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***Cultural and intercultural competence
in fantasy graphic novels:***

Twig by Skottie Young

Nimona by ND Stevenson

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Abstract

This thesis, titled *Cultural and intercultural competence in fantasy graphic novels*, investigates how the fantasy graphic novels *Twig* by Skottie Young and Kyle Strahm (2022) and *Nimona* by ND Stephenson (2015) frame and present cultural and intercultural themes. Norway's LK20 English curriculum emphasizes cultural and intercultural competence as important factors that are considered core elements of the subject. Furthermore, a goal is for pupils to work with different types of texts, such as graphic novels to provide learning. Consequently, this thesis studies how fantasy graphic novels can be used to achieve these goals. Semiotics, social semiotics and comics theory form the basis of understanding and analyzing these graphic novels. Certain themes throughout the graphic novels connected to the overarching topics of portrayals of society and creatures, identity and representation will anchor the discussion and tie the graphic novels to culture. Analysis and discussion of the primary works with additional secondary literature and previous research suggest that fantasy graphic novels can increase real-world cultural and intercultural competence.

Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven, med tittelen *Kulturell og interkulturell kompetanse i fantasy tegneserieromaner*, utforsker hvordan fantasy tegneserieromanene *Twig* av Skottie Young og Kyle Strahm (2022) og *Nimona* av ND Stevenson (2015) legger fram og presenterer kulturelle og interkulturelle temaer. Norges læreplanverk LK20 i engelskfaget legger vekt på kulturell og interkulturell kompetanse som viktige deler av engelskfagets kjerneelementer. Dessuten, et mål for elevene er å jobbe med ulike typer tekster, som for eksempel tegneserieromaner, for å oppnå læring. Som en konsekvens av dette, vil oppgaven finne ut hvordan fantasy tegneserieromaner kan bli brukt til å nå disse målene. Semiotikk, sosialsemiotikk og tegneserieteori står i grunn for å forstå og analysere disse tegneserieromanene. Hovedtemaene er skildringer av samfunnet, samt skapninger, identitet og representasjon, og skal brukes til å knytte tegneserieromanene til kultur. Analyse og diskusjon av hovedverkene med tilleggslitteratur og tidligere forskning tyder på at fantasy tegneserieromaner kan bidra til å øke kulturell og interkulturell kompetanse i den virkelige verden.

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Introduction

Project description & argument

This thesis investigates how the fantasy graphic novels *Twig* by Skottie Young and Kyle Strahm (2022) and *Nimona* by ND Stephenson (2015) frame and present cultural and intercultural themes, and I argue that these texts use the fantasy genre to address, scrutinize and critique real-world topics in instructive manners with clear classroom relevance. The way this which takes place will undergo formal and semiotic analysis, thus covering the spectrum from the way comic-book devices tell stories to their social meaning. The theoretical and methodological basis for these investigations is formed by Peircean semiotics as presented by Magnussen (2000), Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) and the social semiotics of Gunther Kress (2010).

Cultural and intercultural competence are important skills in the 21st century, previous research has shown that cultural and intercultural competence can indeed be positively impacted by reading and working with graphic novels (Hecke, 2011; Porto et al., 2019; Rimmereide, 2022). There has been little focus, however, on graphic novels where the setting is in the realm of fantasy.

Fantasy worlds might seem more remote, but culture bleeds through them in intriguing fashion. How society is portrayed, how creatures and landscapes are detailed, and how identity and representations of characters within these fantasy worlds emerges are all pertinent points within the fantasy setting. Authors create new cultures in their world, which are based on real life cultures either intentionally or unintentionally, functioning as lenses to different perspectives on real themes and topics. These new cultures might form stereotypical views of existing cultures, but even that can work in favor of improving cultural and intercultural competence through reflection and discussion.

On the one hand, fantasy representation of existing cultures can reinscribe stereotypes. Helen Young argues that already established discourses about race are reproduced in fantasy (2015). She refers to this as “habits of whiteness” as many modern fantasy stories in contemporary popular culture are inspired by novels such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, written by white men with western values and morals. It has been argued, for example, that Tolkien's dwarves are informed by antisemitic stereotypes (Brackmann, 2010, p. 85). Fantasy races can in other words be inspired by or based on real life cultures, and thus able to reinscribe stereotypes in society.

This, however, can be claimed to be an unconscious act rather than a conscious one (H. Young, 2015).

Stereotypical representations in already existing fantasy literature can be critiqued in light of contemporary society, as Helen Young does in her critique of Tolkien's semiotic representations of dwarves (2015). The issue is not necessarily related to how the representation is framed, negative or positive. However, the issue stems from how "thinking in stereotypes is wrong to begin with" (Vink, 2013, p. 123). Therefore, fantasy representation of existing cultures is a tool to critique and analyze these stereotypes in order to improve cultural and intercultural competence in readers as they can combat preexisting stereotypical notions.

On the other hand, fantasy representation of existing cultures can also be a tool for critique and analysis in a progressive fashion. Fantasy has the ability to present ideal, progressive societies. In his doctoral dissertation titled *Phantasm of Hope: The Utopian Function of Fantasy Literature* A. C. Morgan posits the idea that:

The politics of fantasy, however, are ours. In stating this I mean that the genre is capable of carrying any ideology within one of its texts, including progressive and utopian ideas; its form cannot be reduced to a vehicle for a singular ideological position (2021, p. 3)

Furthermore, he claims that archetypal figures within fantasy writing are reused and continue to evolve to present ideal progressive societies (Morgan, 2021, p. 6). By acknowledging and understanding the representations of previous fantasy literature, one can attempt to recreate races and cultures in contemporary fantasy works in a more morally up-to-date state, as *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) have attempted.

This thesis analyses multiple scenes from the graphic novels against a background of formal and social sign theories to support the claim that cultural and intercultural competence can be improved through reading and discussing fantasy graphic novels. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994) forms a basis for how to interpret the component parts from the comics, from speech bubbles to panels, while Gunther Kress' theory of social semiotics will be used to place the texts in a societal context. These formal and societal perspectives are tied together by C. S. Peirce's sign theories, which Anne Magnussen argues form a "precise and full" description of how comics work (2000, p. 203).

The primary focal points that anchor my thesis and retain thematic unity throughout, include the graphic novels' portrayal of society and the creatures, nature and landscapes, along with a selection of characters and their representation.

Both the theme and the form in graphic novels can help foster cultural and intercultural competence. Hecke (2011) argues that one of the clear advantages of graphic novels in general is how they are able to foster “intercultural learning”, through addressing “intercultural topics such as identity and intercultural understanding” (2011, p. 655). She also specifies how graphic novels might be rewarding to use in classrooms for struggling pupils, where interpretation of text and image might be more enjoyable and feasible (Hecke, 2011, p. 654). Furthermore, graphic novels can give a grander sense of our globalized world through graphic novels such as *Pashmina* which take place in the US and India. Ghatak argues that diaspora and immigration narratives in graphic novels can deal with identity, gender, and cultural difference (2023, pp. 95–97). Above all, Rimmereide posits that critical literacy can also be trained through the use of graphic novels, where they can be viewed as “not as a transparent window on reality, but as constructed from a viewpoint” (Rimmereide, 2022, p. 112), which is further indicative of how cultural and intercultural competence play into how a graphic novel is interpreted. Consequently, graphic novels can be tools for intercultural and cultural understanding. These studies and articles emphasize cultural and intercultural learning through somewhat realistic graphic novels which take place in reality with existing cultures and history. However, an argument can be made that even fully fictional fantasy graphic novels can still teach and develop cultural and intercultural competence, despite not occurring in “reality”. *Twig* (S. Young, 2022) and *Nimona* (Stevenson, 2015) are two examples of such texts.

Background

Twig (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) are two graphic novels which present unique, colorful and culturally rich worlds with an emphasis on fantasy. *Twig* (2022) is a story about a little blue creature named Twig who inherits a job as a *placeling* after his father passes away. His responsibility is to retrieve artifacts and place them somewhere specific so that heroes of other tales can take these artifacts, or *MacGuffins*, and use them on their own quest. Twig goes on an adventure with his yellow companion where he experiences all the world has to offer, including different alien beings, landscapes, cultures and more as he encounters his own struggles relating to his quest, identity, lineage, and motivation. His world is a mix of magic, technology and many different creatures and anthropomorphized pieces of architecture and

nature. Important features in the world of *Twig* (2022) also include vicious, horrible, evil-looking creatures that fit into a post-apocalyptic world, but are somehow kind and helpful. Judgement based on appearances in a diverse world can lead to negative outcomes, and *Twig* enforces the notion that a character or an individual must be viewed based on their actions rather than their outward appearance.

Another feature of the graphic novel is how themes such as doubt and self-sacrifice affect characters and the story. A rhino creature is told its life can save the world, and he selflessly offers himself up as a sacrifice, whilst Twig, who has to actively take the rhino's life showcases doubts in his own abilities to save said world (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 4). A sense of responsibility over using someone's life for the greater good provides an interesting moral dilemma with different potential outcomes. Cultural values and morals can affect the answer to such a difficult situation, and is another reason why *Twig* (2022) is a fitting graphic novel to analyze in light of social semiotic theory and the semiotic triangle.

Nimona (2015) is comparatively a very different graphic novel compared to *Twig* (2022). It takes place in a fantasy world that resembles our own to a greater degree, with a more medieval aesthetic where magic and technology coexist in a setting referred to as *magepunk* (Bass, 2018). Nimona is the protagonist, who is a shapeshifter able to change her form into any animal or creature in existence, which includes both animals we find in the real world, such as rhinos and birds, and fantasy and mythological creatures such as dragons. She supports a dishonored black knight called Sir Allistair Blackheart on his quest to undermine the Institution, an organization which secretly runs the kingdom whilst researching dark, deadly magics and conducting experiments on citizens. The author and artist, N.D Stevenson, is transgender (ND Stevenson [@Gingerhazing], 2021), and *Nimona* (2015) is concerned with transformations and metamorphoses: the titular character is a shapeshifter capable of changing species and gender. From this stems a theme of identity fluidity that informs the graphic novel in direct and indirect ways. Furthermore, the story delves into aspects of heroism, as well as how expectations can be deceiving. Symbolism through colors and status can also appear subversive, as is evident in how the protagonist Sir Allistair Blackheart and the monster Nimona are the true heroes, masked as villains. Culture, specifically cultural and intercultural competence are two pertinent facets of understanding which are relevant to interpreting and comprehending these fantasy graphic novels.

Culture

Cultural and intercultural competence are central to the project, as I explore how the fantasy graphic novels *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) can contribute to enhancing these competences. Explaining and understanding the terminology of cultural and intercultural competence is integral to exploring them within the field of graphic novels. Graphic novels are multimodal and an entertaining and fun way of experiencing storytelling. Multimodality is when a work features multiple modes simultaneously, such as picture, color and text, to tell a narrative. Consequently, some young people, such as pupils in lower and upper secondary education, might prefer graphic novels to novels. Some research has shown that the current digital age of media has negative impacts on adolescents' attention and ability to read longer works (Twenge et al., 2019), which might explain some preference towards multimodal graphic novels. On the other hand, regardless of attention and reading ability, the appeal of graphic novels is how combining modes enhances the reader experience.

The importance of learning intercultural and cultural competence is emphasized in the Norwegian curriculum of LK20 as an important aspect of education (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). Cultural and intercultural competence are important life skills, as evident in their inclusion within Norway's newest curriculum, the LK20. Within the core elements of the English subject, it states:

By reflecting on, interpreting and critically assessing different types of texts in English, the pupils shall acquire language and knowledge of **culture** and society. Thus the pupils will develop **intercultural competence** enabling them to deal with different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns. They shall build the foundation for seeing their own identity and others' identities in a multilingual and multicultural context. [emphasis added] (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b)

Acquiring knowledge of both culture and society is important as it helps developing intercultural competence, which is central in communicating and interacting with the globalized contemporary society we inhabit.

Culture, along with cultural and intercultural competence, are two pertinent terms when discussing social semiotics and meaning. Jahoda (2012) studies culture through critically reflecting on previous definitions of the word. She reaches the conclusion that there is no definite way of defining or understanding the term 'culture', and posits that one can and should use the term without seeking to give it a finite definition. However, it can also be

pertinent to explain the usage contextually (Jahoda, 2012, p. 438). A useful limitation might be to see culture in the context of human interaction. Aspects of culture include how society functions and is portrayed, what manner of creatures and geographical landscapes forms the culture, and how the identity of individuals are formed and maintained. Kress utilizes his own understanding of culture within his theoretical framework: “**Culture**, in my use, is the domain of socially made values; tools; meanings; knowledge; resources of all kinds; **society** is the field of human (inter)actions in groups, always; of ‘work’; of practices; of the use and effects of power [emphasis added]” (Kress, 2010, p. 14). Interaction between groups of humans create traditions, values, resources and more which are exclusive to those who are a part of said cultural group. Kramersch, furthermore, posits that culture is ingrained into the “collective memory” of a people through time and history, and has inherent value as both something physical, such as artifacts, architecture, or clothing, or as something psychological like memories, values and morals (2013, p. 61).

In sum, culture is a set of the histories, values, geographies, religions, artifacts, and knowledge a group of people has evolved over a period of time which is unique to them. Cultural competence is a way of using and applying one’s knowledge of other cultures in various situations, such as communication. This is supported by the findings of Williamson & Harrison who conclude that especially cognitive aspects of culture such as belief and values, but also the impact of society’s structural framework on individual social positions are important points of knowledge required to interact with patients of differing cultural backgrounds (Williamson & Harrison, 2010, p. 767). Their article focuses on application of cultural competence within the nursing profession, but the definition is applicable in other areas such as education. Culture then, is a flexible term, but it can also be tied to human interaction and communication as well as the concept of collective memory, values, traditions, and beliefs, all of which are aspects which emerge from *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022).

Through their world-building, character designs, storytelling devices and personal interactions, *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022) present complex societies imbued with all the hallmarks of culture mentioned previously. As I will show, these societies have histories, social structures, power relations, cuisines and other elements that are inspired by the histories and cultures of our real world. Furthermore, the way in which cultural perspectives are presented, featuring attires, food, architecture and more, allows readers to explore their own relation to these cultural aspects. This can be done by comparing and contrasting what they experience in the graphic novels to what they are familiar with in their own personal lives.

Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence also has various potential meanings. One such meaning as presented by Dypedahl is “the ability to relate constructively to people who have mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one’s own” (Dypedahl, 2019, p. 102). Emphasis on differing cultural communication styles is important, as ‘inter’ in intercultural implies cultures across the world. Byram, one of the originating scholars within the fields of intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence, posits that there are five elements within intercultural competence: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and finally critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997 cited in Lund, 2008, pp. 2–3). As will be demonstrated, *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) encourage the discovery and application of such elements, for example using skills of discovery and interaction. According to Byram, this skill has to do with the “ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices, and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction” (2020, p. 177). Using *Twig* (2022) in relation to discovery and interaction, one can acquire knowledge about the cultures represented within the story, such as the creatures who utilize birds as a symbol of their society in figure 10. Their cultural practices include building architecture resembling birds, and treating avian creatures with respect. Utilizing this acquired knowledge in real-time communication might prove difficult, as the culture is imaginary. However, one can still discuss said cultural elements with fellow readers of the graphic novel and explore its relation to real-life cultural phenomena, and it might even improve intercultural competence as the featured culture most certainly differs from the students’ own.

Intercultural competence, according to Rimmereide, can be developed in various ways through a focus on themes such as majority and minority rights, discrimination, roots in the present and difference. (Rimmereide, 2022). Thematic work and focus from both author and reader can highlight what is similar and different across cultures. In order to relate to others as described by Dypedahl requires a certain empathy. Nussbaum’s use of *empathy* is widely cited within educational settings, specifically regarding fictional books; “she [Nussbaum] argues for the power of literature and its impact on readers” (Rimmereide, 2022, p. 99). The specific quote Rimmereide is referring to is: “If literature is a representation of human possibilities, the works of literature we choose will inevitably respond to, and further develop, our sense of who we are and might be” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 106). She argues that a move

away from canon literature into non-canon allows texts to evolve with contemporary society and tackle issues and themes that are relevant for our identities.

