

KOMIK MANDIRI IN YOGYAKARTA; LOCAL VALUES REPRESENTATION IN INDEPENDENT COMICS

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Abstract

Independent comics in Indonesia emerged in the mid 90s marked by a movement in art colleges in Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Jakarta. Later on, this movement resulted in a publication of physical comic called '*Komik Indie*'. '*Komik Indie*' was published, among the reasons, to present new local comic that had stopped circulating since late 1980s. Nowadays, in the era that is commonly identified as the disruptive era, with all ease provided by the internet access, social-media platforms, and high intensity on web-comic uploads, the comic book industry in Indonesia is flooded by publications of new national comics. Independent comic publications still remain. The term '*komik mandiri*' is chosen to show the autonomous act in publishing own works. Literally, *mandiri* means 'independent', but in this terminology, the word puts more point on the autonomous act. Comic artists do not have to find or wait for publishers to have their comic published. The discussions focus on the work of independent comics, especially those featuring the unique stories or representations, which have distinctive values from many similar publications. Because of its independency, there are possibilities to find some critical and progressive issues towards the society inside the story. In the independent comics some interesting ideas are found. They focus on the representation of local values that still reflect on the local wisdom, and the new locality, which was formed with the development of times and urbanization. The viewpoint and social experience of comic artists in their environment seems to be a quite strong reference as a provision in presenting deep-rooted narratives without them eliminate the universal value of the narrative work to be enjoyed by a broad audience.

Keywords: Yogyakarta; local values; representation; independent comics

Introduction

Independent comics in Indonesia emerged in the mid 90s marked by a movement in art colleges in Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Jakarta. Later on, this movement resulted in a publishing of physical comic called '*Komik Indie*'. '*Komik Indie*' was published, among the reasons, to present new local comic that had stopped circulating since late 1980s, after the golden period of *silat* (traditional martial art) comics, romance, and superhero comics. Its presence is also believed to provide public with an alternative reading material in the effort to compete the translated comics – mostly Japan's manga – that were produced in a massive publication mode. Independent comic artists produced their own comics by photocopy machines; the most accessible and economic printing method back in the day. These xerox-photocopied independent comics hit the society's awareness about its existence. Wide coverage from local and national newspapers about this phenomenon led to the rising of new local comic studios and comic communities. It created its own market that urged the government through the Ministry of Education and Culture to give support by organizing a biennale national exhibition and festival called *Pekan Komik dan Animasi Nasional* (National Comic and Animation Week), started in 1998. These new comic supporters were the reasons of the emergence of a national comic industry in the mid 2000s. In addition to the human resources, the important things were the new style of storytelling, new technique explorations, critical narratives, and more freedom in delivering ideas. The independent comic readers, the audiences, also gradually became eager audiences for the market of the new promising local comics publishing.

Nowadays, in the era that is commonly identified as the disruptive era, with all ease provided by the internet access, social-media platforms, and high intensity on web-comic uploads, the comic book industry in Indonesia is flooded by publications of new national comics. The government policy to establish Bekraf, the Badan Ekonomi Kreatif or the Indonesian Creative Economy Agency to promote creativity-based economy potentials enhances comic development too. However, independent comic publications still survive and can be found in every comic festival or other comic-themed events for any kind of reasons.

In London Book Fair 2019, Indonesian comic books were also presented in the display, discussion forum, and other side-activities. To appreciate Indonesian comic books, the organizer even talk invited Paul Gravett, a world class writer and comic book scholar, as the moderator to host a talk show discussing Indonesian comics. Indonesian comics also attracted attention in Europolia 2017 and Frankfurt Book 2015.

In many festivals held inside the country, mostly in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Bandung, people could find many stands of comic book. The range covered big publishers capable of publishing large numbers of copies such as Gramedia groups and Mizan Books, comic-specialized publishers, for example Re:On and Bumi Langit, and comic artists who produced a limited quantity of their own works or commonly known as independent publishing.

Independent publishing or self-publishing in this era might have different pattern and objective from the artists of 1994 until 2000s had. However, they still maintain the former photocopying method to multiply their work and start to use newer technologies such as digital print that allows them to treat their comic book as a 'print on demand' product.

