hit the ground (Fig. 1.5). Unfortunately, this time was different: *Spider-Man'*s love interest died (she broke her neck) due to the sudden breaking during the fall.

This story marks the end of the superhero genre's fairy-tale elements. Readers could no longer expect that the hero would always win against evil or be able to save the innocent, and fantasy began to come uncomfortably close to reality (Blumberg, 2006). In *Bronze Age* comics, characters' lives became more complicated and gradually darkened. Due to less strict censorship, there was more and more experimentation with new styles and genres.

From 1985 onwards, a new comic book period began in the American comics industry. However, unlike in the previous periods, there is no consensus on what to call it. The term most commonly used is the *Modern Age* (but the name *Dark Ages* is quite popular as well). This name is derived from the fact that the narratives of characters in major publishers' comics are getting darker and darker. Burg (2012) even argued that this period should be called the Second Golden Age because there has never been such a wide selection of comic book genres and access to them. Terror (2018) supported this statement by noting that empirical evidence on quality (i.e., critics' reviews and scores) supports this notion. Finally, at that time, the comics were gradually shedding the general stereotype that it was a medium exclusively for children.

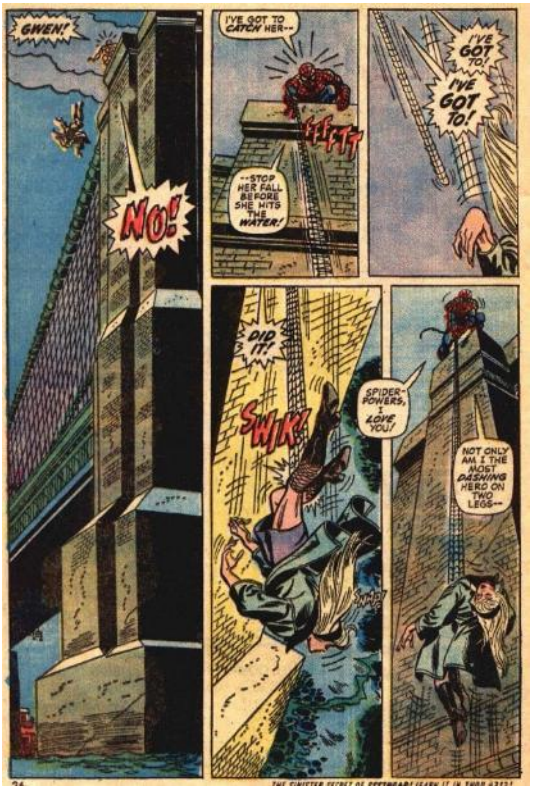

Fig. 1.5. Spider-Man #121 (Source: Marvel Comics, 1973)

In the modern era, comics have become recognised as works of literature. As Bongco (2000) noted, in the history of comics in North America, no other period can compare in terms of original contributions and innovative works. Perhaps the most significant in this area is *Maus*, a historical comic series (1973–1986 and 1986–1991) on the Holocaust by Art Spiegelman. This sensitive and engaging story about the Holocaust and the complicated relationship between a father and his son is the only comic to date to win the prestigious *Pulitzer Prize*. Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986) are still considered among the greatest works of comic book media. These comics inspired more creators to analyse more problematic questions about the world around us and internal conflicts through the medium of comics. Comics have even become a storytelling tool for journalistic reporting (Nobel, 2020).

Along with the revenue publishers generate from adaptations of comic characters in movies and computer video games, and even from the creation of toys, the US comic industry, as the birthplace of modern comics, is arguably

the most influential in the world. However, if one judges only by the number of comic book copies sold, Japan already overtook the USA several decades ago (Friedman, 2012; Flanagan, 2011). Thus, while US comics may not boast the same high sales figures as manga in Japan, the successful adaptation of comic book narratives into other media allows US comics to become part of cultural imperialism.

1.1.4. Comics History: Europe

In Europe, the development of the comic book medium took place under slightly different conditions than in the United States. In Europe, since the birth of the comics medium, comic creators have not faced negative public attitudes toward comics, and the medium itself did not begin its first moments as a free one-time supplement in a newspaper. Furthermore, comic creators in Europe have been considered professional artists since the birth of the comics medium. For example, Hergé's *Tintin in Tibet* (1958–59; Fig. 1.6) is considered one of the best comics not only in Belgium and France but also in the whole of Europe.

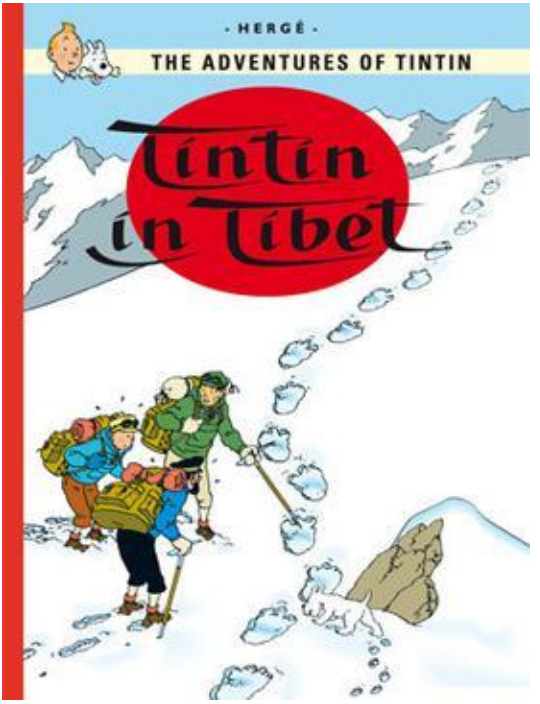

Fig. 1.6. The Adventures of Tintin: Tintin in Tibet (Source: Herge, 1960)

Three circumstances favoured the emergence of the comics medium in Europe. First, comic creators were not only paid for their work but also retained the property rights to their work. This helped to nurture the perception that comics are an artistic endeavour. Furthermore, this practice allowed comics to be linked with a specific author (rather than a comics studio or newspaper).

Second, comic creators retained property rights not only for the comics themselves but also for their further exploitation by adapting them to other media. This is in contrast to the practice in the US, where comic book artwork automatically became the studio's property. Of course, in the first half of the 20th century, no one could predict how valuable those rights would become, but this situation just illustrates how different working relationships were between these two continents.

It is interesting to note that Western European comics creators could successfully make a living from their work, and the best ones eventually became industry stars, thus increasing the prestige of the profession itself. This was one more aspect in which the situation was highly contrasted in the US, where comic creators, for a very long time, hid what they were doing for a living (Duncan & Smith, 2009).

Third, unlike in the USA, there was no forced self-censorship of comics in post-WWII Western Europe, so comics creators had the opportunity to experiment with different genres and styles, explore "harder" and "darker" stories, and become leaders in the academic study of this medium (Duncan & Smith, 2009). Thus, Western Europe became a kind of paradise for comic art and its artists. At least for the successful ones.

Western European (i.e., French, Belgian, Italian, Spanish, UK, and German) comics continue to thrive in contemporary times. This region not only has strong traditions but also success stories that showcase how European stories can become global successes. Furthermore, many European comics have been adapted into TV and film projects. It can be argued that this success was achieved due to the unique cultural environment that allowed comics to be developed into a sophisticated and variant art form, ranging from children's comics like *Asterix* (1959 – present) and *Tintin*, to mature, political, and experimental works like *Persepolis* (limited comic series; Satrapi, 2000-2003), *The Incal* (Alejandro Jodorowsky & Mœbius, 1980–1988), and *It Was The War Of The Trenches* (Tardi, 1993).

However, the situation was completely different in the countries that, after the Second World War, were occupied by the Soviets. Although there were manifestations of comic creation in the Soviet bloc (children's books illustrated in a comic-like style, as well as comic strips in newspapers), it was still widely considered not to be a work of high artistic value (Alaniz, 2010). And in more radical cases, comics were treated as part of demoralising Western culture. Thus, the society of this region could become more familiar with the media format of modern comics only after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the 90s, most of the newly independent republics were introduced to imported comics, but soon local comic creators attempted to create their own. As Alaniz, who studies the culture of Soviet and Russian comics, observes, by the end of the first decade of the 2000s, Russians were able to absorb all manifestations of mass media of Western culture, except for comics (2010:5). Thus, for the first two decades the Central and Eastern European region struggled to tame this new art form and employ it to tell local stories.

It is important to note that the artists from this region struggled with the medium for a number of reasons: not only were there almost no traditions, but also challenges with publishing opportunities and, of course, the strong perception that comics are entertainment forms suitable only for children. In other words, comic book artists had to learn not only how best to employ this medium to tell visual stories but also how to fund, produce, and sell them. No small task for a region that has almost overnight changed its political and economic system.

However, today, Poland, the Czech Republic, Latvia, and other countries are enjoying a gradually growing local comics industry and increasingly popular domestic comics creators. While this region cannot yet celebrate a comics project that would find massive success beyond national culture, the comic scene continues evolving and expanding in quality and quantity.

1.1.5. Comics History: Japan

The circumstances of the emergence of Japanese comics, or *manga*, were slightly different. As with Western comics, it isn't easy to pinpoint the exact origin point of Japanese manga, but traces can be found in works dating back a millennium. Artworks that depict action in an organised sequence have been easy to find since the eighteenth century.

The authorship of the term *manga* should go to the artist Katsushika Hokusai, who used the term to name a series of his artworks (Gravett, 2004:21). The form of the artworks themselves was remarkably similar to the modern medium of comics (Peterson, 2010; Buckley, 2002; McCarthy, 2014; Duncan & Smith, 2009). However, as Exner (2025) noted, manga is a social construct, and there is no unified single definition.

In 1853, as the Americans forced the Japanese to open their borders, the Western tradition of newspapers and their comic strips and caricatures soon followed. Since then, serialised illustrated stories have been abundant in print, but the modern form of manga took shape only after World War II, during the period of American occupation (1945–1952).

As a defeated country, Japan became partially administered by the United States, and along with the occupying army and its personnel, American culture

came to the country. As the comics industry was already established in the US in the 1950s, Japan was flooded with American comics. For Japanese society trying to straighten up and escape from the war-ravaged reality, these comics (called "Red Books" because of the red ink used on the covers of Japanese comics) became not only a refuge but also a herald of the emerging unique Japanese comic culture (Duncan & Smith, 2009).

The occupation authorities considered the popularity of the "Red Books" to be merely a successful adaptation of their culture to the local market and therefore tolerated this form of entertainment. During the development of Japanese comic *manga*, the most famous and influential manga creator was Osamu Tezuka (1928–1989). In 1951, he created one of the gems of manga – the comic book character *Astro Boy* (Fig. 1.7). Inspired by American culture, Tezuka began creative experimentation and tried to combine the American comic book medium, Japanese culture, and cinematic solutions. His experimentation led to results that many manga creators later began to consider as a benchmark (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Patten, 2004; McCarthy, 2014; Petersen, 2010).



Fig. 1.7. Cover of *Astro Boy* (Source: Tezuka, 1960)

In the 1970s, manga took root in Japanese culture and became one of the nation's primary forms of entertainment. Of course, at first, the manga was aimed at younger readers, but later, experiments with other genres began, and different age groups appeared (Gravett, 2004). Interestingly, unlike in the USA, comics in Japan are usually not sold in specialised comic shops but at newsstands (Friedman, 2012). This fact shows that manga readers do not belong to a closed subculture but are an essential part of Japanese culture as a whole.

Today, manga enjoys incredible popularity on a global scale. Although manga was an undiscovered treasure in the US comics market until 1980, it is now one of the largest segments of the comics market. In Europe, manga is no less successful. In France, the manga segment has grown 3.5 times in seven years, and in Germany, it makes up half of the entire comics market (Gravet, 2004). Manga has become an integral part of Japanese cultural identity, so it is not surprising that, due to the enormous popularity of this medium, manga is often used as a means of communication or even propaganda to convey a message to the public.

However, the Japanese comic industry also has its downsides. As the largest comic industry (in terms of manga copies sold globally), Japan is often criticised for how starting manga creators are treated. In Japan, manga creators use a division of labour method, but it is of a different nature than in the US. Manga creators are organised into a hierarchy and begin their careers as the lowest-ranking assistants (Friedman, 2012). These assistants are underpaid, so they are often forced to live highly frugally or even have a side job until they climb the ladder (and maybe even get a chance to publish their own comic).

However, despite these problems, the Japanese comics industry is considered much "healthier" than the American one (Flanagan, 2011). Both comic book creators and publishers provide comics with a much wider variety of content, so no single genre dominates. There is also a significantly more extensive supply of manga for readers of different ages and genders. Another critical difference is that in Japan, property rights are usually retained by the creator of manga. Finally, the fact that manga is an acceptable and popular form of entertainment among readers of all ages and social groups is a circumstance that could be the envy of the rest of the world's comic book industry.

1.1.6. Modern Comics: Situation, Trends, and Challenges

Comics are going through a new period of change in the world today. The direct connection between creator and consumer enabled by digital technology allows for quick consideration and evaluation of expectations, and crowdfunding platforms like *Kickstarter* allow funding for even the most niche comic book ideas. The popular and highly successful adaptations of comic book media characters and their adventures in movies, animation, TV series and video games, which have

become popular in the last decade, have made the comic book market as global as ever. While this brings more exposure to adapted comics, it also means that comics begin to compete directly with other similar-content media for readers' attention (and money). One thing is clear: comics are increasingly appearing on digital platforms (both online distribution for free and selling an electronic version of the comic), so they are now at a new stage of realisation, and it is impossible to predict how today's innovations will change the form or even the content of comics.

Unfortunately, in most countries, comic books are hindered from attaining the popularity they deserve by the global stereotype that this medium is almost exclusively a form of entertainment suitable only for children. The situation in Western and Far Eastern countries differs slightly from that in Eastern and Central Europe. A *DC* survey found that less than 2% of the 6,000 superhero-themed comic book buyers were under 18, with the average reader defined as a 29-year-old male who buys more than 20 different comics per month and spends around USD 100. However, the growing interest of girls and women in comics is forcing publishers to step up and start offering more attractive content to the female gender. Clearly, the children's segment has long ceased to be the primary audience for the USA comics industry (Hampton, 2010, 2016; ICV2, 2012; Carlson, 2007, 2011).

It is essential to address one more comics-specific challenge that this art form faces even today – comic book fans have formed their own subculture, which can be very difficult for outsiders to understand. Phrases, sayings, slang, or gestures used by members of this subculture that originate from comics (or TV series, movies, etc., based on comics) have become a considerable part of their identity (Griffin, 1998). Thus, it is essential to emphasise that *comic book fans*, unlike *comic book readers*, are not individuals who only buy comics. Comic book fans make up only about 10–20% of all comic book buyers, but they invest far more of their time and money, not to mention emotional investment, in the adventures of comic book heroes (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Brown, 2000; Pustz, 2000). Fans organise and participate in comic conventions, where they actively discuss the state and future of the medium with comic creators and each other, or simply share their impressions of the best comics they have read. Therefore, specialised comic shops are an important part of social life for these fans, which play the role of a cultural club (Putz, 2000). Comic book fans take great pleasure in incorporating comics (and elements of the experience they create) into their daily lives.

From the comic book industry perspective, comic book fans are a veritable gold mine due to their emotional attachment to their favourite comic book heroes. The attachment to their favourite comics drives them to buy special boxes or cases to preserve the best quality of the comic books. Also, sales of posters, t-shirts with favourite comic book titles, comic book characters, toys, movies, and computer video games feed the comics industry (Fig. 1.8). But that dedication also makes

comic book fans the industry's fiercest critics, especially when they feel cheated (in some particular aspect).



Fig. 1.8. Importance and extent of merchandising in American comic-specific bookstores (Source: Avila, 2020)

However, the most significant negative element that comic book readers and fans still face today is the previously mentioned stereotype that comic books are exclusively just for children. There are still situations where the interest in comics is hidden because of the fear that "comics are not compatible with the intellectual image" (Pustz, 2000:155). Thankfully, this attitude is changing for the better now that graphic novels are starting to be celebrated as a new literary sensation (Lopes, 2009). However, even in the second decade of this century, there are literary events where, while being celebrated, the medium is publicly referred to as a genre (Critchley, 2017).

In summarising the overview of the history of comics in this doctoral dissertation, it can be said that although comics have had an image problem for a long time, they are a storytelling instrument that has never lost popularity. Furthermore, the fact that it is a global phenomenon shows that comics as a medium are remarkably versatile and adaptable. Thus, this phenomenon should not be beyond the line of sight of scholars and researchers.

1.1.7. Comics situation in Lithuania

This section must start with the statement that the situation for comics was far from healthy for most of Lithuanian independence. Only a few Lithuanian comics managed to attract greater interest among local readers, although more than 50 comic books were published during the entire period of Lithuania's independence (Svitojus, 2023). Therefore, it is not surprising that the situation of the comics industry as a segment of the local creative industry in Lithuania is poor, even compared to neighbouring regional countries that have also freed themselves from the Soviet system and had more or less the same starting positions (Jocius, 2012a, 2012b; Kundrotas, 2012; Smolianskis, 2012; Kaminskas, 2012).

Thus, in Lithuania, the situation of the comics industry is controversial and difficult to measure compared to Western countries. It is necessary to emphasise that it would be incorrect to compare the comics culture in Lithuania with Western European countries or even Japan. Historically distinct economic, social, and political conditions in Eastern and Central European countries prevented the development of this form of entertainment until the 90s. After the countries of Central and Eastern Europe regained their independence, comics (like any other entertainment product) were identified as part of a foreign culture that eventually became assimilated, but, unfortunately, only as a form of entertainment exclusively for children.

Serial comics are considered the backbone of the US comics industry; however, in Lithuania, the first (and last) periodical comics appeared only in 2016: a series of Lithuanian historical comics, "Leičiai", created by Lithuanian authors (#1–4, published in 2016). Until that moment, all attempts to create a comic book series in Lithuania over the last two decades ended in complete commercial failure and until 2016, it just did not work out to publish the second issue of the comic. For example, the comic "Bus dar" (1993), created by one of the first Lithuanian comic creators, had extremely ambitious goals (circulation – 20,000). Unfortunately, this periodic (monthly) comic project never received a second issue.

The long-lasting, unsuccessful sales of comics by foreign and Lithuanian authors led most Lithuanian publishing houses to be sceptical about publishing comics. The established belief that the Lithuanian market is too small to make money becomes a considerable psychological obstacle to attracting investors (Mitkus, 2011).

However, the situation seems to be improving, starting with the mid-10s. It seems that the creators of Lithuanian comics are becoming better not only with the approach to the comic creation but also with the business side of it. One of the most successful examples of this so far is the graphic novel "10 Litas" by Miglė Anušauskaitė and Gerda Jord (2014; Fig. 1.9). While this comic book appeared

more than ten years ago, its significance to Lithuanian comic culture is unquestionable. This was the very first success story, showcasing that local artists' comics can reach a wider audience.

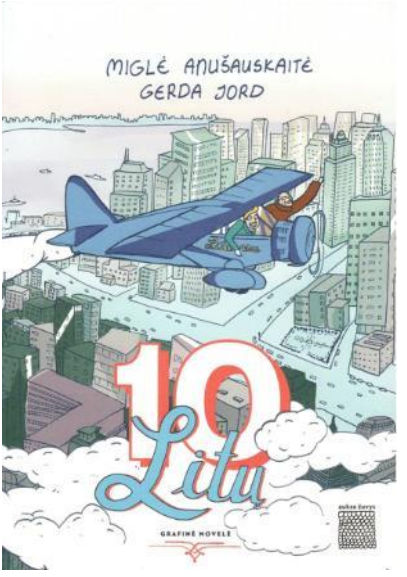

Fig. 1.9. *10 Litas* (Source: Anušauskaitė & Jord, 2014)

It can be argued that after "10 Litas", more comic book creators and, to some degree, book publishing houses (Jačėnaitė, 2017) decided to experiment with this medium. In the next ten years, Miglė Anušauskaitė's "Dr. Kvadratas: Greimas ir jo semiotika" (2017), Rasa Grybaitė and Lina Itagaki's "Grybo auksas" (2021), Danas Bartkevičius and Santana Markūnaitė's "Žalgirio mūšis. Legenda atgyja" (Engl. *Battle of Zalgiris. The Legend Comes to Life*; 2016), Gerda Jord's "Daugiabutis" (Engl. *Apartment Building*; 1998) and "Gertrūda: grafinis Y kartos dienoraštis" (Engl. *Gertrude: the Graphic Diary of Generation Y;* 2016), Tomas Mitkus and Raimonda Steiblytė's "Karo aviatoriai" (Engl. *War Aviators*; 2021), and Andrius Tapinas and Tomas Mitkus' "Vilko valanda. Sidabras" (Engl. *The Hour of the Wolf. Silver*; 2015) would be a few examples of national comic projects that would achieve relative success regarding reviews, awards, number of sales, or general resonance with the local community.

Thus, in the 2010s, Lithuanian comics saw a noticeable surge in comics projects that experimented with various genres and themes. To put it in perspective, out of 52 Lithuanian comic books published after Lithuania's independent restoration (Svitojus, 2023), sixty-two per cent were created within the last ten years. Additionally, it is interesting to notice that none of the comic book artists who

published comic books up to 2013 did it again in 2014 or later. Thus, one could argue that comic book artists who appeared in the last ten years truly are a new type of comic book creators (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2019). These artworks became critical cultural works that not only represented locally important stories and unique cultural elements but also provided social commentary.

It is important to note that comics produced in the last ten years considerably helped the medium gain recognition as a vital storytelling form in Lithuania, offering readers entertainment and education. The notion that the medium can successfully and engagingly tell stories that can produce additional educational value is not new. There are many cases around the globe where comics are employed to illustrate academic books (Sousanis, 2015) and are relatively often used by government agencies to communicate culturally significant concepts, values, or events. However, in Lithuania, comics – as an effective and attractive communicative tool – were discovered only in the second decade of this century.

Thus, several government agencies and institutions decided to use comics media (and Lithuanian creators) to convey educational stories playfully. In the latter case, it is necessary to mention such comics as Anušauskaitė's "Kas išsigando Šliūpo?" (Engl. *Who Was Scared of Shliupus?*; 2021), "Vilniaus Gaonas – kas jis?" (Engl. *Vilnius Gaon – Who is He?*; 2019), "Pirmieji lietuviai Indijoje: komiksai apie kūrėjus ir nuotykių ieškotojus" (Engl. *The First Lithuanians in India: Comics about Creators and Adventurers*; 2021), and "Štetlas – kas tai?" (Engl. *Shtetl – What Is It?*). However, one comic stands out: "Panelė su lape" (Engl. *Lady with a Fox;* Anušauskaitė, 2023). At the moment of writing this doctoral dissertation, this webcomic has become the most popular comic book project that has been downloaded or viewed over 7000 times. Although it is much too early to determine what impact this comic will have on other government agencies, it is safe to say that "Panelė su lape" is the best example of how successfully comics can be used by government agencies to produce content for educational purposes.

On a separate note, it is necessary to indicate that comics, as a phenomenon, slowly became the focus of scholarly inquiry (Mitkus, 2011; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2019; Svitojus, 2023; Jankevičiūtė, 2015; Bugailiškienė, 2007; Danytė, 2009; Pekūnas, 2019; Šiaulytis, 2021) in Lithuania. Not less important is the fact that in 2017, the first textbook about comics was published in Lithuanian and by Lithuanians (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2017). Although it is delightful to state that comics have a presence in the Lithuanian scientific and pedagogical worlds, it cannot strictly be said that this proves a systematic activity.

Thus, there are quite a few indicators that the situation is vastly improving in the 20s. Furthermore, the mostly mild success of Lithuanian comic books proves there is a demand for quality content. However, some challenges remain. First, it is vital to address the fact that the older generation still perceives comics as a

genre. But, as this is not the case with the younger generation, it seems that this troubling obstacle may be resolved on its own in the near future.

The second challenge involves comics project funding. As already stated, the development and execution of high-quality comics in Lithuania are unlikely without state funding (direct or through government agencies). However, with continuous success stories, the situation could improve in the future.

The third challenge involves comics distribution. It is necessary to note that at the end of 2024, all but one comic bookstore closed down. While this suggests that comic-specific bookstores are a very complex and challenging business activity in Lithuania, the ongoing, repeated business attempts demonstrate that there is a belief that there is sufficient demand for comic entertainment in the country.

However, the author of this doctoral dissertation argues that comic bookstores are necessary for the medium to thrive in Lithuania. As mentioned in the previous section, these stores act not only as community centres but also tremendously help Lithuanian comic creators find their audiences. This aspect is crucial, as Lithuanian comic creators (if Lithuanian publishing houses do not back them) often lack funds to promote their content.

It can be argued that, with the start of the third decade, comics culture in Lithuania is experiencing a turning point and starting a period of systematic growth. It is still far from the situation when Lithuanian authors can survive solely from comics production. Without the latter, Lithuanian comic book artists will become true masters of the medium. However, that does not diminish their potential to impact Lithuanian culture and form a modern national identity. Furthermore, evidence suggests that comics can be one of the best means to visually communicate the splicer and scale of the past, at least from an economic standpoint.

1.2. Visual Language of the Medium

Comics are a medium that requires a specific set of knowledge and skills from a creator to produce engaging and immersive entertainment. In fact, the variety of skills needed to create a high-quality comic book product is so extensive that the need to specialise in the production process became evident over time. This section aims to investigate the creative process of comic book production, with a focus on the communicative aspects of the creative process. Thus, this section has three aims. First, it explores the main comic book production process that is employed in the industry. Second, it investigates how the medium creates the experience of action in a medium that cannot portray one. The final aim of this section is to explore the comic medium's approach to the expression of sound through visual means.

1.2.1. Process of Creating Comics

Comic creators can be divided into two groups: (1) independent creators who do all of the creative work themselves and (2) comics creators who use the production method developed by the big publishing studios, where the work of comic production is divided among different artists to optimise the process. Of course, it is necessary to emphasise that there is no "right" or "wrong" way of creating a comic – the creation process depends only on the creator's skill or the desired aesthetic expression.

Some comic creators draw each page and then scan it. Other comic creators adapted their creative (and distribution) process to work with digital tools (Berube, 2025) and create characters and environments right on the computer, but instead of animating the characters' movements, the creator selects the desired poses and lays them out on the page as a comic. This method of creating comics does not require any drawing elements. An even simpler way to create comic shots is possible – a camera or even a mobile phone with a photo function. Several comic books have been created from photographs. Evidently, the methods of creating comics can be very diverse, and the choice of how technically approach this process is rather wide.

This sub-section will thoroughly describe and explain the method of creating comics where different people do all the work. It is important to emphasise that this division of labour can also be applied to the work of several independent creators if they decide to divide the stages of comic work for greater efficiency or simply to divide the work according to the different skills they have (for example, narrative writing and the ability to draw). It is important to note that, judging from the most common practices, developers often aim to separate at least part of the work. This is done to balance the speed of work and creative ambitions.

Narrative. The scriptwriter is responsible for creating the narrative of a comic book, series, or graphic novel. It creates and describes the characters, their goals and obstacles to achieving them, the conflict between the characters, the end of the characters' adventures, and the environments in which everything takes place. As with all mediums that employ narrative, the story is king, and if the storytelling is poor, even the prettiest page design will not save the comic from failure.

Sketching (pencilling). The person doing this job sketches the comic page based on the scriptwriters' description. This is a kind of director's job because the task is to present the story to the reader in the most visually interesting and compelling way. After the work is finished, the sketch is shown to the screenwriter, and after consultation with him, small changes can be made to strengthen the harmony of the narrative and visual presentation.

Lettering. Once a comic page sketch is approved ("locked"), it (or a copy of it) is handed over to the person responsible for the design of the sound effects, text

bubble placement, and writing the text from the script onto the page. It is the artist's responsibility to arrange the text aesthetically and to present the dialogue clearly to the reader.

Inking. At this stage, a specialist turns an already-drawn and approved comic sketch (with text bubbles and sound effects) into an aesthetically finished black-and-white comic page. While this position was historically necessary because of the technical limitations of photocopiers (the machines could scan only full and thick lines), today it is part of distinctive comic book aesthetics.

Colouring. The name of this stage speaks for itself. The variety of colouring techniques and styles is enormous, but colouring is not mandatory. For example, manga creators rarely use colour.

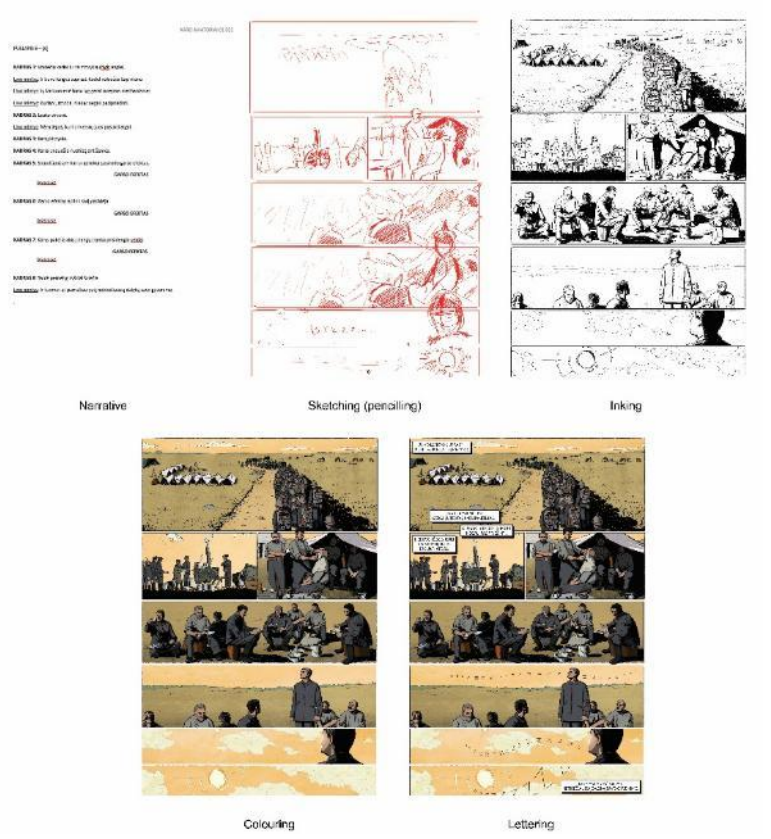

Fig. 1.10. Process of Creating Comics (Source: compiled by the author

If a traditional comic book creation process is used (Fig. 1.10), the comic must be sent for printing and delivered to stores. However, if a digital version is

made, the next task is to properly prepare the files and submit the comic to a chosen digital comic sales platform, where it will be available for a fee to all internet users. Although distributing and selling comics is important and requires relevant skills, the process of producing comics must be completed first.