In other words, to utilize themes in graphic novels to improve intercultural competence, one must inhabit certain empathic thoughts which imply openness to seeing and understanding the world from different perspectives. Furthermore, according to Kress, within intercultural competence and communication “factors such as age, region, education, class, gender, profession, lifestyle, have their specific and distinct semiotic resources, differently arranged and valued” (Kress, 2010, pp. 72–73). The semiotic presentation of factors such as these are central to the graphic novels I study. Class, for example, is subject to critical examination in both *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022), whilst gender is under particular scrutiny in *Nimona* (2015) as the protagonist is a female shapeshifter who can also switch gender. Region and lifestyle are integral parts to the storytelling in *Twig* (2022). Various factors affect how a person’s cultural lenses are shaped and formed, and thus how this individual interprets the world. Because of this, both intercultural and cultural competences are emphasized within the curriculum in Norwegian educational setting.

Relevance

Norwegian curriculums over the years have focused on both literature and culture as important parts of English education. The previous curriculum, LK06, allowed pupils in upper secondary schools in VG2 and VG3 who specialized in study specialization to elect subjects such as “International English”, “Social Studies English”, and “English Literature and Culture” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006). In terms of content in the old subject of English Literature and Culture, some of the clear goals for the subject was to “use a rich, nuanced and precise vocabulary to communicate about literature and culture” and “discuss the USA’s and Great Britain’s cultural position in the world today and the background for it” [own translation] (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006). There was little to no mention of intercultural competence, but it was heavily implied. In the newest rendition of the Norwegian curriculum, the LK20, however, intercultural competence is explicitly on the agenda. Through activities demanding reflection, interpretation and critical assessment, pupils will acquire knowledge which will in turn develop intercultural competence (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b).

Working with texts is one way the curriculum aims to achieve this intercultural competence. Within the core elements of the English subject there is a sub-heading called “Working with texts in English”, where the definition of text is broad:

spoken or written, printed or digital, graphic and artistic, formal and informal, fictional and factual, contemporary or historical. The texts can contain writing, pictures, audio, drawings, graphs, numbers and other forms of expression that are combined to enhance and present a message. (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b)

Graphic novels fit neatly into this wide definition, as they obviously meet many criteria such as containing writing, pictures and drawings, whilst also being graphic and artistic and usually fictional. Despite the differing qualities of texts, graphic novels can also serve a purpose as a cultural product where knowledge of both language and society can be developed and improved (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b).

Kramsch observes that school curricula struggle to decide whether to focus on the “small culture” of everyday life or the “big culture” taught through literature and arts, known as the canon (Kramsch, 2013, p. 58), and the goals of English Literature and Culture can be interpreted as belonging to the big Culture. In comparison, the subjects called “English Programme Subjects 1 and 2” in LK20 have a stronger focus on international relations and competences through the competence aims “reflect over the influence and use of the English language in the exchange of information and opinions globally” and “demonstrate comprehension, independent reflection and critical thinking during the analysis of some current social debates in English-speaking countries” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020c). Here we see more signs of “small culture”, as students are expected to understand the culture of everyday life in various parts of the world through “the exchange of information and opinions globally”. Achieving this can be done through reading and interpreting graphic novels. Both *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) can be said to contain “small culture” artefacts which increase their relevance to the Norwegian classroom setting. A perfect example of small, everyday culture in *Twig* (2022) is in the beginning of chapter 2, when he encounters the skeletal remains of someone he was searching for. Instead of leaving them untouched, Twig decides to build a grave and give him a proper burial as a sign of respect. This “small culture” mirrors many of our real-world cultures by granting respect to the dead. An example of small everyday culture in *Nimona* (2015) is when Nimona morphs into an old, decrepit woman out in the market. She tastes multiple apples at a market stall without the owner seeing, and complains about the apples being too hard as she breaks her tooth on one of them. The owner

wants Nimona to pay for the apple despite the damages done to her teeth, as she tasted without paying (Stevenson, 2015, pp. 54–55). Nimona is, albeit intentionally, a horrible customer who samples the merchandize without paying, and also attempts to trick the owner. In this world, this behavior is considered rude, and the owner rather than the customer is in the right, as evident when the owner wants Nimona to pay for the bad apple. In other words, small culture can be represented by the social interactions and situations we find ourselves in on a daily basis.

Previous literature

The field of graphic novels in classrooms has been researched with various different focus points (Ghatak, 2023; Hecke, 2011; Porto et al., 2019; Rimmereide, 2020, 2022).

Rimmereide's research contributions are mostly within the field of graphic novels. Her focus particularly lies in intercultural understanding, and she argues that graphic novels have pedagogical value (Rimmereide, 2022). She analyzes graphic novels such as *Persepolis*, *Noughts & Crosses* and *The Arrival* through theories such as Kress & Van Leeuwen's multimodality theory, Bhabha's cultural theory and Bakhtin's literary theory, and concludes that using these graphic novels in the classroom can contribute to providing a better intercultural understanding, to inspire students, to encourage critical literacy and to better see the relationship between verbal and visual texts to critically assess the intended messages (Rimmereide, 2022).

Similarly, Hecke has studied graphic novels as a teaching tool at both high school and university level, and her findings suggest that graphic novels, specifically *Birth of a Nation: A Comic Novel* (2004), might foster both intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence, but she adds that the usefulness of graphic novels relies heavily on the teacher's visual literacy and competence along with carefully planned pre-, during- and post-reading activities (Hecke, 2011). Porto et al. (2019) also focused on higher education in their study, with a broader focus on literature, including the graphic novel *Maus*. Their findings imply graphic novels can help develop language learning through emotional engagement with the source material, and that literature in general functions as a springboard for both linguistic, communicative, and intercultural skills and the development of citizenship (Porto et al., 2019). Finally, Ghatak (2023) studied the graphic novel *Pashmina* and its diaspora and argue how various authors use literature to retake personal cultural identity in an intercultural and global world (Ghatak, 2023). She analyzes and interprets the graphic novel

as a clash between cultures, and how it explores expectations, cultural values, self-discovery and gender discrimination (Ghatak, 2023). Many different theories and theoretical frameworks are used when analyzing literature and graphic novels which results in different interpretations, yet there are no specific studies that explore how purely fictional, fantasy graphic novels can also contribute to student learning within the field of cultural and intercultural learning.

Approach

The theoretical framework used to analyze and understand the graphic novels *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) in light of cultural and intercultural competence draws on McCloud's *Understanding comics* (1994) and Kress' theory of social semiotics, with Peirce's semiotic triangle as a type of glue binding them together (Magnussen, 2000). McCloud's point of view and theoretical understanding regarding how comics can be analyzed and understood has been widely used in many different research projects (Eisner, 1990; Ghatak, 2023; Hecke, 2011; Rimmereide, 2020, 2022). Therefore, it is pertinent to continue using the same manner of understanding comics to adhere to a shared understanding of the art. Kress' social semiotic theory, for its part, is used to further explore the cultural meanings hidden within graphic novels. This is done through analyzing the author's use of multimodal storytelling, which utilizes aspects such as speech bubbles, gestures, facial expressions, colors, style, and more.

Since comic books and graphic novels are multimodal texts, social semiotic theory fits well with the purpose of analyzing said multimodal texts. Social semiotic theory seeks to interpret meaning behind semiotic signs. When combined with McCloud's theory of how comics are made, involving signs, icons, transitions, universality and more, the meaning and form of a graphic novel lend themselves to objective scrutiny. This allows the reader to perform an analysis of how cultural and intercultural aspects are integrated, furthermore strengthening the reader's cultural and intercultural competence.

Pierce's sign theories explain the connection between Kress and McCloud. McCloud uses elements of semiotics fairly loosely to create a formal lens for understanding how the different elements on the page interact and produce meaning, while Kress operates within the world of semiotics, where signs obtain meaning within a cultural context.

C. S. Peirce's semiotic triangle

Peirce's semiotic triangle is explored and utilized by Magnussen (2000) and Guynes (2014) as a tool to analyze multimodal texts such as comics. Magnussen has noted how previous researchers explored how text and image fuse dynamically within comics to create an entirely new meaning (Marion, 1993, p. 2 referenced in Magnussen, 2000, p. 193), and argues that Peircean semiotics provide a way to understand and analyze this fusion. Peirce's triangle of semiotics was never applied in the study of communication by the inventor himself, according to Magnussen, but it has since been used for that exact purpose (2000, p. 195).

The triangle itself consists of the three elements *sign*, *interpretant* and *object*. *Signs* are split into a trichotomy of *icon*, *index* and *symbol* in how they relate to the *object*, and *signs* contain these three sub-categories simultaneously in differing proportions (Magnussen, 2000, p. 196). *Symbols* are something we understand due to having learnt it at some point; a convention or habit such as the alphabet, numbers, and so on. *Index* is a sort of cause and effect (Magnussen, 2000, p. 196), where one thing is connected to another. *Icon* relates simply through some degree of likeness or literal similarity: we recognize a person as a person in a comic book, because it looks like one. In a similar way, McCloud also utilizes *icons* and categorizes them into symbols, such as flags and religious markings; icons of language, science and

communication, such as letters, numbers and musical notes; and pictorial icons which resemble their real-life counterparts through similarity in appearance (McCloud, 1994, p. 27). Furthermore, Guynes provides an example of the concept of an *iconic sign* and how it relates to an *object*. He manages this through onomatopoeia, which is



when a word refers to an object based on how they sound similar (2014, p. 59). Sound effects of this type are common in comics, such as in this example from *Nimona* (2015) in figure 0 where the word “clunk” represents the sound created when Nimona tosses a can into a bin. The *sign* also appears to portray an *indexical* attribute because when Nimona throws the can, a speedline between the hand and the bin is used, which indicates the trajectory of the tossed object.

C.S. Peirce's notions of *object* and *interpretant* are the other two parts of the triad. *Objects* are what *signs* refer to, and what *signs* are attempting to simulate (Magnussen, 2000, p. 196). *Interpretants* on the other hand are the ones who attempt to comprehend the message, based

on their own social contexts. The triad functions dynamically, as all parts are required to some degree in the process of comprehension.

For the purposes of this thesis, Peirce's semiotic triangle as featured in the context of comics in Magnussen (2000) is an excellent device in which to naturally connect McCloud and Kress together, as they share similarities. Icons are utilized by both McCloud and Peirce, and features such as Peirce's indexical signs are seen in McCloud's focus on panel transitions and gutters, and through speech bubbles as symbolic pieces of writing. Furthermore, the interpretant in Peirce's triangle decodes iconic, symbolic and indexical signs, which depends on the interpretant's social context which Kress posits as an important aspect within social semiotics.

McCloud's Understanding Comics

McCloud utilizes specific terminology when discussing and presenting comics (including graphic novels), such as calling it a "sequential art", and referring to images as icons. His definition of *sequential art* is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1994, p. 20), which means the images are combined with words in a specific order to present the author's story to a recipient. This in turn creates a response from the recipient and grants them a personalized, culturally dependent understanding. An important part of comics vocabulary is the term *icon*: "any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea" (McCloud, 1994, p. 27). Magnussen (2000) refers to Peirce's icon as a type of sign which is used to resemble what it is supposed to be in the comic. Whenever an image is drawn in a comic, or a graphic novel, it is called an icon, and it resembles its real-life counterpart similarly to C. S. Peirce's iconic sign. Iconography represents meaning.



Figure 1 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 59)



Figure 2 (Young, 2022, Chapter 2)

Icons or iconic signs are presented differently in the graphic novels *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015). *Nimona* (2015) utilizes a relatively simple, cartoony aesthetic, whilst *Twig* (2022) has a more detailed and extravagant usage of icons, as shown in figure 1 and 2. McCloud would refer to *Nimona* (2015) as using more simplified icons than *Twig* (2022). An example are the eyes. Stevenson portrays eyes as small black circles without pupils or color, and sometimes as blank “O’s”. In *Twig* (2022), however, they are big, detailed and utilize multiple colors. Both are still icons presenting “eyes”, in different ways. McCloud writes that more realistic icons (or a higher degree of iconicity) can serve to emphasize “otherness” (McCloud, 1994, p. 44). This aligns perfectly with *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015), as *Twig* (2022) utilizes fantastical creatures whilst *Nimona* (2015) uses mostly icons that represent humans. Since the creatures in *Twig* (2022) do not resemble humans, drawing them realistically can serve to emphasize the fantasy genre. Other important terms which help separate comics from other art forms, are words such as panels, gutters, and closure.

For a graphic novel to combine images in a sequenced manner, there must be different *panels* on each page, connected by *gutters*. The metaphorical connection which ties panels and gutters together and create meaning is a process called *closure*. A panel is simply one image, usually drawn into a box, either rectangular or squared, big or small, filled with colors, characters, speech bubbles and more, at the author’s or illustrator’s behest. In other words, it is in the panels the story takes place. Separating the panels is what McCloud calls the gutter, which is the space between panels (1994, p. 66).



Figure 3 (Young, 2022, Chapter 5)



Figure 4 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 93)

Gutters are generally utilized in the same manner in both *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015), as figures 3 and 4 showcase white borders separating the panels. Stevenson adheres to black borders around panels with white gutters. Strahm, the illustrator for Young, however, does not color the borders of panels, giving the sensation that there is less separation and space in the gutters themselves. On the other hand, there is literally more space in the gutters in *Twig* (2022) as figure 3 demonstrates. These artistic choices may impact how interpretation and closure occurs, but the extent is heavily dependent on the interpreters themselves. When presented with both images and gutters, the reader must use closure: “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud, 1994, p. 63). This implies that the reader must employ their imagination to find out what happens between each panel, and the reader must fill out the blanks within panels as well by employing assumptions. In figure 3 for instance, we witness a purple rhinoceros creature and an alien monster giving chase. Between the panels, no specific actions are taking place, but one can assume the monster is actively running after Twig and the rhinoceros, which is an example of simple closure on the interpreter’s side. In figure 4, there is a scene between two characters in *Nimona* (2015), Sir Allistair Blackheart and Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin. They appear to be chatting in a tavern with mugs of ale. Again, the reader does not witness them drinking from the mugs, but considering the setting the reader might assume through closure that the characters are drinking between their lines and in the

gutters. In other words, the motion is happening in the audience's mind (McCloud, 1994, p. 65). McCloud further elaborates on this through describing panel transitions.

There are six different panel transitions (McCloud, 1994, pp. 70–72). First is the *moment-to-moment transition*, where panels are closely tied within one action, and therefore requires little closure from the reader to understand what is happening, as the panels appear almost identical with a few minor tweaks.

Figure 5 is an example where the only changes between panels, other than the speech, are the facial expressions of Nimona and Sir Allistair Blackheart. Little closure is required in order to decipher what is happening, as the panels are quite evident in their illustration.

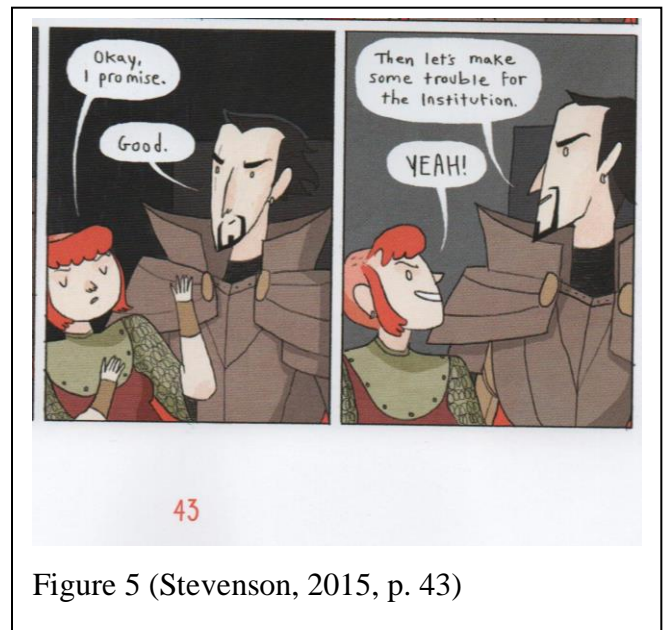


Figure 5 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 43)

Second is the *action-to-action transition* where one subject is performing two different, yet related actions, such as holding a baseball bat in one panel and suddenly swinging it in the next, using squiggly lines to illustrate movement in a still image (McCloud, 1994, p. 70).

Illustrated in *Twig* (2022) in figure 6 is also an action-to-action transition where the rhinoceros is running in the first panel, and attempting to slow down and stop in the following panel. When slowing down, the illustrator draws snow being tossed far into the air, which is a tool artists use to “create” movement in a still image.