The term '*komik mandiri*' is chosen to show the autonomous act in publishing own works. Literally, *mandiri* means 'independent', but in this terminology, the word puts more point on the autonomous act. Comic artists do not have to find or wait for publishers to have their comic published. Once their comic material is ready, they only need to come to a print shop and print any amount they want. With the available good quality printing machines, this production mode enables any comic artist to have as good printed book as real publisher will give them. *Komik mandiri* later presents more choices regarding the themes and art styles, compared to the *komik indie* genre that was sometimes trapped in the definition of indie-comic i.e. comics that are anti-narrative, *fine-art-ish*, against mainstream, and presenting very personal art style (Bajraghosa, 2015). The comic artists do not call their work as 'indie' anymore, but sometimes they just put acknowledgement on the book, that their comic is '*diterbitkan secara mandiri*', which means 'this comic is self-published'.

On the *komik mandiri* point of view, many kinds of stories and genres can be found. There are comics with the story of *silat* or martial art and *wayang* genre, which was famous from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Superhero genre and even romance theme in the manga style also exist. The physical appearance format chosen varies from thick books similar to graphic novel with a serious theme to a compilation of several stories in thin book format. Despite these various themes and art styles, *komik mandiri* presents one similar characteristic namely that the comics visually represent local values.

Local wisdom according to Edi Sedyawati, 2006, is a wisdom in the traditional culture of nation tribes, not only the norms and culture values, but all elements of ideas including the ones which have implication to the technology, health care, and aesthetic. Referring to the definition, many patterns of actions and cultural material products are included as local wisdoms. Sedyawati, 2006, adds that every nation tribe has its own special characteristic in inheriting their cultural values. Comic can be a medium to do the task of inheriting cultural values by means of the story told and other elements contained in it.

The narration in comics is built around specific setting. It may be specific location or specific society that hold their own local wisdom. Comics explicitly represent local value through stereotyping or implicitly served by blending it with universal values. This paper will focus on discussing the work of independent comics, especially those featuring unique stories or representations, which have distinctive values from several similar publications. The objective of this research is not to describe the Indonesian local values neither to glorify the culture, but more to investigate the recent independent comic rhetoric in the socio-cultural environment.

Material and Methods

The samples of the study are the independent comic that can be found and selected from comic exhibitions, comic festivals, and comic market in Yogyakarta. Because of its independency, there are possibilities to find some peculiarities in terms of unique presentations, the use of experimental

aesthetics, or the story that tells about critical and progressive issues happening in the society. The sample must be chosen from comics in a book format, to prove the idea of self-publishing, and the ones that do not directly put the local wisdom as the main narrative theme. *Rasa Juang* by Aulia Azziawaty (2016, self-published) got great attention when exhibited in a festival called Pasar Komik Bandung in 2016 and later in Mangafest 2016. *Beringas Volume 1*, an anthology book created by the collective Barasub (2015, Tan Kinira Books), was the first publication from the collective Barasub. Barasub later was often invited to attend prestigious visual art and comic events such as the National Comic Festival in 2017. Up to this year, there have been 3 volumes available not only in Indonesia but also in Japan and Australia. These two books are proper to be examined in this research.

The samples taken to be analyzed are “Rejection” created by Aulia Azziawaty, taken from *Rasa Juang*, published in 2016, and “Bebal” created by Chrisna Fernand from *Beringas Volume 1*, published in 2015.

Visuals in the comics, consists of both pictures and words, are used to depict the world of the story. Literary theory calls this fictional world of story as diegesis. Research on the visual representation of local values in the independent comic will follow the approach of image function analysis. The function of images should be identified to examine comic book as a medium of communication. Duncan and Smith, 2009, divide images in comics into 3 functions; sensory diegetic images, non-sensory diegetic images, and hermeneutic images. Sensory diegetic images are images of what can be seen and experienced through senses, usually depict the characters, objects, structures, sound, smell, and other sensory environment of the story world. Non-sensory diegetic images show the internal reality of the characters in the story that is undetectable by the senses, which usually depict specific memories, emotions, or sensations. Hermeneutic images do not depict either physical or mental reality of the world of the story, even they are not the part of the diegesis, but instead a comment on the story and an explicit attempt to influence the readers’ interpretation of the story.

To detect and define the representation of the local values in the samples, I refer to my social and empiric experiences as a Javanese living in

Java, as my perceptual filter. The perceptual filter according to Duncan, 2012, consists of beliefs and attitudes that create predispositions and particular knowledge that can contribute to or hinder the understanding of the subject matter. In the independent comics the study sees how the local values are represented, and how these representations rhetorically reveal the meaning and deliver the message as a part of the process to better experience the narrative.