The purpose of separating creative tasks is to make comic book projects more efficient. In other words, the aim is not to achieve higher creative value but to optimise work for faster commercial returns, so that this process can be easily adapted to the latest innovations or other needs. Many independent comic book creators use various combinations of work sharing. For example, working in pairs: a scriptwriter and a comic artist who does all the visual work. Another option is for one person to create the narrative, layout, inking and colouring and additionally use only the services of a text bubble artist, etc. Thus, the combinations can be highly diverse and depend on the talent, skills, and financial resources of the creators participating in the comic project, or simply on their ability to control the desired creative expression.

To summarise this subsection, in the context of this doctoral dissertation, it is important to note that the creative process of comic book production showcases the diverse communicative skills and knowledge required to produce a compelling and persuasive cultural product. In other words, from the ability to present it visually clearly and compellingly on the page to the skills and abilities needed to provide the best aesthetic rendering of inking and colouring results. Yet, skills that would be enough to produce high-quality in other visually based media (i.e., painting, graphic design, posters, illustrations, murals, etc.) do not mean that creatives would be able to create comics successfully. In other words, comics require the creators to clearly understand the medium's limitations and possibilities to create an immersive experience.

1.2.2. Visual Communication Theories

As Lester (2003) noted, for visual communication to occur, two elements are required: functioning eyes and a brain capable of processing sensory information. However, the abovementioned requirements should be regarded as an absolute minimum for visual communication to transpire. And there is absolutely no guarantee that the communication process will be successful. For that, Lester argues, brains need to be able to acquire knowledge of various aspects of the world and conduct critical analysis. In other words, brains need to be able to produce meaning from visual information. After all, it is not the eyes that see but the brain (Barry, 2020).

A significant addition to social science research, "perception theory", while being a broad term, can be defined as applying cognitive neuroscience principles to understand visual communication (Barry, 2020:3). Put simply, this theory does

not separate visual data from humans' ability to interpret it. This theory, which accompanies various approaches within its domain, seeks to understand and explain how our brains transform sensory inputs into experiences and knowledge about the world.

Gestalt theories belong to the perception theory domain. It plays a vital role in the comics experience (Carleton, 2014). Today, the concept of Closure, as outlined in Gestalt theory, which states that the human brain tends to complete incomplete or fragmented visual stimuli, enabling the recognition of a cohesive pattern (i.e., a triangle shape; Fig. 1.11), is arguably the most popular approach to comics analysis. However, once again, it is important to address Gavaler and Beavers's (2018) position that comics closure is only "Gestalt-like" and does not (in most cases) involve actual Gestalt visualising as the juxtaposed information is based on spatial and temporal relationships. Thus, when studying comics, Gestalt theories are a convenient starting point, stating that the brain is a powerful organ that can interpolate given visual data. However, because what happens in the comic book reader's mind is more than a connection of dots to close the gap, the comic book experience (i.e., producing meaning from visual, spatial, temporal, narrative-based and conceptual cues presented in juxtaposition) cannot be explained just with Gestalt.

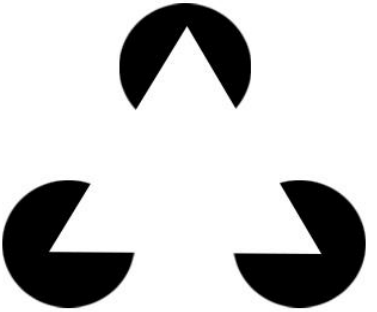

Fig. 1.11. Principle of closure, as outlined in Gestalt theory
(Source: compiled by the author)

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1994; Sweller & Chandler, 1991) examines how the human brain processes information (particularly when learning). In the context of comics, this theory can be employed to study and understand how best to present panels to communicate the clearest temporal coherence across panel transitions. In other words, this theory can help to understand how best to structure visual information in comics to manage the presentation of time and action across panels (especially when cartoonists aim to convey complex or non-linear narratives).

Constructivism emphasises the role of prior knowledge in the learning process (i.e., producing new knowledge). In other words, this theory argues that people construct their understanding by fusing previous personal experience with new information. Although constructivism encompasses various interpretations and applications in various fields today, it is becoming increasingly popular with the pedagogic mainstream (Meyer, 2009). However, regarding the comics art form, this theory helps explain how comic book readers produce meaning from visually based information. In other words, constructivism explains why previous readers' experience is vital to produce meaning from information presented on the comic book page. Furthermore, Eisner (1985) even argued that for a cartoonist to be able to provide information about time passage between the panels successfully, he or she needs to rely on a reader's personal experience. McCloud (1993) agreed with that statement in the sense that any (final) meaning in the comics is constructed in the reader's mind.

Semiotics theory is often employed when analysing the comic book experience. After all, signs and symbols (and how they convey meaning) play a vital role in this art form. From aesthetic execution to decisions on how the text is rendered, the comic book reader interprets all this information to construct meaning. Thus, as Fahmy, Bock and Wanta (2014) noted, semiotics is ideally suited for research in visual communication. With the semiotics approach, it is possible to investigate such communication problems as (re)presentation and transmission of meaning and how the shared systems of codes bridge them (Craig, 1999).

Circling back to comics, although semiotics is a very useful research tool for examining all aspects of the medium (i.e., icons, indexes, symbols of imagery, panel layout, visual syntax, etc.); however, in the context of this doctoral dissertation, the semiotics will play an essential part in the analysis of speech bubbles, thought bubbles, and narration boxes. In other words, these enclosed containers of textual information and graphic elements provide a way in which text and image can interface with each other and create new meanings with much deeper semantic richness (Cohn, 2013; Fig. 1.12). Thus, through speech bubbles (and other textual and iconographic information), semiotics can facilitate and convey nuanced emotions, messages, and experiences.

Framing theory explores and analyses how content creators can shape the message and its interpretation through an emphasis on certain aspects (and de-emphasising others; Fahmy et al., 2014; Lester, 2003; Baran & Davis, 2013). The application of framing theory in the comic book art form is self-evident. Because a cartoonist creates every single panel, the reader's experience is directly linked with the content creator's ability and skills to produce meaning, invoke emotions, and create compelling storylines. Thus, from a visual communication standpoint, framing theory is at the core of any comics content analysis.



Fig. 1.12. *War Aviators* (Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)

However, in the context of this dissertation, the framing theory is especially vital when examining the cases of the comics of a historical genre. Specifically, how comics of a historical genre can aim to promote ideological narrative (Magnussen, 2016; Vadillo, 2010) and how an inability to balance historical facts and storytelling can lead to failure to attract target audiences (de Syon, 2014; Buhle, 2007; Pustz, 2012). After all, the comic book public burning events in the 1950s in the United States happened precisely because the nation strongly believed that this medium had the power to shape the youth.

Narrative theory is another framework that helps to explore how cartoonists create temporal structures to represent the time experience. In the case of comics, this visual communication theory can help scholars and practitioners understand how the illusion of time passage is created between two panels and how to manipulate time presentation in the medium by providing non-linear storytelling devices. McCloud (1993) was the first to systematically analyse how the reader can interpolate transitions between two panels and produce temporal meaning. However, because of the medium's unique form of storytelling and ability to produce plurivectorial narration, there are still many opportunities for researchers and scholars to produce new insights about how this art form employs the sense of time to create a sense of time passage, depicts action, develops characters, invokes the feeling of dynamic verbal exchange, and how overall stories are structured.

To sum up, this section is essential to addressing the fact that visual communication theories provide a broad and multifaceted approach to studying, analysing, and exploring comics (Fig. 1.13). These theories are indispensable research tools for understanding how cartoonists produce meaning and how readers interpret and respond to this art form. In other words, these theories produce valuable frameworks for approaching comics and their ability to communicate temporal and spatial aspects.

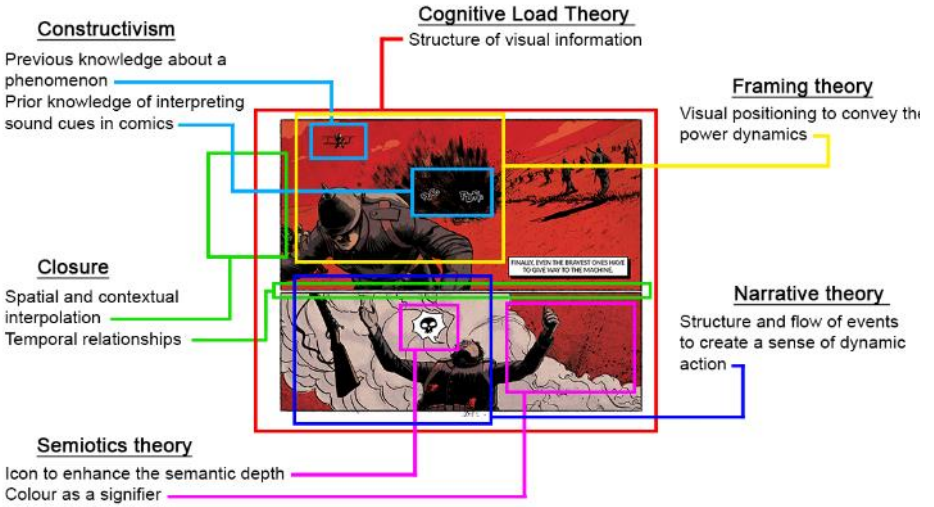

Fig. 1.13. Triangulation of various communication theories
(Source: compiled by the author)

In addition, it is essential to note that while each theory outlined above offers its own conceptual lens, their strength in this doctoral dissertation lies in their synergistic interpretation of empirical findings from the three methodological strands. For example, *perception theory* and *Gestalt closure* are central in analysing questionnaire data on how readers connect information between panels and produce meaning. Here, responses that detail inferred actions or emotional beats can be interpreted as evidence of closure in action, supported by perceptual grouping mechanisms that help readers integrate fragmented visual cues into coherent narrative wholes. This is further nuanced by *constructivist* insights, which explain variations between respondents: differences in the richness or accuracy of reconstructed sequences can be traced back to each reader's prior experience with the medium, historical knowledge, or visual literacy.

Similarly, *cognitive load theory* and *framing theory* have been instrumental in the case study of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. The structural coding of balloon shapes, typography, and placement speaks to the cognitive efficiency (or strain) that these visual forms impose on readers. For example, irregular or jagged balloon outlines may heighten perceived urgency or chaos but also risk increasing cognitive load if combined with dense text or complex panel composition. Framing theory helps to interpret these formal strategies as deliberate acts of emphasis – foregrounding particular sounds, emotions, or narrative beats – while simultaneously downplaying others. By tracing changes in these strategies over decades

of issues, the analysis reveals how story and artistic choices respond to evolving audience expectations and industry trends.

In the autoethnographic study, *semiotics* and *narrative theory* offer the most direct interpretive utility. Semiotics allows the researcher's own production decisions – such as the choice of onomatopoeic style, the integration of text with environmental cues, or the typographic treatment of dialogue – to be understood as acts of meaning-making that operate at both the denotative and connotative levels. Narrative theory then situates these creative choices within broader strategies for representing time, pacing, and action, clarifying how visual-temporal structuring can either enhance or undermine historical authenticity. By combining these perspectives, the study can connect production-side challenges with reader-side interpretive patterns, thus closing the loop between creative intention and audience reception.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks do not function as isolated analytic tools but as an *integrated interpretive scaffold*. This approach is essential to understanding how spatial and temporal information is communicated in comics of a historical genre and how sound is visually represented in a soundless medium. Furthermore, this integrated approach strengthens the empirical analysis, ensuring that findings are interpreted in ways that remain theoretically grounded while also responsive to the nuances of the data.

1.2.3. The Illusion of Action

Comics' ability to produce an illusion of continuous action is very under-researched. In fact, this aspect is completely ignored in most scholarly and methodical literature on the medium. Furthermore, the very reason why the author of this dissertation decided to look into this aspect was a short passage in Duncan and Smith's (2009:153) book "The Power of Comics", in which the comics scholars mention an experiment that aimed to gather data on how comic book readers experience action between panels. The exact experiment description and its results are presented in the book as follows:

> *"<...> subjects read a short story in an anthology comic book and one hour later answered questions about the story. The story included a swordfight depicted simply in just a few panels. When asked to describe the swordfight, subjects often provided details of dramatic actions and gory wounds that did not actually appear on the printed pages of the comic book. No two descriptions of the swordfight were exactly the same. Subjects were using their imaginations to not only make the static images in the panels come to life, but also to fill in actions between the panels."*

Unfortunately, Duncan and Smith's book does not discuss this unique aspect of the medium's experience further. However, this aspect of the medium could explain a great deal about why this entertainment form is so compelling. Thus, it became clear that this communicative element needs further investigation.

In the book, Duncan and Smith later added that this reading experience is strongly related to the personal experience and the state of the emotional being of the reader. However, this can be stated about every relationship between a narrative-based entertainment form and its consumers. Thus, the author of this dissertation does not perceive this aspect of the comic book reader's experience as vital to understanding the phenomenon. Therefore, while recognising this relationship's importance for the consumer experience, it will not be addressed further in this doctoral dissertation.

Among all comic book medium scholars, Scott McCloud (1993) was the first to analyse to a great extent how the phenomenon of *closure* is applied and experienced in the medium. McCloud defined closure as observing the parts but perceiving the whole. In other words, it is the act of mentally completing what is incomplete (Carleton, 2014). Duncan (2000) agreed with this notion and added that comics are reductive in creation (i.e., creators reduce the story to moments) and additive in reading (i.e., readers expand the isolated moments into a story by closure). Thus, the phenomenon of closure is an integral part of the comic experience.

Gavaler and Beavers (2018) noted that closure is a central yet ambiguous term in comics theory – from 1993 onwards (when McCloud first mentioned it), the concept of closure became the prominent approach to comics analysis. However, despite the term's popularity in scholarly works, this term failed to maintain a coherent definition. It is important to note that the concept of closure was first indicated in the 1910s as an integral part of the *Gestalt* theories that later became known as "the Law of Closure" (Palmer & Rock, 1994). But as Gavaler and Beavers (2018) argued, comic closure is only 'Gestalt-like' and does not (in most cases) involve actual Gestalt visualising as the juxtaposed information is based on spatial and temporal relationships. In other words, what happens in the comic book reader's mind is more than a connection of dots to close the gap. Thus, in Gavaler's and Beavers' opinion, the process that happens in the comic book reader's mind is much more complicated, as it requires the reader to produce conclusions from visual, spatial, temporal, narrative-based and conceptual cues presented in juxtaposition to create meaning.

This notion is supported by Carleton (2014), who argues that comic books require more from their readers to establish basic meanings, unlike popular media, such as cinema and television. In other words, this entertainment form cannot be consumed without actively extracting meaning from images. Thus, because the comic book format always presents the action in an incomplete form (the white

gaps between the panels known as “the gutter”), the reader is required to continuously bridge the gaps between the panels and use his or her imagination to form meaningful relationships from implied visual cues (Fig. 1.14). In other words, to produce a meaningful transition between the panels.

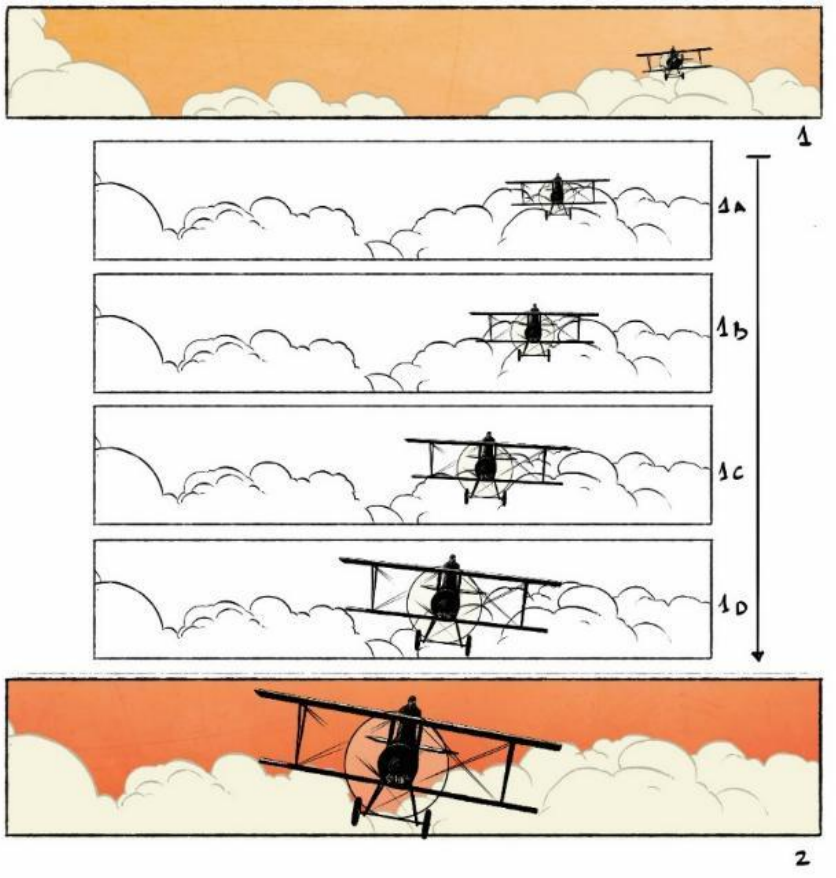

Fig. 1.14. Readers must create closure to bridge these two panels and create meaning (Source: compiled by the author)

According to McCloud (1993), in the comic book medium, this means that the reader can interpolate meaning from these transitions in six different ways:

1. *Moment-to-moment*. This closure category presents different moments of the same action or motion presented in two adjacent panels. However, in this case, the time passage between these two panels is minimal.

2. *Action-to-action*. This category presents moments in thematically continuous action that represent distinct progression. Thus, the passage of time between the two panels is irrelevant.
3. *Subject-to-subject*. This category presents moments that are thematically connected yet separated by space or perspective, but happening in the same scene (so to speak) or idea. In other words, it could be a professional race driver crossing the finish line and (in the next panel) just mere moments later, an investor jumping out of his seat from joy.
4. *Scene-to-scene*. This category presents narrative progression that happens when a significant change in space or time occurs. In other words, it can be a panel that shows a person being murdered and, in the next panel, a detective standing at the crime scene twenty years later.
5. *Aspect-to-aspect*. This category presents a transition in time that represents how the time passage affects place, mood, or idea. The examples that McCloud presented in his book are an aesthetical communicative tool by their nature.
6. *Non-sequitur*. The last category presents a sequence of comic book panels that do not offer any logical connection. Although McCloud argues that even "totally unrelated" panels can develop meaning and, in turn, closure, it is hard to see value in communicative approaches that present no control over what the reader may interpolate from given visual data.

It is important to add that although McCloud originally presented six types of transitions, Abel and Madden (2008) argued that there should be one additional category titled *Symbolic* transition, which employs imagery that provides symbolic meaning to the panel in which it proceeds or follows. In other words, comic book creators employ non-literal depictions to make a point about the situation or mental state. Furthermore, more researchers aim to clarify or redefine the categories of transitions between panels (Gavaler & Beavers, 2018; Cohn, 2003; Cohn & Worcester, 2015). However, as their proposed changes are yet to be accepted by the global scholarly community, the author of this dissertation decided to focus on McCloud's original descriptions because the most important communicative aspect of these transitions is the comic book creator's ability to present the narrative through visual means clearly. The creative choices made by the comic book creator will influence how much closure the reader will need to understand the story (Abel & Madden, 2008).

However, it is important to note that the decision about which moments of the story to present to the reader determines the quality of the experience (Harvey, 1996). In other words, the phenomenon of closure can provide an immersive and pleasant experience only if the comic book creator selects the right moments. McCloud (2006) argued in his book that the creator needs to

base decisions about illustrating action on quality rather than fact. Spiegelman (2011) agreed with this notion and described comics as diagrams that convey information most effectively. Furthermore, for Spiegelman, communicative clarity was much more important in comic experience than aesthetics. Thus, the process of closure cannot produce a meaningful experience if the story's communicative aspect is unclear.

While the act of closure regarding spatial information works very similarly through various visually-based entertainment forms, the process of creating meaning regarding temporal information in comics is somewhat unique. Rowe (2016) noted that when Hollywood adaptations of comic books attempt to emulate source comics very closely and thus produce a similar relationship between time, space, and movement on the cinema screen, they fail to produce an immersive experience. Bukatman (2006) pointed out that even when the comic book reader has proceeded from one panel to another, the panels on the page continue to interconnect mentally. Thus, Christiansen (2000) argued that temporal qualities are more significant than spatial ones in comics.

McCloud (1993) devoted an entire chapter to the phenomenon of framing time in the comic book medium, emphasising how separate action elements within a panel can occupy distinct time slots (Fig. 1.15).



Fig. 1.15. Each speech balloon occupies a distinct time slot, while the thought text happens in parallel to the character's speech (Source: compiled the author)

In his book, McCloud pointed out that the feeling of time passage can be invoked by such creative decisions as the content of the panels, the number of panels, the closure between panels and the shape of the panels (1993). Meanwhile, Eisner (1985) argued that repetition and rhythm can convey a sense of continuity and perception of time. Thus, comic content creators have quite a few visual tools at their disposal to communicate the sensation of temporal passage.

However, the perception of time passage in comics is by no means universal or uniform. Eisner (1985) explored how a reader's personal experience provides a means to give meaning to the time passage happening between the gutters. McCloud (1993:117) somewhat agreed with the latter notion by stating that the very perception of time in comics "depends on your *frame of mind*". Thus, the construction of temporal meaning in comics is guided by visually-based information, which is given final meaning through the reader's imagination, experience, and cultural background. Interestingly, Eisner also argued that too specific instructions can "thesis's epistemological position mitigate the reader's involvement"(1985:30). Thus, the visual information should always suggest rather than dictate the passage of time to create a truly immersive experience.

Interestingly, many scholars indirectly mentioned that the act of closure can stimulate readers to create meaning about comic book characters' inner emotional status and thoughts. In most cases, this act of closure is triggered by visual cues – various nonverbal gestures, postures, and facial expressions in combination with composition decisions can effectively suggest what emotion the character is experiencing at the specific moment (McCloud, 2006; Duncan, 2000; Eisner, 1985). However, as Eisner (1985) pointed out, for a reader to be able to decode implied emotion, the reader must be familiar with the experience. While competent juxtapositional artists can select images that would invoke the wanted emotion, there is no control over what meaning the reader will produce. In other words, the artist can only create an emotional climate that will hopefully invite the reader's involvement with the narrative.

It is necessary to follow up on Duncan and Smith's experiment presented at the beginning of this section. While this juxtapositional closure that the comic book reader generates in his or her mind explains how the comic book medium provides a unique entertainment experience, it does not explain why the reader would create additional narrative content, as Duncan and Smith's (2009) experiment showcases. In other words, there is a difference between creating content in one's mind that would bridge the informational gap that is found in the gutters of two comic book panels and the act of creating completely new story content that would be factually inaccurate. Thus, while the process of creating completely new story content while constructing meaning through juxtapositional closure is completely plausible, it is unclear how often and to what extent it happens. Further-

more, because no other similar study could be found, it is hard to construct hypotheses around such elements as story, style, genre and even the level of detail and its possible influence on the reader's process of closure.

1.2.4. The Illusion of Sound

Will Eisner, in his book "Comics & Sequential Art" (1995), famously stated that "The balloon is a desperation device". And his sentiment is entirely accurate: even the best, the most innovative visual rendering of the sound in comics requires considerable involvement from readers to produce meaning. However, at the very dawn of the medium, comic book artists realised that words could be a handy tool for communication. After all, it was evident that "some specific concepts and names can *only* be clearly expressed through words" (McCloud, 2006). In other words, by using words, comic book artists can compress the story and produce more meaning and a more explicit nature than just wordless pictures.

While there are wordless comics, most comic books contain written information in the form of word balloons, captions, or sound effects (Pratt, 2009). Thus, the reader is provided with three types of auditory experiences that can be audible and inaudible (Dey & Bokil, 2017). However, it is essential to note that it took time and a great deal of experimentation before the best communicative and aesthetic approach to presenting sound in all of these three types of auditory experiences was found.

The earliest applied visual solutions that added sound features to text were text size and font: these solutions can be found in the initial comic strips that used text balloons. Another popular visual tool to emphasise spoken or thought text – boldface – was employed in the first "Famous Funnies" issue (1934). Finally, comic strips and books employ various text balloon shapes to indicate that the dialogue is a whisper or a shout. Thus, in the 30s, at least in the USA, sound in comics is no longer monotone (so to speak).

However, most of the early comic books suffered greatly from text-image disharmony. Specifically, most comics use enormous amounts of text, often making it very small and thus hard to read. In addition, the text often repeats what is seen in the illustration, overshadowing the illustrations. McCloud argued that the (perfect) balance between words and pictures should emphasise each one's strengths (2006). Furthermore, the success of the verbal–visual blend is the most critical aesthetic criterion for judging a comic book (Duncan & Smith, 2009). However, Eisner (1985), in his book published in the 80s, still addressed the necessity (or, more precisely, the right of artists) to omit dialogue of narrative that can clearly be demonstrated visually. This notion is followed by McCloud (2006), who was happy that modern comic writers (most of the time) manage to avoid textual redundancy. Thus, suggesting that achieving this word/image balance is not so simple. Or, if one looked from a different perspective, it would seem that

the desire to rely on the text to communicate what is happening in comics can be really hard to resist.

McCloud (1994, 2006) identified seven distinct categories of word/image combinations:

i. *Word-specific*: words provide all one needs to know, while pictures illustrate the scene's aspects.
ii. *Picture-specific*: Pictures provide all one needs to know, while the words accentuate the scene's aspects.
iii. *Duo-specific*. Words and pictures both send roughly the same message.
iv. *Intersecting*. Words and pictures work together in some respects while also contributing information independently.
v. *Interdependent*. Words and pictures combine to convey an idea that neither would convey alone.
vi. *Parallel*. Words and pictures follow seemingly different paths without intersecting.
vii. *Montage*. Words and pictures are combined pictorially.

These different combinations of words and pictures can serve communicative and aesthetic applications: they can help storytellers ensure readers can follow the narrative easily and provide a visual experience rarely found outside the comic book medium.

At this point, it is worth exploring how dialogue and thought balloons can convey various sound experiences. First, it must be addressed that words in the balloons and captions cannot be placed within the picture space or outside of it (Carrier, 2000). In other words, captions and word balloons do not exist in the same plane of reality as pictures presented in comics (McCloud, 2006): they are "visible" only to the reader. Furthermore, text in comics does not have a fixed position in space; rather, its position and relationship to other elements contribute to the measurement of time (Eisner, 1985). And, unlike depicted architecture or furniture, balloons and captions usually don't obstruct characters (Carrier, 2000). Thus, in comics, balloons and captions perform a much more complex role than simply a text-based presentation of information.

The shape of the balloons can also play a role in representing some auditory elements. The most common designs are spiky outlines that indicate sound emanating from a radio, telephone, television, or any other machine, dotted outlines that mean the character speaks quietly, and non-uniform outlines that indicate a shaky voice. With time, more innovative designs were employed. For example, icicles at the bottom of the balloon indicate that the character's speech is "cold". In other cases, the tail on the balloon can physically envelop the character, as to suggest that the speaking character's voice enslaves the listener. Of course, in some cases, as McCloud (2006)

noted, the shape of the balloons is merely a stylistic expression that does not aim to convey any additional meaning regarding sound.

The colour can also be used to suggest various qualities of a sound. In this regard, colour can be employed in two ways: as a means to give (other than standard black) colour for text and as a means to give (other than standard white) colour for the text balloon background. It is essential to note that experimentation with colour, particularly regarding the text in general and balloons, in particular, began later due to considerable limitations in printing technology (Fleishman, 2022; Comic Tropes, 2020). Thus, experimentations with colour to influence the experience of sound started relatively late, only when the innovations in printing technology allowed for ensuring that (a) the text part of the comics could be read clearly and (b) that it was not expensive.

The most frequently used colour application for the text in the comics balloons is red to signal the importance of the dialogue (or part of it). In addition, text in red is usually larger in size, thus putting even greater emphasis on that spoken part. As for text, the balloon's background colour can be used in several different ways. First, the colour can be used as a communicative tool to indicate who is talking (when character details are insufficient to recognise them or when their view is obstructed by other objects). The second case is to imply drama or a higher-than-usual importance of their spoken dialogue. Thus, in this case, the colouring of the text balloon would be a temporary design solution. The third case is to give some unusual auditory attributes to the character's voice. The two most popular designs for text balloon backgrounds are *black* to imply an unearthly, often demon-like voice and *red* to suggest a commanding yet very dangerous tone for the character.