Figure 6 (Young, 2022, Chapter 3)

Third, the *subject-to-subject transition*, is when the panels change the viewpoint in a scene, while still remaining in the same realm of ideas and actions. Here, “reader involvement is necessary to render these transitions meaningful” (McCloud, 1994, p. 71), because there is no literal connection between panels, but one must use their own interpretation to decipher what is occurring. In figure 7, Sir Blackheart is wearing a disguise and Nimona is transformed into a little boy whilst they are visiting a science fair. The panels show them exploring the fair for the sake of a scheme, with Nimona claiming it to be boring. The round image in the center of the page is sudden and unexplained. To comprehend the reason for its inclusion, reader involvement and closure is required, as this further implicates the setting as being a scientific fair, showcasing an electrical machine or Tesla coil.



Figure 7 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 105)

Fourth, the *scene-to-scene transition* is simply a panel transition where the reader is transported to an entirely different space and time (McCloud, 1994, pp. 71–72). An example of this is if one panel features a bustling night life in Las Vegas, whilst the next panel illustrates a warm, sunny jungle on a different continent. *Twig* (2022) is famous for its usage of the scene-to-scene transition, as it frequently features entire pages of Twig’s journey as evident in figure 8. Here, Twig travels from a weird tree structure resembling monsters, to jumping from rock to rock with the sunset in the background

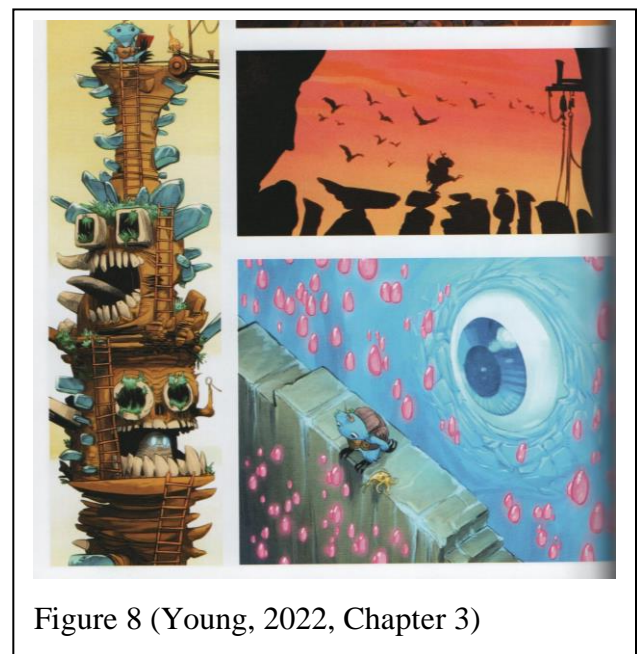


Figure 8 (Young, 2022, Chapter 3)

indicating a change in both scenery and time. Finally, we see twig on top of a wall looking down on pink, flying lights whilst a massive blue eye stares at him from behind. Scene-to-scene transitions can be useful for showing different aspects of the world presented in graphic novels. World-building is one such aspect, which is pertinent in creating fictional societies and cultures by showing snapshots of what these societies can look like in terms of architecture, attire, geography, natural resources, art, attractions and more.

Fifth, the *aspect-to-aspect transition*, is according to McCloud a “wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea or mood” (McCloud, 1994, p. 72), whilst the sixth and final transition is called non-sequitur and features no logical relationship between panels. Figure 9 utilizes an aspect-to-aspect transition between panels to show two different areas of a bank and vault after Nimona and Sir Blackheart commit a bank robbery. The first panel shows the broken wall from the perspective of the bank, whilst the panel underneath shows the vault

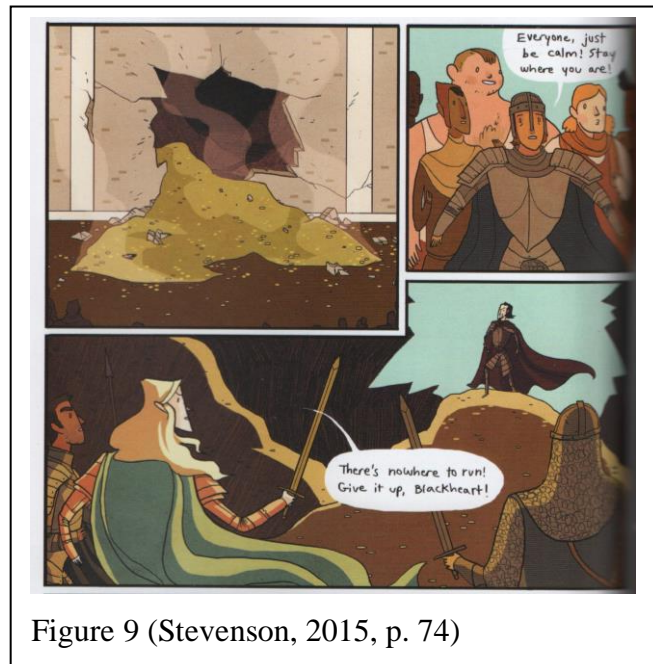


Figure 9 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 74)

from the inside, with larger amounts of gold coins stacked in heaps. *Non-sequitur transitions* are quite rare and no good examples can be found in either *Nimona* (2015) or *Twig* (2022). The active use of panel transitions and gutters in comics can appeal to readers in various ways, and is useful for keeping readers engaged. A connection between panel transitions and reader engagement can be variation, as it exposes the reader to different approaches to keep reading from becoming stale and monotonous. Additionally, it challenges student literacy as the interpreter and reader needs to be on their toes to explore and comprehend the intricacies of what transitions and gutters can afford the graphic novel. By exposing themselves to various panel transitions, student literacy can increase as a result, leading to more enjoyment from interpreting gutters with their own experiences and thoughts intermingled with the graphic novels.

Aside from panel transitions, McCloud highlights other aspects of comics that are integral to the art form. Synaesthetics, universality and identity are important aspects integral to the art of comics. *Universality* in comics is when an image has the ability to relate to many people

(McCloud, 1994, p. 31). This occurs when an icon, or a character, are similar in appearance with the reader, usually by being drawn in a simple manner where detail is usually left out, and simplicity in focus. A circle with two dots and a line represents a face which is so universal that it would naturally appeal to most readers who can identify eyes and a mouth. According to McCloud, the reason behind this identification with simplified, illustrated icons is that experiences in life are “separated into two realms, the realm of concept and the realm of the senses” (1994, p. 39). Furthermore, he goes on to posit that cartoons can portray “the world within” (McCloud, 1994, p. 41), where senses, feelings and emotions are affected by the comics. When art is used as a tool to appeal to feelings and senses, it is called *synaesthetics* (McCloud, 1994, p. 123). Comics, in other words, are great art forms where readers can identify with the content and find their emotions and senses awakened and appealed to through the various modes which constitute a comic.

Social semiotics

McCloud, Peirce and Kress are all linked through multimodality. Multimodality is one of the most important factors which distinguish graphic novels and comics. The aspect of *modes* emerges in both McCloud and Kress, and by combining different *modes* such as image, gestures, colors, moving imagery and speech (Kress, 2010, p. 79) one can create a narrative such as *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015). These narratively driven fantasy graphic novels can be understood and interpreted in light of the theory and terminology provided by Kress, McCloud and C. S. Peirce to analyze and discuss how fantasy graphic novels can provide learning in cultural and intercultural competence.

To fully comprehend the social semiotics of graphic novels, one must first acknowledge the role of *multimodality*: the fact that comics consist of multiple modes such as the written word, iconic images and formal narrative devices such as panels. The importance of multimodality within the field of communication is widely important to ensure that the messages communicated will be able to reach the recipient. Kress argues that using multiple modes simultaneously strengthens the message conveyed, where each mode has its own purpose (Kress, 2010). An example given by Kress is how a traffic sign functions: “Using three modes in the one sign – *writing* and *image* and *colour*... image shows what takes too long to read, and writing names what would be difficult to show. Colour is used to highlight specific aspects of the overall message” (Kress, 2010, p. 2). These modes recall Peirce’s symbolic

signs (writing), and the icon of Peirce and McCloud. Kress also posits that multimodal social semiotics can be divided into three separate perspectives. The first is *semiosis*, which stands for meaning making. Second is *multimodality*, which focuses on both issues and relationships between modes. Finally, the third perspective is *modes*, where the appropriateness of the specificities of any given mode, for instance speech, are considered (Kress, 2010, p. 61). According to Kress, a *mode* is “a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning... Image, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image... are examples of modes used in representation and communication” (Kress, 2010, p. 79). When considering multimodality, each mode serves a purpose, but there are also limitations such as the reach of any given mode. Kress emphasizes that every mode serves a purpose in the cultural domain, but also that there are certain aspects to communication that certain modes cannot achieve (Kress, 2010, p. 84). Multimodality used as a tool to communicate creates the basis of the theory of social semiotics.

Social semiotics is a theory which combines the terms “social” and “semiotics” to find meaning. Social issues, environments and interactions create meaning, which means the term “social” generates ideas and nuances through the usage of semiotic processes and forms. This social meaning is culturally dependent. Kress further writes that signs are the primary unit of semiotics, which fuses form and meaning, and these signs exist in all types of modes within multimodality, connecting social semiotic theory to C.S. Peirce through signs (Kress, 2010, p. 54). Within “a social-semiotic account of meaning, individuals, with their social histories, socially shaped, located in social environments, using socially made, culturally available resources, are agentive and generative in sign-making and communication” (Kress, 2010, p. 54). It becomes clear that human beings take agency and create signs to communicate, which takes place through various different modes. Kress also claims “the world of communication has changed and is changing still; and the reasons for that lie in a vast web of intertwined social, economic, cultural and technological changes” (Kress, 2010, p. 5). All these culturally dependent factors have an effect on communication. These signs are intentional meaning-making tools to convey messages to recipients. Questions to be asked through social-semiotic theory are “Whose interest and agency is at work here in the making of meaning”, “What meaning is being made here?”, “How is meaning being made?” and “With what resources, in what social environment?” (Kress, 2010, p. 58). In other words, the theory tells us about:

interest and agency; about meaning(-making); about processes of sign-making in social environments; about the resources for making meaning and their respective

potentials as signifiers in the making of signs-as-metaphors, about the meaning potentials of cultural/semiotic forms. The theory can describe and analyse all signs in all modes as well as their interrelation in any one text (Kress, 2010, p. 60)

When encountering modes such as speech, writing, colors, pictures, videos and so on, social-semiotic theory can analyze and deduce the meaning behind them. In graphic novels, this can reveal information about the author's own social standing, environment, and culture, as well as allow the reader to obtain a better intercultural understanding through analyzing the modes, the words, pictures, colors, and their interrelations, and comparing to their own cultural background. It might also reveal that the author's messages might go unnoticed or misinterpreted due to different cultural backgrounds of the recipients. However, specifics of an author are never as clear as the objective text itself, as the interpreter's culturally dependent interpretation disregards the author's social standing as it might seem irrelevant to the experience of reading. A way an author can intentionally create meaning, however, is through careful *orchestration* and *framing*.

When an author creates a work, such as a graphic novel, they have to orchestrate modes into something coherent and cohesive, and they also need to *frame* their message in a particular manner to provide adequate communication. There is a specific semiotic sequence behind the creation of any given message, where three aspects are central. First comes *attention*, what exactly does the author want to say, and what meaning do they want to convey? Second is *framing*, how can they utilize the available resources within each mode to convey said message? Third is *interpretation*, how does the recipient actually understand and decode the message? (Kress, 2010, pp. 33–34). Depending on cultural background and experiences, the communication between author and recipient can be faulty, as communication is subject to different factors, be they social, cultural, economic or political (Kress, 2010, p. 19). By understanding and analyzing these factors and delving into the meaning of the work, recipients can move out of their own cultural sphere of understanding and examine new ways of thinking and cultural and intercultural understanding. *Frames* are defined by Kress as something that "... mark(s) spatial and/or temporal extensions and limits of a text or other semiotic entity" (2010, p. 149). Furthermore, they "define[s] the world to be engaged with; it excludes and it includes; and in doing that it shapes, presents the world according to the interest and the principles of those who frame" (Kress, 2010, p. 149). In other words, *framing* defines the worldview which the author wants to represent. This grants the author full agency over their message and communication by including or excluding certain details in a world,

such as in a graphic novel. The communicated message depends on the author's orchestration, which is the process of assembling signs into modes, and assure that they work in a way the creates a coherent work (Kress, 2010, p. 162).

In sum, Kress' main points relevant for the thesis are as follows: authors want to create and present a narrative using *signs* and *modes* to provoke an aesthetic response in the reader. This narrative is *framed* in a particular manner through *orchestrating signs*, such as image, colors, and words, into fitting *modes*, which are semiotic resources shaped by society and culture (Kress, 2010, p. 79). These *modes* recall Peirce's *symbolic signs* of writing, and the *icon* of both Peirce and McCloud. Furthermore, individuals employ *modes* in their communication which are impacted by social histories and cultural backgrounds of both author and *interpretant* (Kress, 2010, p. 54). Consequently, links between Kress and Peirce are made in their focus on the *interpretant* as a vital source in communication. Intended messages by the author might not be interpreted as the author intends, and much agency lies within *interpretants*. Interpretation of graphic novels is an interpretation of multimodality, which introduces the methods used to synthesize potential results to the thesis statement.

Method

In order to explore and analyze thematic strands in the graphic novel related to culture and intercultural competence, I will subject the primary texts studied in this dissertation to *semiotic analysis* and *close reading*. This mixed method provides insight into *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022), and allows a synthesis of theory, primary and secondary literature.

According to Brookman & Horn, a close reading is "to perform a purposeful and skilled analysis and interpretation of the structural, stylistic, and linguistic features of a text" (2016, p. 177). In other words, this dissertation analyzes individual pages and panels to address broader issues. McCloud and Magnussen provide terminology and knowledge about the structure and style of graphic novels. Kress utilizes the interpretant and author as communicators with their own cultural backgrounds, which explores the effect a graphic novels can possess. A close reading and analysis will apply these theoretical concepts to the graphic novels to explore the thesis statement. Furthermore, by analyzing in light of various themes within the broader topics of society and creatures, identity & representation, shedding light on how these literary works can help develop cultural and intercultural competence becomes possible.

Analysis and discussion

The theories of C.S. Peirce, McCloud and Kress will be used to analyze and discuss the graphic novels *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022), and to synthesize possible answers to what extent fantasy graphic novels can contribute to increasing cultural and intercultural competence. Within the comics, two thematic strands will be analyzed to provide pertinent data. First, the graphic novels' portrayal of their societies, and, indirectly, our own world. Second, creatures and nature, and how landscapes and animals assist in forming and maintaining cultural heritage, along with identity and representation are themes that allow a closer reading of the characters. Themes such as moral ambiguity, anti-heroism, social hierarchy, morality, exploitation, cooking and travelling, poaching and identity fluidity will be studied to explore how cultural and intercultural competence is approached in these graphic novels. Each analysis will be followed by a summary and discussion of the themes and classroom relevance.

Portrayals of society

This chapter studies the representation of social class in *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022), and demonstrates how comics portray class relations through layout and visual composition, emotional mimetics, and the combination of words and pictures. Various themes are employed within these stories, such as homelessness, sinister institutions, animal symbolism, and work ethic. Through careful analysis of some panels and pages, a following discussion will illuminate how and why these fantasy graphic novels can contribute to developing cultural and intercultural competence for the reader.

Figure 10 has a panel which establishes a seemingly thriving society within the world of *Twig* (2022). Despite much of the world seeming grim, abandoned and almost lifeless, Young is able to showcase a bustling city square with unique architecture and many creatures who go about their day. Added context reveals that Twig has ruined a magical stone and has to fix it by refilling its “nektar” from a so-called “Nektarmancer” (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 2), and finds himself in a thriving city center to ask for directions towards the “Bog of the Nektarmancer” as



evident by the scene-to-scene transitions (McCloud, 1994, p. 71) which transports him through both time and space between panels. The use of this particular panel transition allows the reader to be more interpretive by filling in the gaps left by the gutters.

The imagined journey is a part of communication, since “Communication happens as a response to a prompt; communication has happened when there has been an interpretation” (Kress, 2010, p. 36). Figure 10 functions as the prompt, showcasing a barren desert in the first

panel with what appears to be trees in the background. Following this panel we experience a scene-to-scene transition to the next panel as we have entered the desert city, which is not in fact barren, but filled to the brim with colors, animals, structures, stalls and people. The reader's interpretation of what happens in the graphic novel through all modes, such as image, color, gestures, and speech bubbles, determines what the communication between author, graphic novel and reader is. The barren desert followed by the inhabited, lively marketplace communicates because the reader is able to create an interpretation. One potential interpretation is that the empty desert subverts expectations as there is a bustling city somewhere thought to be relatively uninhabitable.