Results and Discussion

Emoticons On The Coin Jar

Silent comic titled 'Rejection' starts its story by putting a close up image of a jam-bottle kind of jar functioned as a piggy bank for coins, on the first panel (Fig. 1). A hand belonging to a man, later known as Adi, holds the jar. Through the close-up view, we can see the doodle drawing on the surface of the jar: two happy faces. Just as nowadays emoticons, each face only shows eyes and smiling mouth. What makes the doodle drawing different from the smartphone emoticon is the attributes added to each face.

On the left, the face has ears and some kind of a hair-do, altogether with the hair accessories. Below the smiling mouth, on the left chin, we can see a dot, served as a small mole to the face. On the right side, the smiling face only has a kind of hat, like an upside-down bucket, horizontally divided into two sides. The upper side has strips. My perceptual filter, as a Javanese living in Java, drives me to understand these doodles as a drawing of Javanese bride's and groom's happy faces. The hair-do on the left face is called '*sanggul*' or '*konde*', and the accessories on the hair called '*tusuk konde*'. The hair-do and the accessories define that it is a Javanese bride depicted. The face with the bucket hat is auto-understood as the groom. The kind of bucket hat is called '*kuluk*'. Related to this research, I underlie an assumption that the drawing on the jar on this panel represents the local value: emoticons of Javanese wedding style.

On the next panel, Adi smiles with the eyes closed, while he holds the jar close to his face, and later he keeps it on his postman bag hanging on the wall. The story continues with a cut-to-cut flashback of Little Adi who met his new neighbor, a Little Girl of his age, who just came with her parents bringing

boxes from their former house. Still jetlagged and felt strange to the new neighborhood, the Little Girl did not pay attention to Adi and he attempted to welcome her with a handshake. This panel cuts to a series of panels that show a grown-up Girl carrying a box, accidentally elbowed a bag that a coin-jar inside sprang out of it and smashed to the floor.

The following panels and pages focusing on how Adi and The Girl met as new neighbors, got close, separated again as the girl had to move with the family out of the neighborhood when they were still students of an elementary school, and then somehow they met again as university students when they joined the same class in a university in Yogyakarta. The busy Yogyakarta city is represented with its famous landmark: a small monument called Tugu, surrounded by some passing vehicles. Then the panel cuts to a university building. This representation depicts the landmark of the city just to make sure that this story happens in Yogyakarta. Maybe as they study in the business and economy department, Adi and The Girl open their small coffee shop. As it shown in several panels, the coffee shop seems quite busy and they plan to have the place renovated and upgraded. Adi is shown struggling to finish his undergraduate thesis as well as struggling to cut the food expenses by eating cheap instant noodles to save money; he puts the coins into the jar.

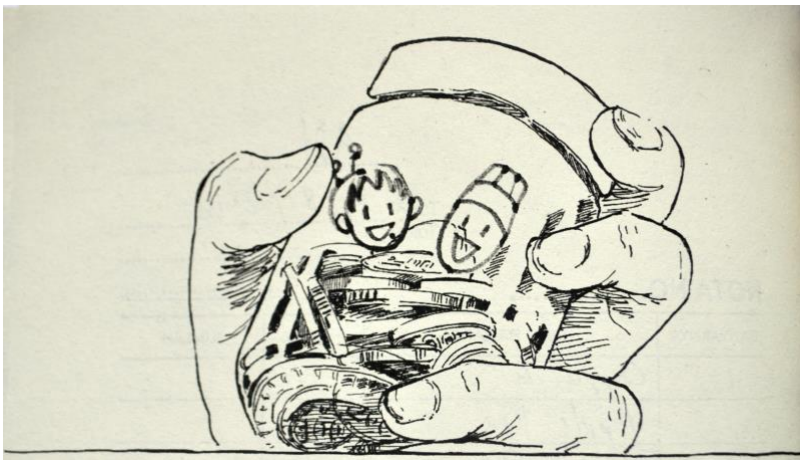


Figure 1: The Close up View of a Coin Jar Opens the Story (Notice the Emoticons of the Javanese bride & groom on it.)