Of course, different colours for text balloon backgrounds in modern comics are used, but in most cases, the meaning of the colour can only be decoded through the narrative. In other words, the colour blue in the text balloon could mean not that the character is calm or sad, but that he or she originated from a blue alien planet or the depths of the ocean.

Fonts, as mentioned earlier in this doctoral dissertation, play a significant role in indicating the vocal inflexion produced on a word-by-word basis (McCloud, 1994). Fonts' ability to provide unique auditory characteristics to the comic book character's speech is mentioned in every comprehensive book on comic book production (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1994, 2006; Duncan & Smith, 2009; Carrier, 2000; Abel & Madden, 2008; Fig. 1.16). Eisner (1985) noted that lettering could reflect the nature and emotion of the speech, while Kaindl (1999) observed that movement, directionality, and speed could be indicated through the lettering. Abel and Madden (2008) argued that lettering (i.e., drawn words by cartoonists and not produced by computer) is not only an essential part of the overall aesthetics but also provides a much better reading ex-

perience. Furthermore, Eisner (1985) argued that the style of the letters strongly affects the "message". Thus, several graphic solutions can be employed to provide additional auditory meanings to words.

But speech balloons do not necessarily have to present words to illustrate sounds: dialogue balloons can employ symbols to express auditory elements (most often using "!" or "?"; Carrier, 2000). Three dots in the speech balloon suggest that the character is (at that moment) still composing himself or herself to say something. The *Usagi Yojimbo* comic book series (1984 – present) is rather innovative in showing that characters are taking their last breath by placing a skull symbol in the balloon (Fig. 1.16). And, of course, there are random letters and symbols, like "%$*¡@#" (Fig. 1.17), that usually suggest that the character is swearing. Thus, graphic symbols are a standard tool in comic book media for visually expressing various sounds.

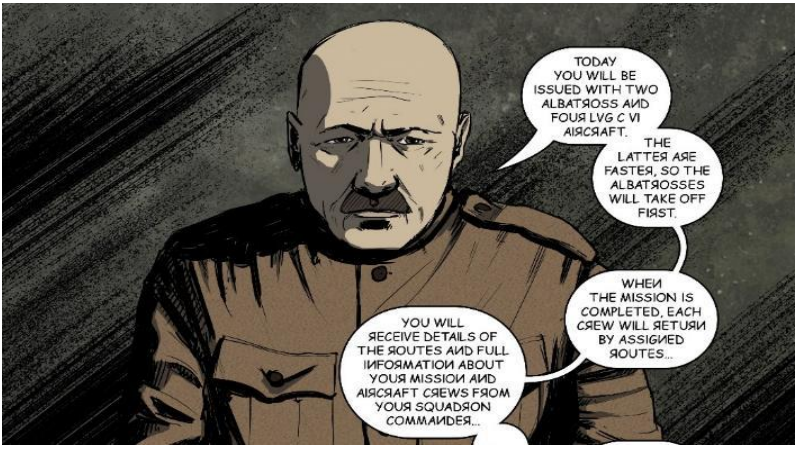

Fig. 1.16. Horizontal flip of the letters is used to indicate a person's strong accent. (Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)



Fig. 1.17. Example of wordless visual communication of sound (i.e., character's speech) in the comics medium. (Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)

Although speech balloons use graphic symbols, thought balloons offer a much greater variety of expressions that, in many cases, would be difficult to express in words. In the book "Comics & Sequential Art", Eisner (1985) provided excellent examples of thought balloons where one character is shown to think about money (a dollar sign is presented in his balloon) while in the other presented case, two characters are shown wondering in the desert where the first's thought balloon shows the drawing of a camel while the second's balloon presents an image of a facet with running water. These examples are truly great for illustrating how comics can employ visual solutions to express ideas or moods that would require significantly more words, and what is arguably more important, less involvement from the reader to produce meaning.

And then there are sound effects. Catricala and Guidi (2015) identified these three categories for sounds expressed in words:

a) *Phonomime* or *onomatopoeia*: words that mimic actual sounds (like an explosion)
b) *Phenomime*: words that depict non-auditory senses (like smell and taste).
c) *Psychomime*: words that depict psychological or bodily feelings (like a state of despair or confusion).

Phonomime or onomatopoeia are the most common among sound effects, mostly likely because it is considerably easier to communicate to the reader what sound the word represents. The other two types require agreement between the artist and the reader that the depicted words are linked with actions that (directly) do not produce sound. For example, the action of smelling is presented with the phenomime "Sniff" or the emotion of surprise with psychomime "Eeek" or "Zoing" (Giyatmi et al., 2023).

However, it is essential to note that, while sound effects are usually onomatopoetic in Western comics, in the East (predominantly Japan), they are mainly descriptive (Pratha & Avunjian, 2016; Fig. 1.18). In other words, in Western comics, the sound effect of the punch would be *Pow*; in Japanese comics, it would be presented as *Punch*. Thus, different culturally-based approaches to presenting sound effects in the comic medium exist. However, in this article, the authors focus only on the onomatopoetic approach to sound effects in comics, as it is common in American comics.

McCloud (1994) noted that creating great sound effects does not require the sort of methodical consistency that good balloon lettering needs. Quite the opposite: sound effects are one-shot inventions one can improvise "like crazy". And, from the aesthetic point of view, sound effects provide great opportunities to combine the onomatopoeia with visually based association (i.e., the text of water-based sound effects can be presented in water-mimicking shapes) and incorporate them in visually stimulating ways. Thus, sound effects are one of the auditory

elements that can provide a rather unique and stimulating experience in a medium that does not produce sound.



Fig. 1.18. In the panel above, the Japanese sound effect ズポッ (English translation – Slip/Slide) is written in the background of the character that just fell into the uncovered manhole (Source: Kardy & Hattoru, 2007:103)

Finally, there are captions. While captions were initially used to give voice to a narrator (to provide exposition or other information necessary to follow the story), they are also used today for character thoughts or even dialogues. Visually, the most significant difference from speech or thought balloons was that text in captions was presented in a quadrilateral-shaped box. However, there were aesthetic variations: the lines of the caption box could be rendered wavy or mimic a flag-like shape. Modern comics even abandon the box shape and present the text. However, this visual approach is usually reserved only for information indicating a time or place shift in the latter case. "Meanwhile" is the most used word in comics when captions are employed to connect panels with the passage of time and changes in location (Eisner, 1985).

In summary, comics, being an art form exclusively based on visuals, for over a century, found innovative solutions that provide a sound experience through the text and create genuinely unique visual solutions that are only possible in this medium. Furthermore, it is very important to mention that sound in comics is expressed not only with text, but also with symbols. Thus, as Dey and Bokil (2017) noted, text plays a vital role in the comics medium as a narrative element. However, only when text combines the best communicative and aesthetic qualities is a genuinely unique comics experience created.

1.3. Defining Historical Genre in the Context of the Creative Industries

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

It is important to note that there is substantial research on the influence of American, Japanese, and even French comic books on modern culture (e.g., Pustz, 2012; Park, 2005; Johnson-Woods, 2010; Gabilliet, 2009; Apostolidès, 2010). However, most of this research uses historical discourse analysis or particular case studies and does not aim to question whether 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 this would happen again?" These questions are really important for more than one reason.

Although today's comics culture is dominant in the global landscape of popular culture, there is a considerable gap in comic production and consumption between countries with established, developed industries and those that began producing 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 them today, although the conditions for comic creation and distribution today are objectively the best in the medium's history. But one genre of comics offers hope to create success stories for countries that don't have such an industry – the historical genre.

In this section, the author of this doctoral dissertation will investigate how the comic book medium can uniquely visually communicate this genre to the cultural product's consumers. To achieve this, the author will employ inductive reasoning, exploring how the comic book medium can help countries search for historical epics to be portrayed in emotionally impactful ways and which specific tools are best to achieve that. Finally, the author will argue that the 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, TV series or even video games.

1.3.1. 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 across

various visual media, including theatre, opera, cinema, television, literature, video games, and graphic novels. It is hard to imagine any other genre in the context of audiovisual or visual media that could provide as much national pride and be one of the most potent ways to enable 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 be an effective instrument for nations to build soft power, or even to be a blunt instrument for propaganda.

Although historical accuracy is an integral part of the audience's desired experience in the historical genre (Dukes, 2021), it is not a required form of artwork (for that, there are documentaries or other works that require scientific accuracy). Historical artworks portraying fiction have another primary goal – to entertain the audience and, in return, to be financially rewarded.

However, historical accuracy in artwork is a very intriguing topic. There is an understanding that historical accuracy today must be in harmony with the narrative. Thus, in this doctoral dissertation, the term historical genre is used broadly. Although it mainly addresses fictional work, all the principles presented can easily be applied to non-fictional narratives (for example, documentaries or journalistic works). Even though there are no specific numbers on how many years the plot may have taken in the past, the historical genre should be at least 50 years or two generations (Dukes, 2021; 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 the *epic* scale. This attribution is not technically correct because epic is a separate genre that "often takes a 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" and "often cover a large expanse of time set against a vast, panoramic backdrop" (Dirks, 1996a). Thus, an epic story can be created without its historical element. That does not mean that artwork has to be one or the other, but one of the biggest appeals of the 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 because they often focus on visual elements of architecture and costume design (Dirks, 1996b). Therefore, in this article, the term "historical genre" is always understood as of epic scale unless specified otherwise.

While this sub-section explores the historical genre's phenomena in the comic book medium, its cultural and social applications are mainly focused on small countries. While the benefits of the comic book genre apply to all countries, the author of this doctoral dissertation argues that its true potential lies in countries that lack the economic means to employ other popular cultural expressions, such

as film, TV, 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 propaganda. The term "propaganda" in this doctoral dissertation is used broadly to mean that there is an additional communicational agenda beyond entertainment. It could be simply to boost the population's morale (patriotism) or to claim a 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* (2016), *Baltic Tango* (2017), and *Crimea* (2017) that, as Shlapentokh (2009) argued, present the past with the aim to retro-integrate it into one historical continuum that is in line with the current political regime.

Finally, this sub-section needs to address the prestige of historical artwork. The author of this doctoral dissertation will briefly discuss the Lithuanian case: over three decades of independence, the nation still lacks a movie that depicts its past in the historical *epic* genre. The reason for that is highly pragmatic: the country simply cannot produce audiovisual artwork and hopes that it will be commercially viable. Thus, this national desire can be brought to life only with state backing. Yet, filmmakers, the population and even policymakers do not discuss the need for any other genre. No one feels a need for a Western, sci-fi, religious, sports, action or even animation of 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* (2000), *The Last Emperor* (1987), *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Braveheart* (1995) and *300* (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, Ejaz and Shabir (2019) argued, historical artwork (in this case, movies) has the power not only to entertain and move the audience emotionally, but the impact of 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.

1.3.2. Comics of a Historical Genre

It is important to note that historical comics are not an unknown or rare phenomenon. In the USA, quasi-historical comics often depict 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, addressing the challenges of depicting historical settings in popular culture products is necessary. As Pustz (2012) noted, there is a danger to casual learning (i.e., through entertainment works) when the original text is flawed or inaccurate. Thus, it is important to distinguish between quasi-historical and historical works of fiction when discussing the educational value of this form of entertainment. In other words, the fact that a comic book can present the past does not automatically mean that it will present it with fidelity and accuracy.

Thus, it is necessary to separate the two terms: *quasi-historical* and *historical* narratives. Quasi-historical (or historical fantasy) artworks can draw heavily from past settings, but they do not claim to be truthful to historically accurate events, causes or outcomes. Although still fictional, the historical genre usually claims that works portray realistic detail and fidelity for the time (Britannica, 2021). Although in this doctoral dissertation the author mainly focuses on historical artworks, quasi-historical works, in no shape or form, are inferior to the historical genre, as long as historical fantasy does not claim to be truthful. Thus, according to Vadillo (2010:157), "history is a conceptual construct that can be used or abused depending on the comic book creator".

Nevertheless, as Pustz (2012) argued, fictional historical work (that primarily 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, their primary usefulness is their ability to illustrate that life in the past was considerably different. In turn, this can help develop historical thinking, making the comic medium an effective tool for re-elaborating and renegotiating 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; Koutnikova, 2017; Magnussen, 2025). 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 & Barajas, 2020) and higher education institutions, or even in individual science publications (e.g., Green & Myers, 2010; Arroio, 2011; Weber et al., 2013). Although comics in scientific and cultural communication and education are not only a new concept but have been proven effective, 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, the

information provided in comic book format has greater potential to capture and maintain the students' interest (Weber et al., 2013; Huska, 2014).

However, Farinella (2018) noted 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 argued, "while comics have been studied as a tool for classroom education, their application to the specific challenges of science communication remains largely unexplored" (2018:1). There are still no empirically proven, clear models on how comics can be successfully integrated into the classroom and overall curriculum.

However, Farinella admitted that there is strong empirical evidence that, when scientific comics are presented through personal narratives (which are easier for readers to identify with), this significantly improves understanding and recall of instructions and data. Interestingly, when the Mexican Ministry of Public Education sponsored the creation of two historical comic book series (*México: Historia de un Pueblo* (1980) and *Episodios Mexicanos* (1982)) one of the creative team's goal was to "humanise history – to present protagonists (real and fictitious) as human beings, with doubts, with successes and failures, with weaknesses and strengths" (Huska, 2014:77). And, as de Syon (2014) suggested, when the 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 mesmerise 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 (2007:318) noted, "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 transferred scientific (chemistry) information (Weber et al., 2013). Boer (2020) argued that the comic book medium fosters pauses and ambiguities that heighten emotional impact and educational value.

Another important aspect of the comics medium is stylisation. Thus, that means that 2D characters' appearances "are generally more accepted by the audiences, as the demands of reality are diminished" (O'Neill, 2016:7). Writer and comic book theorist Scott McCloud (1993:30; Fig. 1.19) argued 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 the two-dimensional rendering of the world and its inhabitants, the comic medium provides an effective means to connect with characters.

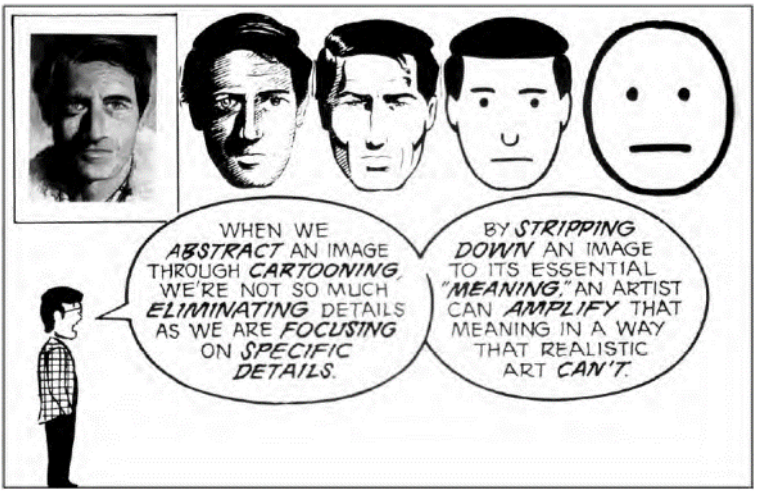

Fig. 1.19. Abstraction of the human face (Source: McCloud, 2006)

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 the reader's attention without breaking the suspense of disbelief. The comic book 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) pointed out, juxtaposing two images often produces an illusory sense of time passing. McCloud (2000:1) argued 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 for every single action. As to what is arguably the most interesting aspect, while time-based media (live-action and animation) provide a "continuous, largely involuntary and virtually imperceptible" experience, comics provide an experience that is "far from continuous and anything but involuntary" (McCloud, 1993: 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, the comic medium has the ability to graphically portray simultaneous events in multiple locations without destroying the suspense of disbelief. Visual storytelling ability is extremely hard to express in audiovisual media. Furthermore, as Goldstein (2014:134) argued (by using the example of Jacobson and



Fig. 1.20. *War Aviators* (Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)

Colón's 2006 graphic novel "The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation"), the comic medium provides tools to present simultaneously happening events "into a neat temporal/spatial package that does not diminish the emotional impact". An example of how the comics medium allows the portrayal of simultaneous events in multiple locations without disturbing spatial and temporal flow can be seen in Figure 1.20.

To summarise this sub-section, there is overwhelming academic research that showcases how effectively comics can communicate the widest variety of messages. The medium has all the strengths of 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 my educated guess would be the general population's biased view of the medium.

Finally, the comic book medium historical (epic) genre is as perfect as that of superheroes. This argument is based on the spatial and temporal systems being employed in comics; the reader can set their own pace and 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 come with comic 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 are extremely effective in telling stories of the historical genre.

1.3.3. Historical Comics' Superpowers

It is important to state that the author of this doctoral dissertation 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 strengths, and each genre has its loyal fans. Thus, in this sub-section, the researcher will further discuss the comic book medium's potential to fill the general public's demand for the historical genre.

As presented in the previous sub-section of this doctoral dissertation, the historical movie genre stands above all others regarding prestige. Furthermore, with its ability to educate and 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 the 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 (2013:25), who argued that, based on the average price range of USA comic books, a 120-page historical comic book would cost from USD 40.8K to USD 120K to produce. This equates to around 3–9% of the most expensive Lithuanian national movie at the time (*Tadas Blinda. Pradžia*, 2011; budget – almost EUR 1 million). However, a closer look into comics projects supported by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture (KT, 2021) in 2020 and 2021 revealed that comic book project budgets are considerably lower:

- comic book Jonas Šliūpas Otherwise (originally: *Jonas Šliūpas kitaip*) – EUR 5000;
- graphic novel War Aviators (originally: *Karo aviatoriai*) – €12 500;
- graphic novel A Guide to Shanghai (originally*: Gidas po Šanchajų*) – EUR 1800;
- graphic novel The Bees (originally: *Bitės*) – EUR 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 for producing historical comics. Furthermore, the author of this

doctoral dissertation does not believe there should be a choice, let alone a discussion, about what we need more – (historical) national comics or films. Ideally, the 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 seen as a cheaper version of movies but as an alternative with its own unique strengths.

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

This also applies to films, TV series and even video games. The power of the comics medium (besides cost) is its ability to direct the audience's attention to detail and pacing, and to connect emotionally with the characters, which comes through stylisation. There are scholarly texts arguing that for the audience, it is easier to connect to stylised characters than to living actors (McCloud, 1994, 2006).

Additionally, it is worth noting that comics require a significantly smaller creative team (compared to audiovisual media), which means comic authors can fully control the final look of the comic. This means not only visualising the story but also giving 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. Lastly, as Hudoshnyk and Krupskyi (2025:1) noted, comics are a medium that allows us to document "here and now – in an effort not to forget and lose, to leave a memory and a remembrance of life".

Another unique benefit of comics is that translating them into different languages is not only cheaper and quicker (compared to movies or video games) but also does not cause the "uncanny valley" effect when actors' lips do not match the spoken dialogue. Thus, comics are a very convenient medium for exporting to other cultures.

Of course, some challenges need to be addressed in this dissertation. First, for historical reasons, regions such as East and Central Europe have not produced comics for a very long time and have fostered negative associations towards artistic expression. Therefore, not only is the market for comic books still relatively small (although growing; 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 for using 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 than film, TV, and video games does not automatically make comics a sound financial investment. This is especially the case in smaller countries or countries that, for historical reasons, actively ignored this artistic expression. Thus, producing historical comics without state support may not be feasible for countries where comics culture is still developing. Furthermore, even if suddenly there was additional funding for historical comic books, without the specific challenges of the genre being considered, the result would simply be a higher number of low-value comic book works.

There is also a question about the 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 the film medium might be applied and tested.

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

1.4. Conclusions of the First Chapter and Formulation of the Tasks of the Dissertation

1. A comic is a visually based medium through which the art is presented in sequence (with at least two separate panels that are thematically con-

nected). This means that comics can be expressed in various forms. Furthermore, comics, as an art form, can perform not only to entertain but also to inform or educate.

2. Research projects that aim to produce new knowledge by examining visually based art forms must be able to employ visual communication theories, which provide a broad set of research frameworks to gather insights. These theories are essential in understanding comic books' ability to produce meaning. Furthermore, visual communication theories can help to explain how comics communicate temporal and spatial information.
3. Comics production is divided into separate steps for a few reasons. First, it increases production speed. Second, it creates conditions for assigning creative tasks to specialists specialising in different fields (e.g., narrative, composition, inking, colour, and textual communication). This is important in the context of this doctoral dissertation because it suggests that not only are different types of communicative skills needed to create compelling and immersive comics products, but also these skills are rather unique. In other words, comics require the creators to understand the medium's limitations and possibilities to create an immersive experience for comic book readers.
4. Investigation into the comic book phenomenon of closure revealed that the medium has one unique strength compared with other popular culture media. Due to the need to bridge informational gaps between panels, comics force the reader to actively participate in producing meaning. Furthermore, comic book content creators must have specific communicative skills to create the organic sensation of temporal and spatial passage for closure to be successfully produced.
5. While wordless comics exist, most comic books employ one of three written information presentation devices: word balloons, captions, or sound effects. The way textual information is presented in comics can suggest various auditory elements. Furthermore, creative decisions can communicate importance, reading order, speech speed and volume, indicate who is talking, and even auditory attributes. However, unsuccessfully executed textual information placement confuses the reader and breaks the immersion. Thus, to obtain a successful creative result, communicative tasks are as important (or even more important) than aesthetic ones.
6. Historical comics have creative powers that are extremely well-suited to tell narratives of epic scale visually, 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 economic factor as a key argument for the comics medium concerning the historical genre, that is not the medium's only, or even

main, strength in artistic expression. Literature analysis suggests that the most important creative communication tools that comics employ to tell visually compelling stories are 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 doctoral research, stylisation and spatial and temporal systems are also the medium's aspects that enhance the reading experience of the comic of the historical genre. Furthermore, the comics medium is an effective tool to re-elaborate and renegotiate the meanings of the studied historical concepts.

7. 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 the creation of historical movie epics is an investment that cannot be produced without direct state support, comics could be a great alternative. However, it is important to address that historical comics are not the medicine that can cure all culturally-related diseases. Thus, comics are an integral part of popular culture and, if successfully utilised, can be a very effective tool to communicate past events to the general population visually.

Considering the conclusions of the First Chapter, further tasks of the dissertation are planned:

1. To identify challenges when producing historically accurate comic book content;
2. To explore how comic book readers perceive action in the medium;
3. To investigate how the representation of sound in comic books evolved;
4. To propose recommendations on how best to approach a comic book project of a historical genre from a visual communication aspect.

2

Multifaceted Approach to Comics Media Research

The chapter will present the methods employed in this doctoral research, which are necessary to broaden the understanding of temporal and spatial communication applications to produce successful comic books of a historical genre (Fig. 2.1). This research aimed to advance the understanding of the challenges and opportunities for comic book practitioners to produce comic books of historical genre projects from a visually based communication aspect. The main research question was formulated as follows: What are communicative challenges and opportunities when producing comics of the historical genre?

Scientific articles have been written and published on the topic presented in this chapter (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2021, 2023).

2.1. Research Structure

As the research progressed, the author of this doctoral dissertation uncovered complexities regarding the comics phenomenon and gaps in the existing literature that were not initially anticipated. Thus, three progressive questions emerged that directed the research. Addressing them is essential to ensure the topic is fully understood and explored. Three progressive questions:

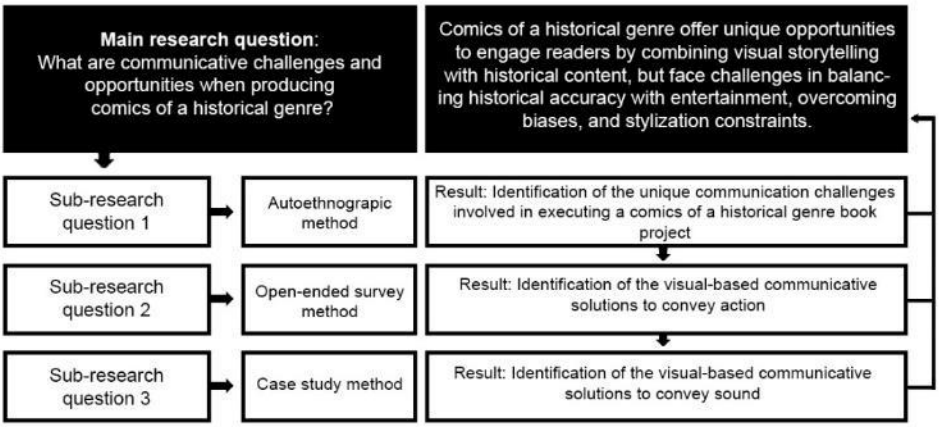

Fig. 2.1. Logical structure of the doctoral dissertation
(Source: compiled by the author)

1. What are the challenges when comics projects aim to produce historically accurate representations of the past?
2. How does the medium visually approach the representation of action?
3. How does the medium visually approach the representation of sound?

To answer the research questions raised in this doctoral dissertation, a triangulation approach is necessary to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Cohen & Manion, 1986; Altrichter et al., 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Furthermore, as Turner and Turner (2009) have noted, the triangulation approach is often used when the field of study is challenging and demanding and, thus, can compensate for the *lacunae* and partiality of single techniques, data sources or researcher analyses. Additionally, Turner and Turner (2009) argued that the triangulation approach can be used not only with the employment of different methods to gather data but also with theory triangulation. The latter is used when more than one theory is needed to understand the phenomenon.

This research strategy was necessary to explore the multifaceted nature of temporal and spatial communication in comics of a historical genre. By integrating the autoethnographic, qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions and case study methods, the author of this doctoral dissertation aimed to address the knowledge gaps surrounding the visual communicative approaches used in the medium, particularly in the context of historical narratives and, as a result, to identify communicative challenges and opportunities when producing comics of a historical genre. Triangulation allowed for a richer, more layered analysis of the research questions, offering diverse perspectives and cross-validation of the findings across different data sources. This approach ensures that the results are

robust, revealing a more holistic view of the communicative challenges and strategies in the production of comics of a historical genre.

2.2. Research Paradigm of a Study

A research project should always start with the selection of a topic, aim, problem (or at least one of interest) and paradigm that will inform the approach to data collection and analysis (Creswell, 1994; Mason, 1996; Punch, 2016). The main aim of this dissertation is to identify how to visually communicate spatial and temporal aspects through the use of comics of a historical genre. The paradigm is a "basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:157) or simply a model or approach to research that is considered the standard by a substantial number of researchers in the field (Punch, 2016).

This doctoral research adopts a qualitative approach, driven by the understanding that the visually-based temporal and spatial communication processes in comics are closely linked to the reader's personal and subjective experiences. As such, a positivist approach would be insufficient for fully answering the research questions posed by this study. Therefore, the author of this dissertation will employ constructivism as the central theoretical perspective, as it emphasises the active role of individuals in constructing their own understanding of the world, which aligns with the primary focus of the study – the meaning-making processes of comics readers. In other words, by applying constructivism, the researcher can explore how readers build connections and produce meaning from the juxtaposition of visually based information. Furthermore, to investigate how comic book readers' unique personal experiences can influence their emotional engagement and narrative comprehension.

As it was established in the literature review, the visually-based temporal and spatial communication processes in comics are strongly linked with the reader's personal experience. Therefore, any advancement in understanding how best to produce comics of a historical genre from a visual communication point of view cannot come from quantitative research approaches (at least not solely). In addition, it is important to note that the intention of this research, with a preliminary focus, was to gather data regarding how best to use the comic medium to tell visually based stories set in the past.

The epistemological position of the author of this dissertation regarding the research in this dissertation is formulated as follows: (a) comics of a historical genre are incredibly potent visually based communication tools to help form modern national identity; (b) in comics medium, there are communication challenges that need to be addressed in order for creative work to be impactful to the reader; and (c) working with historical genres creates additional challenges

that must be successfully solved. To comprehensively understand these phenomena, a multifaceted research strategy has been employed, combining various qualitative methods that allow for both in-depth investigation and broad exploration of the medium's communicative strengths and limitations.

The research strategy for this dissertation integrates several complementary methods to gather data and develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in creating comics of a historical genre. First, an autoethnographic inquiry has been used to reflect on the challenges and opportunities encountered during the production of historical comics, providing rich, personal insights into the creative process. Second, an open-ended questionnaire was conducted with readers to explore how they perceive action within the medium, shedding light on the role of closure and other narrative mechanisms in comics. Finally, a case study of *The Amazing Spider-Man* series was undertaken to analyse how sound, a crucial yet absent element in the comic book medium, is represented visually and how this depiction has evolved over time.

By employing this triangulation approach – combining autoethnography, reader questionnaire, and a case study – the doctoral dissertation aims to answer the primary research question: What are the communicative challenges and opportunities when producing comics of a historical genre? The study also addresses several related questions that emerged as the research progressed: (i) What are the challenges when comic projects aim to produce historically accurate representations of the past? (ii) How does the medium approach the representation of action? and (iii) How does the medium approach the representation of sound?