Kramersch writes how symbolic meaning-making is interpreted through discourse (2011, p. 356), and further describes “[c]ulture as the idea of construction of meaning and imagined communities” (Kramersch, 2011, p. 355). To unravel this quotes in relation to *Twig* (2022), the reader of the text enters communication with the author and the graphic novel when they interpret the panels. In context of the thriving city, Young communicates to the reader that the world of *Twig* (2022) is one filled with different cultures and peoples, which is done primarily through a singular frame or panel with iconic signs with vivid colors resembling surreal architecture. Figure 10 shows people dressed in red, blue, green and purple attires, with brown and orange buildings, paved, sandy roads and beautiful, wine-red bottles and flasks on a salesman's table. These are examples of iconic signs.

Iconic signs, as a sub-part of Peirce's semiotic triangle (Magnussen, 2000) utilized by the illustrator makes it clear that the attires, buildings, bottles etc. resemble their real life counterparts. Just based on the trees on top of the buildings which resemble palm trees, along with the sandy colors on the roads and buildings, a reader can interpret this as taking place in a desert-area, which might bring forth the reader's own cultural connotations and associations with real life desert cities such as Egypt or the Middle East. The multimodality showcased by Young also functions as the discourse, which in turn contributes to symbolic meaning-making (Kramersch, 2011, p. 356) where the colors and images themselves are symbolic through usage of symbolic icons. Furthermore, the culture within the city in figure 10 creates an imagined community in the reader's mind, as this society invented by Young only exists in a single, motionless panel. Interpretation and imagination, in other words, is what creates a thriving, exciting world in this graphic novels which enhances the storytelling. It also might be argued that it enhances the reader's own intercultural competence through Young's orchestration, assuming the reader thinks and reflects about the scenery and its relation to its real-life

counterparts and influence. Regardless, the image of a desert city will inevitably bring forth connotations and association in the reader, mostly implicitly and subconsciously.

The orchestration (Kress, 2010, p. 162) of figure 10 reveals that in this particular case, the modes of image and color are most central to meaning-making, as the only speech made by one of the city's inhabitants is a set of directions for Twig to follow to reach the "Dark Pines". Only in figure 10 does the city appear in the graphic novel, and the reader receives a single snapshot of this particular society in the entirety of *Twig* (2022). Consequently, image and color are the only modes which can be interpreted. The panel is framed in a manner in which image and color as modes include both individuals, architecture, food culture, animal symbolism and cultural garbs and articles of clothing, all represented by iconic signs. However, figure 10 is also framed in a manner which excludes politics, backstory, and even facial gestures of the inhabitants as their faces are just shadows with yellow, luminescent eyes. These creatures are familiar in fantasy stories, as evident by similar creatures featured in both *Star Wars* movies, and the game series *Final Fantasy* where a similar character is a protagonist in *Final Fantasy IX* (Square Enix, 2000). Consequently, it becomes evident that readers' interpretations may be formed by knowledge of other stories, franchises, and films. Despite *Twig* (2022) depicting a fantastical universe, it has many forebears in the world of fiction, further strengthening the idea that cultural competence and knowledge of past works and phenomena impacts understandings and interpretations of literary works.

The reader knows nothing about this civilization other than what is specifically shown through image, color, and gestures, and is left to assume and create their own backstory and canon. The architecture of the city features towers and buildings which resemble birds. Simultaneously, the reader can see multiple blue birds walking around the streets, which indicates that they are valued in society rather than looked upon as an annoyance. Otherwise, the buildings probably would not resemble birds, which is a good utilization of iconic and symbolic signs. According to McCloud, comics serve both as visual communication and as a way for readers to identify themselves in the characters or word portrayed with the help of universality (1994, p. 31). The characters themselves are well-dressed humanoid creatures whose faces are shadows, which may make it easier to associate with each of them because of universality. Figure 10 exhibits a character on the bottom left of the panel, who walks home from the market with a bag of freshly baked bread, which is an action most people can see themselves doing. The culture found within figure 10 features "... the domain of socially made values; tools; meanings; knowledge; resources of all kinds" (Kress, 2010, p. 14). A

culmination of all modes and signs within the image, along with reader interpretation, closure, and imagination, form a specific culture which will be slightly different from reader to reader depending on own cultural experiences.



Figure 11 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 134)

Society as represented in *Nimona* (2015) is based on real life medieval culture and is therefore hierarchical, as is reflected through Stevenson’s application of, “Get the nobles out of there”

and “They’re PEASANTS. Take care of it” (2015, p. 134). The dialogue between the director and the guard in the panels at the bottom of the page showcases the graphic novel’s reach of modes (Kress, 2010, p. 84). Speech from the speech bubbles combined with the imagery, specifically the director’s and the guard’s gestures and facial expressions as presented by symbolic and iconic signs, reveal to the reader that the two social classes are treated differently. The director’s haughty face when she emphasizes the word “PEASANTS” reveals her interpretation of their class, namely that they are lower ranked and less substantial than nobles. Semiotically, this might imply her own social standing in society, perhaps insinuating that she herself is part of the noble class and showcasing a sense of superiority. Furthermore, the interplay between modes, the guard’s facial expression along with the speech bubble “But – the crowds –“ (Stevenson, 2015, p. 134) shows hesitation; he does not agree with the director that peasants are less valuable than nobles, yet he still follows her orders in a professional manner to fulfill his duty as a guard. Regardless of the guard’s social standing, he chooses to adhere to the status quo of power and structure, implying the cultural significance of locating and fulfilling one’s purpose.

Social semiotics and “the material, the physical, the sensory” (Kress, 2010, p. 105) is evident in figure 11 where the nobles both stand in a physically elevated position and wear what appears to be fine clothes, whilst the peasants are more colorless, angry due to the circumstances of being poisoned, and in a state of rebellion. This is a case of what Kress calls *communication*, rather than *representation* (Kress, 2010, p. 49), as it appears Stevenson wishes to communicate his own material realization of his world and story with the audience. Furthermore, one can also argue that this is Stevenson’s way of communicating a point; a hierarchical society with classes is closely linked to inequality, injustice, and something akin to police brutality when the guards in later pages use force to detain rebelling peasants.

Interpretation of *Nimona* (2015) offers an insight into Stevenson’s own lifeworld and his own culture. Class, hierarchy and difference, along with injustices of society as represented in the clash between peasants and nobles in figure 11 might reflect his own experiences in life.

Although he does not live in a hierarchical society in a medieval sense, modern contemporary society still retains much difference in financial, political, social, and cultural power.

Furthermore, the synaesthetics, how art appeals through senses, is also defined as “a rare experience where one property of a stimulus evokes a second experience not associated with the first” (Banissy et al., 2014, p. 1). Color as a mode in figure 11 functions as a stimulus which also has an added effect. Through red, powerful colors used in the panels and the

action-to-action transitions, the reader is able to identify with the peasants and might be swayed to join them in their struggle to stop the oppressing secrecy of the director. In other words, colors also evoke an emotional response. This action-to-action transition is also what Peirce refers to as an indexical sign (Magnussen, 2000), which shows that the actions have consequences.

However, there is still a sense of universality in the characters, both the nobles and the peasants. Figure 11 illustrates an action set piece where the gutter tells much of the story (McCloud, 1994, p. 66). Although little closure is required on the part of the reader to understand the sequence, one can still imagine and draw conclusions that this is a massive rebellious activity with many participants. The distrust in the government due to the fear of being poisoned aggravates people, and perhaps inspires a movement for change. Due to the universality of the peasants, how they appear simply drawn as icons with various shapes, colors and sizes, viewer identification can increase the reader's empathetic nature and put themselves in the position of the oppressed peasants in a hierarchical society. The design of the panels, with primarily red, intense colors, further invites an empathetic reading. However, on the other hand, the fourth panel showcasing the finely dressed, yet terrified nobles, can show a perfect juxtaposition between classes. According to Kress, *framing* defines that which is to be engaged with by including and excluding various details, such as through modes like coloring and gestures (2010, p. 149). Stevenson's *framing* of the nobles, through terrified facial expression and gestures of shock and awe at having peasants rush towards them and throw cups at them, shows us that despite the peasants being oppressed, that their violent actions towards a solution do not necessarily have a positive impact. Stevenson's signs of meaning-making do not provide a "right/wrong" juxtaposition or a solution to any problem, he simply showcases the potential reality of being oppressed, where all parts of the hierarchy might experience horror in different manners.



Figure 12 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 85)

Faithfulness and trust in the governing institutions of society is lacking in the world of *Nimona* (2015). Contextually, the panels in figure 12 take place after Sir Blackheart and Nimona discover that the Institution is experimenting on jaderoot, a poisonous substance. To

reveal this to the masses, Sir Blackheart manufactures a similar, but non-lethal poison, and poisons some peasants in order to spread dissent and distrust in the shady, governing Institution. Kress' semiotic sequence of attention, into framing, into interpretation (2010, p. 33) reveals Stevenson's possible intent in these panels. Design wise, figure 12 uses iconic signs to showcase and *frame* a dreary, medical green color, and the action-to-action transition shows us two medical professionals walking inside "His Majesty's Hospital – Medical Clinic" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 85) towards a quarantined area, discussing multiple patients with the same symptoms of poisoning. Comics as visual communication, where all information conveyed and to be interpreted is purely visual and requires only one of the five senses (McCloud, 1994, p. 89), reveals to the reader that despite Sir Blackheart's non-lethal poison, patients are still in a critical condition inside the quarantine room where the color changes from green to yellow, indicating that color as a way of *framing* (Kress, 2010, p. 151) makes the reader interpret the situation as serious and potentially hazardous.

Multimodality comes into play when combining the speech bubbles and the facial expressions of the two medical professionals. The textual function (Kress, 2010, p. 87) of the characters discussing whether or not the Institution is behind the poisoning whilst looking doubtful creates a tension; they do not fully trust the government. The synaesthetics of the panel in figure 12 creates an emotion of wonder and mystery in the reader. Through closure, the reader needs to interpret the situation; is the Institution the true cause, or is it Sir Blackheart's dubious manner of exposing the Institution through "minor" poisonings? Distrust is evident in not only Stevenson's story, but also distrust within the reader as the protagonist is considered a "hero-turned-villain". Ghatak's (2023) study deals with cultural expectations, and the reader in *Nimona* (2015) expects a certain amount of adventure and mystery because of the nature of the graphic novel, mainly fantasy. Culturally speaking, one would expect an Institution, surrounded in bleak, "evil" colors such as a matte green to be suspicious and not worthy of trust. However, the correlation between the "evil" Institution and the "evil" Sir Blackheart is evident because their lairs and bases share the same color palette, linking the protagonist and the antagonist through color. Therefore, color as a framing device of semiotic meaning might imply that the reader should not fully trust anyone on a whim, rather utilize reflection to figure out who the "hero" and who the "villain" truly is.

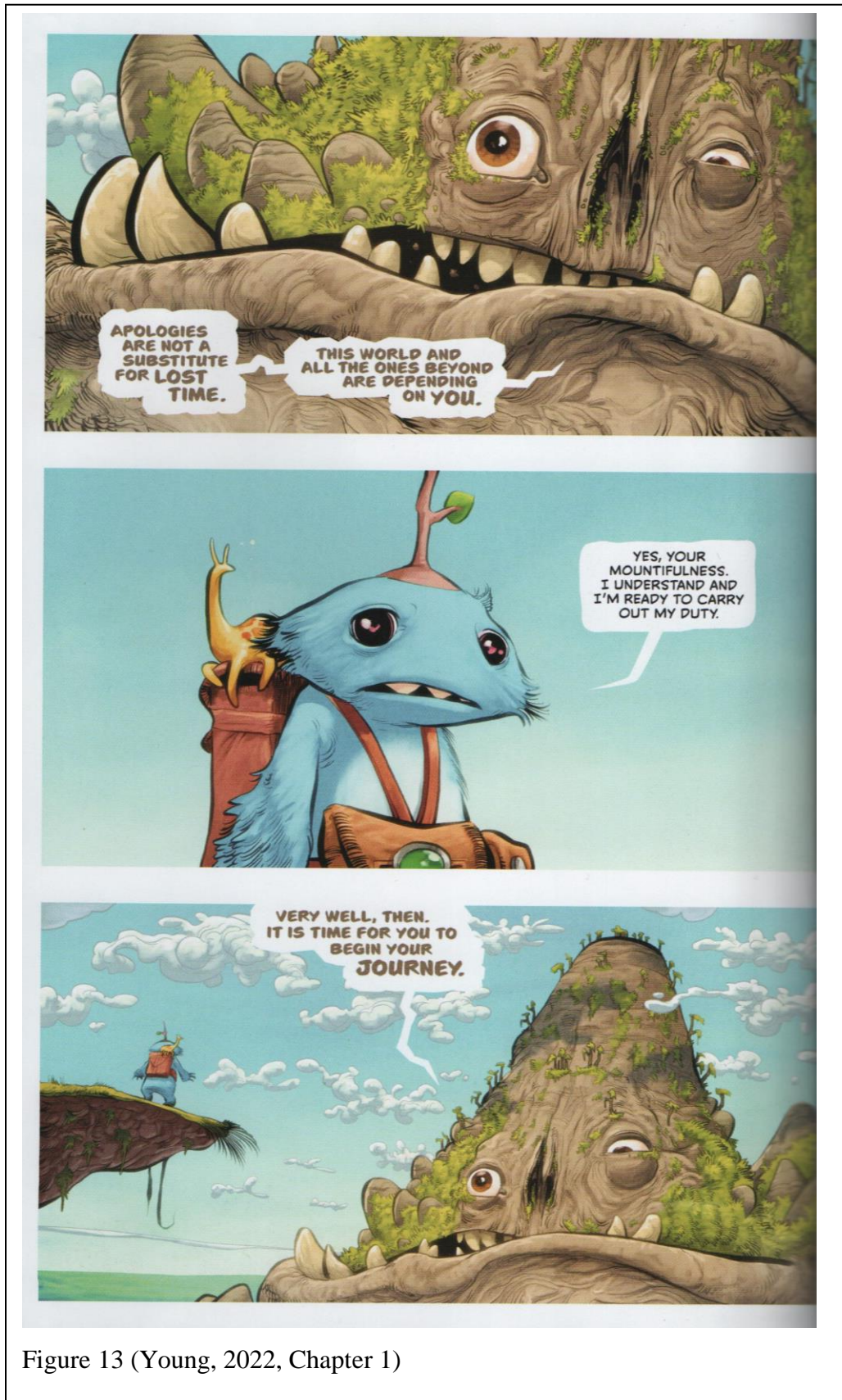


Figure 13 (Young, 2022, Chapter 1)

Work, ethics, and a sense of purpose is paramount for the protagonist in *Twig*. Rimmereide studies how graphic novels can encourage both critical literacy and contribute to better

understanding the relationship between verbal and visual texts to understand the intended message (2022). By reading into color and appearance and analyzing how these factors influence the characters and story of *Twig* (2022), readers are able to critically assess whether such factors have an intended meaning, and also create meaning for themselves based on their own cultural backgrounds and experiences. The moment-to-moment transition (McCloud, 1994, p. 70) between the iconic signs of anthropomorphized mountain Mount Guphin and Twig illustrates the importance of Twig's duty and task as a newly employed *placeling*, as it is evident and requires little to no closure from the reader to interpret the situation. However, since Twig arrives late on his first day and apologizes for his tardiness, his gesture and facial expression, along with the text bubble, grants the reader an opportunity to interpret the meaning of the panels.

Young's design of the multimodal comic scene combines the icons of gesture, facial expression, color and text to "realize(s) and project(s) social organization" (Kress, 2010, p. 139). Meaning is created by the reader's interpretation and agency towards reading the text, and it becomes evident that Twig is sad, perhaps disappointed. Arriving late for his first day as *placeling* seems to not only disappoint Mount Guphin, who, emphatically claims with brown, bold text that "this world and all the ones beyond are depending on you" (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 1), but according to figure 13 it also disappoints Twig himself as he evidently reflects on his actions and is readying himself for the commitment of his position as *placeling*. Figure 13 indicates an interpersonal function (Kress, 2010, p. 87) of hierarchy between the characters through the modes of image and text specifically, where Mount Guphin with his tall stature as a literal mountain stands above the small Twig, along with Mount Guphin's bolded text versus Twig's normal text. Mount Guphin's bolded text is an example of *iconicity* and is a way of expressing large volume and tone of voice typographically, which fits his grand stature, wisdom and size, further elaborating the major difference between him and Twig. The *framing* indicates that work-ethic and responsibility are important and valued aspects of society in the world of *Twig*, and that a hierarchy of power-relations exists, where size and experience also matter.