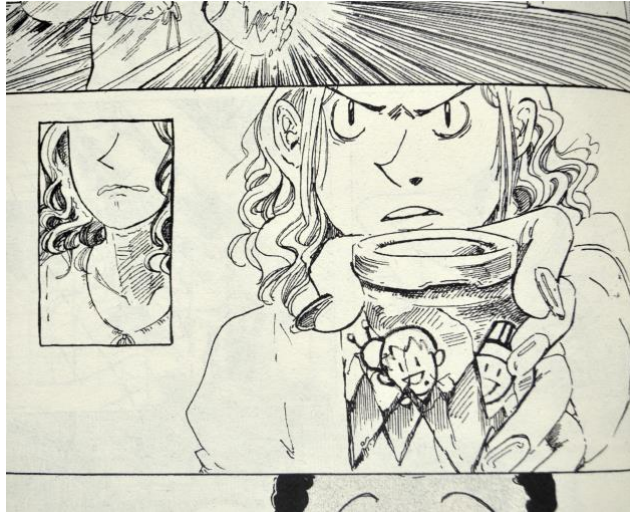


Figure 2: The Angry Girl and the Broken Coin Jar (The emoticons still can be seen.)



Figure 3: Another Close up View of the Coin Jar and an Added Detail; a Ring on the Girl's Left Ring Finger.

On a busy day, when Adi goes out and brings groceries, he meets The Girl who seem does not in a good mood. She is a little bit angry and yells at something too. She just accidently elbows Adi's coin jar that it is smashed on the floor and the coins in it fall out and scattered around it. She is not sorry for

what she has just done because her attention is distracted by what she find on the jar: the doodle drawing of Javanese bride's & groom's happy face emoticons. She questions Adi about it. The image showed on the panel emphasizes it; an extreme close up view of the upper part of the breaking jar and the lid is still closed with glass cracks all over it. However, the happy faces of Javanese bride & groom are still intact among the cracks and clearly visible. The Girl holds it as a foreground to her angry, confused face (Fig. 2). Adi says no word. Next in between panels just shows his confused face and his expression of unwillingness to explain about the drawing and the coin-jar, neither the situation. The extreme close up of the jar image is repeated, focused on the jar with the emoticons only and The Girl's left hand holds it. Another detail is shown: there is a ring on her ring finger (Fig. 3). She leaves a station. Outside, in the backyard small terrace, Adi follows the girl and calms her down. They hug each other for a moment, and then The Girl pushes him.

The following panels, with a quite wide gutter between the panels, show a bright sun; telling it is a sunny day. Adi is in a batik shirt. Some people wear fancy clothes too. Andi smiles with something in his mind. He smiles to the bride & groom as some people queue to give the lovely couple a congratulation handshake. The bride and groom are represented in the comic wearing Javanese royal wedding dress style, especially Royal Surakarta style (Fig. 4). The hair do and the *kuluk* hat, the black velvet kind of dress, the cloth they wear, and all accessories applied, define the style. When it is Adi's turn to congratulate the bride, the woman with a small mole on her left chin, they look at each other for a moment. Then Adi proposes a fist-bump salute, instead of a handshake. She responds back. At the moment, she remembers that she was the one who taught Adi the fist-bump salute when they were still little kids living at the same neighborhood.

Near to the end of the story, the relation between the bride & groom fashion style and the doodle drawing on Adi's coin-jar is uncovered although the wedding is not his. Adi might save his extra coins because he had planned to marry or at least propose The Girl with a little mole on her left chin. That was why he put the emoticon drawings on it. Unfortunately, he never did any

of his plans until the incident of the broken jar revealing one of the two whether The Girl might be engaged to someone else, or she was just not really into him that at last she married another man. In this way, the title of this short comic 'Rejection' makes its sense.

The wedding scene obviously represents a local value by dint of the choice of the fashion style of the bride and groom. The couch for the bride and the groom to sit on is the one takes a form of a small bed that can often be found in *senthong* room. This room is a private room along with other section of the house constitutes the old Javanese *Limasan* architectural tradition. The pictures of guest handshaking the couple also represent a local habit that commonly encountered in wedding reception parties in Yogyakarta, or even broader in Java.