The triangulation of methods works in synergy to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In other words, each method complements the others by offering a distinct yet interrelated perspective on the medium and its ability to communicate spatial and temporal information in comics of a historical genre. Thus, together, these methods create a robust framework where the strengths of one method compensate for the limitations of others, allowing for a richer interpretation of the data and a more holistic view of the research questions. Furthermore, this approach helps to address the unique challenges involved in producing works that are both historically accurate and emotionally engaging for readers. The research strategy provides a thorough examination of both the creation and reception of comics of a historical genre, contributing new insights to the field and offering practical recommendations for comic book practitioners.

Finally, it is necessary to address the ethical safety in this research. In the context of this dissertation, two research risks need to be addressed. First is the questionnaire that involves human participants; the second is how to conduct autoethnographic research.

When conducting a qualitative open-ended questionnaire to gather insights about the comics' closure phenomenon, it is essential to adopt a rigorous ethical approach that ensures participants' rights and well-being are respected throughout the research process. This includes obtaining informed consent, clearly explaining the study's purpose, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of respondents' answers. Additionally, ethical mindfulness should be maintained in the interpretation of responses, ensuring that participants' voices are represented fairly and accurately while avoiding any exploitation or misrepresentation of their perspectives.

Research risks in autoethnography include significant ethical challenges, particularly in relation to relational ethics (Tullis, 2013). Since autoethnographic narratives often involve the presentation of relationships with identifiable others, such as family, colleagues, and friends, ethnographers must carefully navigate their responsibilities toward these individuals (Ellis, 2004; Lapadat, 2017). Pathak (2010) highlighted four core ethical principles: accountability, context, truthfulness, and community. Douglas and Carless (2013) argued that ethics in autoethnography also encompass moral ethics, mindfulness, trust, and care. Forber-Pratt (2015) stressed the importance of developing a personal ethical process to ensure validity and credibility in the research. Thus, in accordance with these recommendations, the author has made every effort to address and uphold all ethical considerations related to the empirical research.

2.3. Autoethnographic Method

Autoethnography is an approach to qualitative inquiry that employs the researcher/author as the subject of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 2000, 2002). In other words, autoethnographers aim to examine their own feelings, insights, and understandings to gather data on the research topic. Thus, when an autoethnography approach is used to gather findings, researchers are both the research subject and the analyst who examines and interprets the data (Dumitrica, 2010). In other words, ethnography's key difference from the rest is that empirical data is gathered from the researcher's personal experiences.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that stands apart from other approaches, such as critical ethnography and reflective ethnography, by focusing on the researcher's personal experiences as empirical data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). This method embraces subjectivity, allowing the researcher's personal insights to deepen the understanding of a discipline or culture (Holt, 2003). Autoethnography is particularly valuable when the researcher's lived experiences can illuminate aspects of the research topic that might otherwise be overlooked.

However, not all self-reflective writing qualifies as autoethnographic, as it must also promote awareness of the relationship between self, others, and society. Importantly, autoethnography requires careful ethical consideration, especially in terms of how personal experiences are framed and presented.

Emerging from anthropology in the late 20th century (Scott-Pollock, 2020), autoethnography was formally established as a research methodology by Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner in the 1990s (Dumitrica, 2010). However, its roots can be traced back to the 1970s, during the development of phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and existential sociology (Adler & Adler, 1987; Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). This approach emphasises documenting the researcher's emotional and experiential journey, thus enabling a richer, more nuanced exploration of the research subject.

However, while all personal texts could be perceived as cultural examination, not all writing is autoethnographic. Jones et al. (2013:22) described the characteristics that make a researcher's personal narratives autoethnographic:

1. Purposefully commenting on/critiquing culture and cultural practices;
2. Making contributions to existing research;
3. Embracing vulnerability with purpose; and
4. Creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.

Before utilising autoethnography, researchers must consider several aspects. As Lapadat (2017) asserted, the methodology requires the researcher to clearly state their personal background, perspectives, theoretical stance, and political aims. This framing not only enriches the research but also maintains its rigour by resisting the temptation to generalise or produce overly authoritative interpretations. Scott-Pollock (2020) and Lapadat (2017) emphasised that the researcher's motivation and standpoint must be transparent to ensure both the validity of the research and its ethical integrity.

In the context of this doctoral research, autoethnography is an ideal methodology for both in-depth investigation and broad exploration of the medium's communicative strengths and limitations. As this dissertation addresses the challenges and opportunities in the production of comics of a historical genre, the researcher's personal involvement in the creation of such works provides unique insights. The process of producing historical comics inherently involves subjective choices – ranging from visual representation to narrative construction – that are best understood through a personal, reflective inquiry. Moreover, autoethnography allows for the examination of the researcher's direct experience with the medium, shedding light on the creative and communicative processes that contribute to effective visual storytelling. By documenting these experiences, this

methodology enables a deeper understanding of how comics as a medium communicate temporal and spatial elements in the context of historical narratives, thus offering an invaluable perspective that external observers cannot fully replicate.

Furthermore, autoethnography is especially suited for addressing the research questions regarding the challenges of visual communication in historical comics, as it allows the researcher to interrogate not just theoretical frameworks but also personal creative practices. In doing so, this approach ensures that the research is grounded in real-world experience, rather than solely in abstract theory. This methodological choice, combined with its focus on subjectivity and reflexivity, provides a comprehensive and ethical way to explore the communicative complexities of comic book creation, particularly when dealing with historical genres.

In this doctoral dissertation, the author employed three key approaches to gather data about two comic book projects of the historical genre. The first one is a reflection on action. However, while the second comic book was finished just a few months ago in relation to writing this section of the dissertation, all the insights are quite fresh; the first comic project was finished and published more than five years ago. Thus, personal reflection on action may be distorted due to the passage of time.

The second data-gathering approach is informal discussions with an illustrator to gather the practitioner's point of view on the creative process. While this data-gathering approach is not strictly autoethnographic, it is integral for this investigation as it provides much-needed context and includes the practitioner's perspective on the creative process. Furthermore, this approach aligns with the autoethnographic focus on personal experience and reflectivity, presenting insights into the practitioner's (personal) experiences. Thus, this data-gathering approach offers a nuanced understanding of the creative endeavour when producing comics of a historical genre while enriching the author's own narrative with an external perspective.

The third data-gathering approach is reviewing *post-mortem* documents. A project post-mortem is a term used to describe a process that focuses on identifying what caused problems and challenges in the production with the goal of preventing them in the future. In other words, the goal is to learn from mistakes so that the team can better evaluate risks in future projects (Collier et al., 1996). The studio that produced both comic projects has the practice of writing after-action reviews after every major creative project. Thus, in both cases, there is a documented account of challenges, as well as gathered insights and suggestions for improving future projects' creative processes. However, because these documents cover a wide range of aspects of (in this case, comics) production process like aesthetics, technical formatting, publication, advertising, digital file logistics, etc.,

in this doctoral dissertation, the researcher will focus only on management and communication aspects.

Finally, it is important to address Scott-Pollock's (2020) recommendation that radiographers try to answer two important questions before employing self-reflectivity as a means to gather data:

- Why do you want to understand something?
- Why do you think it is worth telling other people?

Thus, the answer to the first question is that the researcher (in the context of her professional practice outside her university career) plans to continue to work with historical genre projects. However, the simple trial-and-error method is extremely slow and wasteful. Thus, there is a firm drive to better understand how best to manage the process when historical consultations are an integral part of the desired creative result.

The answer to the second question is that there is a considerable knowledge gap about the historical genre in general, not only in management and communication aspects of creating comic books. And, as Getz (2019) observed, "both historians and creators of graphic histories have a lot of work to do to mutually develop a genre". Therefore, presenting case studies and gathering autoethnographic insights could not only help other practitioners approach the historical genre in comic (or any other) medium but also help to kickstart further research into this fascinating phenomenon.

Finally, this qualitative data-gathering method provides unique insights into the challenges when comics projects aim to produce historically accurate representations of the past. In other words, through this approach, the author of this doctoral dissertation can step away from communicative challenges within the comic book medium (i.e., how to engage with the reader through the artwork successfully) and look at the communication challenges within the creative team that can happen when cartoonists aim to produce high-accuracy historical genres. Thus, the aim of this empirical research is to explore the challenges involved in the production of historical genre comic books, with emphasis on the management and communication aspects with the creative team. To achieve this aim, the researcher sets these tasks:

(i) to critically assess the process of creating comics of a historical genre through personal reflection on two distinct comic book projects;
(ii) to gather data on the creative process by engaging in informal discussions with an illustrator and consultants involved in the projects, to provide a broader perspective on the development process;
(iii) to review post-mortem documents related to the comic book projects, focusing on management and communication aspects, in order to identify areas for improvement in future historical genre projects.
(iv) to generate autoethnographic insights that can inform future comic

practitioners how best to approach the intersection of historically accurate storytelling with primary entertainment purpose.

2.4. Open-ended Questionnaire Method

The second method employed in this doctoral research is a qualitative open-ended questionnaire to gather insights about the comics' closure phenomenon. This method is best applied when the research requires in-depth insights and to explore, explain, and/or reconfirm existing ideas (Goodrich, 2008; Neuert et al., 2021; Singer & Couper, 2017; Jackson & Trochim, 2002). Furthermore, as Singer and Couper (2017) claimed, open-ended questions are not only good for testing methodological theories and hypotheses but also for giving respondents a voice during standardised interviews. In addition, open-ended questions do not force potentially invalid responses (Gillespie et al., 2021).

However, while this method has many advantages, it also has considerable challenges – analysing open-ended responses requires collapsing (often an extensive number of) unique answers into considerably fewer categories for the data to be analytically useful (Goodrich, 2008). Furthermore, additional coding challenges can arise if some respondents misunderstand or do not answer the questions (Gillespie et al., 2021; Goodrich, 2008; Jackson & Trochim, 2002). Thus, flawed questionnaire design (due to question-wording or visual representation) may lead to information of little or no benefit (Reja et al., 2003; Couper, 2001; Reips, 2000).

This qualitative method was chosen because it allows for the gathering of insights into people's experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. The rationale for this decision is that the phenomenon of closure is inherently subjective, and the questionnaire method enables a comprehensive exploration of this process by directly asking participants to recall, interpret, and fill in missing information based on their own experiences with the comic. This approach provides rich qualitative data that can reveal the underlying cognitive process involved in the phenomenon of closure.

For the data analysis, a qualitative approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes across the responses. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the data analysis process involved coding the open-ended responses into categories that would provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon of comics' closure. Responses were first reviewed for content that illustrated participants' engagement with the comics, particularly in relation to the closure process, where readers fill narrative gaps between panels. A thematic analysis was conducted, focusing on how respondents described their interpretation of the action and meaning-making, as well as their emotional engagement with the material.

The data were drawn from 143 third-year undergraduate students on January 11, 12, and 13, 2023. The majority of respondents were female participants (n = 105, 73% of the total sample). Undergraduate students are particularly well-suited for qualitative open-ended questionnaire aimed at gathering insights into the comics' closure phenomenon because this group is typically familiar with visual media and often engages with comics, graphic novels, or other forms of sequential art, making them ideal respondents for exploring how they interpret the visual and textual elements in comics (Clark et al., 2024; Pawar & Jmbhale, 2024). Their prior exposure to both visual and written forms of storytelling provides a basis for understanding how they engage with the closure process, whereby they make inferences and fill in narrative gaps between comic panels. This familiarity allows the researcher to focus on their engagement with the medium itself, rather than having to first introduce them to the basic concept of comics as a storytelling medium.

To participate in the questionnaire, the respondents first had to read two chapters from the graphic novel "War Aviators" (2021). The particular graphic novel was chosen for the study for several reasons. The first and arguably most important reason was that the researcher had access and permission to use part of the graphic novel for the study. This was important not only from a legal and ethical perspective but also because it allowed the author of this dissertation to use high-quality samples for the experiment. Second, the comic book was published in the Lithuanian language. Third, the comic falls within the historical genre, the historical accuracy of which was ensured through consultations with historians. Lastly, comic books were advertised to the public as primary entertainment content, as opposed to educational content (as is the case with most Lithuanian comics).

The two chapters were provided to respondents on the same day that the questionnaire was conducted. The two chapters consisted of 18 pages, including two pages that contained only textual information about chapter numbering (Fig. 2.2). Within 16 pages, there were 88 comic panels. Questionnaire participants were first provided with the comic book segment and then had to participate in an intellectual activity (for roughly 30 minutes), and only then were they granted access to the questionnaire. It is important to note that participants were not allowed to check on comics at the time of the questionnaire.

The number of pages in the comic was selected to ensure it was manageable for students to read in a single sitting while still being sufficiently lengthy to foster an emotional connection with the fictional character. This latter consideration was necessary, as the literature review strongly suggests that the ability to identify with a character in a work is an integral part of the reading experience.



Fig. 2.2. Comic book pages from *War Aviators* (Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021) graphic novel that were used for the experiment

Additionally, the decision was made to provide respondents with complete comic book chapters rather than truncated excerpts to avoid presenting a story that ends abruptly. However, it is important to note that the selection of these pages was based on the author's judgment, as there are no prior studies available to guide the formulation of the experimental design.

The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions, and the introductory page contained all the information related to the study and the rights of the study participants. All the data were collected using the online teaching platform *Moodle*. This platform was chosen for its ability to customise, collect, store, and present data. In other words, the platform was chosen because Moodle is user-friendly and accessible from any device (although the questionnaire was conducted in the university's computer laboratory). It is important to note that all participants had to indicate their consent to participate in this study. Additionally, it is essential to note that no pre-test of baseline knowledge/retention was administered; therefore, the findings are treated as descriptive of meaning-making in this context rather than comparative performance metrics.

The first questionnaire question was, "From memory, please chronologically describe in detail the story presented in the comics". This question aimed to test Duncan and Smith's (2009) experiment's claim that comic readers create additional narrative content to bridge the informational gap between two panels. This questionnaire tests a few theoretical constructs, such as closure, cognitive processing, constructing meaning, and semiotic interpretation. These communication theories help explain how readers interpret information presented in comic book form.

The second question was, "Please name the protagonist's goal (what was he aiming to achieve)? Why did he pursue that goal?". This question was formulated as a redundant follow-up question to test if the respondent actually read the two chapters. This safeguard element in the questionnaire was important for the research to identify answers that were fictional in nature and not the result of the closure phenomenon. In addition, it is important to note that the protagonist's personal story arc presented in the graphic novel segment was fairly simple and straightforward. Thus, if one has read the comics, it should not provide any challenges in answering the question correctly.

The third question was, "Please name the elements that stuck with you the most from the comics that you just read". The aim of this question is to examine Duncan and Smith's (2009) proposed phenomenon from a slightly different angle. In their book, Duncan and Smith argued that readers experience comics by interanimation of meaning. In other words, readers must understand the connection between various levels of available (visual and textual) information to construct meaning that would emotionally resonate with them. Thus, the author of this dissertation decided to use this questionnaire to gather additional data about

which visual elements used in the comic book emotionally resonated the most with the respondents.

This questionnaire question aligns with several communication theories that focus on meaning-making and emotional engagement – semiotics, closure, and narrative. These theories can help to explain how comic readers engage and create meaning from the visually presented story and how the experience contributes to emotional resonance.

The fourth question in the questionnaire was, "Name the year and location the event illustrated in the comic took place". This question was added to identify readers' value of explicit information in the comics medium. Although comics-related literature does not explicitly state that the time or place of the narrative is often imperceptible to readers, the author's personal experience shows that this phenomenon exists to some extent. Thus, the author of the dissertation constructed a preliminary hypothesis that many respondents will not remember the dates and locations explicitly presented in comics, as the information does not add additional meaning to the story for them to resonate with. In other words, because the comic book reader can fully enjoy the story even without remembering the specific date and place where it took place, it is very likely that this particular information will be forgotten.

The final question was, "Name the country from which the Lithuanian Air Force purchased combat planes?". This question was formulated to check the opposite effect, whether the reader remembers the information better if it is presented contextually. In other words, the graphic novel segment presented to the respondents does not explicitly state that the Lithuanian Air Force purchased the combat planes from Germany. It is information that can be understood only through deductive reasoning. However, the author of this doctoral dissertation formulated a preliminary hypothesis that more respondents would be able to answer this question correctly than the previous one. This question also falls on cognitive load, framing, and semiotics theories to explain hypothesised results.

This question aligns with several communication theories that focus on meaning-making and emotional engagement – semiotics, closure, and narrative theory. These perspectives explain how comic readers interpret and integrate visual and textual cues, construct meaning from the story, and experience emotional resonance with characters and events. To clarify the theoretical grounding of each question, Table 2.1 maps the five open-ended questionnaire questions to the specific communication theories they draw upon and the analytical aims they serve within this study. This structure demonstrates that, while multiple theories are engaged, the intention is to use them collectively to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation rather than to extend any single theoretical framework in isolation.

Table 2.1. Questions in the questionnaire and connection to communication theories

Question	Theories Engaged	Analytical Aim
(1.) From memory, please chronologically describe in detail the story presented in the comics.	Closure; Cognitive Processing; Constructivism; Semiotics	To examine how readers bridge narrative gaps between panels and construct meaning from sequential visual-textual cues.
(2.) Please name the protagonist's goal and why he pursued it.	Reading Comprehension (control measure)	To verify reading engagement and filter out non-relevant or fabricated responses, ensuring that closure-related findings are based on actual reading.
(3.) Please name the elements that stuck with you the most from the comics that you just read	Semiotics; Closure; Narrative Theory	To investigate which visual or narrative elements emotionally resonate most with readers and how meaning-making occurs through interanimation of text and image.
(4.) Name the year and location where the event illustrated in the comic took place.	Cognitive Load Theory; Framing Theory; Semiotics	To assess retention of explicit information when it is not central to the narrative's emotional or thematic meaning.
(5.) Name the country from which the Lithuanian Air Force purchased combat planes.	Cognitive Load Theory; Framing Theory; Semiotics	To evaluate how well readers infer contextual information not stated explicitly, testing the role of deduction in comics comprehension.

Finally, it is essential to note that this empirical study is exploratory in nature. As such, its results are not definitive but rather serve to open new avenues for further research. Thus, the author of this doctoral dissertation acknowledges that changing research parameters, such as the comic book (i.e., using a comic of a different style, genre, or general quality of implementation) or respondents from a different cultural, social, or age group, it is likely that the collected data may differ significantly. Thus, this study aims to investigate under-researched phenomena, clarify a few visually-based communicative concepts, and form new hypotheses, but it does not provide conclusive results or explanations.

Thus, the aim of this empirical research is to explore the closure phenomenon in the comic book medium by examining how readers create additional story content to bridge informational gaps between comic panels and create meaning. Additionally, the study aims to examine the emotional engagement and meaning-making processes of comic book readers. To achieve this aim, the researcher sets these tasks:

(i) to investigate if readers produce additional narrative content in response to incomplete information;
(ii) to assess how visual elements in comics emotionally resonate with readers;
(iii) To test the impact of explicit information (e.g., date and location) on reader retention;
(iv) to investigate how well comic book readers can collect and interpret contextual information from sequential experience.

2.5. Case Study Method

The final research method employed in this doctoral dissertation is a case study, one of the most extensively used strategies in qualitative social research (Priya, 2021; Yin, 2009). A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon in its real-life context, allowing the researcher to employ any ethical data collection method suited to the research purpose (Priya, 2021; Creswell, 2014).

In this study, the corpus of *The Amazing Spider-Man* comics (801 issues, 1963–2018; approximately 14 issues per year on average) was treated as a set of historical and cultural documents, and a document analysis approach was applied to examine them systematically. Document analysis, as described by Bowen (2009), involves skimming, reading, and interpreting textual and visual material to identify meaning, patterns, and relationships within the data. The procedure combined qualitative content analysis with elements of comparative historical analysis: each issue was reviewed in chronological order, with communicative solutions identified, coded, and compared across time periods.

Contact analysis is a method used to identify and interpret meaning within recorded information by isolating small segments of data and applying a framework to organise them in a way that helps describe or explain a phenomenon (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991; Krippendorff, 2019). It is particularly effective for uncovering similarities, differences, and patterns, both overt and implied, in large volumes of communicated material (Graneheim et al., 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).



Fig. 2.3. *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic book covers published in 1963–1971

To address the study's research questions, the analysis employed a two-tiered coding system distinguishing between structural and content dimensions:

- **Structure-based categories**: (i) shape and outline of balloons or captions (e.g., jagged, wavy, smooth, and irregular), (ii) typography and lettering style (e.g., bold, italic, and size variation), (iii) placement and spatial relationship to characters or objects, and (iv) integration with panel composition (e.g., overlapping, breaking borders).
- **Content-based categories**: (i) type of verbal element (speech balloon, thought balloon, and caption), (ii) use of onomatopoeia and sound symbolism, (iii) descriptive or emotive textual content, and (iv) visual reinforcement of sound (e.g., accompanying gestures, motion lines, and environmental cues).

For each identified case, the following metadata were recorded: (i) year of publication, (ii) issue number, (iii) page number, (iv) comic book authors (penciller and letterer), (v) coding category, (vi) short description, and (vii) print-screen of the element in context. This method allowed for tracing both the formal design changes and the evolving communicative role of sound depictions over the series' 55-year history.

Additionally, the authors of each comic book were documented to investigate whether shifts in creative personnel correlated with the introduction of new communicative solutions. This approach was intended to assess whether authorial change functioned as a catalyst for innovation in the visual representation of sound. However, the analysis did not yield consistent or noteworthy patterns, and thus, this variable is not examined further within the scope of the present study.

The decision to analyse *The Amazing Spider-Man* series is based on two main considerations. First, it is one of the longest-running comic book series in the

United States (Harth, 2021, 2022a), providing favourable conditions for tracing the evolution of stylistic and communicative solutions over time. Second, as Marvel's flagship title (Harth, 2022b; McMillan, 2023), the series has played a central role in shaping the American comic book industry, often adopting, refining, and disseminating innovative practices. While not all communicative or aesthetic innovations originated within Spider-Man, it is reasonable to assume that most significant solutions, whether developed in other titles or within this one, were quickly incorporated here, influencing the wider comics landscape.

This empirical investigation draws on several communication theories, including perception, cognitive load, constructivism, semiotics, framing, closure, and narrative theory. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for examining how the depiction of sound in a soundless medium conveys meaning, engages readers, and enriches the narrative experience. The purpose of this study is not to advance any single theoretical framework in isolation but to employ these theories collectively to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Accordingly, this research aims to explore the evolution of sound depiction in American mainstream comic books, with a specific focus on The Amazing Spider-Man, and to understand how visual communication strategies convey auditory elements. It addresses the following research questions:

a. How have the formal, design-based elements (e.g., shape, outline, typography, and placement) of speech balloons, thought balloons, and captions evolved over time in their representation of sound?
b. How have the textual and illustrative components (e.g., onomatopoeia, descriptive text, integration with visual context) changed in their communicative execution of sound?
c. How do these structural and content-based strategies influence reader comprehension, emotional engagement, and the perceived "auditory" quality of a scene?

To achieve this aim, the researcher sets these tasks:

(i) to investigate how different stylistic and communicative solutions are used to depict sound over time;
(ii) to catalogue and categorise each instance of new communicative execution found in the series, detailing the year, issue, page number, comic book authors, and specific sound;
(iii) to analyse the impact of sound depictions on reader comprehension and engagement, utilising a framework based on communication theories such as perception, cognitive load, constructivism, semiotics, framing, closure, and narrative.

2.6. Limitations of the Research

A considerable knowledge gap regarding the comic book phenomenon (especially with communication aspects) presented the author of this doctoral dissertation with numerous challenges. As described in the introductory chapter, the gaps in the existing literature necessitated continuous adaptation to newly gathered insights and an evolving theoretical framework. Furthermore, this meant that the doctoral journey had to focus on empirical analysis or real-world phenomena rather than relying solely on theoretical frameworks.

This situation also meant that there were methodological limitations. Empirical research conducted with comic book readers, while providing valuable insights, cannot fully represent all readers, particularly outside Lithuania. Furthermore, while open-ended questions yielded rich qualitative data, this method also requires significant interpretation on the researcher's part. This limitation may also affect the generalisability of some findings. Lastly, this data-gathering method, due to the chosen designs, did not yield conclusive results (the selected segment of the graphic novel was found to be too long, which may have hindered the ability to test the phenomena under consideration conclusively). Thus, a new experiment with a refined methodological approach could produce more insightful results.

The case study approach of *The Amazing Spider-Man* series focuses explicitly on mainstream American comics. Thus, while this study provides valuable new insights into the medium's communicative advancement, the findings may not be fully applicable to other comic traditions, regions, and cultures. In other words, there is a need for further exploration of different cultures and traditions to gain a holistic understanding of the development and execution of the communicative representation of sound in comics.

2.7. Conclusions of the Second Chapter

1. Investigation into historical comics and the importance of temporal and spatial communication to successfully represent the past requires a multiple-methods approach to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. In other words, to successfully answer all raised research questions, it is necessary to use a data triangulation approach. For this reason, three methodological approaches – autoethnographic, open-ended questionnaire, and case study – were selected to achieve the aim of the doctoral dissertation.

2. Autoethnographic investigation is a research approach that employs the researcher's personal experience to provide knowledge about cultural, social, or political phenomena. In the context of this doctoral dissertation, the research has unique experience and insights into the production of historical comics that are difficult or impossible to obtain using other methodological approaches. In other words, only inwards-directed research can produce new knowledge about challenges and opportunities regarding comics of a historical genre production. To produce rich data, the researcher employs three key approaches: (i) reflection on action, (ii) informal discussions with an illustrator of previous comic book projects, and (iii) review of projects' post-mortem documents. This methodology provides insights that could be interesting not only for scholars but also for practitioners.
3. The open-ended questionnaire method is employed when the researcher seeks to acquire data from a greater pool while at the same time acquiring a better understanding of the respondents' perspectives regarding particular phenomena. In other words, this method provides an opportunity to gain statistical insights by analysing respondents' sentiment. The third research method employed in the doctoral research is a qualitative open-ended questionnaire to gather insights about the comics' closure phenomenon. Findings from this method could be vital to understanding how the comic book medium creates a connection between various levels of available (visual and textual) information to construct meaning that would emotionally resonate with them.
4. The case study method is employed when researchers seek concrete, in-depth knowledge of specific real-world phenomena. Thus, this method is employed when research questions require empirical investigation of the phenomena in their real-life context. In order to explore how sound depiction evolved in American comics over time, 801 issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018) comic books were examined. This data-gathering exercise provided insights into the experimentation process that cartoonists engage in to develop communicative approaches that would best transmit various aural experiences in a soundless medium.

3

Visual Communication in Historical Comics: Empirical Findings and Implications

This chapter presents the analysis and dissemination of the data collected using the methods presented in the previous chapter. Scientific articles have been written and published on the topic presented in this chapter (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2021; Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė & Mitkus, 2024).

3.1. Autoethnographic Investigation

The inquiry into how best to employ visually based communicative decisions to produce comics of the historical genre cannot be complete without the aim of understanding the specific challenges that arise when producing comics that present the past. The importance of this investigation arises from the fact that the author of this doctoral dissertation could not find any studies of a similar kind. In other words, although there is a wide variety of literature on historical comics and their ability to resonate with readers, there are no studies that specifically address the unique challenges of *creating* historical comics.

3.1.1. "Leičiai": Costly Mistakes and Hard Lessons Learned

Leičiai (Fig. 3.1) was the second comic book project supervised by the author of this doctoral dissertation. However, it must be stated that the first project (a short adaptation of the steampunk-western book) was more of a training exercise than a confident execution based on a solid understanding of the medium, mainly because the first comic project was a quasi-commission from the publishing house, rather than a project developed by the creative studio managed by the author. This situation meant that many of the creative decisions were made by the publisher, and printing, logistics, and advertising were fully implemented without my intervention.

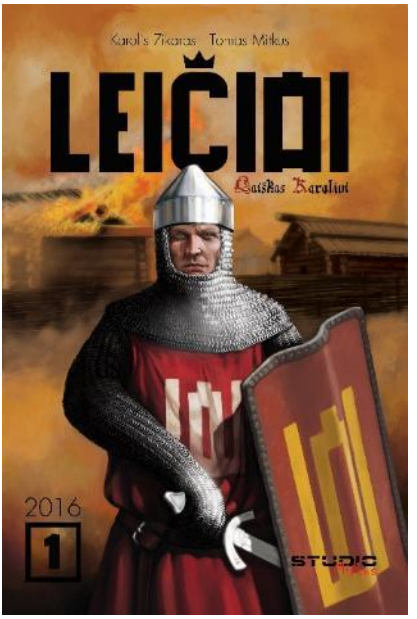

Fig. 3.1. Cover of the first issue of the comic book *Leičiai*
(Source: Mitkus & Zikaras, 2016)

However, the studio's illustrator felt much more confident in his abilities and competencies, thanks to the experience from the project above. The studio received partial state support for this project. It was the largest amount ever awarded by the state for a comic project.

Additionally, the studio worked with the Lithuanian Armed Forces as a partner on this project. This partnership provided the project with historical consultations about 14th-century military aspects and the whole narrative concept. In other words, the armed forces provided the *Leičiai* project with the narrative (script)

and arguably the most consultations on the historical aspects of 14th-century Lithuanian settings. In comic book creators' opinion, the partnership with the Lithuanian Armed Forces most likely played a huge part in convincing the Lithuanian Cultural Council (an institution that evaluates creative projects that seek state support) that the project was worth supporting. Of course, it is only an educated guess.

The person delegated by the Lithuanian Armed Forces to help with the project's narrative and historical consultations was, by education, a historian. And that helped the project greatly. Furthermore, due to professional connections in the historical field, the delegated person provided additional consultation (at no cost) that significantly improved the comic book's historical accuracy. However, this came with an unforeseen price.