Disappointment in oneself due to not fulfilling one's work and obligations can be translated to the reader. Considering Young's design of the world and characters, and how the characters are non-human creatures with human traits that depict a certain sense of universality, the reader can experience viewer-identification (S. Young, 2022, p. 42) in the disappointed Twig. By inhabiting the character of Twig, the reader can experience the same emotions through

synaesthetics (McCloud, 1994, p. 121). The multimodality of image, color and text invites the reader to experience these sensations. Furthermore, by committing to one's purpose, as Twig does by claiming he is "(...) ready to carry out my duty" (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 1), and having that commitment acknowledged by Mount Gruphin, who is established as powerful individual, gives further importance to the aspect of purpose and work-ethic.

Critical questions arise from this setting, that perhaps Young is representing a society wherein exploitation of workers is a reality. He creates a certain ambiguity in *Twig* (2022) where the world appears ambivalent by featuring both grim and horrible alongside beautiful and serene settings. The blue, simplistic and small Twig is juxtaposed by the monstrous, terrifying, and grim Mount Gruphin. Kress writes how the design of communication is affected by contemporary society, and how it realizes social organization and relations through modes such as image, color and writing (2010, p. 139). Alongside McCloud's notion of comics as visual communication (1994, p. 89) and how specifically colors achieve mood-making and symbolization of character through various types of icons (McCloud, 1994, pp. 188–191), one can argue that Young is setting the stage for a complex world where, despite purpose and work-ethic being considered key aspects of society, other factors such as appearance play a large role in who is in possession of power.

Through the graphic novel, size and appearance often indicate a creature's power, as evident whenever we see flashbacks of Twig's more experienced father who is much larger than his son. Simultaneously, Twig's small, yellow companion is one of the smallest creatures in *Twig* (2022), yet he is still able to push Twig towards his goals throughout the story. Kress' theory states that the reach of each mode has both potentials and limitations (2010, p. 84). Color specifically, indicates that being bright and colorful in *Twig* (2022) affects a character's potential for greatness, despite being smaller in size. However, color does not necessarily indicate a character's affiliation or goodness, as every character, both good and bad, come in different colors such as blue, yellow, brown, green, pink, purple and red. One thing to note is that purple is the most threatening color throughout the story as multiple antagonistic creatures seem to be this color. Exposure to evil purple characters creates a certain expectation and bias in the reader, where they distrust purple characters. These expectations are faulty, as multiple purple creatures also end up assisting Twig, despite often having objectively scary appearances as indicated by the iconic signs featuring cruel grins and sharp teeth.

Homelessness is represented (Kress, 2010, p. 49) in Stevenson's graphic novel only through a singular panel, but adds much to the readers' interpretation of the world of *Nimona* (2015). Nimona herself shapeshifts into a bird and becomes the focalizer for this particular scene, which is evident due to the coloration of the bird, namely the characteristic shade of red. It is framed (Kress, 2010, p. 149) in a manner where image, color and gesture and text decides what is included and excluded. Figure 14 establishes Nimona surveying the city during nighttime, as evident by the iconic and symbolic signs which represent streetlights and dark sky. Action-to-action transition (McCloud, 1994, p. 70) is used between the panels and shows the reader that



Figure 14 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 19)

Nimona is moving around the city. Stevenson's orchestration of the entire page, the way he organizes the various signs such as color, image, gesture and text (Kress, 2010, p. 162), establishes the ironic state of the world. Initially the reader is given an overhead view of a dark city with guards roaming around as small, black figures. A statue of the hero, Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin, stands tall in the middle of the city with the text "Our Hero" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 19) embedded at the bottom of the statue, as portrayed by an iconic sign. Furthermore, the statue itself is made of white marble, and appears to be a source of light

itself in the darkness of night, which indicates a certain feeling of safety, as associations of light and heroes evokes an emotional response in the reader through synaesthetics (McCloud, 1994, p. 121).

However, the next panel is framed in a manner which indicates issues in the society of *Nimona*, because a person is sleeping underneath the statue. A guard appears, and figure 14 shows that the guard is covered in darkness and says “You can’t sleep here, bub. Get a move on” (Stevenson, 2015, p. 19). Reader interpretation and closure, “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud, 1994, p. 63), makes it evident to the reader that this man is homeless, and sleeps on the streets out of necessity. He is failed by the so-called “hero”, Sir Goldenloin, as he is not allowed to sleep near the safety of the statue, nor does it appear that this homeless individual is receiving aid from society to get himself back on his feet. Finally, the reader sees the red bird, Nimona, fly away in the distance. *Framed* in the background is a huge, well-lit castle next to multiple buildings with lights on in the windows and fumes through the pipes, indicating warmth and home. Nimona and the reader are both shown the downsides of society through careful orchestration (Kress, 2010, p. 161) which perfectly conveys how society can contain issues despite appearing safe and helpful.

To fully grasp the intricacies of a series of images, such as the ones in figure 14, requires the reader to possess knowledge about characters and their backgrounds:

[H]igh levels of cultural empathy require good knowledge of other people’s background or of the context in which they live. Consequently, area studies, or studies of societies and social contexts, can be instrumental in developing cultural empathy and the ability to decenter” (Dypedahl & Bøhn, 2020, p. 92)

The context of people’s background, which Dypedahl & Bøhn refer to, can be extrapolated through the panels on figure 14. Close-reading and analyzing the orchestration (Kress, 2010, p. 162) and the meaning-making of the various signs and modes of a fantasy graphic novel such as *Nimona* (2015) can increase the cultural empathy, and also cultural competence in general, of the reader. However, the colors employed by Stevenson, light symbolizing goodness and dark symbolizing something more dangerous, are both culturally dependent in how they are interpreted. Other interpretations of this scene are possible, but through closure (McCloud, 1994, p. 63) and an open mind, one can acknowledge that in the context of the culture within the world of *Nimona* (2015). Light does not always mean safe and good,

especially considering how the protagonist, Sir Allister Blackheart, is associated with darkness despite wanting to do good.

Discussion of themes

Various themes within the graphic novels are displayed, such as moral ambiguity, social hierarchy, symbolism and exploitation. By discussing these themes in light of cultural and intercultural competence, one can both implicitly and explicitly imply how these graphic novels can contribute to an increased competence, which aligns with LK20s goals for the English language subject (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). Additionally, Rimmereide herself points out the benefits of focusing on themes as a venue into exploring one's cultural competence in her research (2022). Despite their differences, the two fantasy graphic novels still manage to shed light on culture and intercultural, in the sense that they create their own rich and multifaceted worlds containing colorful, unique perspectives that the interpreter can link to their own personal experiences and knowledge.

Moral ambiguity and anti-heroism are themes which deal with the perspective of right and wrong. According to Krakowiak & Oliver, audiences of stories tend to favor morally good characters over morally bad characters, but characters who are morally ambiguous act in more ambiguous ways and are more unpredictable; thus making them more exciting as they require more effort to fully understand (2012, p. 118). Furthermore, these ambiguous characters might appear more realistic to the viewer (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p. 119), which can also be connected to the universality of the characters which occur in comics, as relating to characters might make them seem more real. Morality and the question of right and wrong are heavily contextual themes, as it depends on culture and other factors. Additionally, there are multiple perspectives within morality, such as “the construction of judgements about justice, equality and cooperation” (Turiel, 2002, p. 1). Social semiotic theory also emphasizes that “the world of communication has changed and is changing still; and the reasons for that lie in a vast web of intertwined social, economic, cultural and technological changes” (Kress, 2010, p. 5). Factors such as these, especially cultural changes, affects how stories are told, and almost as important, how they are interpreted and perceived. Interpretation in *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022) happens under the guise of Turiel's aforementioned judgements of justice and cooperation specifically (2002, p. 1). As is evident when figure 14 showcases a statue the hero of the land, Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin, along with a poor, homeless peasant who is not

allowed to sleep in public. This is a question about morality. Is it good or right that the guard dismisses the homeless man? Perhaps the guard is just following the law, which states something along the lines of sleeping in public is a federal offense? What is the author trying to communicate? Questions such as these can spark the interest in the interpreter, and can create a dialogue between pupils regarding the aspect of moral ambiguity.

Figure 12 showcases a brilliant example of moral ambiguity and the aspect of anti-heroism. The panels are *framed* in a medical, dark setting as patients suffer from poisonings committed by the protagonist, Sir Allistair Blackheart, the companion of Nimona. He utilizes non-lethal poison on the population of the city to expose the Institution. The intentions of exposing evil might be argued to be inherently good, but the question of whether the ends justify the means are quite relevant in discussing this approach, as he evidently portrays aspects of anti-heroism, almost seeming like the villain. Interpretation is key to reaching this conclusion based on signs and objects created by the illustrator (Magnussen, 2000). Utilizing one of Byram's *savoirs*, specifically the skills of interpreting and relating are vital in decoding the *framing* on figure 12, as the "ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events of one's own" (2020, p. 176). Conspiracy theories in our real world can be used as a comparison to interpret figure 12, as the symbolic signs featured by the medical staff's speech bubbles indicates that seeds of doubt on the governing body of their nation are being planted. Comparatively, our real world contains many similar conspiracy theories distrusting the government, and are examples of moral ambiguity. Some might argue that these conspiracies try to help individuals become independent and knowledgeable, whilst others argue against conspiracies as they are controversial and often not based on any proper evidence. Figure 12 in can introduce a discussion of morality and conspiracy theories in the classroom, leading to an exploration of culture and perhaps intercultural learning through dispelling wrong and dangerous conspiracy theories.

Hecke posits that graphic novels "can be used to foster intercultural learning... discuss intercultural competence on the story level" (Hecke, 2011, p. 654). Various cultures have their own takes on right and wrong, but some cultures put individuality on a pedestal, whilst others favor the collective group. Sir Blackheart is hurting few in the hopes of exposing evil, thus saving many. Generalizing cultures is also a point to be discussed, as despite some cultures generally valuing family and the collective more than other cultures might, there are guaranteed examples of the different cultures agreeing and disagreeing with how Sir Blackheart poisons some to save many. This indicates that despite sharing a culture, there will

definitely be disagreement and difference between individuals. From a social semiotic point of view, the author himself might attempt to communicate a specific message or story to impact the audience, through *framing*, signs and other tools. One potential message is exposing the truth. Exposing the truth can introduce both good and bad consequences, as evident in real life news when whistleblower Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, faces great personal consequences for attempting to expose government secrets (Weaver, 2024). The graphic novel can instigate discussion and the real-life aspects it might reflect, for example how Sir Blackheart acts similarly to whistleblowers like Assange and Snowden. These examples of whistleblowing expose ambiguities of real-world situations, where some view whistleblowers as heroes, whilst others might view them as traitorous criminals. Sir Blackheart, however, does not sacrifice himself, rather other people, which further establishes him as an anti-hero. In other words, the contents of a fantasy graphic novels can be tied to real-life events, and thus is a great way of improving cultural and intercultural competence as the examples can instigate discussions of said real-life events. This requires critical literacy.

As previously mentioned by Rimmereide, critical literacy can be trained through the use of graphic novels (2022, p. 112). Luke posits that critical literacy asks certain questions, such as “What is ‘truth’? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? Who should have access to which images and words, texts, and discourses? For what purpose?” (Luke, 2012, p. 4). This also aligns with Kress’ points in social semiotic theory where the interests and agency of the author are vital in the making of signs into messages (Kress, 2010). In figure 12 and 14 regarding moral ambiguity and anti-heroism, the reader or interpreter needs to utilize critical literacy to decipher their own truth. By having analyzed the graphic novels’ form and understanding the gutters, transitions, signs, *framing* and icons, the interpreter is well equipped to comprehend how it is presented and represented, and the next important step is finding its purpose. On the other hand, being fictional fantasy graphic novels the intended purpose of these works of art are mostly entertainment and telling a compelling story with relatable and intriguing characters, but an unintended purpose might be showcasing culture, albeit fictional ones. Critical literacy and culture are mutually inclusive, as critical literacy enhances one’s ability to understand culture. By asking critical questions of knowledge, stereotypes, and foreign cultures, one is able to learn by simply being interested. With a social semiotic approach one can conclude that fantasy graphic novels purposefully spark interest within the reader. An unintended consequence of this is that said reader can delve into familiar and foreign cultures in the graphic novel and improve cultural and

intercultural competence as a result. Another interesting insight into culture can be provided through social hierarchy, as many cultures are built up with a hierarchical system where a minority possess economic, cultural and political power, whilst the majority are lower on the hierarchical ladder with potential for less impact.

Social hierarchy as a theme is present in both graphic novels. Figure 11 showcases the social classes of peasants and nobles in *Nimona* (2015). *Twig* (2022) on the other hand requires more interpretation of the panels and content to establish the theme of social hierarchy. This demands pupils to decode graphic novels:

Students can only fully grasp the complex meanings and allusions of the story if they are also able to decode the images offered in these texts (...) achieving comics literacy always includes the ability to decode the complex ways in which visual imagery and verbal language collaborate in the construction of narrative coherence and meaning” (Hecke, 2011, p. 659)

Hecke points to comics literacy as a skill to fully comprehend graphic novels, decoding visual and verbal messages and managing to utilize and combine all modes in the multimodal comics.

Figure 11, as previously mentioned, features dirty-looking peasants attacking fancy-looking nobles. Cultural and contextual clues such as clothing are important features to focus on to determine social class. The medieval-inspired setting in *Nimona* (2015) implies that specific types of attires are worn by different classes, mirroring ancient sumptuary laws in real-life that put restrictions on the quality of personal belongings such as clothing and jewelry, often “on religious or moral grounds” (Britannica, 2009). *Nimona* (2015) does not emphasize or even mention the reason behind differences in clothing, so the reader is left to interpret difference in clothing based on clues and their own cultural knowledge. The working class tends to wear more beige, gray clothes because they do manual labor and have a low or average salary. Nobles, on the other hand, are wealthy enough to afford fancy clothing with puffy shoulders, hats and vibrant colors, which are most likely expensive due to material and production costs. Cultural and intercultural competence are related to social hierarchy in the sense that attire and social classes are culturally dependent, and using comics literacy to decode these meanings and panels also requires cultural and intercultural insight; whose culture are we seeing? Why does vibrant, colorful attire mean rich, whilst dirty, colorless means poor? Another point to make is how the facial gestures of the director implies a sense

of superiority when she shouts “They’re PEASANTS, take care of them” (Stevenson, 2015, p. 134). The interpretant might also wonder why these peasants are looked down upon, when they do important work like growing crops which feed the population at large, including nobles.

All the literary devices, both visual and verbal signs, icons, gutters, transitions, and the *framing* itself point to separation of classes and a sense of superiority, but the interpretant needs to come to their own conclusion as to *why* the graphic novel presents society like this. Figuring out a solution based on intuition, stereotypes, experiences and cultural insight, improves cultural competence in a general sense. Hecke further posits that by learning about other cultures, stereotypes can vanish (2011, p. 662), which in the context of a fictional fantasy graphic novel might prove more difficult. However, considering these fantasy cultures are always based on real life, there is transferable knowledge, such as attire and clothing saying something about status and class. This is highly relevant in contemporary society, though it differs from culture to culture. *Twig* (2022) also presents social hierarchy, but in a different manner than attire.

Figure 13 shows Twig and Mount Guphin’s asymmetrical relationship. The primary manner in which this is done is how the iconic signs used to illustrate Twig and Mount Guphin are simply to give them very different sizes. Mount Guphin talks down to Twig in a literal sense and a symbolic sense. Age also impacts the panels as Mount Guphin is an ancient pile of rocks, whilst Twig is a young, organic creature. Strahm, *Twig’s* (2022) illustrator, *frames* the panels to create a hierarchical difference between them, implying that with age and size comes knowledge and wisdom. Hierarchical societies are the norm in real life cultures in contemporary society, as “[e]very civilization... is a hierarchy of distinction, of standards of wealth, comfort, strength, skill, order, organization, etiquette and civility” (Hickel & Haynes, 2018, p. 79). In other words, different cultures value different aspects of life to determine social standing. In the case of *Twig* (2022), size, strength, age and organization determines ones social standing. Within *Nimona* (2015), markers such as wealth, order, strength and civility are better suited to determine social standing. Cultural and intercultural competence can be improved by acknowledging how different factors determine society in different cultures. Cultures also contain different types of symbolism.