Rhetorically, the portrayal of a wedding scene in which the bride and the groom wear a royal Java style wedding dress conveys three functions. The first one is to say that the setting of the story is still in Yogyakarta, or at least one of the couple is a Javanese. Second one, and the more important one is the visual luxury seen from the royal wedding dress contains philosophical symbols commenting to the sacredness of the wedding itself. On the narrative of the comic, this also symbolizes a sacred ceremony through which a member of a family, i.e. The Girl is officially taken out from her home by somebody else, i.e. the groom. The choice of the dress has greater impact to the narrative about love and rejection. The last one, related to the plot and visual keys delivered in this comic, the choice of the wedding dress obviously is a reflection, a realization of the happy face emoticons on the jar. But in a plot twist. The emoticons open the story. Then they cause a conflict. Even though they are small, not fully rendered on the glass jar, big attention is put on their presentations along the panels. Readers are aware of this emoticon presentation part by part, and then draw a conclusion about the wedding scene and about the dress the bride and groom worn. The dress might be a plot device, but it functions well, again, in building the narrative about love and rejection.



Figure 4: The Wedding Scene (Notice the similarity between the bride & groom's hair do and the emoticons on the jar.)

Young Artists in Yogyakarta

Eighteen pages comic entitled 'Bebal', literally means stupid/foolish, tells a story about two young art school students who question about art that is treated as a commodity; how art exhibitions are organized just to sell artworks and the artists' attitude towards this situation. The plot of the story is established by depicting a series of non-literal images and visual metaphors showing beautifully rendered solid black and white figures mostly in symbolic and non-sequitur panel transitions. According to Abel and Maden (2008),

symbolic panel transition occurs when a panel followed or preceded by a panel that shows something non literal, in order to pinpoint a character's state of mind or a situation via a visual metaphor. While non-sequitur panel transitions is a transition that can not shoehorn into the storyline and define closure from the reader, Abel and Madden (2008), McCloud (2008). The narrative is delivered by texts which present similar format found in a modern poetry. These texts are positioned in the empty spaces around the images, above, under, or in the middle of it. In general, the text placement is proper and does not disturb the pleasure in enjoying the pictures.

The images contained do not always reflect the word. Scott McCloud (2007) identifies this kind of word and picture relation in Chrisna Fernand's comics that mostly show the interdependent relation, parallel relations, and montage relations. Large images occupy several pages. There is one page with only one image on it. There are also pages with each page presents one image that is divided into panels. We can see the picture as a holistic image in a page, but since the narration texts are placed in each panel, this picture seems presented partly, in a piece by piece way. Some of them have no text. This kind of portrayal frees the readers to enjoy the symbolic transitions between continuous images inside the panels.

Except for the texts that are presented in Bahasa Indonesia, there is no specified cultural thing can be used to identify the setting of the story. Those images are 'nationless'. We will find images on each page serve as sensory diegetic images namely two boys as the main characters, a scooter, a house, an art gallery, a drawing table, a chair, a television, and a table lamp. We also can find images served as non-sensory diegetic images such as headless men in suits with long tie, head of a tiger, some boxes, smokes, twin orangutans, masks, and some weird things. None of them can be easily identified as an object of a specific or particular culture.

Apparently there are visual representations of local values. The first one is the set of street food on display trays. The others are two drawing-posters of *wayang* (shadow puppet) characters: *Togog* and *Betara Ismaya*.

The food display depicted on page 29 of the book (or page 7 of the *Bebal* section) is very familiar for the residents of Yogyakarta who have ever visited or had meal at street food stall called '*angkringan*' (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6). In urban slang it is called a '*warung koboi*'¹. This is the common place for university students or middle class workers, or those who want to eat with minimal budget. They serve a small amount of rice together with few cuts of tempeh, or small dried fish, or *sambal*, in a very small package yet is enough to 'delay' someone's hunger. Because the portion is very small, the popular name for the rice is '*nasi kucing*' or rice for a cat. Other than *nasi kucing*, this kind of stalls also sell side dish and snacks such as fried tofu, fried tempeh, fried banana, quail egg satay, and snail satay. This street food stall has been very popular among the local people. Nowadays, it even develops to become a famous tourism destination in Yogyakarta.

The *angkringan* scene only appears in 3 panels. Before these 3 panels, it is seen that the young artist is struggling to climb a rough wall (see Fig. 6). The wall is a part of 'a cube-ing phenomenon' mentioned by the narrator. At the top of the wall, he finds something and his hand reaches it. It is a cube-shaped thing and in the background there is a circular-ornamental pattern similar to a paper doily. The pattern seems glorifying the act of reaching something. This panel cuts to the first *angkringan* panel where a hand suddenly shown taking a similar cube-shaped fried tofu in the food tray. The next panel shows the young artist is going to eat it and in the panel after, the *angkringan* seller while making a drink asks: "is art exhibition only about selling artwork or not?". It is common for people visiting *angkringan* and also the seller to have conversation about various topics ranging from a light talk to a heavy topic discussion on some specific themes. Sometimes compared to the food, it is more the conversation, as social connection, that interest the people to come.