The contract with the Ministry of Culture (which provided state support for the project) stated that the studio would have to finish, print, and distribute *Leičiai* comic books in less than six months. For various reasons, such as to better control the artistic vision and flow of the project, only one artist worked on the comic book pipeline. In other words, one illustrator did pencilling, inking, colouring, lettering, and cover design work. From the beginning, it was decided that all processes would be digital to save time and money.

The first major challenge was the script. Because the project's scriptwriter was a historian and military personnel, he greatly understood the historical context and military procedures of the time period. And that was, without a doubt, a huge advantage for the project. However, the lack of storytelling skills and a strong focus on patriotic themes made the story slow-paced and, at times, very static. In the case of *Leičiai*, the narrative, regrettably, was not identified as problematic because, at that time, no one involved in the project had the necessary skills and knowledge to understand what a solid narrative for a comic book should look like. Furthermore, the high historical accuracy was perceived as the ultimate redeeming quality that can compensate for all other shortcomings. It is safe to say that it was a wrong perception. Additionally, because the scriptwriter worked only after office hours, there were times when the script for new issues would hold production for weeks. This resulted in increased stress for the illustrator and, to a lesser degree, the author of this dissertation (project producer).

The second major challenge came with consultations of a historical nature. And this challenge is truly a multi-headed beast. At the very foundation, there were unforeseen issues with the concept of the historical genre when working with historians. All historians involved in the project, albeit to varying degrees, were narrowly focused on portraying historical details to the fullest. This has more than once brought tension with the illustrator because in fictional artwork, especially that portrays stylised reality, not all details are needed to create a functional world that does not break the suspension of disbelief to the audience. However, as the

illustrator recalls, there were moments when historians would hold their consultations (thus, in fact, holding up production) until some minor details, arguably unnoticeable to the comic viewer, were fixed on the comic book page.

In addition to the mentioned challenges, others arose from the decision to employ additional history specialists during mid-production. Because those new specialists would specialise in different fields, it meant that they would notice incorrect depictions of various things in comics that previous historians would approve as correct (or rather, would not identify as incorrect). Some pages would be redrawn up to five times because, at different versions of the page, a different historian would identify wrongly depicted details of the outfits, architectural elements, and furniture (Fig. 3.2).

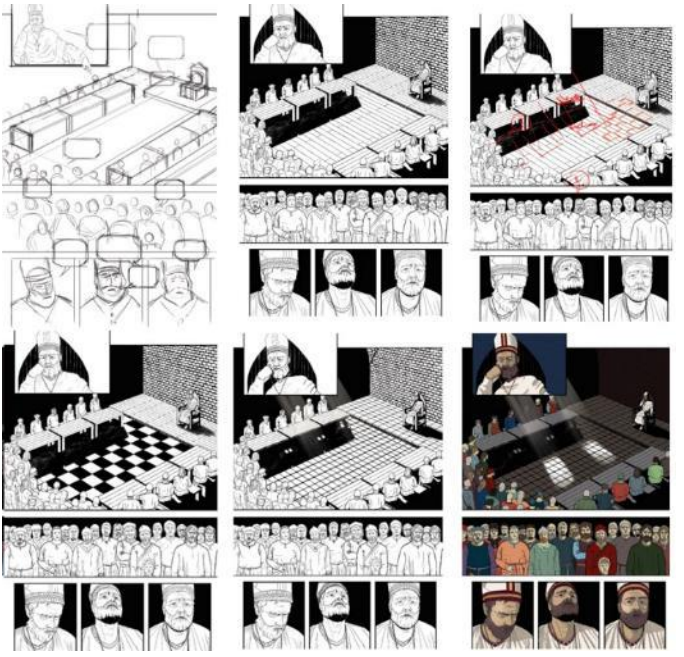

Fig. 3.2. Progression of changes in one page of the comic book *Leičiai* (Mitkus & Zikaras, 2016)

Finally, there is a challenge of perception about what is (or should be) a historical genre artwork. Most people (outside academia) perceive the fictional historical genre as a concept with many intermediate options. Based on the experience of the dissertation's author with this project, historians, unlike ordinary people, view it as a dichotomy where entertainment from creative work can only

come if it is historically accurate. In other words, there is a perception that historically inaccurate work cannot provide sufficient entertainment for a non-academic audience.

Inefficient time management, combined with overly optimistic assumptions about production output, despite limited experience in the matter, led to physical and psychological fatigue, ultimately resulting in the project's submission to the Ministry being postponed twice. This arguably damaged the studio's image in the eyes of an institution that provides state support. Finally, the rush and pressure to finish the comic project led to qualitative shortcuts with the comic book illustrations. As a result, the level of illustrations became very inconsistent between the different pages, even within the same issue. A creative result that not only negatively affected the comic's evaluation among readers but also likely had an impact on the studio's subsequent applications for state funding.

After the project was finished and presented to the public, it received mixed reviews. On the one hand, it caught public attention as one of the first Western-looking comic books that promised an epic account of Lithuanian history. There were even fan letters praising their experience reading this particular Lithuanian historical comic. Thus, it can be said that at least some of the goals set in this project were achieved.

On the other hand, the average storytelling level and wavy illustration quality created tangible damage to comic book series commercials and critical results. In this case, it can be added that the lack of knowledge or experience in the successful distribution of a comic book product in Lithuania also considerably damaged commercial success. Some bookstores were reluctant to sell comics because they did not know how to present or sell a comic book series (rather than a book), and larger bookstores did not want to start business relationships with small publishers. Other bookstores admitted that their previous experience with comic book sales was negative, so they did not believe they would be able to sell comics.

Soon after the project ended, the illustrator created a post-mortem document listing his insights about the process. It should be noted that this was a habit of the illustrator that he did after each major project, but in this particular case, it helped a lot in implementing this study. The key insights are listed below:

- There is no substitute for a weak narrative. Great illustrations and historical accuracy cannot compensate for a weak narrative in a medium that prioritises entertainment. Finally, arguably, it is much better to have a professional scriptwriter who is interested in history than a professional historian who is interested in storytelling in entertainment media.
- It is important to prepare to work with historians. They perceive what is important in the fictional historical genre differently. Also, it is important to plan time intervals when work will stop because historians will require

time to respond. It is paramount to discuss and agree with historians on the consultation process before starting the project.

- By increasing the number of historians (who specialise in different aspects), comic projects naturally create higher historical value. However, that will affect the timetable negatively.
- When one artist creates all comic artwork, although there is greater control over artistic vision, this not only conditions longer project execution time but also creates tremendous physical and psychological fatigue.

In the end, although this project provided a great additional understanding of the execution of the medium and the genre and generated minor prestige for the illustrator and the studio (and, of course, became an important achievement for me as a project manager), it was not a commercially or critically successful project. Furthermore, the studio was unsuccessful in securing further state funding for the *Leičiai* series and was unable to complete the story. However, arguably the most important benefit from this project was the knowledge and skills gained through developing, implementing, and distributing a comic book of a historical genre. Furthermore, the experience gained by the dissertation author enabled her to recognise that a historical comic book project poses unique communication and management challenges. This experience became an important part of choosing which research project to implement during my doctoral journey.

Finally, the lessons learned and insights drawn were tested in another project produced by the dissertation author, which is presented in the next section.

3.1.2. "War Aviators": Repeating Mistakes and New Insights

War Aviators (Fig. 3.3) was the next (and, at the moment, last) historical comic book project of the dissertation author. It is important to note that there were other comic projects between this one and *Leičiai*. However, since they were not of the historical genre, they will not be further mentioned or analysed. As the illustrator jokingly noted, it took a few years to recover from the traumas of the last project of this genre and to approach new comic book genre projects with passion.

The key differences with this project from the get-go were the following:

- To have a realistic timetable for execution;
- To employ division of labour in the creative process. In other words, there should be separate artists for digital inking, colouring, and lettering;
- To prioritise narrative over visual art;
- To have the script before the start of the production;
- To better explain to historians that the fictional historical genre is not a documentary (or even academic work) and should not be perceived as one;

- To take into account and plan for the fact that historians will need time to prepare consultations. And that will stop production as a result.



Fig. 3.3. Graphic novel *War Aviators* (Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)

It is important to note that this project also received state support. However, due to the Ministry's operational constraints, the creative team had less time to produce comic projects than initially planned or desired. Again, the decision was made to take on the project (and work overtime) rather than to lose the funding. Notably, state support was secured at the onset of the global pandemic, a period when private sector commissions significantly decreased, leading to considerable financial uncertainty.

Unsurprisingly, this produced the same results as the last time. Significant overtime was required to finish on the given timetable (although, again, deadline postponement was required), resulting in arguably even worse physical and psychological fatigue (the pandemic and overall uncertainty over the future did not help either). It is worth noting that hiring an additional team helped alleviate the workload of the project's main illustrator. However, this also introduced new communication challenges that, due to a lack of previous experience, were difficult to manage. Additionally, even though the decision to avoid shortcuts and to

maintain the highest possible level of illustration quality was made, one can only speculate how the illustrations would have looked if there had been no fatigue.

Luckily, this time, historical consultations were managed much better. But, then again, this could result from fear of repeating previous experiences. In fact, one of the reasons this time the narrative was chosen to depict events in the early 20th century is that it has much better documented historical resources that are easily accessible online. Furthermore, the narrative set in the early 20th century provides a chance to get pictures of everyday life and events, people, or places referenced in the narrative. And that makes the life of illustrators much easier. Thus, when compared with the *Leičiai* project, where there was almost no reliable information that could be collected without historians specialising in a specific area, the 20th century was a real treat.

Thus, two scriptwriters (one with a higher education diploma in history) could conduct extensive research before handing the narrative for a historian's judgment. In any case, historians attached to this project provided timely consultations on aspects needed for the comic illustrator. And, importantly, there were only a few things that the initial research conducted by scriptwriters did not answer. Thus, questions for historians were surgical. This meant that responses also arrived significantly faster and did not hold up production.

Interestingly, just as in *Leičiai*, a situation arose where a historical fact was provided to the creative team about a vital inaccuracy after the comic pages were already finished. Due to the project timetable, it was not possible to correct this inaccuracy. Thus, a solution was concocted to provide information at the end of the comic book about historical aspects that are likely to be different from those portrayed in the comic. Gathered feedback shows that the comic's readers perceived this as a positive aspect.

As mentioned earlier, employing an assembly line approach to the creative process gave mixed results. Mainly because two positions were given to final-year bachelor-level students, although both students worked hard and enthusiastically, they were trying to gather all the needed skills and knowledge for their respective positions, the lack of professional experience meant that very attentive supervision was required, and a substantial amount of fixing from the main illustrator was necessary. In the end, the illustrator's opinion was that the candidacy for a less creatively challenging and more technical letterer's position worked out well for this project. This is related to the fact that the knowledge required to implement (digital) comic bubbles in a high-quality manner is acquired relatively quickly. Another important thing was that the illustrator had a clear vision of how he wanted to implement the textual information, so practically no creative decisions were required from the letterer. Therefore, it should be noted that, without supervision from an experienced senior illustrator or project manager who is not well-

versed in aesthetic and communication solutions in the comic medium, the results may very likely be significantly worse.

However, the candidacy for a more creatively demanding position of colourer was not very well suited for the project. This is because colouring in comics, while requiring technical skills, is a highly creative endeavour. In the context of this project, the illustrator provided several examples of how the pages should be done; however, the colourist's lack of experience was evident. It is necessary to emphasise once again that it would have been unreasonable to expect aesthetic decisions of particularly high value from a student without professional experience, but, looking at it from today's perspective, my illustrator's and my expectations were too high. In other words, only an experienced creator would be hired as a colourist for my new comic book project.

The post-mortem document had these insights that related to the communication and management of the project:

- Focusing on a higher-quality narrative worked. Most of the positive feedback comments are on the narrative rather than the art. Thus, no project should start or even be considered before the story is solid;
- The colourer must have solid experience in colour theory. Otherwise, it is an additional workload for the main illustrator to fix and correct every page.
- DO NOT agree again to work on the comic project if the timetable is not feasible (requires constant overtime to finish on time);
- Realistic work planning is 0.5 pages for pencilling and inking per day (excluding early layout), 2.5 for colouring, and 5 for lettering;
- A detailed explanation of what is desired of the historians has greatly helped them to contribute more effectively to the project. The polite mantra of "this is entertainment first" has been very helpful.

Finally, it is interesting to note that although the creative team is generally happy with the achieved results, the overall cost to finish this project will most likely result in a couple of years' gap before a new historical project is considered. In other words, although this project was much more successfully implemented in a communicative, creative, narrative, and managerial sense, it still required significant inner strength and health due to the challenges experienced. However, this project also provided a great opportunity to test the insights and knowledge gained from the "Leičiai" project. And while this project provided many new insights, perhaps the most critical finding I gained personally is that it confirmed that a historical comic book project has unique challenges that require specific preparation and communication skills.

3.2. Open-ended Questionnaire: Investigation into Spatial and Temporal Communication

The comic book medium holds its position firmly in the pantheon of most popular narrative-based entertainment forms today. In other words, in most parts of the world, a person is as likely to pick up a comic book to entertain themselves as to play a video game or watch a movie (and TV). Yet, the comic book medium's popularity was achieved despite it not using sound or being incapable of producing continuous action, which are substantial communicative limitations that, at first glance, should be a deal breaker for any entertainment form. Yet, the comic book medium not only managed to overcome these communicative limitations but even presented them as a creative advantage over other forms of entertainment. This situation requires more in-depth scholarly research to understand how this segment of the creative industries has successfully engaged its readers in the immersive experience.

It is essential to acknowledge that, although this doctoral dissertation identifies two significant communicative limitations of the comic book medium (in comparison to other popular narrative-based entertainment forms) during the literature review, only the element of the illusion of continuous action portraiture will be analysed further. In other words, the researcher will focus on the juxtaposed art form's ability to bridge the informational gap between two comic book panels by presenting to the reader a sequence of selected action moments.

To investigate the phenomenon that in itself encompasses such communication and narrative elements as exact action moment to portray, story pacing, dialogue, and overall imagery (background and character design, panel and page composition, style, gesture, etc.), the author of this dissertation chose to employ a qualitative research approach to gather insights about comic book readers' experiences. Thus, a decision was made to gather qualitative data through a comprehensive examination of how comic book readers perceive action after reading a particular comic book. The Lithuanian historical genre graphic novel *War Aviators* (2021) was chosen for this study.

It is necessary to address that responses were coded by the primary communicative dimension cued by the elements participants described in their answers: temporal (structuring sequence, duration, or pacing across panels), spatial (locating the source or clarifying relationships within panel/page space), and mixed (spatial-temporal) when both functions were integral to interpretation. This coding follows the study's interpretivist stance and draws on narrative theory (time construction), framing (salience and emphasis), semiotics (code–cue systems), closure (gap-bridging), and constructivism (reader-driven meaning-making). Coding used a primary function rule unless spatial and temporal cues jointly underpinned comprehension, in which case a mixed assignment was made.

When it comes to analysing data, open-ended questions always present additional challenges, as they require researchers to systematically search for patterns in respondents' answers that differ significantly in detail, quality, or the respondent's ability to understand the question's meaning clearly. However, allowing respondents to provide feedback in their own words can help researchers uncover opportunities and connections that otherwise could be overlooked. Thus, the open-ended data-collecting approach is very beneficial for researchers who aim to explore under-researched phenomena, as the method offers participants the freedom to express themselves fully, spontaneously, and freely, without being influenced by the researcher. And provide the foundation for future research inquiries.

The first question in the open-ended questionnaire asked participants: *"From memory, please chronologically describe in detail the story presented in the comics."* A total of 143 responses were collected. The vast majority of respondents provided answers ranging from 100 to 200 words, offering detailed descriptions of the events depicted in the two comic chapters. However, 15 responses consisted of three or fewer sentences and had limited analytical value.

Unfortunately, as often happens with exploratory research, the findings regarding the first (and, to some extent, the second) question were inconclusive. This is most likely due to a poorly chosen segment of the comic. The obtained data suggest that the presented excerpt of the graphic novel was too long to verify the phenomenon under consideration. Duncan and Smith (2009) mentioned that the subjects were provided with a comic containing only a few panels for the experiment in question. Sixteen pages of comics and only a short paragraph describing all the action presented in the comic book is insufficient communication-wise.

However, the collected data was still valuable, as it shed light on phenomena that are still under research. Among the respondents who provided more comprehensive feedback, there were noticeable patterns of including action that, while implied, was not portrayed in the comics. In other words, as Duncan and Smith (2009) claimed, respondents described the action in the comics by providing additional details and meaning. However, in those few cases, when the respondents clearly added additional details to the described action (for example, many respondents described in detail the characters' emotional state or actions that might have determined their reactions to situations presented in the comics' panels), it happened in segments of the comics that portrayed the biggest temporal gap between the two panels. This suggests that the act of producing new story content is most effective when there is a significant gap in information between two moments (i.e., panels) in the portrayed action. However, as already mentioned, the respondents' answers that confirm the existence of this aspect of closure account for less than ten per cent of the 143 submissions. Therefore, further experimentation with a more robust research design is necessary to provide conclusive and illuminating insights into the phenomenon.

Additionally, it is worth noting a noticeable pattern in the responses, where respondents would create meaning about comic book characters' inner emotional status and thoughts. Respondents often use words to describe characters' reactions to situations, such as "outraged", "dissatisfied", and "angry" (and a few other synonyms). As these specific words were not used in the dialogues, it suggests that these acts of closure are triggered by visual cues: various nonverbal gestures, postures, and facial expressions.

The second question in the open-ended questionnaire asked participants: "*Please name the protagonist's goal and why he pursued it*". A total of 142 responses were collected. One response was left blank, another indicated that the participant was unable to answer, and nine were deemed invalid due to respondents' misunderstanding of the term protagonist. As outlined in the methodology chapter, this question served as an instrumental manipulation check to ensure that participants had followed the instructions and read the comics. Once it was confirmed that all responses accurately reflected the main story points, a thematic analysis was undertaken to assess whether readers generated additional narrative content to bridge informational gaps between panels.

The third question asked: *"Please name the elements that stuck with you the most from the comics that you just read*." A total of 142 responses were collected, with one left blank. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify the visual and textual elements most frequently retained by participants and to explore how these elements functioned semiotically and narratively to construct meaning. Particular attention was given to how visual cues and textual components interacted to create closure, frame key narrative moments, and evoke emotional resonance in the reader.

Findings from the third question indicated that the elements of the comics that had the strongest emotional resonance for respondents were narrative moments with the most significant dramatic points. A few examples of the answers from respondents: "How the hero took down the ad and the protagonist's joy (the last panels) that he will soon rise to the clouds as he dreamed", "Perhaps a conversation with the general, the tension on the scene", "The first pages, where there was an advertisement, a conversation with the commander, and the plane 'touching scene' on the last page of the comic", and "The commander's doubts about allowing the young man to become part of the aviation platoon and the young man's emotions after receiving a negative response from the commander". 37% of the respondents named a scene where the protagonist is begging his commander to transfer to the air forces (Fig. 3.4 a), and 32% indicated that for them (Fig. 3.4 b), it was the final scene where the protagonist is gently touching the plane as the most memorable element from the experience or reading the comics. It is interesting to note that these numbers are remarkably high, considering the questionnaire uses open-ended questions. Furthermore, the questionnaire does not



(a) „Protagonist begging his commander“ (b) „Protagonist is gently touching the plane“

Fig. 3.4. Two scenes that respondents indicated as most memorable from the comics (Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)

ask for the scene to be specified from the comics. What it does is ask to identify what stands out from the reading experience.

Findings also indicated that over 11% of respondents expressed delight due to comic book characters' clearly understandable facial expressions. These findings were quite puzzling, as this outcome was not anticipated (i.e., as a concern for the readers).

The fourth question in the questionnaire asked: *"Name the year and location where the event illustrated in the comic took place"*. A total of 140 responses were collected, with three left blank. A thematic analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that a substantial portion of readers would disregard explicit geographical and temporal details when these elements are not perceived as integral to the narrative's core meaning (Fig. 3.5). This assumption aligns with closure theory, which suggests that readers selectively attend to and retain information that contributes directly to constructing narrative coherence, while omitting details they perceive as peripheral to their emotional or interpretive engagement with the story.

This hypothesis was fully confirmed: only six per cent of all respondents could correctly indicate the exact year and the names of two cities where the action occurred. It is worth noting that both cities featured in the comic book narrative are relatively large and rank among the country's top six largest cities. In other



Fig. 3.5. Panels with information about location and year
(Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)

words, one could not argue that the two city names presented in the comic book are fairly unknown to the Lithuanian reader. Yet, the readers' minds could not bother to remember them.

The final question in the questionnaire asked: *"Name the country from which the Lithuanian Air Force purchased combat planes."* A total of 135 responses were collected, with eight left blank. A thematic analysis was conducted to examine whether readers retain information more effectively when it is embedded contextually within the narrative rather than presented as an isolated, explicit fact. The results indicated that four out of five respondents correctly identified Germany as the source of the combat planes acquired by the newly formed Lithuanian Air Force. Notably, approximately one-quarter of these correct answers were accompanied by a question mark (e.g., "Germany?"), suggesting a degree of uncertainty in recall. This finding supports the premise rooted in closure and constructivist theories that when information is integrated into the story's emotional or thematic core, readers are more likely to retrieve it, even if their recall is accompanied by hesitation.

Finally, while these findings offer valuable insights into how readers bridge gaps, assign meaning, and emotionally engage with comics, several limitations must be noted within this study. The use of a single graphic novel excerpt and a sample limited to Lithuanian undergraduates constrains the generalisability of results.

Table 3.1. Questions in the questionnaire and connection to the spatial–temporal dimensions

Question	Coding dimension	Key indicator(s)	Result
Q1. Chronological recall of the story	Temporal	Add/produce action or meaning in the panel gaps (closure)	<10% of 143 responses clearly added new actions or details, concentrating where temporal gaps were largest.
Q2. Protagonist's goal (manipulation check)	– *(control)*	*Reading compliance*	*Not analysed for spatial/temporal coding.*
Q3. Elements that "stuck with you"	Mixed (spatial affect and temporal aspects in tandem with narrative elements)	Dramatically intense scenes; nonverbal cues (faces/gestures), emotional indications	37% named the commander-appeal scene; 32% named the final plane-touch scene
Q4. Year and location	Temporal + Spatial (explicit facts)	Correct recall of year (temporal) and two cities (spatial)	Low retention of peripheral explicit facts
Q5. Country of aircraft purchase	Mixed (contextual inference with spatial referent)	Contextually embedded geopolitical origin	~80% correctly answered Germany

Analysis through spatial–temporal communicative dimensions (Table 3.1) suggests that dramatic peak moments in the narrative function as mixed cues: readers anchor to spatially legible affect while updating the temporal model of events. This is consistent with framing (salience of high-stakes beats), semiotics (stable visual codes for emotion), and closure/constructivism (gap-bridging and prior-knowledge infusion). By contrast, explicit time–place labels (fourth question) show low retention when not narratively central, aligning with cognitive load expectations: peripheral facts are filtered out. Conversely, contextually embedded information (fifth question) is retrieved at high rates, indicating that when spatial referents are woven into the plot's thematic core, readers integrate and recall them more readily. Open-ended responses, while rich in detail, are also subject to variability in interpretation and the effort required from respondents. The results align with closure, semiotics, framing, and constructivist theories, yet the study's scope did not allow for in-depth testing of any single framework. Future research should

examine a broader range of comic genres, cultural contexts, and reader demographics to determine whether these patterns hold across different narrative styles and audiences.

3.3. *The Amazing Spider-Man* Case Study Investigation Into Aural Communication

The comic medium is exclusively a visually-based art form. Thus, unlike other popular culture products, comics cannot use audio-enhanced dialogue, voiceover, sound effects, or music tracks to enrich the user experience. Therefore, this non-auditory art form was compelled to devise visually based communicative solutions that allowed the reader to experience sound elements in the graphic (i.e., silent) form necessary for understanding the story presented in the comics. In other words, the medium's inability to produce sound did not diminish its need for and importance of telling compelling stories. Thus, this section presents findings about how comic book creators have tackled the challenges of portraying various qualities of sound.

The relationship between text and images in comics is essential for a comic book reader to understand the narrative (Igareda, 2017; Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1994, 2006; Carrier, 2000; Abel, 2008). Therefore, sound, as expressed in comics, is always an essential part of any analysis, review, or educational process. Thus, it cannot be claimed that the visual expression of sound in comics is an under-researched topic. Quite the opposite, the phenomenon of sound in visual form attracts researchers from other fields, particularly literature, semiotics, and aesthetics. However, how does this art form (in which visual elements play a major role in conveying various aspects of sound) evolve? How long did refining some solutions as effective and others as inept take? The researcher addresses these questions by examining over 800 issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018) comic books.

The performed analysis of the case study demonstrated how innovative graphic solutions were gradually applied in the US comics industry, which allowed the communication of additional meanings to the ones presented in the text. The case study revealed how experimental the first steps were and how much guessing was involved. Thus, there is an enormous qualitative difference in presenting various sound qualities in visual expression between the first and last issues.

After reviewing 801 issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018), 268 unique communicative solutions were identified. After additional review and discussion, 83 entries were removed because they were only minor updates to existing communicative solutions, rather than new approaches to presenting written information in the comics medium. The final catalogue consists of 51 entries of captions, 75 speech (and thought) balloons, and 59 sound effects.

In this study, the unit of analysis was each distinct communicative solution used to visually depict sound, including captions, speech balloons (including thought balloons), and sound effects. During this investigation, an attempt was made to identify and collect creative and communicative solutions that were used for the first time in the comic book series. In other words, this investigation was in search of (new) solutions that represented a significant variation or innovation in form, style, or communicative function. Analysis followed a directed qualitative content analysis approach, with each instance recorded by year, issue, page, description, and contextual function. Evolution was tracked primarily by publication year to identify when innovations appeared, how they replaced or modified earlier conventions, and whether they became recurring features. Consistency in coding was ensured through iterative review and cross-checking against the initial framework.

This project is a single-case, longitudinal, exploratory–descriptive, instrumental case study: exploratory in mapping visual practices, descriptive in documenting their forms, and instrumental in using *The Amazing Spider-Man* to investigate how sound is visualised in mainstream comics. The author of this doctoral dissertation combined document analysis (systematic skimming, close reading, memoing, and extraction of instances) with directed qualitative content analysis and comparative historical analysis to track change over time. The unit of analysis was each distinct communicative solution (caption, speech/thought balloon, and sound effect) in context; each instance was catalogued by year, issue, page, formal description, and communicative function. Evolution was indexed by publication year, noting first appearance, recurrence, modification, and replacement of earlier conventions.

It is necessary to note that technological advancements in the printing process played a significant role in the innovative presentation of sound in the visual medium. Especially the digitalisation process provided artists with vast new creative approaches that were unimaginable just decades before. Thus, when analysing the evolution of text presentation in comics, one must consider the role of technological advancement. This approach allowed the study to separate stylistic innovation arising from creative choice from that enabled – or constrained – by technological capability.

Interestingly, in the first decade of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, there was great experimentation. As an expected outcome of the experimentation process, many solutions proved ineffective in terms of communication. For example, there are a significant number of experiments with colour in the early issues of the Spider-Man comics. However, the colours are used without any evident communicative purpose – the chosen colours used to fill the background of the captions and speech (and thought) balloons are there only to be used as a spectacle for the reader (Fig. 3.6). It is evident, that in the sixties the understanding how the colour can be employed to produce additional meaning to the textual representation of sound is not yet gathered.



Fig. 3.6. Early experimentation with colour in speech and thought balloons in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018) comic books (Source: compiled by the author)

Captions are another element that was significantly experimented with in the early issues of the Marvel superhero comics. Various shapes, colours and fonts are employed to find the best way to produce satisfying experiences (while providing the necessary information needed to understand the story) for the reader (Fig. 3.7). It is interesting to note that while some of the experiments later evolved and became an integral part of *the Spider-Man* comic book series, the others were just single-shot ventures. However, it is evident that in creative artists' hands, this communication tool can take any shape or form to transmit the most diverse information.

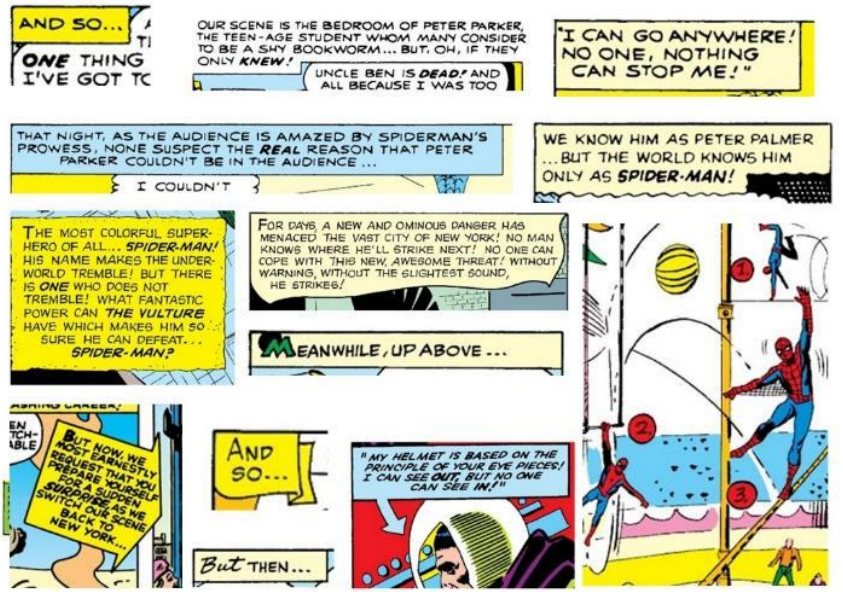

Fig. 3.7. Early experimentation with captions in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018) comic books (Source: compiled by the author)

Special mention should be made about how captions were used to end the comic book story in every issue. There is an extreme variety of shapes, colours, fonts, and even phrases (i.e., "The end", "End", "Finis", "To be continued", "More next issue!", "Next: (...)", "Nuff said!", "And you'll regret it if you miss next issue!", etc.) used to finish the story in each comic book. This suggests that there were internal motivations to experiment with this particular caption continuously rather than to find the best version to communicate the end of the narrative in the comic book.