Interpreting symbolism along with animalism can improve cultural and intercultural competence. The world of *Twig* (2022) is filled with unique cultures where iconic and symbolic signs feature *objects* such as architecture and attire that can provide deep

intercultural insight. Kramsch's mention of symbolic meaning-making (Kramsch, 2011, p. 356) is most pertinent when it comes to discussing the contents of the graphic novel. Young provides a city where a central theme is birds. Animals themselves also serve as important cultural features in real life contemporary society. Not only does research show that animals such as chimpanzees and orangutans have social intelligence and culture for themselves (Whiten & van Schaik, 2007, pp. 604–605), but animals also serve as a source of inspiration into human societies. Examples of this include how most nations have national animals, such as the bald eagle in the US and the kiwi bird in New Zealand. Another point is that some national flags have animals on them, such as the Welsh dragon, albeit a mystical creature, and Albania's bird. Royalty, particularly in Europe, is also known to feature a lion, or "the king of the animals", on various busts, flags and statues to symbolize power. In regards to *Twig* (2022), the animals featured, birds, have a massive impact on the society featured in figure 10. Why do these people use clothes imitating birds? Why do they create structures with beaks and the heads of birds? This invites an invitation of the symbolic meaning of birds, and why specifically birds are the chosen animal for this particular culture. In the Norwegian classroom these discussions can provide intercultural insight.

Intercultural insight and competence, as stated in the core elements of the English subject, should be taught through reflection, interpretation, and critical assessment of texts such as graphic novels (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). Students in the classroom should attempt to discuss and reflect the symbolic meaning behind birds in this setting. There is much to be learned despite being provided with relatively little content in a singular panel; one such piece of information is the single sentence uttered by one of these people, where they help Twig with directions on his way onwards. Through reflecting on the implications of this discourse, students can conclude that in spite of looking scary, being helpful is an important part of their culture. Furthermore, Twig approaches any and all creatures without prejudice, despite their appearances. As mentioned prior, the mode of color is important in communication, and through the story Twig encounters scary antagonistic creatures, many of them being colored purple. Despite experiencing trouble around purple creatures and character, Twig still does not develop negative stereotypes and prejudices towards the color purple. An important lesson in intercultural competence can be not to judge the character, values and morals of others based on color or outward appearances, but rather upon their actions. This coincides with Hecke's findings that an advantage of graphic novels is "that they can be used to foster intercultural learning" (2011, p. 654). Reflecting and discussing Twig's various good and bad

encounters teaches the reader how to approach other cultures without prejudice, which aligns with the core elements of English in the LK20 curriculum (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b).

Another point to be made is that within the culture, they treat birds with respect as evident in how they do not chase them away from the market stalls. This might also indicate that birds have a high degree of intellect, perhaps being another sentient race in *Twig* (2022). Through identifying and recognizing features provided in the story, as Hibbs alludes to in his study of developing students' intercultural competence through children's and adolescent literature (2016, p. 12), a student can compare their own culture with what they interpret in the graphic novel to synthesize a history and culture for these people, based on the little information presently available. On the other hand, if not handled by the teacher correctly, these interpretations might be filled with stereotypes and haphazard understandings and can lead to a negative view on this foreign culture. Since what Young created is fictional and fantastical, it can be easy to fill the blanks with stereotypical renditions of real-life cultures. This aligns with the findings of Porto, "This means, among other things, that 'educational discourse, policy and practice should deal directly with the notions of power, struggle, class, gender, resistance, social justice, and possibility'" (Aloni, 2008, p. 155 cited in Porto et al., 2019, p. 8). By critically assessing the students' own interpretation of a fictional culture, they might learn more of their stereotypes of real-life cultures and are able to combat these, thus improving cultural and intercultural competence. Therefore, potential stereotypical interpretations can in fact contribute to fighting said stereotypes in an organized fashion within an educational setting.

Another topic valuable to this discussion is exploitation. Exploitative actions occur mostly in *Nimona* (2015), where class and hierarchy have much impact on who utilizes others for their own material gain, which is pertinent in the discussion of cultural and intercultural competence. If the norm in a society is exploitation, then one is able to discuss the cultural impact and compare other cultures where exploitation is morally wrong. According to Dypedahl & Bøhn, humans possess different mindsets, which "are strongly affected by different socialization processes, for example in the family, at school, and through the media. In these socialization processes, we are influenced by certain values, norms, attitudes and beliefs" (2020, p. 82). Furthermore, intercultural competence is "the ability to relate constructively to people who have different mindsets" (Dypedahl, 2019, p.102 referenced in Dypedahl & Bøhn, 2020, p. 81). The goal is not to change other cultures, but to understand what, why, and how various values and norms arise. Additionally, "promoting dialogue and

understanding between diverse cultural identities and forging links based on mutual respect” is a point highlighted by Bland (2020, p. 69) on the meaning of interculturality.

Intercultural competence, in other words, is not a one-way process where the reader has to acknowledge and accept exploitation. They can understand it and argue against, but through communication with others. In other words, properly learning and developing intercultural communication might be difficult through the medium of fantasy graphic novels, as the reader is the sole interpreter who is unable to communicate with the author. On the other hand, following LK20’s core elements in the English language subject a goal is for the students to gain “insight into ways of living, ways of thinking and traditions of indigenous peoples” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b) through critically assessing and reflecting texts. As *Twig* (2022) features potential exploitation of the indigenous peoples within Mount Guphin in figure 15, it can be used to teach both ways of living and thinking. The workers are all seemingly of the same species as evident by their appearance, and they all work as miners, indicating that it is the norm within their species and culture to do this type of physical labor. Readers can only assume this is the primary occupation for members of this species, as the graphic novel never portrays them doing anything else as we only see them briefly. Furthermore, considering how they are miners within a sentient mountain, and how one worker mentions he wished to do something else with his life when he was a child (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 1), it can be easy to assume they are working as miners against their will, or are being exploited. Whether it is exploitation or simply the traditions of this indigenous group of creatures is up to interpretation, and can be used as a discussion point in class. Reading and interpreting exploitation in *Nimona* (2015) and *Twig* (2022) can thus grant insight into others ways of both living and thinking, as students can reach their own conclusions as to why exploitation is a topic.

Figure 14 again shows the homeless peasant sleeping on the streets of *Nimona* (2015), who can be argued is being exploited. This reading assumes that the peasant is a worker, rather than an outcast of society with no profession. If the peasant does indeed have a normal job, either as a farmer who produces grain or livestock, a miller or baker who makes bread and other foods, or a mechanic or craftsman who makes and fixes various objects, he still resides in the streets during nighttime. His tired, worn expression whilst being told by the guard he is not allowed to sleep indicates that he is used to this manner of treatment. In other words, the *framing* of the panel allows the reader to interpret whether the man depicted contributes to society or not. He is being exploited because he improves and maintains society through his

work, but is treated as if he is an eyesore and not getting any benefits from his work. Despite working, he does not appear to have anywhere to live, nor have a roof over his head. Is he being exploited by the upper echelon of society to save expenses? The less money and resources spent on the poor; the more resources are left for the rich. This further develops the aspect of classes, which again can lead to uprisings as seen in figure 11 because of the major divides in society. From a cultural perspective, this might be the norm and cause inherently negative consequences, which allows the reader to understand that despite something being a norm in a culture, it is not necessarily beneficial. Critical literacy, in other words, is trained alongside cultural competence through interpreting symbolic, iconic and indexical signs presented in the graphic novels.

Creatures, identity, and representation

This chapter studies the creatures and characters of *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015), their identities, and the environments that frame and shape them. These broad topics focus on appearance and how the graphic novel creators illustrate their worlds and characters. Environment specifically is a site where culture takes place, and also functions as a force which has an influence over how culture develops and evolves, such as how geography, climate, animals and plants affect the nearby cultures and peoples. Additionally, this chapter sustains the approach combining Peirce, Kress and McCloud where their terminology and theories continue to be vital in decoding these graphic novels. Creatures, identity, and representation can be utilized to compare, contrast, associate and explore similar aspects of real life, as cultures have different creatures and landscapes both in fiction and reality, along with differences in how identity is viewed and formed. Furthermore, previous research lacks a particular focus on the creatures and landscapes one finds in graphic novels as a path towards improving cultural and intercultural competence (Hecke, 2011; Porto et al., 2019; Rimmereide, 2022). There is untapped potential in focusing on creatures and geological landscapes which might prove fruitful for the purposes of this thesis. Identity and representation, on the other hand, have been researched before (Hecke, 2011; Porto et al., 2019; Rimmereide, 2022), which establishes how important identity is in the discussion of cultural and intercultural competence.

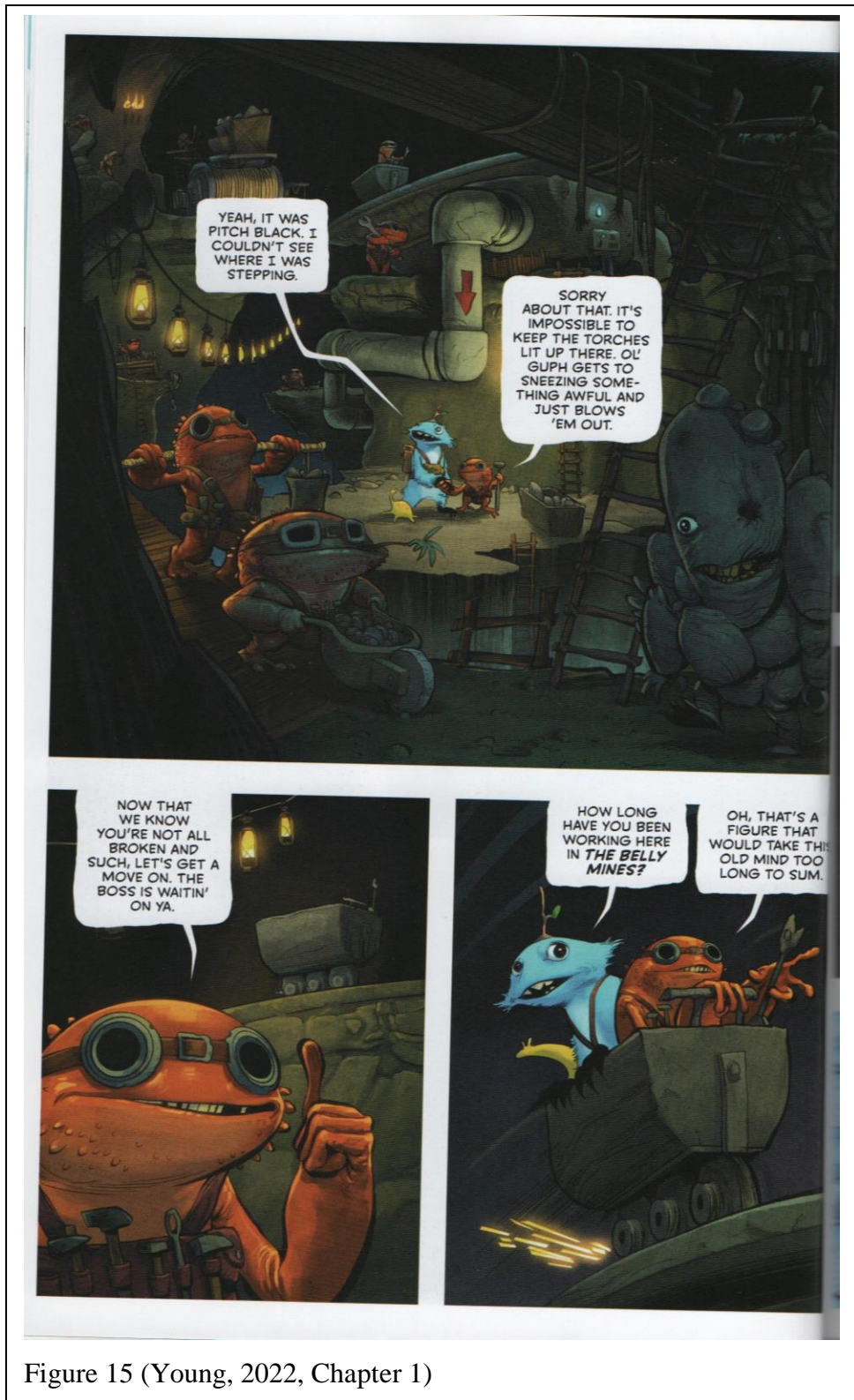


Figure 15 (Young, 2022, Chapter 1)

Civilization, landscape, and culture in Twig are portrayed through passing panels and left up to the readers' interpretation to fully understand. Using McCloud's terminology, we are presented with an interdependent combination of images and words (1994, p. 155) where dialogue between Twig and the other characters and the background images tell relatively

independent stories, where both are pertinent to the world-building. In figure 15, Twig and his sidekick have just been swallowed by Mount Guphin, and it is revealed that there is an entire city within his mountain-body. Kress' terminology of *framing* indicates that the colors of this particular scene frames how Twig does not belong in this city, as his blue color evidently stands out from both the other creatures and the actual city itself. Iconic signs of mechanical valves and tubes, minecarts, wheelbarrows filled with various rocks and orange creatures with goggles mining with pickaxes tells the reader much of their culture and geographical landscapes. Twig asks the miner how long he has worked in this place, to which he replies "Oh, that's a figure that would take this old mind too long to sum up" (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 1).

Within the culture of the "Belly Mines" inside Mount Guphin, it appears the inhabitants and workers live long lives seemingly trapped in their social position. This is indicated by the miner's dialogue with Twig on the following page, where he says how "... when I was just a wee **miner**, I wanted to be a **placeling** like you" (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 1). Utilizing social semiotic theory, one can extrapolate meaning from the modes of image and speech; Young combines image and speech to create a grim and dull workplace where a worker indicates his willingness to leave and explore the world instead of being stuck. However, the panels also utilize gestures and facial expressions to show how all the workers look happy and content by smiling and doing their work, indicating that within their culture, this work is considered meaningful and rewarding. Furthermore, the miner who wishes he was a *placeling* in order to explore the world does not appear to still retain this wish, as he was simply a "wee miner", in other words, young, when this was his wish. This is a perfect example of Rimmereide's notion of how graphic novels can contribute towards a type of dialogue between the reader and the text (2022, p. 99), where the reader's interpretation and closure of both the panels and the gutters provides meaning for the reader. In other words, by utilizing all available tools at their disposal, readers can understand a graphic novel in their own manner. Nussbaum's term of "empathy" (2010) is also pertinent within the close-reading of Twig, as despite the creatures being far removed from being humans, they retain enough human characteristics to allow the reader to see themselves in the universality of the characters.

Despite universality being a feature in many of the characters represented in *Twig*, it is not always simple to fully empathize with them and see oneself in their characters. An example is in figure 15, the one-eyed rock creature walking in front of a ladder. Previous and future

panels do not recognize this rock-creature and the reader only sees it once. Its presence is lacking as its coloration mixes with the grayish background. Does the orchestration (Kress, 2010, p. 162) of this panel with multimodality have a specific purpose in mind for the rock-creature? Or is it perhaps only meant to serve as a *framing* device which insinuates that the city or mine within Mount Guphin is more multicultural than first assumed? Kress posits that the material and physical is emphasized in the multimodal social-semiotic approach (2010, p. 105), which implies that despite the seeming lack of purpose, the rock-creature does in fact serve a purpose simply by existing. The interpersonal and textual function (Kress, 2010, p. 87) of this creature is to give the reader more to think about, more chances to synthesize an interpretation of *Twig's* (2022) world, and to create meaning through the author's and illustrator's sign-making. Hecke's study reaches a conclusion that "[v]isual language is necessarily culturally specific" (2011, p. 657).

Both the culture of the author and the culture of the reader matter in interpreting the multimodality of the graphic novel. The author uses iconic, symbolic and indexical signs to signal an intended meaning, which is also culturally dependent. However, the interpretation of the reader might differ from the intended meaning. Using figure 15 as an example, the rock-creature might be intended to be an example of a multicultural workplace within the mine in Mount Guphin's stomach. The reader, however, might interpret the lone, different creature with a missing eye as some sort of slave worker to do work for the miners. Young does not present us with any specific answer to this situation, but through closure and interpretation based on one's identity and cultural background and experience, one might reach wholly different conclusions.