¹ Angkringan literally means a place to do 'ngangkring' (eating without table manner) and 'warung koboi' means 'a cowboy food stall'; because cowboy is known for their brave and rough habit so they can eat anywhere.



Figure 5: Detail of the Street Food Stall Display on the “Bebal” Comic



Figure 6: Page 29 of the “Bebal” Comic

Rhetorically, the street food stall scene may deliver a message that to survive, artists, as common human beings, still need to eat. The transition from a metaphorical object to a real food object also gives a self-comment that the creator of this comic still mind about his surroundings, not only focus to talk about his artistic through the use of difficult jargons of art and visual metaphors. By presenting the street food stall scene, there is also a possibility to bring out another subject that is the seller. This character gives comment on art from his point of view, as a symbolic representation of common people thinking about art. Lastly, besides saying that the setting of the story is Yogyakarta, the choice of representing the *angkringan* is a way of stating that this young artist is still poor so that he is only capable of eating at the *angkringan*.

The drawing-posters depicted wayang characters are not fully shown but readers surely can read the text written on it; the first one is Togog and the second one is Betara Ismaya (Fig. 7). From the style of the drawing, the posters are likely the young artist's artwork, not a mass-printed commercial poster. He puts it on his room wall, together with his other drawings. The characters, *Togog* and *Betara Ismaya*, are better known for their comedy roles and the clown-like personas in the *wayang* show. Actually they are fallen to earth gods, and the jokes they deliver serve as a subtle reminder containing layers of Javanese philosophy. The *wayang* drawing-poster shortly can be examined as a manifestation and also reminder of Java-ism spirit for the young artist/student in the story, rather than just a poster of fandom. Many international well-known artists from Indonesia such as Entang Wiharso, Heri Dono, and Eko Nugroho have been exploring wayang stories to find inspiration and presenting it with their respective style. The young artist in the Bebal story narration talks about art, artist, how audience appreciate art, art market, and other things related to it. He might realizes that wayang is fertile land of inspiration for his art, and the drawing-poster he made is just a beginning.

The images that visually represent local values in the narrative serve as sensory-diegetic images. They are real and exist in the world of the story, as parts of the setting and properties. These images are presented along with and juxtaposed to non-sensory diegetic images showing surrealistic ideas inside the head of the narrator. It can be said that they function to anchor the story back to the earth, the reality, so that the readers will understand that the poetry, the

backbone of this comic narration, happens in the real condition namely in the complicated situation of art market in Yogyakarta, where the young artists have to live the life and make art.



Figure 7: Drawing-poster Depicted Local *wayang* Character in the Young Artist's Style.

Conclusion

In “Rejection” by Azziawaty and “Bebal” by Fernand, there are some interesting ideas. In accordance to the area study in Yogyakarta, the representation of local values can be found and still reflect on the local wisdom. The royal Javanese wedding dresses are represented in the comic, as the narrative deliver a story about a wedding party and in emoticons form. These choices has impacts on how the reader will follow and understand the story rhetorically.

The new locality visual representation, which was formed though the development of times and urbanization also can be found in the *angkringan* street food stall depiction. As a symbol, the tofu in the street food stall used as a visual transition from visual metaphor to daily object. This representation not

only served as an element to the setting of the story, but rhetorically also served as a self commentary to the poetry-like narration to keep it not too high and back to the reality. This representation of the street food stall does not reflect old traditional culture value, but indeed there is a possibility this new locality will develop as new cultural values of Yogyakarta recently and in the future.

The comic sample examined each is a single artist creation, and it can be stated that this creation is carefully prepared, to let the reader enjoying the story as well as absorb the emotion delivered. Whether it is a sadness caused by a love rejection, or a confusing condition of a youth's uncertainty choice about a professional step in the art world. The viewpoint and social experience of comic artists in their environment, seems to be a quite strong reference as a provision in presenting deep-rooted narratives without then eliminating the universal value of the narrative work to be enjoyed by a broad audience.

These kind of independent comics can be seen providing stories that are close to everyday life, offering different and critical ideas, and at the same time offering readers a self-critic and self-reminders to look more wisely at the society and surrounding environment.

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