The investigation into Spider-Man comics revealed that in later years (around the 80s), the captions underwent a significant transformation. First, captions slowly but irreversibly become the dominant form to present the character's thoughts. However, this process was very lengthy, as the artist had to overcome numerous communicative challenges that arose from this transition. Secondly, captions – as a means to provide exposition and various data about location or time – dropped the box (surrounding frame) and became just text floating on the page. However, and it must be emphasised, the latter change happened precisely because captions became a platform for presenting the characters' inner thoughts (Fig. 3.8).

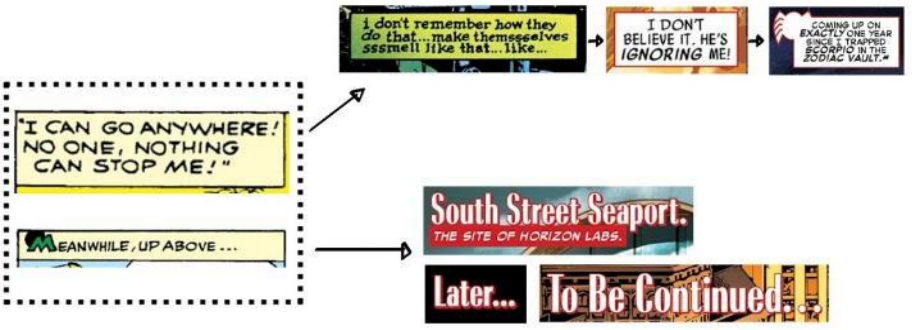

Fig. 3.8. Evolution of captions in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018) comic books (Source: compiled by the author)

It is very interesting to note that while the idea to present characters' thoughts through captions was first used in the very first issues, it took more than twenty years for an issue (#229) to come out where, though balloons would be wholly absent, all thoughts would be presented through captions. However, it will take another ten years to reach a point where captions will become the dominant form for characters' thoughts. And even from that point, the thought balloons will sparsely return to *The Amazing Spider-Man*. This suggests that even though captions provide a much better (from a communication and aesthetic point of view) vehicle to present thought on comic book pages, it is really hard to break the habit

of using thought bubbles, especially when they have done their job perfectly (at least according to the artist) for years.

Comic book artists really struggled at first with how best to use captions when there was a need to present more than one character's thoughts. After all, the thought balloons had one great advantage – the balloon's tale could clearly indicate who was thinking what. Of course, this challenge was overcome in the latter issues by giving captions a colour indication and, later on, a recognisable icon at the start of the thought sequences (Fig. 3.9). However, it is necessary to emphasise that it took time to tame the captions-as-thoughts delivery system. On the other hand, once the caption system was perfected, it became an extremely clear and aesthetically pleasing way to deliver various types of textual information.



Fig. 3.9. Evolution of speech balloons in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018) comic books (Source: compiled by the author)

However, another critical element that the author of this doctoral dissertation noticed while conducting this case study was that there were substantial shifts in mindsets during the 800 issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* run. During the first 300 issues, comic book artists heavily relied on thought balloons to explain what and why characters were doing. This suggests that in the early days of American comic books, comics were treated more as illustrated text rather than a new medium that aimed to use illustration and text in harmony to produce something more than the sum of their parts. Plus, it is very likely that because comics were considered a juvenile entertainment form at that time, the authors of the comic books felt the need to be very clear about what was happening story-wise. However, this trend eventually died off.

Experimentation with speech balloons had a slow start. As mentioned before, shapes and (mainly) colour were often employed only as a spectacle element that did not add anything to the story. Quite the opposite – it often resulted in creating visual noise on a page that was already suffering from oversaturation. Still, once the comic book artist understood how balloon shapes, colours and fonts could be

applied to suggest various vocal inflexions, the results became very intriguing (Fig. 3.9). In this case, it is necessary to note that technical advancement played a significant part in the innovative ways speech can be presented in the comics medium. With better printing possibilities, the artist could put more details and nuances into the speech balloons. But with the digitalisation process, artists can now employ various shapes, colours, and fonts that previously were too time-consuming or even impossible. Thus, in many cases, the innovative ways of presenting speech in comics were directly linked with technical possibilities.

However, speech balloons in comic book art forms do not always try to provide phonomime expressions of the sounds. In several instances, *The Amazing Spider-Man* comics employed unique visual representations of sounds, requiring readers' imagination to enhance the experience. For example, adding pink hearts to the balloon indicated that the person speaking was in love with the other character. Or blurring the text and, in such a way, suggesting that the character is passing out and having trouble understanding the speech of another character. Adding tiny bubbles to the speech balloon indicates that the character speaks while drunk. There are plenty of other examples that create unique reader experiences. Thus, illustrating how this form can uniquely approach the experience of sound.

Another comic art form experience often found in comics (and thus needs to be addressed) is speech censorship. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* series, this censorship is executed in two ways: (i) by replacing curse words with random symbols (i.e., *grawlix*) or (ii) by covering the words by blacking them out with heavy, imperfect lines (i.e., redaction). While speech censorship is not unique to comics (it is done in audiovisual media as well), the need to censor profanity in comics where violence is presented in such extreme ways presents a very peculiar value system in American comics.

Sound effects (Fig. 3.10) in the comics medium are a phonemic experience that quickly became almost a separate art form in the comic book medium. There are numerous ways for comic book artists to express sound and, in turn, enhance the reader's experience. However, the authors of this article have noticed two aspects of sound effects that signified a qualitative change in how they were expressed in *The Amazing Spider-Man* series. The first change happened with the digitalisation process in the comic book industry: suddenly, comic book artists had opportunities to fine-tune every sound effect. The results were truly incredible from a communicative and aesthetic point of view.

The second qualitative change did not happen as suddenly as with the digitalisation process, but it was evident when going through all 801 issues: the change in comic creators' mindset. As with the overuse of speech and thought balloons in the early issues, sound effects were exaggerated. In other words, every single action required a sound effect. However, with time, sound effects in *The Amazing Spider-Man* series become much rarer and are used only to emphasise particular actions and not to illustrate them with sound attributes.



Fig. 3.10. Evolution of sound effects in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–2018) comic books (Source: compiled by the author)

Furthermore, once sound effects ceased to be perceived as auxiliary tools, comics creators began to use them innovatively and sometimes, realising their importance to storytelling, employed them as the most critical elements in the panel. Furthermore, in some cases, it could be even argued that sound effects become the most critical aesthetic decision on the page.

Finally, it is necessary to address this study's limitations. *The Amazing Spider-Man* series is a great case study of how the American mainstream superhero genre developed over fifty years. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these series represent absolutely all successful communicative solutions implemented in the US comics industry.

3.4. Conclusions of the Third Chapter

1. An autoethnographic investigation revealed that comic book projects that aim (to a degree) to accurately present the past produce additional challenges. While working with historical consultants provides additional educational value, it also invokes additional communicative and management challenges. Furthermore, findings strongly suggest that historians often struggle to fuse historical value with entertainment elements. In other words, these professionals would struggle to understand that comic book projects should first be entertaining for the target audience, with educational value secondary. Thus, for the project manager (and cartoonists), it is necessary to approach cooperation with professional historians with clarity (i.e., what is the project's goal and what is the role of the consultants).
2. Findings from the questionnaire suggest that the most memorable and impactful experiences for comic book readers are the dramatic story moments that mirror conflicts in their own lives. Other findings indicate that readers will not absorb explicit information unless it is judged vital to the overall reading experience. They also suggest the opposite, that the act of closure allows the readers to observe the parts but perceive the whole. Findings also suggest that comic book readers value clarity in the comic book medium.
3. The "Amazing Spider-Man" case study shows that it took extensive experimentation to develop communicative tools that enable the production of vast aural experiences in a soundless medium. Furthermore, the case study showcased that many early solutions were ineffective communication-wise. In addition, it was noticed that speech balloons in comic book art forms do not always try to provide phonomime expressions of the

sounds. In other words, cartoonists would produce unique visual representations of sounds that required readers' imagination to fulfil the experience. Lastly, sound effects quickly became almost a separate art form in the comic book medium that (eventually) was used as one of the most critical elements in the panel.

4

Comics' Ability to Engage Readers

The comic book medium is a unique artistic form that, through exclusively visual means, can create an engaging experience for the reader. Furthermore, comics can create the illusion of action and sound without the means to produce either. Yet action segments with dialogues and sound effects are integral parts of the comic book experience. However, the most spectacular achievement of this medium is its ability to stimulate readers to engage with the story and produce meaning actively.

This chapter presents the analysis and evaluation of the collected data. Scientific articles have been published on the topic of this chapter (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė 2021, 2023; Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė & Mitkus, 2024).

4.1. Working with Historians on a Creative Project

The tests of historical genre and comic book medium have a great synergy. In the United States, quasi-historical comics often transported readers to the Western period and, later, to the settings of both World Wars. A similar situation is in Japan, where comics regularly portray the samurai era, and in France, where cartoonists often depict plots that are set as far back as Roman times. In other words, the comic medium has successfully transported its readers to the past all around

the globe from the very start of this artistic expression. However, addressing the challenges of depicting historical settings in popular culture products is necessary. Mainly because when it comes to depicting history in entertainment-based works, there is an interval between complete fantasy and factually based documentaries at their extremes, with many divisions between them (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998).

Historical comics, as opposed to any other genre, can always claim that they can also be used as a casual learning tool in addition to entertainment value. Pustz (2012) argued that fictional historical work (that primarily aims to entertain and not educate) can be a great additional tool for teaching history, given that the teacher can help identify fictional and historical elements. Such works are primarily useful because of their ability to illustrate that life in the past was considerably different. Furthermore, even old historical comics can greatly help as a casual learning tool.

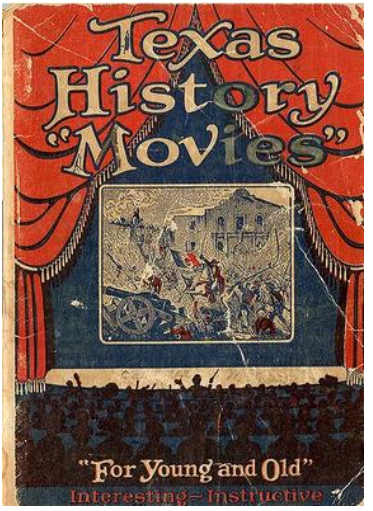

Fig. 4.1. *Texas History "Movies"* (Source: Rosenfield & Patton, 1928)

In this regard, an interesting example is *Texas History "Movies"*, published from 1926 to 1928, and later used in schools as textbooks (Fig. 4.1). It must be noted that comic series presented a dominant historical narrative of the time, "with the Anglo Americans as the real Texans and with other ethnic groups (Native Americans and Mexican Americans) as historical enemies of counter-images to the Anglo American" (Magnussen, 2016:99). Thus, although, at the time most Texans believe that it is an accurate representation of history, today it would be extremely unethical to be presented as such. However, as Magnussen (2016) argued, with the teacher's help, *Texas History "Movies"* can be used as a historical

source to contribute knowledge about historical context. And in this particular case, how Texas history was understood in the 1920s.

Thus, the historical genre, with the guidance of a professional pedagogue, has various interesting applications to help develop the ability of historical thinking. In other words, the comics medium is an effective tool to re-elaborate and renegotiate the meanings of the studied concepts (Weber et al., 2013). This general notion that comics can be an effective secondary pedagogical tool is supported by many studies (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Tatalovic, 2009; Araya et al., 2021). Lastly, Magnussen (2016) argued that the comics medium, through its specific characteristics, makes it possible for the reader to relate to the comics characters in ways that fundamentally differ from conventional historical textbooks.

Thus, the possibility of claiming that one's artwork can be used as a casual learning tool can do wonders when one is applying for state support. That is why the historical genre is always popular among various artistic media expressions when applying for Lithuanian state support. However, one cannot just claim to produce artwork of a historical genre without backing it with evidence. As Pustz (2012) argues, there is a certain risk when entertainment works claim historical representation when, in fact, the work is flawed or inaccurate. Especially when that artwork could be used as a casual learning tool. Thus, it is necessary to address the difference between quasi-historical (or historical fantasy) and historical fiction works. Although quasi-historical artwork can be heavily influenced by aspects of the past, it does not claim to be trustworthy in terms of the historical accuracy of events, causes or outcomes. Historical genre, although still fictional, claims that artwork portrays realistic detail and fidelity for the time period (Britannica, 2021). Therefore, the label of historical genre should not be assigned frivolously. And as Vadillo (2010:157) said, "History is a conceptual construct that can be used or abused depending on the comic book creator".

However, working with historians on a creative fictional project whose primary purpose is to entertain (and, in turn, generate income for the creators) could be extremely challenging because it requires effective cooperation between two very different perceptions. Thus, unsurprisingly, Getz (2019) noted that "many graphic histories suffer from a deficiency either as comics or as histories". Furthermore, the cooperation between historians and cartoonists could end up being quite unpleasant and, in the worst-case scenario, could lead both sides to a disappointing evaluation of the produced historical comic. Thus, reaching a conclusion that these two different worlds simply cannot find common ground and, thus, avoid such cooperation in the future.

It is important to state that although the author's personal experience with a consulting historian in the *Leičiai* case was far from perfect, it did not negatively affect the researcher's future willingness to work with them. In fact, the comic book project's illustrator still has a warm relationship with all of them, even though the experience was highly stressful. On the other hand, it took years to

recover from that experience before starting another comic project of the historical genre, only because the studio's illustrator is very fond of the genre. Thus, the first experience undoubtedly affected a further approach to working with historians. However, one cannot claim that the same outcome would be for all creators or that they would have similar experiences.

However, if it all comes to the question "Is this type of cooperation necessary to produce high-quality historical artwork?", the answer is unequivocally yes, based on the author's experience gathered by producing two comic book projects. But the much more important question is "How can that type of cooperation be executed in order to achieve the best results?". For this, the author suggests the following rules:

1. At the very start of the collaboration with historians, it must be emphasised that the purpose of the artwork is to entertain and not to educate or enlighten. It is highly recommended to indicate immediately which elements cannot change due to narrative aspects and which are desirable to be as historically precise and accurate as possible.
2. Historians should always approve narrative-based artwork at the script level before investing in its production. Screenwriters, even if they look responsibly at historical research, cannot compare in their understanding of the past to a professional historian. Thus, scriptwriters can inadvertently give tremendous dramatic importance to historically inaccurate aspects. If these inaccuracies are caught at the narrative level, it is much easier to correct them than in production.
3. The work schedule and creative process must anticipate and adapt to temporary stops while historical information is being collected. Furthermore, it is always necessary to plan for the emergence of new historical information that may fundamentally change certain aspects of the artwork. It is naive to expect that the project's implementation will be completed according to an optimistic schedule.
4. If historical inaccuracies are caught in artwork during production but cannot be corrected, one should not be afraid to admit them formally.

However, if these rules cannot be obeyed for some reason, there is one final and important recommendation: abandon the claim of the historical genre. There is no shame in revisiting past settings and having fun with them by asking "What if?". Unfortunately, there is simply no middle ground. In the digital age, with ever-increasing access to information, false claims of historical accuracy could be damaging to one's prestige.

Finally, it is necessary to address how this autoethnographic investigation fits with previously explored communication theories. I will start with semiotics theory, as it can explain the conflict perceptions between entertainers (in this case,

comic book creators) and scientists (i.e., historians). As the insights from this investigation suggest, there are conflicting values regarding how to define a successful historical genre comic book between the aforementioned groups. When producing the *Leičiai* comic book, failure to communicate with consulting historians that the target audience values entertainment much more than historical fidelity led not only to a stressful work environment but also to unsatisfactory commercial results. Furthermore, it is necessary to point out that in the *Leičiai* project, time and other resources were invested in extremely high accuracy of various details that, in the end, readers could not decode and, thus, appreciate. Furthermore, pages were often cramped with text that provided historical exposition that not only considerably slowed down reading pacing but also produced aesthetic challenges. Interestingly, Getz (2016) identified that it is a common problem when historians lead the comic book project: the results are often "graphic histories with cramped, text-crowded panels and pages because we [historians] lack the skills to let the images do the work".

The other two important communication theories – narrative and closure – strongly overlap in this investigation. However, both of these theories can be employed to explain why readers fail to fully engage with the narrative in particular and with comic series in general. Of course, it is important to address the statement that the comic book illustrator still had limited experience with the medium (especially with the *Leičiai* project). This suggests that to create narrative coherence and emotional engagement with the comic book reader, one needs a strong understanding of how to achieve closure through a cohesive, flowing narrative that fully utilises symbolic communication.

4.2. Insights into Closure in Comic Book Reading and Reader Engagement

The aim of this empirical experiment was to explore the phenomenon of closure in the comic book medium. Or to be more precise, to identify if comic book readers produce additional details and meaning to the story due to the juxtapositional presentation of the narrative. While the findings were inconclusive of the primary question, the gathered data strongly suggest that certain moments in the comic book have a substantial emotional impact on the readers. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the complex ways in which readers engage with narratives presented in comic book art form.

However, in the context of this dissertation, it is necessary to emphasise that the first task of this study has not been empirically confirmed. Thus, while it was a major driving force for the study, it requires further investigation. Once again, it is necessary to address the challenges of open-ended questions, which, while

providing rich data, always produce difficulties in identifying patterns and drawing clear conclusions. Furthermore, flawed questionnaire design (due to question wording or visual representation) may lead to information of little or no benefit (Reja et al., 2003; Couper, 2001; Reips, 2000).

However, the open-ended data-collecting approach is very beneficial for researchers who aim to explore under-researched phenomena, as the method offers participants the freedom to express themselves fully, spontaneously, and express an opinion without being influenced by the researcher (Reja et al., 2003; Foddy, 1993). And, as it was in this particular case, collected data led to interesting discoveries regarding comic book readers' engagement in the story, embracement of the main character, and processes by which the value of factual information is determined.

It is necessary to note that while Duncan and Smith (2009) claimed that comic book readers tend to add additional meaning and story details, this cannot be confirmed with certainty. However, findings suggest that this phenomenon exists to some extent: respondents clearly added additional details to the described action in segments of the comics that portrayed the biggest temporal gap between the two panels. This suggests that the act of producing new story content works most strongly when there is a significant lack of information between two moments (i.e., panels) in the portrayed action. However, the respondents' answers confirming this aspect of closure are less than ten per cent out of 143 submissions. Thus, additional experimentation with a better-constructed research design is necessary to provide conclusive and illuminating insights into the phenomenon.

Findings from the third question provided a few insights. Findings showed that respondents had a strong emotional response to two scenes. However, before discussing the findings, it is vital to address that in the context of this study, an emotional response refers to the comic book reader's cognitive and affective reaction to a specific aesthetic or narrative cue found in the comics. In other words, the author of this dissertation measures emotional response by the degree to which mentioned cues are remembered, described in detail, and associated with the character's internal states. Furthermore, these reactions may manifest as empathy toward the protagonist, recognition of the character's emotional condition, or a sense of personal connection to the depicted events. Lastly, the definition used here is not limited to every emotional expression by the reader but includes inferred engagement, where readers articulate the significance of a moment in terms of the protagonist's perspective or emotional journey. Thus, in line with Duncan and Smith's (2009) framework, emotional response in this research is understood as the outcome of the reader's interpretive process, in which meaning is constructed through the integration of visual and textual information that triggers affective identification with the narrative moment.

It is interesting to note that both singled out scenes are among the narrative points with the strongest drama. The literature review suggests that these moments

were selected because the participants could identify themselves with the nature of the conflict and emotional experience. In other words, for the participants, the act of closure was achieved by infusing personal experiences from their lives. And in return, the act of juxtapositional closure created a much more immersive and impactful experience. This finding supports notions presented in the work of McCloud (1993) and Duncan and Smith (2009), who argued that comics invite readers to emotionally invest in the characters' experiences through visual and narrative cues.

In addition, it is worth noting that respondents often described why the scene that they chose to write about in the feedback was important. However, and this is vital to note, not why it is important to them (i.e., the reader), but for the protagonist. For example, one respondent wrote, "<…> the final scene in which the protagonist stands in front of his final goal and feels freedom and fulfilment", while another respondent stated that "<…> the last scene, where the character can now reach the sky, as it belongs to him now". The structure of the answers suggests that the strongest resonating elements of a graphic novel are those that make it easy to identify with the protagonist's emotional state. Thus, the fact that most respondents chose to identify a specific scene or even panel suggests that visual cues that help the readers decode the emotional state of the character play a very important role for the reader.

Additionally, a noticeable pattern in the responses suggests that respondents would create meaning about comic book characters' inner emotional status and thoughts. Furthermore, how the respondents described the plot suggests that acts of closure often were triggered by visual cues – various nonverbal gestures, postures, and facial expressions. These patterns coincide with insights voiced by McCloud (2006), Duncan (2000), and Eisner (1985).

One unexpected finding was the frequency with which respondents highlighted the clarity of the character's facial expressions and how this positively influenced and enhanced their reading experience. Of course, in the literature review, the importance of the artist being able to provide clear visual indications regarding the emotional status and inner thoughts of the character was identified. Furthermore, Medley (2010) and McCloud (2006) argued that the level of abstraction and exaggeration in comics not only helps with communication but often conveys a more robust and longer-lasting message than realistic depictions. Thus, this communicative condition was understood as a default and not as exceptional to the reading experience. Yet such participants' statements as "emotions visible on the face invoke empathy to the character" suggest that it is not the visual execution of facial expressions that invoked a pleasant experience for the readers, but the rarely experienced ability to clearly understand various characters' actions (i.e., motivations, fears, desires, and personal values). In other words, the respondents' enjoyment of the comic book characters' expressions is more closely tied to their

personal experience with the medium than to the comic's exceptional communicative implementation. In other words, this insight suggests that readers may not be accustomed to such communicative transparency in character emotion within comics. When it occurs, it enhances their empathetic engagement with the story. However, without additional data, it is only speculation. Lastly, this highlights the importance of visual cues in the medium in order to facilitate emotional closure.

The fourth question fully confirms the hypothesis that a large part of the readers would ignore explicit information about the geographical and temporal settings of the narrative, as it is not vital (from the reader's point of view) for the overall experience. Furthermore, one respondent stated, "Nobody cares about dates in comics". While the other respondent confidently claimed, "The year was not written". Interestingly, these findings indirectly support McCloud's (1993), Carleton's (2014), and Duncan and Smith's (2009) notion that the comic book medium requires active participation from the reader to construct meaning from juxtapositional information. In other words, the information itself was deemed meaningless (and, in turn, forgettable) because readers could not immediately discern any tangible value from the explicit details about the geographical location and timeframe of the events depicted in the comics.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the findings derived from this question. While the question examines how readers retain explicit information presented in the comic book, it does not account for participants' general ability to retain explicit information. In other words, the study lacks a pre-test baseline that would allow for a meaningful comparison between participants' general retention skills and their retention of information from the comic. Consequently, the insights gained from this question should be interpreted only in a broad, indicative sense rather than as definitive measures of information retention.



Fig. 4.2. Comic book panel that indicated where planes were bought (Source: Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021)

The last question overwhelmingly supports the notion that when information in the comics is presented contextually (i.e., as important for the overall story), the reader will be able to deduce the right conclusion. Furthermore, readers are much better able to understand and retain it (Fig. 4.2), which again supports the phenomenon of closure in the comic book medium. In other words, comic book readers' ability to observe the parts but perceive the whole. However, this is only fulfilled if the perceived juxtapositioned information is vital to the overall experience. In this particular case, because contextual information was presented as part of the narrative's core meaning (e.g., the protagonist's relationship to the planes), the readers were able to absorb and retain information.

In closing, it is necessary to note that the focus of the experiment was to empirically test whether Duncan and Smith's (2009) statement that readers tend to provide additional details and meaning to the story presented in a juxtapositional medium is factual. On this account, the study could not provide conclusive results due to a flawed research design. However, findings still succeeded in providing new insights into the phenomenon of closure. Furthermore, the experiment provided insights into how comic book readers approach various types of visual information presented in a juxtapositional storytelling format.

4.3. Development of Visual Representation of Sound in American Comics

The Amazing Spider-Man comic book series came two decades after the birth of the American comic book industry. In other words, before the very first issue of the *Spider-Man* comic book hit the shelf, comics, as an independent medium, already had two decades to experiment with how best to present a compelling story in comic book form. Thus, it was interesting to observe that at that point, comic book artists were still heavily experimenting to find the best way to present sound in an utterly soundless medium. Furthermore, this case study highlights the extensive experimentation required to develop communicative solutions that may seem elementary today.

It is essential to address that not every text in comics represents sound. An argument could be made that captions, unless they present the character's thoughts or narrator's voice, are not truly a "speech". In other words, even in the movies, when information about location or time is presented, it is not voiced out loud. Furthermore, Eisner (1985) argued that "thought balloon (…) is… unspoken speech!". In other words, we *read* other people's minds, not *hear* them. Thus, should text in comics automatically be perceived as sound? Well, in the opinion of the authors of this article – *yeah, sort of.*

Comics are a soundless medium. While there are scholarly debates that challenge the premise that comics are an exclusively visual medium (Hague, 2014), the author of this doctoral dissertation holds the position that comic formats that include additional sensory elements (e.g., sound, motion, or depth) should be studied as separate (or different) experience and, thus, perceived as a "hybrid media" (Smith, 2012; Morton, 2015). Thus, when the reader experiences comics, he or she provides meaning to every text and image. Thus, every text is attributed with context, as sound is. This means that the creators of the comic do not seek to create a sound-resembling experience but simply to communicate additional meanings, as sound would do. For example, when a person suddenly starts speaking loudly or whispering, it is not the change of volume that is of interest, but what this change communicates about the person, their emotional state, and their reaction to the events. Thus, all text in comics should be perceived as sound, as all (non-diegetic) text can provide additional meaning and, in turn, an immersive experience.

The case study revealed how long it took for comic creators to master communicating the desired meanings through text fully effectively. And how crucial technological innovation was for this process. Of course, it does not mean that searching for new (and better) ways to communicate the auditory experience in the comics medium is over. Rather, the opposite: this case study demonstrates how important it is for the comic medium's development that creators would not be afraid to experiment and look for new communicative solutions. Furthermore, it should be widely accepted that experimentation often leads to failure before satisfactory results are achieved. And, as the case study shows, even when creative solutions that are convenient in terms of communication and aesthetics are found, it may take time for them to take effect.

As it was stated in the First Chapter of this doctoral dissertation, all empirical investigations do not seek to expand understanding of one particular communication theory, but to study how they work in synergy to produce meaningful experience for the reader. From a framing-theory perspective, the gradual refinement of captions, speech balloons, and sound effects in *The Amazing Spider-Man* illustrates how creators increasingly learned to emphasise specific narrative elements to guide readers' interpretation more strategically. Early reliance on redundant textual (verbal) explanations to the reader indicates a framing approach that, above all, prioritised clarity over subtlety, often at the expense of visual storytelling. As the series matured, artists shifted towards more integrated visual-verbal framing, where textual elements were no longer explanatory crutches in panels but active communicative agents that helped shape narrative emphasis, emotional tone, and thematic focus.

The evolution observed in the case study also aligns strongly with semiotics and closure theory. The replacement of thought balloons with captions, for example, can be interpreted as a semiotic refinement: captions function as signs that

allow more flexible interplay between text and image, enabling readers to infer internal states without the visual "bubble" tethered to a character's head. Furthermore, captions provided new visual tools to add new meanings to the character and his emotional state while communicating to the reader his inner thoughts. This shift increased opportunities for closure, as readers were required to bridge the gap between the visual cues in the panel and the more abstract, untethered textual voice.

These developments indicated a change in the mindsets of the creators as the new compositional decisions signalled trust in the audience's interpretive competence – a principle consistent with constructivism, where meaning is co-created by the reader based on prior experience and contextual cues. Interestingly, these insights about the change in the comic book creators' mindset provided a better understanding of why Eisner (1985) had such a distaste for the overuse of textual information and why McCloud (2006) remarked that comic book artists of the past used words to explain what was happening in the comics to the point of redundancy – early American comic books were frustratingly disharmonious with its usage of textual information (Fig. 4.3). And it negatively affects the overall comic book experience. Because, as Carrier (2000) and Eisner (1985) argued, written words should not be employed to tell a story when it could be communicated by visual means alone.