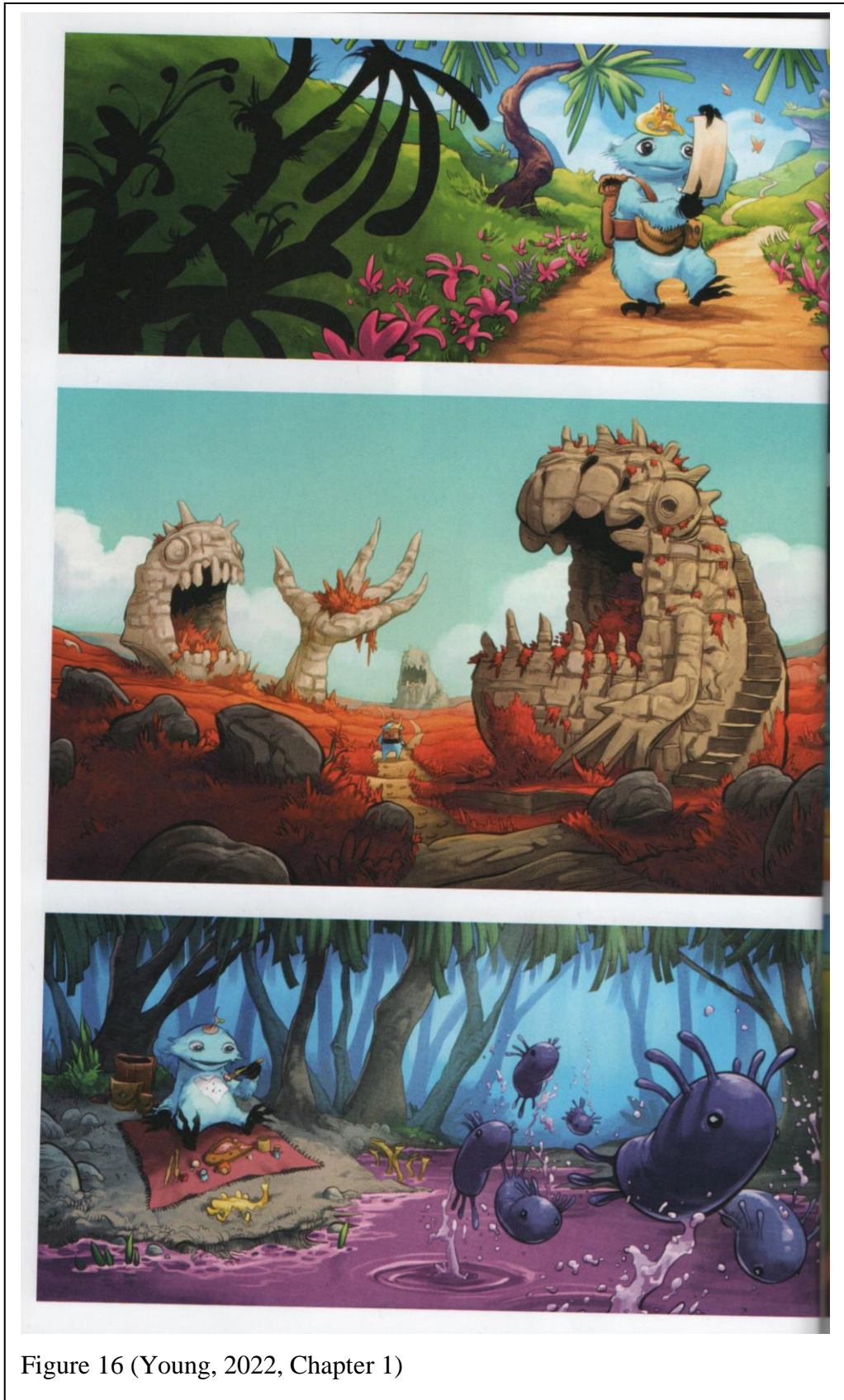


Figure 16 (Young, 2022, Chapter 1)

Landscape shots for exposure from the author and illustrator provide world-building and more cultural insight into the world of *Twig* (2022). The three panels illustrated in figure 16 are an example of McCloud's scene-to-scene transition (1994, p. 71), where the reader is taken to

three entirely different spaces showcasing three separate areas in Twig's world. Initially, the reader is shown Twig and his companion walking along a dirt path or road, with iconic signs resembling pink flowers and green shrubs and grass, along with a tree. Through usage of a singular mode, namely image, the creator and illustrator show a sight which might appear similar to something found in reality, thus *linking* (Kress, 2010, p. 119) Twig's (2022) fantasy world with the real world to showcase certain similarities.

Twig utilizes a map whilst walking, which also indicates another link to technology found in the real world. By interpreting the map to create meaning, the reader can be "inwardly productive" (Kress, 2010, p. 108) and understand that despite it taking place in an entirely different universe, there are still many shared aspects between this world and ours which are inherited through the author's own experiences and creativity. Furthermore, through scene-to-scene transition Twig and his companion moves to a more foreign land, more akin to the fantasy the reader expects to find. Twig is still on a dirt path or road, but finds himself surrounded by three monster-looking, calcified rock formations that appear to be abandoned, but created by a civilization. The reader's interpretation of the panel can differ depending on how cultural experiences and knowledge, but the panel is open to these different interpretations by only containing modes such as image and color, lacking anything more specific. Young's orchestration (Kress, 2010, p. 162) of the panel is depending on the still image as a singular modality to *frame* and carry all meaning.

Intercultural communication between the author and reader is important; "To whom, and what 'cultural group'" (Kress, 2010, p. 72) is the panel, or graphic novel in general, appealing to? No matter what background the reader has, age, gender, sociopolitical background and more, the monster-looking stone formations appear "man-made" as they are shaped like a specific creature, and because the building next to Twig has a set of stairs leading to the back of the monster building. The icon of "monster-looking stone formation" is linking to a real-life building of sorts, based on the size, how it appears man-made and because of the stairs leading to an entrance in the back. Furthermore, since they are seemingly abandoned by the author's lack of *framing* any life other than Twig, it can also signify the remnants of an old culture. The usage of both iconic and symbolic signs creates a mystifying world with much speculation and interpretation required by the interpretant.

According to Kress, culturally dependent factors determine communication (2010, p. 5), which means the interpretive reading of these abandoned rocks which mimic creatures lies in the understanding of the reader which differs depending on their background. Hecke (2011)

posits that by discussing various interpretations of scenes, panels and frames such as this, one might be able to improve intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence. If one reader associates the rock formation as a building or home, and another reader interprets the rock as a symbolic gesture for something spiritual or religious, one might hazard a guess that these readers come from different cultural backgrounds. The social-semiotic purpose of Young's orchestration might be for the reader to create their own understanding of *Twig's* (2022) world, rather than relying on an objective explanation from Young's own mind.

Furthermore, a reader’s own interpretation of the world can depend on cultural background of both the reader and the creator of a work, which is the figurative Achilles heel of practicing social semiotics, as the message of the author might be sidelined if the reader does not inherently understand their cultural standing. Figure 17 is both an example of how Young’s orchestration of signs into modes (Kress, 2010, p. 162) forms a message, and how it frames the world and cultures of *Twig* (2022). Initially, figure 17 reveals that Twig and his companion are on the road yet again. Two primary modes are utilized, the verbal writing and the visual illustration. However, modes such as gesture and color also add meaning to the scene. Despite the blue, vibrant sky, Twig mentions how “It’ll be dark soon” (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 1), which is followed



Figure 17 (Young, 2022, Chapter 1)

by an action-to-action transition (McCloud, 1994, p. 70) to a new panel where Twig is in the process of setting up camp by tying together branches and laying great, green leaves as cover from the elements.

Twig mentions to his companion how he spotted mushrooms on the path, and asks him to fetch some. Picking edible mushrooms is also known as foraging, which is a culturally

dependent phenomenon. It has been a part of real human cultures from around two million years ago to around ten thousand years ago, however, foragers are a minority in today's society (Boyette, 2016) and is mostly considered a hobby. Twig is on a journey where he seemingly does not have access to food wherever and whenever he desires, and must rely on techniques such as foraging to feed himself. In Norwegian classrooms, the curriculum for English has since at least 1997 focused on how students are required to develop abilities within intercultural communication, and one important point studies have shown is that "Learners also need to become aware of their own cultural background and their own frames of reference" (Lund, 2008, p. 4). In relation to figure 17, for the reader to make full sense of what Twig is doing, certain knowledge is needed about what foraging is and why it is important, specifically for Twig, to fully comprehend the story. This can strengthen cultural understanding as the reader's comprehension is scaffolded by the orchestration of modes (Kress, 2010, p. 162). The yellow text box in figure 17 which belongs to Twig's yellow companion states that he is starving. Consequently, Twig mentions the mushrooms which indicates they are edible. Juxtaposed with the panel of Twig chopping the mushrooms and putting them in a pan concludes for the reader that these foraged mushrooms are edible sustenance.

Furthermore, the action-to-action transition which shows Twig chopping up mushrooms, followed by a panel of cooking them over a fireplace in the dead of night, indicates how they have been at camp for some time. Then the reader is shown an overview of their camp, which is situated on a hill with a forest and plains in the background, and what appears to be stars and three planets or moons on the horizon. Simply focusing on the visual mode reveals much about the world of *Twig* (2022) and the culture of both author, fictional world, and the reader. McCloud posits that panel transitions give an indication of the culture of the author, as he believes "[t]raditional western art and literature don't wander much. On the whole, we're a pretty **goal-oriented culture** [boldface added]" (McCloud, 1994, p. 81). Young (2022) transitions from one action to the next in a very rushed fashion, indicating the goal-oriented western culture. However, it is also evident that some eastern influences have an impact on the graphic novel, as colorful, wide panels such as the one found at the bottom of figure 17 focus on world building and expanding the focus on nature.

Young's own culture, experiences and social standing can be interpreted by the reader in regards to social semiotic theory, where "Whose interest and agency is at work here in the making of meaning" (Kress, 2010, p. 58) is an important aspect to keep in mind whilst

reading. One can also assume that *Twig* (2022) might represent some of Young’s own thoughts and opinions. Cooking and travelling are frequently used in *Twig* (2022) to both explore the culture and world they inhabit as evident by the mode of illustration. Perhaps these actions are considered valuable in both the world of *Twig* (2022) and in the author’s personal life. Readers can also consider whether these activities are valued in their own cultures, as Hecke’s article suggests “Another advantage of graphic novels is that they can be used to foster intercultural learning, particularly in those cases in which they address intercultural topics such as identity and intercultural understanding or discuss intercultural competence on the story level” (Hecke, 2011, p. 654). Comparing and contrasting cultures and values represented in fantasy graphic novels, such as cooking and travelling, can easily generate results, as, despite being fictional, these graphic novels are still orchestrated with great care to create coherence and cohesion through careful usage and combination of signs and modes.

One of the most prominent creatures in *Twig* (2022) is one that, through iconic signs, resembles a rhinoceros. Narratively speaking, the first exposure *Twig* (2022) provides of this particular creature is through a book, as evident in the iconic sign in figure 18. Young *frames* the creature in an intriguing fashion, as through the multimodality of speech, writing, drawing and color it is evident that the rhino

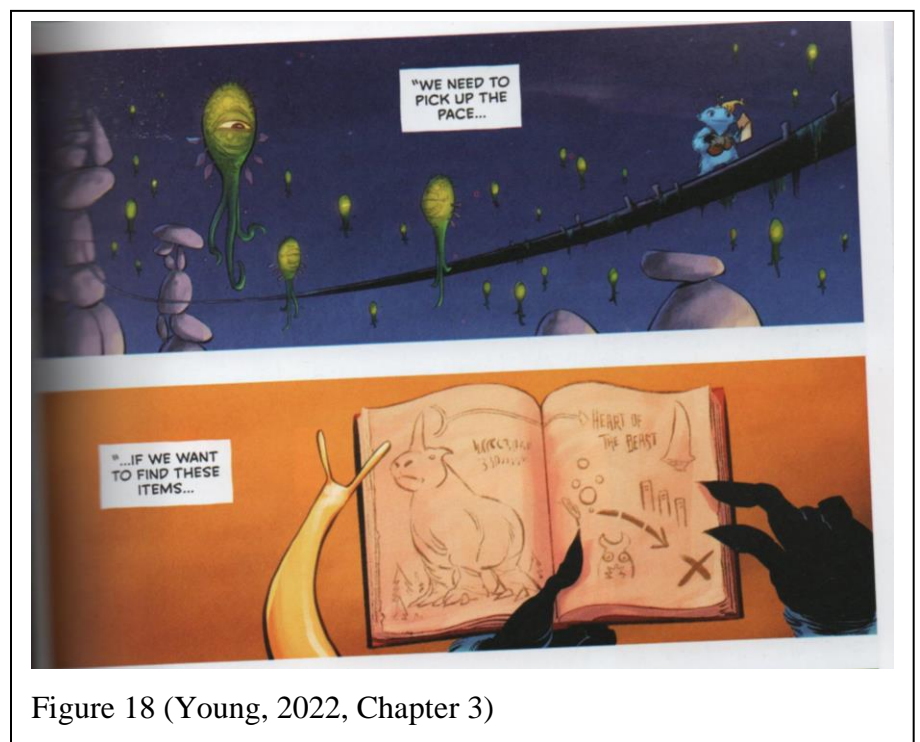


Figure 18 (Young, 2022, Chapter 3)

creature is a rare, magical and almost extinct creature. As Kress points out with color usage, that it helps “highlight specific aspects of the overall message” (2010, p. 2), having the rhino appear in a beige book appeals to the sense of it being ancient, or at the very least old.

Twig and his companion are on a journey to fix a broken, magical *MacGuffin*, which requires the healing properties of the horn of the rhino creature. Speech as a mode provides the reader with a sense of urgency, as Twig says “We need to pick up the pace... if we want to find these

items...” (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 3). Furthermore, the sense of urgency is enhanced by multimodality and synaesthetics (McCloud, 1994, p. 123), as the green, creepy, flying monsters hovering around Twig on the first panel of figure 18 look hostile and dangerous. Considering the monster on the left of the panel possesses an eye which almost pierces the atmosphere in a cold, cruel manner, the reader can feel an eerie, uncomfortable sense.

Multimodality in figure 18 utilizes modes which enhance each other, which coincides with Rimmereide’s notion that the signifiers of graphic novels is that “verbal and visual texts are arranged on the page in a way that together forms a message” (2020, p. 195), which in this case is urgency. Utilizing an action-to-action transition (McCloud, 1994, p. 70) between panels we see the attention of focus switched from the journey to the map, which through the icon in the first panel is in the hand of Twig. Reader involvement in interpreting the gutter does not add much, other than assist the reader to carefully assess and look at the first panel to find details, such as the book itself.

Figure 19 takes place after Twig has encounters the rhino creature and explains to it why it is necessary to take its horn. Earlier in the graphic novel, it is established that the rhino’s heart is located in its horn, so removing it is fatal. Sympathy and empathy are revealed from the rhino creature as he willingly agrees to let Twig take his horn, after hearing the explanation that his life will save the world. Nussbaum’s use of the empathy term (1997) is clearly evident in both the rhino creature who is willing to sacrifice himself, and in Twig who struggles to end him, and sheds a tear on the bottom panel. *Framing* of the panels utilizes both moment-to-moment and action-to-action transitions (McCloud, 1994, p. 70), which are considered the simplest transitions. Simplicity might enhance the gravity of the situation and allows the reader to focus on the narrative without



Figure 19 (Young, 2022, Chapter 4)

necessarily needing to interpret the gutter. Furthermore, the rhino creature and Twig utilize different text boxes in their speech, Twig with the normal white box, but the rhino has pink speech bubbles which connects to his pink color.

Background images consist of iconic signs which represent a snowy, cold landscape. Scattered around are iconic signs which resemble bones. These also function as symbolic signs as they imply that these bones are the remnants of the rhino creature's kin, indicating how they are, and have been, victims of poaching. Furthermore, as Rimmereide concludes, emotions are revealed "through facial expressions, coloring, shadowing, onomatopoeic representations or other illustrative devices" (2022, p. 121). Kress also posits that the purpose of multimodality within social semiotics is for the author to create and spread meaning, or a message (2010, p. 54). Combining signs, emotion and Kress' social semiotic account of meaning, figure 19 evidently provides the reader and interpreter an emotional, narratively driven depth and an ethical dilemma. Cultural resources such as heritage, traditions, history and values impact the interpretation of these panels to various extents. Especially the regret and loss in Twig's facial expression (Kress, 2010, p. 79) have a synaesthetic effect (McCloud, 1994, p. 123) on the reader which invites empathy and reflection.