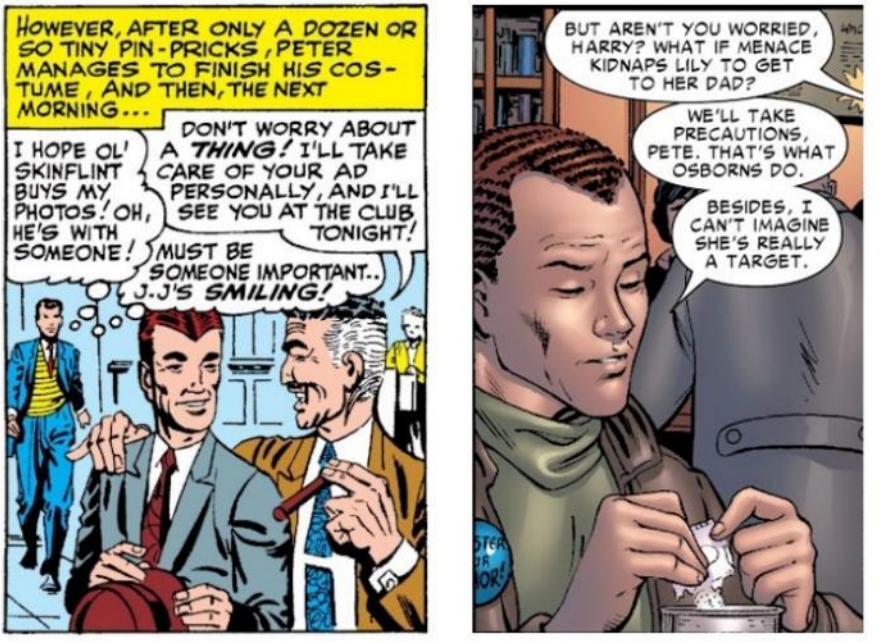

Fig. 4.3. Evolution of the use of textual information in one panel
(Source: compiled by the author)

And, as mentioned before, once the mindset changes, the artist can start to approach captions, speech balloons, and sound effects not as a means to ensure that the story is understood but as an integral part of visual storytelling. It would be an understatement to say that towards the end of the series, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, some of the most aesthetically pleasing and emotionally resonating panels were provided that thoroughly used text-based information to tell the story better. In other words, it took time, but once the understanding of how best to tell the story in the comics medium was achieved, a truly masterful artwork could be produced.

Finally, the case study provided a valuable understanding of how speech balloons, captions, and sound effects evolved over time. Especially fascinating is the process of thought balloon transformation into captions. It was evident that the comic book artists understood early how thoughts presented in captions provided better communicative and aesthetic tools to present a story in a format that shows only one moment at a time. However, the struggle to clearly connect characters with their thoughts was also very evident. Thus, even the most apparent solutions need time and courage to come into existence.

In addition, this longitudinal investigation of *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic book series is meaningful not only for understanding the evolution of sound depiction in mainstream American comic series, but also for providing theoretical and practical insights for the development of comics in the Lithuanian context (historical and otherwise). By identifying long-term trends, creative breakthroughs, and the gradual communicative and aesthetic innovations, this study offers transferable new knowledge to local comic book practitioners and scholars. Furthermore, the American experience – marked by decades of experimentation, technological adaptation, and shifts in audience expectations – can serve as both inspiration and cautionary reference for Lithuanian creators, educators, and publishers seeking to expand the local comics medium. Therefore, this investigation contributes to a broader understanding of how communicative and aesthetic solutions evolve and how such lessons can be adapted to enrich emerging markets, especially in smaller countries (such as Lithuania), where comics can be the only economically viable solution to produce epic-scale entertainment products.

4.4. Further Research

There is a considerable knowledge gap regarding how visual communication is used to create meaningful immersion for the comic book reader. Especially when producing historical genre content.

The author of this doctoral dissertation believes that a multifaceted qualitative approach is the best way to continue investigating how visually-based communicative decisions can be employed to create the most enjoyable and informationally coherent experience for the comics reader. In other words, to see the big picture (i.e., to truly understand this phenomenon), it is necessary to continuously employ triangulation of data-gathering approaches. Furthermore, combining theoretical and practical experimentation can achieve the best possible results. The rationale for this approach is that creative experimentation is necessary to achieve the best scholarly outcome of effectively employing comic books to produce immersive experiences. The analysis of sound representation in American mainstream comics highlights the crucial role experimentation played in developing communicative approaches in this soundless medium.

The communicative angle in representing sound in comics is a very promising research path, especially when exploring how culture influences the visual approach to the production and interpretation of meaning. Another interesting scholarly approach would be to create an album that documents different ways in which various aspects of sound are communicated to the reader. Overall, sound in comics represents enough scholarly tasks that it could easily be tackled by a few additional doctoral research projects.

Comics as an additional educational tool is another very popular topic among academia that still fails to produce tangible knowledge of how best to methodologically approach this art form. In other words, although numerous academic articles argue that comics can be valuable tools in classrooms, there is still very little reliable data on how best to use them to get substantial results, and how comics can be used at different stages in life (i.e., early literacy, higher education, or even as an educational tool to be used later in life). Thus, this research path requires considerable additional research to be produced before the topic will be sufficiently understood.

One of the most promising research paths would be further investigation into the phenomenon of closure (i.e., cognitive processing of sequential art), particularly its relationship to the creation of additional meaning. A clear answer to this phenomenon and its ability to stimulate readers to insert additional information into action presented in the comic book pages would provide the medium with a unique trait and an apparent superpower in regard to other popular media.

Another critical study that would have practical benefits for cartoonists from smaller countries would be an investigation into how comics travel across cultural borders, specifically the challenges and opportunities that arise when comic books are adapted for different linguistic needs and cultural sensibilities, and how comics can be used to reclaim specific historical narratives and communicate them to global audiences.

Finally, this doctoral dissertation focuses on historical genre and its applications in producing immersive and lasting experiences. Other genres within the comics medium also deserve in-depth analysis to identify their respective strengths and challenges. Especially compared to other visually based popular media. However, the most suitable concluding thought of this doctoral dissertation would be that the comic book art form is still an incredibly fertile scholarly ground to produce numerous intellectual investigations across various academic disciplines.

4.5. Conclusions of the Fourth Chapter

1. An autoethnographic approach enabled the researcher to gather data and insights into the creative process of producing comics of a historical genre. The two cases presented in this dissertation showcase how challenging the creative process can be once creators set out to produce historically accurate comic books. Both experiences serve as a foundation for planning better and executing creative work when working with the genre. The experience led to the formulation of rules that should help creatives better plan the creative process and utilise the consultation of the historians for the best possible artistic results. However, it is important to note that these rules are just guidance on approaching historical genre when historians are involved, but they cannot account for all aspects that can complicate the creative process, especially if it is the first time that a cartoonist has worked with this kind of genre. Finally, the decision on which historical period to choose will determine how effectively screenwriters can conduct their own historical research. The older the period being portrayed in the narrative, the more difficult it is for an untrained person not only to collect reliable data about that period but also to be able to interpret it correctly. Therefore, portraits of older historical periods should always be viewed cautiously.
2. An open questionnaire investigation obtained rich data regarding how the phenomenon of closure acts in the comic book medium. Although the findings did not directly support Duncan and Smith's claim that comic book readers would insert additional information into the action presented in the pages of the comic book, the gathered data suggest that this phenomenon exists to some extent, especially when there is a substantial spatial and temporal gap between the juxtapositional panels. The findings suggest that a new experiment, where participants are given a comic consisting of just a few panels, would produce better results regarding the phenomenon as mentioned earlier.

3. The case study provided insights into the development of visual representations of sound in American mainstream comics, acknowledging that developing an effective and engaging representation of sound in comics took considerable time and experimentation is vital. Furthermore, some of the visual solutions (for example, captions to communicate characters' thoughts) took decades to develop. Another critical insight identified by this research is a transformation of the comic artist's mindset. This transformation was vital for a medium's growth as an art form. Only when that sound in comics has ceased to be perceived as a means of conveying (explanatory) information and has become an integral tool to tell a story, have comics become an entertainment form that can truly captivate its audience.
4. Stylisation (in tandem with spatial and temporal communicative systems) is the medium's aspect that enhances the reading experience of historical comics. Due to stylisation, comic content creators can relatively easily reduce communicative noise and emphasise the remaining details. Finally, due to stylisation, content has a great chance to travel through cultural borders. In addition, across all three empirical components, stylisation emerged as a recurring facilitator of effective communication, whether in simplifying historical environments, focusing reader attention, or transcending cultural barriers. This suggests that stylised historical comics are more adaptable for cross-cultural dissemination, which is particularly valuable for small markets aiming for international reach.
5. The medium's "suggestive" nature is a communicative strength. In the sound depiction study and the closure experiment, it was evident that readers actively co-create meaning from visual cues rather than passively consume a fixed representation. In other words, through visual cues, the cartoonist can imply that one of the characters speaks in an underworldly demonic voice; however, how this particular character speaks is created only in the reader's mind. Thus, the reader is always in charge of producing the most satisfactory meaning from the visually based cues delivered by the content creator. This co-creative capacity – whether imagining a character's tone of voice or filling narrative gaps – confirms comics' distinctive power to engage audiences cognitively and emotionally. Lastly, due to the exclusively visual nature of the medium, comics provide communicative opportunities to suggest or imply action or experience to the reader rather than produce it.
6. While the comic art form is excellent for telling historical genre stories, additional challenges also need to be addressed. The first two are already mentioned: the balance of finding entertainment with historical fidelity and the ability to successfully employ professional historians. The third major challenge that needs to be addressed is the public image problem of comics.

For historical reasons, regions such as East and Central Europe have, for a long time, fostered negative associations towards artistic expression. This created various challenges, such as older generations being biased towards the medium and not perceiving comics as serious literature and a small community of cartoonists. Thus, even if the reason for using 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. Of course, these changes can be overcome with success stories and time.

General Conclusions

1. Across different cultural and geographical contexts, comics moved from marginal popular entertainment to recognised art through a recurring process of negotiated legitimacy shaped by creators, audiences, institutions, and markets. In North America, comics as a medium quickly rose to popularity. However, moral panic and self-censorship delayed cultural acceptance and recognition of comics as serious literature and commentary. In Western Europe, stronger author status, rights retention, and limited censorship enabled earlier prestige. In Japan, manga became a mainstream, multi-demographic medium after World War II and later achieved global dominance. Lithuania and other post-Soviet contexts show how disrupted traditions, weak infrastructure, and persistent "children-only" stereotypes constrained development until the 2010s, when new creators and institutions began to normalise comics as a cultural and educational tool.
2. The analysis shows that the comic book medium's communicative possibilities depend on the coordinated use of visual and verbal resources rather than on any single production technique. Professional workflows foreground distinct communicative competencies – narrative design, visual staging, lettering, and graphic rendering – that must align to maintain clarity and immersion, and skills from other visual arts are insufficient

without medium-specific literacy. Theoretical triangulation indicates that meaning arises through reader participation: closure integrates fragmented cues into perceived continuity, constructivism and perception theory explain how prior experience shapes interpretation, and cognitive load, semiotics, framing, and narrative theory clarify how layout, signs, and emphasis structure time, action, and inference. Finally, comics achieve uniquely effective communication by creating an illusion of continuous action through gutters and by visualising sound via balloons, captions, typography, symbols, and effects, where the word–image balance is central to both comprehension and aesthetics.

3. The autoethnographic analysis demonstrates that creating historically accurate comic book content entails unique creative, communicative, and managerial challenges. The main difficulty is balancing historical accuracy with narrative clarity, pacing, and visual effectiveness, as factual correctness alone cannot make up for weak storytelling or text-heavy layouts. While working with historians is vital for credibility, it also brings risks such as conflicting priorities, delays in consultation, and changing interpretations of historical details. The findings underscore the importance of resolving historical issues during the scripting phase, clearly identifying which elements are negotiable and which are not early on, and designing production schedules that realistically accommodate consultation-related delays. Ultimately, the case studies show that historical comics demand strong communication skills, as failures in narrative structure and resolution greatly reduce reader engagement, even when visual quality and scholarly input are high.
4. The open-ended questionnaire indicates that readers most readily recall and emotionally invest in dramatically charged moments signposted by clear nonverbal cues (faces, posture, and gesture). There is some evidence that readers add narrative content to bridge larger inter-panel gaps – consistent with closure and constructivist accounts of meaning-making – though the prevalence of this behaviour remains inconclusive given the study design. Explicit time/place details showed low retention, whereas contextually embedded information was remembered by a large majority, albeit sometimes with hedged certainty.
5. The long-term evolution of sound depiction in comics illustrates the medium's capacity for sustained communicative innovation. The longitudinal analysis of *The Amazing Spider-Man* traced how speech balloons, captions, and sound effects became more strategically integrated into visual storytelling over five decades. The shift from explanatory redundancy toward subtle, interpretively rich framing reflects a growing trust in readers'

semiotic competence. This finding has practical implications for emerging comics markets, such as Lithuania, where creators can adopt mature visual-verbal strategies without replicating decades of trial-and-error.

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Summary in Lithuanian

Įvadas

Problemos formulavimas

Komiksai yra vizualine raiška grįsta pramoginė medija, gyvuojanti jau daugiau nei šimtmetį. Šia tema egzistuoja gana gausi mokslinių tyrimų bazė, apimanti akademines knygas, straipsnius, konferencijų pranešimus ir daktaro disertacijas (Bugailiškienė, 2009; Duncan & Smith, 2009; Eisner, 1985, 1986, 1996; Heer & Worcester, 2005, 2008; Hess et al., 1996; McCloud, 1993, 2000, 2006; Smith & Duncan, 2011; Tabachnick, 2009; Wright, 2001). Pastaraisiais dešimtmečiais komiksai vis dažniau vertinami kaip rimta kūrybos sritis, o ilgai gyvavęs stereotipas, siejęs šią mediją išimtinai su vaikų auditorija, palaipsniui nyksta. Tačiau komiksų, kaip medijos, komunikaciniai aspektai vis dar sulaukia palyginti nedidelio dėmesio. Ši spraga ne tik pabrėžia tyrimo aktualumą, bet ir sudaro prielaidas formuluoti pagrindinį tyrimo klausimą: kokie vizualiniai komunikaciniai sprendimai komiksų medijoje prisideda prie įtraukiančios ir paveikios pramoginės patirties kūrimo? Kitaip tariant, kurie konkretūs vizualiniai elementai lemia ilgalaikį skaitytojo įspūdį?

Nors akademiniai komiksų meno tyrimai pradėti jau XX a. aštuntajame dešimtmetyje (Mambrol, 2017), didžioji dalis per vėlesnius keturis dešimtmečius atliktų darbų buvo orientuoti į bandymus atsakyti į klausimus: kaip apibrėžti komiksus ir kaip pagrįsti jų, kaip savarankiškos medijos, o ne žanro, statusą (Mitchell, 2014). Kitaip tariant, ilgą laiką mokslinės diskusijos daugiausia buvo sutelktos į paties tyrimo objekto statuso įtvirtinimą. Tik pastaraisiais dešimtmečiais imta kryptingiau tyrinėti šios vizualine seka grindžiamos

raiškos formos taikymo galimybes. Vis dažniau keliami klausimai, kas lemia komiksų, kaip pramoginės medijos, išskirtinumą ir populiarumą. Vis dėlto vizualinės komunikacijos aspektai – tai, kaip konkretūs vizualiniai sprendimai padeda kurti reikšmes, sukelti emocinį poveikį ir didinti skaitytojo įsitraukimą – akademinėje literatūroje tebėra nagrinėjami fragmentiškai ir išlieka nepakankamai išplėtoti.

Tokios aplinkybės šiam tyrimui kelia papildomų iššūkių: esamos šaltinių spragos rodo, kad autorei teks nuosekliai adaptuoti teorinius rėmus, atsižvelgiant į naujai įgyjamas įžvalgas. Kitaip tariant, disertacija pirmiausia bus grindžiama empiriniais stebėjimais ir konkrečių reiškinių analize, o ne vien nusistovėjusiomis teorinėmis koncepcijomis. Sutelkiant dėmesį į vizualinius komunikacinius sprendimus, kurie formuoja skaitymo patirtį, tyrimu siekiama prasmingai prisidėti prie identifikuotos žinių spragos užpildymo ir praplėsti komiksų medijos komunikacinio potencialo suvokimą.

Darbo aktualumas

Nors komiksų fenomenas tyrinėjamas jau kelis dešimtmečius, ypač pradėjus leisti šiai sričiai skirtus akademinius žurnalus, tokius kaip *The Comics Journal*, *Studies in Comics* ar *International Journal of Comic Art*, komiksų tyrimai vis dar laikomi nepakankamai išplėtota sritimi. Reikšminga dalis naujausių publikacijų ir monografijų ir toliau koncentruojasi į pačios medijos apibrėžimo arba jos istorinės raidos analizę. Palyginti su panašaus laikotarpio medijomis, pavyzdžiui, kinu ar animacija, kurios pasižymi gerokai platesniu ir labiau susistemintu akademiniu pagrindu, nusistovėjusiomis teorinėmis prieigomis bei metodologijomis, komiksų tyrimų laukas akivaizdžiai atsilieka. Pažymėtina ir tai, kad net ir tokios naujos pramoginės medijos kaip kompiuteriniai žaidimai, šiandien sulaukia didesnio akademinio dėmesio nei komiksai.

Šia daktaro disertacija siekiama ne tik papildyti ir plėtoti žinias apie temporalinius ir spatialinius komunikacijos aspektus komiksuose, bet ir nustatyti, kaip šie komunikaciniai mechanizmai funkcionuoja istorinio žanro kontekste.

Galiausiai pažymėtina, kad gilesnis istorinio komikso kūrimo principų supratimas gali turėti reikšmingą teigiamą poveikį šiuolaikinės nacionalinės tapatybės formavimui. Prie kultūrinio pasitikėjimo stiprinimo gali prisidėti įvairios pramoginės medijos, tačiau ne visos jos yra vienodai prieinamos dėl ekonominių priežasčių. Atsižvelgiant į tai, kad komiksai yra viena pigiausių vizualinės populiariosios kultūros medijų gamybos kaštų atžvilgiu, ši medija tampa itin tinkamu komunikaciniu įrankiu valstybėms, turinčioms ribotas galimybes remti kultūrinius produktus.

Tyrimų objektas

Vizualine raiška grindžiami temporaliniai ir spatialiniai komunikacijos aspektai komiksų medijoje.

Darbo tikslas

Šio darbo tikslas – išsiaiškinti, kokie vizualinės komunikacijos sprendimai leidžia efektyviai perteikti erdvinius ir temporalinius elementus istorinio žanro komiksuose.

Darbo uždaviniai

Darbo tikslui pasiekti reikia išspręsti šiuos uždavinius:

1. Ištirti, kaip komiksai atsirado ir vystėsi, tapdami pripažinta meno forma skirtinguose kultūriniuose ir geografiniuose kontekstuose.
2. Išanalizuoti komiksų medijos komunikacines galimybes.
3. Identifikuoti iššūkius, kylančius kuriant istoriškai autentišką komiksų turinį.
4. Ištirti, kaip skaitytojai suvokia veiksmą komiksų medijoje.
5. Išanalizuoti garso reprezentacijos raidą komiksuose.

Tyrimų metodika

Disertacijoje taikomi šie mokslinių tyrimų metodai:

- literatūros analizė – monografijų, vadovėlių, akademinių straipsnių, komiksų ir kt. šaltinių nagrinėjimas;
- autoetnografinė analizė – taikoma siekiant identifikuoti istorinio žanro komiksų kūrimo iššūkius ir galimybes;
- atviro tipo klausimai – skirti išnagrinėti, kaip komiksų skaitytojai suvokia veiksmą šioje medijoje;
- atvejo analizė – taikoma siekiant suprasti vizualinės komunikacijos sprendimus, naudojamus garsinei patirčiai sukurti.

Darbo mokslinis naujumas

1. Nors komiksų fenomenas tyrinėtas gana plačiai, tik nedidelė dalis mokslinių darbų analizuoja komunikacines prieigas istorinio žanro komiksuose. Ši disertacija atskleidžia, kaip komiksų medijos vizualiniai komunikaciniai sprendimai formuoja įtraukiančią skaitymo patirtį ir integruoja dvi tyrimų sritis – komiksų medijos studijas ir istorijos reprezentacijos analizę.
2. Dėmesys garsinės komunikacijos raidai komiksuose leidžia nustatyti komunikacinių priemonių ypatumus be garso veikiančioje medijoje ir suteikia naujų įžvalgų apie tai, kaip garsiniai elementai sustiprina emocinę ir sensorinę patirtį.
3. Autoetnografinis istorinių komiksų kūrimo proceso tyrimas įveda praktine veikla grįstą perspektyvą ir leidžia identifikuoti įžvalgas, kurios retai atsiskleidžiančia komiksų medijos studijose.

Darbo rezultatų praktinė reikšmė

1. Autoetnografinė prieiga leido sukaupti empirinių duomenų ir suformuoti rekomendacijų rinkinį komiksų kūrėjams, leidėjams ir projektų vadovams, susijusį

su efektyviomis bendradarbiavimo su istorikais praktikomis įgyvendinant istorinio žanro komiksų projektus.

2. Tyrimo duomenys leidžia teigti, kad istorinio žanro komiksai gali būti reikšminga edukacinė priemonė, gebanti rezonuoti su skaitytojais.
3. „Nepaprastas Žmogus-Voras“ atvejo analizės rezultatai atskleidė nuoseklią vizualinių garso reprezentacijų raidą Amerikos komiksuose ir parodė, kad be garso veikianti medija gali kurti įtraukias ir paveikias patirtis, pasitelkdama uždarymo (angl. *closure*) fenomeną.
4. Klausimyno duomenų analizė patvirtino, kad tais atvejais, kai istorinio žanro komiksuose pagrindinio veikėjo vidiniai iššūkiai išryškinami kaip kertinis naratyvo elementas, skaitytojai linkę užmegzti ryšį su protagonistu, o pasakojimas palieka ilgalaikį įspūdį.

Ginamieji teiginiai

- Istorinio žanro komiksai pasižymi unikalia komunikacine savybe – gebėjimu vizualiai perteikti istorinius įvykius taip, kad skaitytojui būtų sudarytos sąlygos užmegzti emocinį ryšį su istorija.
- Komiksų medija, pasitelkdama laikiškumo ir erdviškumo komunikacinius elementus, gali kurti įtraukias patirtis, reikalaujančias aktyvaus skaitytojo dalyvavimo konstruojant prasmę, o ne pasyvaus informacijos stebėjimo.
- Komiksuose taikomi erdviniai ir laikiniai komunikaciniai sprendimai nuolat kinta ir vystosi, todėl ši medija yra itin priklausoma nuo eksperimentavimo ir kūrybiškų pasakojimo strategijų.

Darbo rezultatų aprobavimas

Disertacijos tema yra publikuoti šeši moksliniai straipsniai: du – mokslo žurnaluose, referuojamuose *Clarivate Analytics Web of Science* arba *Scopus* duomenų bazėse (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2022; 2023; Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė & Stasiulis, 2022; 2023), ir keturi – recenzuotuose tarptautinių konferencijų leidiniuose (Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2021; 2023; Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė & Mitkus, 2019; 2024).

Disertacijoje atliktų tyrimų rezultatai buvo pristatyti mokslinėse konferencijose Lietuvoje ir užsienyje:

- CONFIA 2021: 9th *International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, 2021 m. spalio 28–29 d., Aveire, Portugalijoje.
- CONFIA 2023: 10th *International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, 2023 m. liepos 6–7 d., Kaldas da Rainja, Portugalijoje.
- CONFIA 2024: 11th *International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, 2024 m. liepos 4–5 d., Barselose, Portugalijoje.
- VISUALITY 2021: VI tarptautinė konferencija *Media and Communication*, 2021 m. balandžio 22–23 d., Vilniuje, Lietuvoje.

– VISUALITY 2023: VII tarptautinė konferencija *Media and Communication in the age of (dis)information*, 2023 m. balandžio 20–21 d., Vilniuje, Lietuvoje.

Disertacijos struktūra

Disertaciją sudaro įvadas, keturi skyriai, bendrosios išvados, literatūros sąrašas ir autorės publikacijų disertacijos tema sąrašas, santrauka lietuvių kalba. Darbo apimtis yra 152 puslapiai. Darbe pateiktos 2 lentelės ir 33 iliustracijos. Rašant disertaciją panaudoti 164 literatūros šaltiniai.

1. Komiksai kaip vizualinės komunikacijos priemonė: istorija, teorija ir istorinis žanras

Komiksai yra medija, kurioje reikšmės formuojamos per vizualinę struktūrą, o ne per linijinį teksto ar garso pateikimą (McCloud, 1993). Nors darbe pateikiama trumpa komiksų raidos apžvalga, didžiausias dėmesys skiriamas vizualiai konstruojamos informacijos analizei ir skaitytojo vaidmeniui prasmės formavimo procese. Komiksų komunikacija suprantama kaip procesas, reikalaujantis iš skaitytojo ne pasyvaus stebėjimo, bet aktyvaus vaizdų jungimo ir interpretacijos (Duncan & Smith, 2009).

Uždarymo (angl. *closure*) sąvoka apibrėžiama kaip skaitytojo atliekamas veiksmas, kuriuo užpildomos informacijos spragos tarp atskirų panelių (McCloud, 1993). Kūrėjas pateikia atskirus momentus, tačiau naratyvinis tęstinumas atsiranda ne vaizduojamoje medžiagoje, o skaitytojo mąstyme (Carleton, 2014). Dėl šio proceso komiksai tampa medija, kurioje prasmė kuriama „tarp vaizdų“, o ne pačiuose vaizduose. Tai iš esmės išskiria komiksus iš kitų vizualinių medijų, pavyzdžiui, kino, kuriame naratyvinis tęstinumas kuriamas automatiškai. Komiksuose skaitytojas pats interpretuoja, kas įvyko tarp pavaizduotų veiksmų momentų, ir taip aktyviai prisideda prie istorijos sukūrimo (McCloud, 2000).

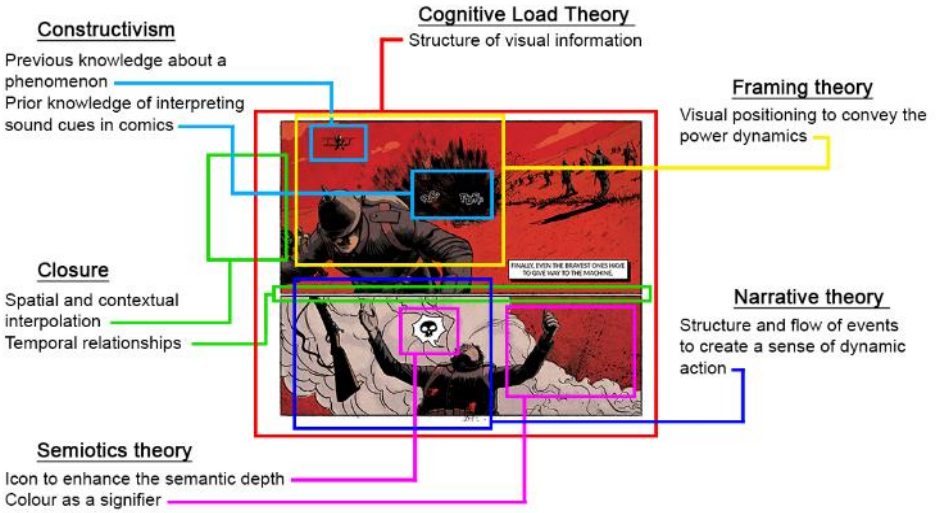
Atskirai analizuojamas ir temporalumo konstravimo reiškinys. Viename kadre gali būti pateikiami keli laiko momentai, o kalbinių elementų išdėstymas lemia jų suvokimo ritmą (Cohn, 2013). Laiko patirtis komiksuose nėra vienalytė: skaitytojas gali sustoti, grįžti prie ankstesnių kadrų ar iš naujo juos interpretuoti. Tokiu būdu komiksai suteikia savanorišką ir neautomatizuotą naratyvinę patirtį (McCloud, 1993). Temporalumas kuriamas pasitelkiant vizualinius ženklus, tokius kaip judesio linijos, kadro dydžio ir formos kaita, dėmesio centrai puslapio kompozicijoje bei perėjimai tarp panelių.

Erdvės reprezentacija siejama su puslapio struktūra ir kadro planavimu. Vaizdų išdėstymas puslapyje, panelių santykis, perspektyva ir kompozicija lemia informacijos hierarchiją (Duncan, 2000). Skaitytojas seka erdvinę struktūrą, kuri nurodo naratyvo kryptį. Komiksuose erdvė nėra neutrali forma, bet komunikacinis sprendimas, kuriuo nustatoma pasakojimo tvarka ir ritmas. Skyriaus analizė rodo, kad dviejų vaizdų gretinimas savaime kuria laiko iliuziją ir padeda nustatyti įvykių seką (Cohn, 2013).

Be temporalumo ir erdvės, skyriuje aptariama garsinė komunikacija vizualioje medijoje. Kadangi komiksai yra begarsė medija, garsui perteikti taikomos vizualios priemonės. Garsui iškomunikuoti komikse naudojami dialogo balionai, tipografiniai akcentai, raidžių dydžio ir formos kaita, grafinių ženklų intensyvumas bei onomatopėjos. Eisneris teigia, kad dialogo balionas yra kompromisas tarp žodinio turinio ir vizualaus pateikimo

(Eisner, 1985). Garsinės reprezentacijos komiksuose skirstomos į kategorijas pagal jų funkciją ir semantinį lygį (Catricala & Guidi, 2015). Garsas komiksuose tampa naratyvo ritmu, padedančiu formuoti emocinius akcentus ir stiprinti skaitytojo sensorinę patirtį.

Komiksų analizė reikalauja kelių komunikacijos teorijų derinimo. Semiotinėmis, naratyvinėmis ir vizualinės komunikacijos prieigomis papildyta uždarymo koncepcija leidžia analizuoti, kaip kuriama prasmė tarp vaizdų ir kaip skaitytojas prisideda prie naratyvo formavimo (S1.1 pav.). Taigi, integruota teorinė prieiga būtina siekiant tirti laiko, erdvės ir garsinės informacijos konstravimą komiksuose kaip komunikacinius procesus (Mitchell, 2014).



S1.1 pav. Komunikacijos teorijų trianguliaciją, taikoma analizuojant komiksų turinį (sudaryta autorės)

Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad komiksų komunikacija remiasi vizualine prasmės konstrukcija, kurią suformuoja skaitytojas. Uždarymo, temporalumo kūrimas ir vizualiai kuriama garsinė patirtis yra centriniai procesai, leidžiantys komiksams veikti kaip efektyviai vizualinės komunikacijos medijai. Šios teorinės įžvalgos yra būtinos nagrinėjant istorinio žanro komiksų komunikacinius ypatumus, ypač tuos atvejus, kai siekiama sukurti įtraukiančią ir emociškai paveikią skaitytojo patirtį.

2. Daugialypis požiūris į komiksų medijos tyrimus

Antrame skyriuje pristatoma tyrimo kryptis, suformuota reaguojant į komunikacinių spragų mastą komiksų medijoje. Siekiama sistemingai suprasti, kokie komunikaciniai sprendimai leidžia vizualiai perteikti laiko tėkmę, erdvės struktūrą ir garsą, ypač kuriant istorinį žanrą. Esminis tyrimo klausimas formuluojamas kaip komunikacinių galimybių ir kliūčių, kylančių kuriant istorinio žanro komiksus, identifikavimas. Tačiau, tyrimo eigoje

paaiškėjo, kad suprasti vieną dimensiją nepakanka. Vizualinė komunikacija komiksuose yra kompleksinė, todėl apima ne tik estetiką, bet ir semantiką, naratyvinę logiką, skaitytojo suvokimą ir empirinių procesų analizę. Dėl šios priežasties pasirinkta kelių metodų trianguliacija, kuri suteikia galimybę nagrinėti reiškinį iš skirtingų perspektyvų ir užtikrinti rezultatų patikimumą (Cohen & Manion, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).
Tyrime taikomi trys metodai: autoetnografija, atviroji anketinė apklausa ir atvejo analizę. Tokia struktūra leidžia derinti praktines įžvalgas, skaitytojų patirčių analizę ir sistemingą kūrybinių komunikacinių sprendimų stebėseną. Autoetnografija pasirinkta todėl, kad tyrėjas turi tiesioginę praktinę patirtį istorinių komiksų kūrimo procese.



S2.1 pav. Komiksų puslapiai iš grafinių novelių „War Aviators“ (Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2021), naudoti atviros anketinės apklausos tyrime (sudaryta autorės)

Asmeninė patirtis, refleksija ir komunikacija su piešėjais atskleidžia specifinių iššūkių visumą, kuri nėra dokumentuota komiksų tyrimuose. Šie duomenys padeda identifikuoti problemas, kylančias bendradarbiaujant su istorikais, renkant medžiagą apie praeities vizualinius elementus, planuojant stilizacijos principus ir derinant istorinio tikslumo reikalavimus su naratyvu. Autoetnografija šiame tyrime veikia kaip metodas, leidžiantis surinkti sunkiai dokumentuojamus duomenis: kūrybines klaidas, laiko sąnaudas, nesusikalbėjimą tarp tyrėjų ir kūrėjų bei estetinės ir informacinės medžiagos balansavimą (Dumitrica, 2010; Ellis, 2004).

Atvirosios anketinės apklausos metodas taikytas siekiant suprasti skaitytojų suvokimą ir naratyvo rekonstrukciją komiksų skaitymo metu (S2.1 pav.). Šis metodas tinkamas kokybinei informacijai rinkti, nes leidžia nustatyti, kaip skaitytojai identifikuoja veiksmą, kaip supranta laiko perėjimus ir kokie vizualiniai elementai sukelia stipriausią įsitraukimo efektą (Foddy, 1993; Gillespie et al., 2021). Ypač svarbu, kad anketos struktūra leido užfiksuoti ne tik faktines nuomones, bet ir skaitymo procesą: kuriuos vizualinius ženklus skaitytojai interpretuoja pirmiausia, kas jiems padeda suvokti veiksmą, o kas trukdo. Gauti duomenys sudarė empirinį pagrindą nustatyti, kurie komunikaciniai sprendimai efektyviausiai sukuria uždarymo pojūtį, kaip perkeliamas veiksmų ritmas ir ar aiškiai perteikiama veikėjų trajektorija.

Atvejo analizė pasirinkta siekiant ištirti ilgalaikę vizualinės komunikacijos raidą, susijusią su garso perteikimu. Analizei atrinkta „Nepaprastas Žmogus-Voras“ (angl. *The Amazing Spider-Man*) komiksų serija, apimanti 1963–2018 m. laikotarpį; išanalizuotas 801 numeris. Tokios apimties chronologinė analizė parodė, kaip kito tekstinių elementų ir vizualinių sprendimų santykis, kaip transformavosi dialogo balionų formos, šriftai, onomatopėjos, tipografiniai ženklai ir jų funkcija kuriant garsinę patirtį (Carrier, 2000; Dey & Bokil, 2017; Eisner, 1985). Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė aiškią raidos kryptį: nuo perteklinio teksto ir paaiškinimų ankstyvuosiuose numeriuose iki lakoniškesnių, semantiškai labiau integruotų tekstinių elementų vėlesniuose leidimuose. Ši transformacija atskleidžia didėjantį pasitikėjimą skaitytoju kaip aktyviu prasmės kūrėju ir rodo strateginį kūrėjų posūkį nuo informacijos perteikimo prie vaizdo ir teksto sinergijos.

Trianguliacija tyrime buvo, nes nė vienas metodas atskirai negali pateikti išsamios komunikacinės analizės. Atvejų analizė leidžia matyti ilgalaikes tendencijas, apklausomis atskleidžiamos skaitytojų patirtys, o autoetnografija papildo akademinę analizę industriniais pastebėjimais, kurie nebūtų pasiekiami kitais tyrimų būdais. Šio metodų derinimo tikslas yra ne vieno teorinio modelio patvirtinimas, bet tarpusavio papildymas, leidžiantis sukurti išsamią duomenų bazę tolesnėms išvadoms.

Šioje dalyje taip pat identifikuotos pagrindinės tyrimo ribos. Apklausos duomenys negali būti visiškai reprezentatyvūs visai komiksų skaitytojų populiacijai, ypač už Lietuvos ribų. Atvejo analizė apsiriboja amerikietiška populiariosios kultūros tradicija, todėl rezultatai negali būti tiesiogiai taikoma europietiškoms ar azijietiškoms komiksų praktikoms. Autoetnografiniai duomenys suteikia giluminių įžvalgų, tačiau yra susiję su tyrėjo subjektyvia patirtimi ir todėl reikalauja kritinio interpretacijos konteksto. Vis dėlto šie ribotumai laikytini ne metodologinėmis kliūtimis, bet sąmoningai pasirinktu ribojimu, leidžiančiu tiksliau apibrėžti tyrimo apimtį ir suformuluoti kryptį tolesniems darbams.

Apibendrinant, ši tyrimo kryptis grindžiama nuostata, kad vizualinės komunikacijos analizė komiksuose reikalauja daugiabriaunės metodologijos, galinčios atskleisti paslėptus procesus tarp kūrybos, skaitymo ir teorinio aiškinimo. Toks požiūris sukuria pagrindą empiriniam vertinimui, kuris bus taikomas analizuojant laiko, erdvės ir garso konstravimo principus istoriniuose komiksuose bei sprendimus, lemiančius skaitytojo įsitraukimą ir estetinę patirtį.

3. Vizualinė komunikacija istoriniuose komiksuose: empiriniai duomenys ir įžvalgos

Analizuojant vizualinės komunikacijos taikymą istorinio žanro komiksuose, tyrimas parodė, kad praktiniai kūrybos procesų aspektai yra tiesiogiai susiję su komunikaciniais rezultatais. Empiriniai duomenys atskleidžia, kad komiksų medija, nepaisant daugiau nei šimtmečio istorijos, nėra pakankamai ištirta praktiniu požiūriu, ypač kalbant apie istorinio žanro vizualinius sprendimus. Autoetnografiškai tirti Lietuvos komiksų projektai parodė, kad vienas svarbiausių iššūkių yra naratyvo ir istorinio autentiškumo balanso išlaikymas. Istorikų kuriami scenarijai pasižymi aukštu faktų tikslumu, tačiau dažnai stokoja dramaturginės struktūros ir tempo, o tai silpnina vizualiosios komunikacijos dinamiką. Kadangi komiksas yra sekvencinė vizualinė medija, perteikianti veiksmą per ritmą, tarpų sistemą ir vaizdo įtaigą, perteklinė tekstinė informacija menkino vizualumo prioritetą ir mažino skaitytojo įsitraukimą (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993).

Autoetnografiniai duomenys rodo, kad konsultacijos su istorikais, nors ir būtinos faktinių detalių tikslumui užtikrinti, turi neplanuotų pasekmių kūrybiniam procesui. Istorikai dažnai reikalavo koreguoti smulkias detales, kurios vizualiai mažai pastebimos skaitytojui, tačiau reikšmingai stabdė kūrybos eigą ir didino produkcijos kaštus. Vienas iš svarbiausių empirinių pastebėjimų – istorinį tikslumą netikslinga laikyti prioritetine vertybe, galinčia kompensuoti naratyvo trūkumus. Kūrybinio proceso patirtis rodo, kad istorinis žanras tampa sėkmingas tik tada, kai tikslumas veikia kaip struktūrinis pagrindas, o vizualinė komunikacija išlaiko dramaturgiją, ritmą ir emocinį svorį. Tai patvirtina nuostatą, kad istorijai perteikti vizualiai efektyvesnė yra ne dokumentacija, bet įtaigi stilizacija (Pustz, 2012; Vadillo, 2010).

Klausimyno duomenys atskleidė skaitytojų gebėjimą spontaniškai rekonstruoti veiksmą, remiantis užuominomis ir fragmentuotais vizualiniais elementais. Respondentai nurodė, kad labiausiai įsimenamos yra scenos, kuriose veiksmas perteikiamas mimika, gestais ir kadrų sekos ritmais, o ne tekstu ar informaciniais paaiškinimais. Tai patvirtina uždarymo fenomeno aktualumą komiksams – skaitytojas pats sujungia atotrūkius tarp kadrų ir tampa aktyviu reikšmės kūrėju (McCloud, 1993). Tyrimas parodė, kad iš visų vizualinės komunikacijos priemonių kontekstualizuota neverbalinė informacija pasižymi didžiausiu afektiniu potencialu. Laiko ir vietos žymėjimas, perteikiamas tekstiniais intarpais, buvo mažiau įsimintinas nei vizualūs semantiniai signalai, integruoti į aplinką ar veiksmą.

Garso reprezentacijos raidos analizė, atlikta remiantis 801 amerikietiško komikso „Nepaprastas Žmogus-Voras“ numeriu, atskleidė, kad garsas komiksuose vystėsi palaipsniui – nuo informacinių tekstinių elementų link aukštos vizualinės integracijos ir naratyvinio funkcionalumo. Ankstyvosiose publikacijose garsažodžiai (onomatopėjos) buvo

naudojami kaip žodiniai pranešimai, perteikiantys veiksmą, tačiau vėlesniu laikotarpiu jie tapo vaizdine sistema, papildančia judesio iliuziją, ritmą ir emocinį poveikį (Dey & Bokil, 2017; Kaindl, 1999). Tyrimas parodė, kad efektyvus garsinių elementų perteikimas nėra susijęs su grafiniu sudėtingumu, bet su semiotine funkcija: kuo labiau garsažodžiai integruojami į vaizdo struktūrą, tuo stipresnį įsitraukimą efektą jie sukuria. Ryškiausia transformacija pastebima tada, kai garsas nebenaudojamas kaip informacinis paaiškinimas, bet tampa naratyvo elementu, keičiančiu vaizdo ritmą, valdančiu skaitymo tempą ir sustiprinančiu emocinį poveikį.

Svarbus empirinės analizės aspektas yra stilizacijos reikšmė. Stilizacija leidžia sukurti homogenišką vizualinę sistemą, mažinančią „komunikacinį triukšmą“, išryškinančią svarbiausius elementus ir padedančią efektyviau valdyti istorinės informacijos kiekį. Gauti duomenys rodo, kad stilizacija ne tik sutrumpina kūrybinius procesus, bet ir leidžia kūriniui veiksmingiau peržengti kultūrines ribas, nes perteikiamos struktūrinės reikšmės, o ne dokumentinis tikslumas. Tai ypač aktualu mažoms rinkoms, siekiančioms tarptautinės auditorijos ir neturinčioms susiformavusios nacionalinės komiksų tradicijos (Bugailiškienė, 2007; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2019).

Analizuojant vizualinės komunikacijos taikymo iššūkius istoriniuose komiksuose, paaiškėjo, kad medijos reputaciniai aspektai yra ne mažiau svarbūs nei metodiniai. Vidurio ir Rytų Europoje komiksai ilgą laiką buvo suvokiami kaip nebrandi arba „vaikiška“ raiškos forma. Dėl šios priežasties kultūrinė produkcija ilgą laiką rėmėsi kitų medijų – kino, televizijos ar teatro – modeliais, o komiksų kūrėjų bendruomenės išliko mažos, profesionalūs įgūdžiai fragmentiški, o rinkos infrastruktūra menkai išplėtota. Empiriniai duomenys rodo, kad kūrybinio personalo kompetencija yra lemiamas veiksnys: istorinio žanro projektai ypač pažeidžiami dėl žemo naratyvinio raštingumo ir nepakankamos vizualinės dramaturgijos patirties.

Apibendrinant tyrimą, galima teigti, kad vizualinės komunikacijos aspektai istoriniuose komiksuose grindžiami trimis principais. Pirma, komunikacinis efektyvumas priklauso nuo naratyvinio lakoniškumo ir vizualinio ritmo, o ne nuo perteklinės faktinės informacijos. Antra, skaitytojų įsitraukimas formuojamas per užuominą, fragmentiškumą ir semiotinį aktyvumą, o ne per linijinį pasakojimą. Trečia, garsiniai vizualiniai elementai, stilizacija ir semiotinė ekonomija yra būtinos priemonės, leidžiančios perteikti sudėtingus istorinius kontekstus nepaverčiant puslapių informaciniais blokais. Šie principai sudaro prielaidas kurti komiksus, kurie išlaiko istorinio žanro vertę, užtikrina naratyvinį vientisumą ir veikia kaip afektyvūs, pažintinį dalyvavimą skatinantys kūriniai.

4. Komiksų gebėjimas įtraukti skaitytojus

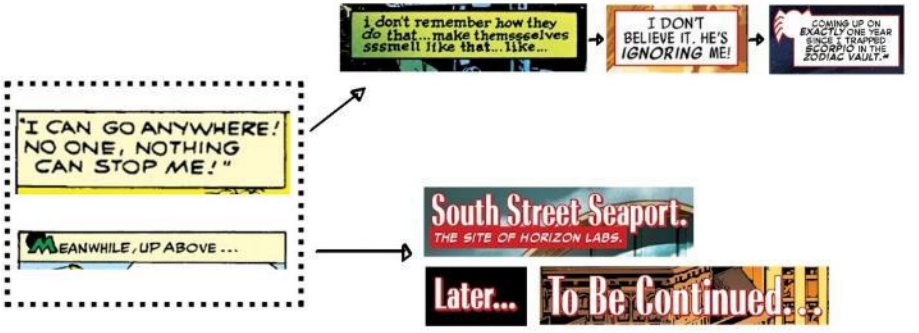
Empirinė analizė, sutelkta į istorinio žanro komiksų komunikacines savybes, parodė, kad skaitytojų įsitraukimas yra tiesiogiai susijęs su vizualine medijos struktūra, naratyviniais sprendimais ir kūrybine bendradarbiavimo praktika. Tyrimo rezultatai leidžia teigti, kad komiksai pasižymi unikaliomis komunikacinėmis savybėmis, skatinančiomis aktyvų skaitytojo dalyvavimą, ir šiuo požiūriu veikia kitaip nei linijinės ar garso ir vaizdo medijos. Didžiausią poveikį daro vizualiai apibrėžtos spragos tarp atskirų vaizdinių elementų, kurios sukuria situacijas, reikalaujančias skaitytojo interpretacijos, reikšmės kūrimo ir emocinio įsitraukimo. Ši sąveika tarp medijos struktūros ir skaitytojo kognityvinės veiklos

buvo nuosekliai stebima analizuojant kūrybinės praktikos atvejus, apklausų duomenis ir ilgalaikius vizualinės bei garsinės komunikacijos pavyzdžius.

Kūrybinės praktikos analizė, paremta autoetnografiniu metodu, atskleidė, kad bendradarbiavimas su istorikais yra reikšmingas, tačiau turi specifinių apribojimų. Vienas svarbiausių aspektų yra komunikacinių prioritetų skirtumas: istorikai siekia aukščiausio faktinio tikslumo, o komiksų kūrėjai – aiškumo ir dinaminio naratyvo. Empiriniai duomenys rodo, kad, siekiant įtraukti skaitytoją istoriniuose komiksuose, būtina atskirti istorinius elementus, kurie turi būti tikslūs, nuo detalių, kurias galima stilizuoti vizualinės komunikacijos tikslais. Kūrybiniai projektai, kuriuose faktinė informacija tampa pagrindiniu vizualinių sprendimų varikliu, patiria naratyvinių nuostolių: veiksmui skiriama mažiau vietos, puslapiai persotinami tekstu, o vizualiniai signalai praranda aiškumą. Tai lėtina skaitymo tempą ir trikdo ritmo struktūrą, kuri yra svarbiausias komiksų įtraukimo aspektas (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993). Praktiniai stebėjimai leidžia daryti išvadą, kad sėkmingi istoriniai komiksai remiasi nuosekliu scenarijaus planavimu dar prieš pradedant iliustracinį darbą ir aiškiai apibrėžtu vaidmenų paskirstymu tarp istorikų, scenaristų ir dailininkų.

Klausimyno duomenys parodė, kad skaitytojai veiksmą komiksuose suvokia ne tiek kaip nuoseklią įvykių seką, bet kaip vizualiai suformuotas prasmines struktūras, jungiančias gestus, mimiką ir lauko kompoziciją. Respondentų atsakymai leidžia daryti prielaidą, kad reikšmingiausias emocinis poveikis kyla tuomet, kai pagrindinio veikėjo patirtys pateikiamos kaip naratyvinės ašies centras. Kai istorinė informacija pateikiama kaip fonas, o ne kaip siužeto dominantė, skaitytojai labiau įsimena situacijas, veikėjų išgyvenimus ir konflikto logiką, o ne datas, vietas ar faktines detales. Tokie rezultatai sutampa su tyrėjų pastebėjimais, kad kognityviniai uždarymo procesai leidžia skaitytojui individualiai užpildyti tarpus tarp kadrų interpretuojama medžiaga ir taip sukurti asmeninę naratyvo versiją. Tai sustiprina įsitraukimą ir sudaro prielaidas emocinei atminčiai, kuri istorinio žanro kontekste yra reikšmingesnė nei informacinė atmintis (Medley, 2010).

Garsinių vizualiųjų elementų raida komiksuose atskleidė tam tikrą struktūrinį dėsningumą, kuriuo grindžiamas skaitytojo įsitraukimas. Tyrimas, atliktas analizuojant komikso „Nepaprastas Žmogus-Voras“ publikacijas, parodė, kad onomatopėjos, kalbos balionai ir teksto intarpai ilgainiui tapo naratyviniais įrankiais, o ne vien informacijos perteikimo priemonėmis (S4.1 pav.).



S4.1 pav. „Nepaprastas Žmogus-Voras“ (1963–2018) komiksų antraščių raida (sudaryta autorės)

Garso perteikimo formų kaita rodo, kad vizualinė transformacija yra glaudžiai susijusi su skaitytojo semiotine kompetencija. Skaitytojai buvo linkę geriau įsiminti ne tradicinius, bet stilizuotus garsinius elementus, kurių tipografija, spalviniai sprendimai ar kompozicija perteikia emocinę įtampą. Tyrimo rezultatai leidžia teigti, kad komiksai sukuria tam tikrą garsinę „vidinę patirtį“, kurią skaitytojas rekonstruoja ne per realų garsą, bet per vizualiai pateiktus stimulus. Tokia „garso vizualizacija“ skatina kognityvinį aktyvumą ir sustiprina naratyvinį įtraukimą (Dey & Bokil, 2017; Kaindl, 1999).

Analizuojant skaitytojų reakcijas į istorinius komiksus, išryškėjo du pagrindiniai veiksniai, lemiantys aukščiausią įsitraukimo lygį: stilizacija ir naratyvinė koncentracija į pagrindinio veikėjo patirtį. Stilizacija sumažina informacinę perkrovą ir sudaro aiškias vizualines hierarchijas, kurios palengvina teksto ir recipiento sąveiką. Tyrimas leidžia teigti, kad stilizacija yra ne estetikos, bet komunikacijos komponentas. Sandarindama vizualinę medžiagą, stilizacija padeda skaitytojui lengviau identifikuoti prasminius akcentus, sukuria emocinių signalų sistemą ir leidžia informaciją suvokti nuosekliau. Be to, stilizacija palengvina kultūrinę adaptaciją, o tai ypač aktualu mažoms šalims, siekiančioms tarptautinio komiksų produkcijos matomumo. Empiriniai stebėjimai patvirtina prielaidą, kad stilizuoti istoriniai komiksai sukelia mažiau atmetimo reakcijų ir yra lengviau suprantami kultūriniuose kontekstuose, kuriuose istorinė vaizduotė skiriasi.

Atsižvelgiant į empirinę disproporciją tarp faktinio tikslumo ir naratyvinio efektyvumo, tyrimas rodo, kad komiksai kaip medija turi specifinių pranašumų pateikiant istorines patirtis. Vizualiai konstruojamos patirtys sužadina skaitytojui galimybę įsitraukti kaip veiksmų interpretatoriui, o ne pasyviam stebėtojui. Tokia skaitymo praktika yra esminis komiksų, kaip vizualinės medijos, komunikacinis komponentas: reikšmė sukuriama „tarp“ vaizdinių elementų. Būtent šiuose intervaliniuose „tarp“ momentuose skaitytojo emocinis ir kognityvinis aktyvumas pasiekia aukščiausią lygį, o tai sustiprina ne tik naratyvo suvokimą, bet ir istorinio konteksto internalizavimą. Tyrimo rezultatai leidžia teigti, kad istorinio žanro komiksai gali veikti kaip veiksminga papildoma edukacinė priemonė, tačiau tik tada, kai vizualinė komunikacija grindžiama struktūriniu paprastumu, estetiniu nuoseklumu ir semiotine ekonomija.

Bendrosios išvados

1. Skirtinguose kultūriniuose ir geografiniuose kontekstuose komiksai iš marginalios populiariosios pramogos palaipsniui tapo pripažinta meno forma. Šis procesas įvyko per nuolatinį legitimumo derinimą, kuriame dalyvavo kūrėjai, auditorijos, institucijos ir skaitytojai. Šiaurės Amerikoje komiksai kaip medija greitai išpopuliarėjo, tačiau visuotinė panika ir savicenzūra ilgam atidėjo jų kaip rimtos literatūros ir socialinio komentaro formos kultūrinį pripažinimą. Vakarų Europoje stipresnis autoriaus statusas, kūrinių teisių išlaikymas ir ribota cenzūra sudarė palankias sąlygas komiksų meno pripažinimui. Japonijoje manga po Antrojo pasaulinio karo tapo masine nacionalinė pramogos forma ir vėliau įgijo pasaulinį dominavimą. Lietuva, kaip ir kitos posovietines šalys, susidūrė su prievarta nutrauktomis kūrybos tradicijomis, silpnai išvystyta infrastruktūra ir įsišaknijusiu stereotipu, kad komiksai skirti tik vaikams. Tai reikšmingai ribojo

šios medijos raidą iki 2010-ųjų, kai nauja kūrėjų karta ir institucijos pradėjo normalizuoti komiksus kaip kultūrinį ir edukacinį įrankį.

2. Atlikta analizė atskleidžia, kad komiksų medijos komunikacinės galimybės priklauso nuo suderinto vaizdinių ir verbalinių išteklių naudojimo, o ne nuo vienos konkrečios gamybos technikos. Industrijoje taikomi kūrybos procesai išryškina skirtingas komunikacines kompetencijas – naratyvo konstravimą, vizualinę mizansceną, raidžių komponavimą ir grafinį atlikimą – kurios turi veikti darniai, siekiant išlaikyti aiškumą ir skaitytojo įsitraukimą. Tai rodo, kad kitų vizualiųjų menų įgūdžiai be specifinio medijos raštingumo yra nepakankami. Teorinė trianguliacija leidžia teigti, kad prasmė kyla per aktyvų skaitytojo dalyvavimą: uždarymo procesas sujungia fragmentiškus signalus į suvokiamą tęstinumą, konstruktyvizmo ir percepcijos teorijos paaiškina, kaip ankstesnė patirtis formuoja interpretaciją, o kognityvinės apkrovos, semiotikos, kadravimo ir naratyvo teorijos padeda suprasti, kaip maketas, ženklai ir vizualiniai akcentai struktūruoja laiką ir veiksmą. Galiausiai komiksai pasiekia išskirtinį komunikacinį efektyvumą kurdami nenutrūkstamo veiksmo iliuziją per tarpus tarp kadrų ir vizualizuodami garsą, kai žodžio ir vaizdo harmonija tampa esmine tiek suvokimui, tiek estetiniam poveikiui.

3. Autoetnografinė analizė parodė, kad istoriškai tikslaus komiksų turinio kūrimas susijęs su išskirtiniais kūrybiniais, komunikaciniais ir vadybiniais iššūkiais. Pagrindinis sunkumas – suderinti istorinį tikslumą su naratyvo aiškumu, tempu ir vizualiniu efektyvumu, nes faktinis tikslumas savaime negali kompensuoti silpno pasakojimo ar tekstu perkrautų puslapių. Nors bendradarbiavimas su istorikais yra būtinas siekiant istorinio tikslumo, jis taip pat kelia rizikų, susijusių su skirtingais prioritetais, konsultacijų vėlavimu ir kintančiomis istorinių detalių interpretacijomis. Tyrimo rezultatai pabrėžia istorinės problematikos sprendimo svarbą jau scenarijaus rengimo etape, ankstyvą derybinių ir nederybinių elementų identifikavimą bei realistiškų gamybos grafikų sudarymą, numatant galimus konsultacijų nulemtus stabdymus. Galiausiai atvejų analizės rodo, kad istoriniai komiksai reikalauja aukšto lygio komunikacinių gebėjimų, nes naratyvinės struktūros ir rezoliucijos trūkumai reikšmingai mažina skaitytojų įsitraukimą net ir esant aukštai vizualinei kokybei.

4. Atviro tipo klausimyno rezultatai rodo, kad skaitytojai lengviausiai įsimena ir emociškai labiausiai įsitraukia į dramatiškai svarbiausias akimirkas, aiškiai pažymėtas neverbaliniais signalais (veido išraiškomis, kūno laikysena, gestais). Gauti duomenys leidžia manyti, kad kai kuriais atvejais skaitytojai papildo naratyvą savarankiškai sukurtais elementais, siekdami užpildyti didesnius laiko šuolius tarp kadrų. Tai atitinka uždarymo ir konstruktyvizmo prasmės kūrimo sampratas, tačiau tokio elgesio paplitimas dėl tyrimo dizaino išlieka nepakankamai apibrėžtas. Tyrimo rezultatai taip pat parodė, kad aiškiai nurodyti laiko ir vietos duomenys pasižymi menku skaitytojų įsiminimo lygiu, o kontekstualiai integruota informacija buvo įsiminta didžiosios dalies respondentų, nors kai kuriais atvejais su tam tikru neapibrėžtumu.

5. Garso reprezentacijos raida komiksuose atskleidžia šios medijos gebėjimą nuosekliai kurti komunikacines inovacijas. Analizuojant komiksų seriją „Nepaprastas Žmogus-Voras“ nustatyta, kad per penkis dešimtmečius tekstinė informacija iš pagalbinio paaiškinamojo elemento tapo strategiškai integruota vizualinio pasakojimo dalimi. Perėjimas nuo perteklinio paaiškinamojo teksto prie subtilių, interpretacinį aktyvumą skatinančių sprendimų rodo didėjantį pasitikėjimą skaitytojų semiotine kompetencija. Ši įžvalga turi praktinę reikšmę naujai besiformuojančioms komiksų rinkoms, tokioms kaip Lietuva, kur kūrėjai gali remtis jau susiformavusiomis vizualinių ir tekstinių elementų strategijomis ir taip išvengti ilgamečio bandymų ir klaidų proceso.

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Doctoral Dissertation

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ISTORIJOS VAIZDAVIMAS KOMIKSUOSE:
LAIKO IR ERDVĖS KOMUNIKACIJOS SVARBA

Daktaro disertacija

Socialiniai mokslai,
Komunikacija ir informacija (S 008)

Lietuvių kalbos redaktorė Deimantė Grigaitė
Anglų kalbos redaktorė Jūratė Griškėnaitė

2026 01 23. 13,7 sp. l. Tiražas 20 egz.
Leidinio el. versija *https://doi.org/10.20334/2026-002-M*
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