Stevenson introduces the protagonist Nimona in a lighthearted manner and quickly establishes her ability to shapeshift. Figure 20 utilizes additive combinations (McCloud, 1994, pp. 152–155) where words and images amplify each other, as evident by the second panel where Nimona refers to Sir Blackheart as “the biggest name in supervillainy” (Stevenson, 2015, p. 2) with an illustration of a burning city and two shaded monsters portrayed by iconic and symbolic signs. This further adds to the lighthearted manner, which also indicates some character traits for Nimona, namely that she puts up a superficial, unserious façade. According to Kress, “identity is embodied and becomes more than a merely mental phenomenon, an ‘attitude’ maybe, that I display or perform” (2010, p. 77). Interpreting Nimona’s silly gestures and child-like posture and form, specifically how she is held up by Sir Blackheart like someone would hold a kitten, establishes how she acts childishly. Furthermore, she talks about how she wants to be Sir Blackheart’s sidekick, and convinces him by transforming into a shark. This immediately piques Sir Blackheart’s interest as evident by his surprised facial expression. When he agrees to take Nimona on as a sidekick, she is visibly pleased, as figure 20 illustrates her smile in the form of a shark along with an almost audible “YESSS” outside of a speech bubble. The panels in figure 20 appear to be very monotone in their usage of color, where the most prominent color other than grey is red. This shade of red symbolizes both Nimona and Sir Blackheart as characters (McCloud, 1994, p. 188), as they are mostly associated with this shade of red



Figure 20 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 2)

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throughout the graphic novel. In other words, the prominence of red sets the mood for both the characters and their villain nature, as red is more associated with evil than for instance blue. However, after chapter nine when Nimona loses control of her abilities and loses confidence in herself, she changes her hair color to purple, indicating a dynamic character who is affected by experiences and changes. Stevenson’s orchestration (Kress, 2010, p. 162) utilizes all modes, especially color, to both set moods (McCloud, 1994, p. 190) and to convey meaning and create character development.

Nimona herself is a fascinating character, partly due to her shapeshifting capabilities which enhances her potentials within the story. The premise of figure 21 features Nimona and Sir Blackheart in the progress of a bank robbery, partly because they need money, secondarily because they are waiting for another scheme to play out. The imagery and orchestration (Kress, 2010, p. 162) of the panels features nothing out of the ordinary in the department of color, where most background and colors seem dull. However, the most noticeable color is Nimona’s red hair color seen on a burly, masculine man. She has, in other words, transformed into this man to enter the bank unnoticed, as the guards are on



Figure 21 (Stevenson, 2015, p. 61)

the lookout for Nimona's original form. These panels are a great example of what Kress calls transformation, where meaning change can occur by "re-ordering of the elements in a text or other semiotic object, within the same culture and in the same mode" (2010, p. 129).

However, this meaning change can only occur with more context of the author's biography, as Stevenson himself has transitioned from female to male to be true to his own identity.

Transgender theory is complex and controversial, as "[t]ranssexualism is defined as innate and biological, not chosen, therefore deserving of both social and legal recognitions.

Conversely, transgenderism is thought of as learned, freely chosen, and socially determined, therefore not deserving of legal recognition" (Wallbank, 2004, referenced in Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 432). However, transgenderism, transitions, and metamorphosis in the context of *Nimona* (2015) should not be read as a simple allegory for transgenderism, but perhaps something loose as Nimona herself changes shape, species and gender, but always returns to her "normal" form.

Whether or not transgenderism is learned, it still impacts individuals who are transgender.

Perhaps Stevenson's decision to nonchalantly introduce Nimona as a shapeshifter is to attempt to normalize shifting of gender and public perceptions surrounding transgenderism.

On one hand, people see Nimona as a monster because she is different, and is able to shapeshift into animals and dragons. On the other hand, the person closest to her, Sir Blackheart, pays no mind to her shifting to other species and even genders, as he learns to accept Nimona for who she is. Kress' notion of social semiotics indicates that individuals in a socially shaped society who utilize all culturally available resources, such as the multimodal story-telling tool of graphic novels, are both "agentive and generative in sign-making and communication" (Kress, 2010, p. 54). Stevenson is able to show the reader that identity is an important factor in how one is perceived by others in society, along with the possibilities and limitations that affords someone. By having Nimona team up with the villain Sir Blackheart, along with her somewhat aggressive attitude towards society as a whole and her volatile plans which often involves explosions and destruction (Stevenson, 2015, p. 3), the reader is able to interpret the potential reason she acts in this manner. Furthermore, "one's identity is not just about his or her own self-identification but is also about the intersecting larger social structures and the power differentials that are associated with belonging to a certain group or groups" (Shields, 2008, cited in Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 433). Being assigned to the social groups of monster and outsider influence Nimona, and to a further extent, transgender people, by limiting them in society. This topic in *Nimona* (2015) can be utilized by teachers to

more indirectly address and engage the topic of transgenderism in a classroom, through metamorphosis and shapeshifting.

Through the graphic novel, Stevenson *frames* Nimona as a capable, young woman who can turn into other creatures, and also different gender and age. Being written before his public transition as transgender, the story of *Nimona* normalizes and invites how change does not affect character, as despite appearing as a burly, masculine, and bearded man in figure 21, Nimona is still herself, with her own personality, ambitions and relations, despite looking different. Kress' term *transformation* gives more meaning to the fact that Nimona can transform into different creatures and genders, as this becomes part of her identity. Arguably, however, she is distinct from a transgender person in that where someone who is transgender has to change physically through surgery and medication to become who they really are, Nimona borrows and discards a variety of shapes instantaneously, but always reverts to being a woman. Because of this, the connection to real-world transgenderism is somewhat muddled and difficult to understand, making it relatively ambiguous. However, this can also be brought up as a point of discussion and reflection as an introduction into a controversial, difficult subject.

Stevenson's sign-making is culturally dependent, as Kress would put it, and can only be understood with contextual clues of transgenderism in society. Porto et al. argue that through emotional engagement with source material, students can use literature such as fantasy graphic novels as a springboard for intercultural skills (2019). Using *Nimona* (2015) as a springboard into transgender discourse can help improve intercultural skills, which is also an important aspect of the LK20 Norwegian curriculum:

By reflecting on, interpreting and critically assessing different types of texts in English, the pupils shall acquire language and knowledge of culture and society. Thus the pupils will develop intercultural competence enabling them to deal with different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b)

By viewing, analyzing and reflecting on the contents of figure 21 on how Nimona is transformed into a man, one can easily open up a discussion of how transgender discourse in contemporary society is handled and how ways of living differ from person to person in any culture.

The protagonist in Young’s graphic novel *Twig* (2022) is also named Twig. Consequently, when the reader is introduced to the character Twig, they will recognize how this is a story about him, who he is as a character and what he experiences. In other words, Kress’ social semiotic *framing*, which defines what is to be engaged with by inclusion and exclusion of various resources and modes (2010, p. 149), such as how the title emphasizes *Twig*, grants the reader something specific to relate to. This also aligns with Rimmereide’s article where she states “What signifies graphic novels is that ‘verbal and visual texts are arranged on the page in a way that together forms a message’” (Rimmereide, 2020, p. 195 cited in Rimmereide, 2022, p. 100). Orchestrating the graphic novel to utilize multimodality by linking illustrations of Twig to both the graphic novel’s title and to speech bubbles that refer to Twig work together to both form a message and to *frame* the story.

Twig’s character is well defined and explored through the orchestration of modes and *framing* in figure 22. Moment-to-moment transition (McCloud, 1994, p. 70) introduces Twig as he utilizes the symbolic signs of speech bubbles to speak to himself; asking how his father managed to repeatedly save the world. Iconic signs are used to create and resemble Twig, a unique, blue, furry creature with big black and pink eyes, with a green leaf hanging on the brown twig on his head, either as a biological part of him or as a type of hat. Background colors are dark blue with bright yellow flares appearing from a bonfire in the gutter (McCloud, 1994, p.



Figure 22 (Young, 2022, Chapter 5)

66). These features combine to form synaesthetics, as the situation appeals to feelings of a

dark, yet hopeful moment. Afterwards, an aspect-to-aspect transition (McCloud, 1994, p. 72) occurs as the illustrator turns to a memory of Twig from when he was younger, indicated by his smaller size as he sits next to a larger, yet similar creature.

The multimodality of the panel provides information about the setting, as one speech bubble from the tiny Twig states “Like the heart I have in me, Papa?” (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 5). This, along with the creature besides Twig is twice his size and has a same appearance, but a different color, is indicative of their familial relationship. Gestures and mouth positions (Kress, 2010, p. 79) also indicate that this is a happy memory, as Twig and his father are smiling and eating colorful, seemingly delicious food. Cultural connotations of pizza as a party food and celebratory meal also creates a good atmosphere in the panel, as the food pictured is an iconic sign which resembles pizza. In other words, Young *frames* the memory as a happy and hopeful moment in Twig’s life through iconic and symbolic signs, colors, and cultural connotations. Finally the final panel transitions back to contemporary Twig in another aspect-to-aspect transition (McCloud, 1994, p. 72) where he realizes what he needs to do. His father, through a speech bubble, explains the difference between “having heart” and the physical properties of the bodily organ, heart. Friendship, cooperation and loyalty are qualities tied to “having heart”, which will aid in Twig’s adventure as a *placeling*.

Discussion of themes

Within the thematic strands of creature, identity and representation, themes such as ambiguity, cooking and travelling, poaching and identity fluidity are pertinent to discuss in light of cultural and intercultural competence. One reason these themes in particular are chosen is because they provide different perspectives on culture, as “it is literature that opens up ‘reality beyond realism’ that enables readers to live other lives – by proxy” (Kramsch, 1995, p. 85). Fantasy graphic novels can provide this empathic proxy that readers can possess to explore different worlds. Kramsch elaborates in her article that language teaching has a cultural component, which ties cultural competence and language learning together. It also aligns with LK20’s core goals for the English language, namely communication, language learning and working with texts in English which translates to cultural and intercultural competence (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). The aforementioned themes provide intriguing perspectives into culture, as they arguably deal with less focused aspects of culture.

Ambiguity is a theme which touches both representation and creatures in this setting, as a working creature in *Twig* (2022) both wishes and does not wish to become a *placeling*. Professions are wide and varied in every culture and world, and Young *frames* the panels in a manner which includes professions such as miner, *placeling* and chef. When the miner was young, he says he “wanted to be a *placeling* like you” (S. Young, 2022, Chapter 1) to explore the world, rather than being stuck in mines. Through ambiguous professions and settings one can approach culture by “... involving the intercultural and citizenship dimensions with social justice concerns so as to ‘enable students to reflect critically on language, discourse, and culture with regard to power and inequality’” (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 147). Professions, either forced or voluntary, make up the backbone of civilized society, and are shaped by and shape culture.

As evident in other panels within Mount Guphin, all the workers are the same species as indicated by the iconic signs which resemble red and beige lizard-like creatures with two arms and legs, wearing pitch-black goggles and mining equipment. The interpretant in Peirce’s semiotic triangle is the only one who can read what this ambiguity means. Do all these creatures work in the mines as a choice? Are they perchance all miners because their bodies naturally belong in dark places, such as mines? Or is there a cultural reason why they are all miners, such as this profession being highly valued or simply part of a heritage? Regardless of what the objective answer is, the miner at one point desired a different profession, but feels the life of a miner is equally important. One can draw parallels towards Ghatak’s research; she focuses on how Chanani’s graphic novel *Pashmina* features diasporic sensibility, which she explains is a type of yearning towards home (Ghatak, 2023, p. 92), as the protagonist in *Pashmina* is an Indian-American girl born in America yearning for her cultural home of India. The ambiguity of staying in one’s profession or leaving can be affected by the feeling of home and familiarity; some creatures in *Twig* (2022) might value home and cultural heritage more than a sense of adventure.

Readers and interpreters might have differing views on these ambiguities. Potential reading of figure 15 employ empathy (Nussbaum, 1997) as a way of reaching an interpretation. If experiencing life through these creatures as proxies, what would the reader value? In a dialogue between reader and text (Rimmereide, 2022, p. 99) the reader uses all available tools and signs provided by the author, and in the case of these creatures in *Twig* (2022) they are *framed* with smiles and content looks despite being in dark mines. Cultural backgrounds and biases recognize smiles as something positive, but dark places as something negative because

it is foreign and unfamiliar. However, in the final panel in figure 15 Twig and the miner creature walk towards blue, fluorescent mushrooms which brighten up the mines with a calming, beautiful light. Using Kress' notion of signs as communication and Peirce' symbolic signs, one can argue that these bright mushrooms symbolize something akin to hope, both to Twig's quest and to the creatures' work culture, as light is associated with something good and hopeful. The ambiguity touches both home versus adventure, and light versus dark. These reflective interpretations employ critical literacy, and can enhance cultural competence by emphasizing values in a given cultural context.

Ambiguity through metamorphosis and potential transgenderism is a difficult topic featured in *Nimona* (2015). Considering Nimona's ability to transform into different species and genders, she can be viewed as an allegory for transgenderism. However, this is an oversimplification, as despite the author being transgender himself, it does not equate the graphic novel as an allegory. Nimona, after all, always reverts back to her original form, which is not a realistic view on transgenderism in the real world. However, one can still utilize her transformations to introduce the real-world topic of transgenderism, and explore the potential issues and difficulties this subject matter has on various cultures around the world. Rimmereide writes that "critical literacy and critical visual literacy invite examination of the interests that are served by texts in terms of power, identity and access" (2022, p. 112). By critically analyzing and assessing *Nimona* (2015) and her shapeshifting through the featured iconic and symbolic signs and *framing*, one can explore identity and its ambiguous nature. Who am I, truly? Can identity be viewed as controversial and difficult in various cultures? Classroom discussions can explore the pupils' relation to this topic, and to avoid controversial transgender issues the focus can instead be on identity in more general terms, as it is still possible to relate these issues to cultural and intercultural competence because identity and questions of gender identity are more pertinent contemporary topics in the 21st century. A less complicated, but still relevant topic in regards to cultural and intercultural competence is cooking and travelling.

Cooking and travelling are themes which are tied to landscapes and creatures in *Twig* (2022), and provide an interesting perspective on culture within their world. Figure 16's three panels provide ample information about some of Twig's travels. Scene-to-scene transitions (McCloud, 1994, p. 71) are utilized to show that both distance and time changes between the panels. Panels one and two show how Twig travels on a man-made, or rather creature-made road, indicating that these areas are traversed by many. Despite that, only Twig and his yellow

companion are the only seemingly sentient creatures seen travelling. Most creatures featured in *Twig* (2022) appear to avoid travel, which is entirely different from our contemporary world where vehicles are driving everywhere at all hours of both day and night. Additionally, traditional mechanical vehicles are completely absent as methods of transportation. Byram's theories on intercultural competence, and his savours on attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2020) are all aspect which can be used in relation to discussing fantasy graphic novels.

One way to utilize Byram is to apply his skill of interpreting and relating to the fantasy world visible in the panels in figure 16. Particularly the second panel where Young *frames* what appears to be either buildings or simply the skeletal remains of ancient creatures as evident by the iconic signs and usage of the mode color, as these buildings or remains have a color resembling bones. By interpreting the scene, namely these creatures with sharp teeth, claws on their hands and also stairs leading up from the ground can spark a cultural interest within the reader. Are these remains of large creatures, or are they built by a civilization long gone? Do they serve a purpose, either as a warning to creatures passing by, or as buildings functioning as homes? Dypedahl & Bøhn write that:

high levels of cultural empathy require good knowledge of other people's background or of the context in which they live. Consequently, area studies, or studies of societies and social contexts, can be instrumental in developing cultural empathy and the ability to decenter (2020, p. 92)

The background and context are not available to the reader. Figure 16 showcases panels and areas that, like many others in *Twig* (2022), only appear once. Hence, interpretation of the few *signs* that are available is vital in comprehending and decoding the travels of Twig and the cultures he encounters. Cultural empathy, another term used by Dypedahl & Bøhn is also important, as it allows the reader to enter other potential cultures and try to understand them from within. This might also help training intercultural competence, as being able to view the world from other cultures' points of view also allows better communication between cultures. Interpreting landscapes found in travels and the cultures that form around them indicates a better understanding and competence of culture in general.

Within figure 16's travelling, the reader witnesses the landscapes of the fantasy world. With an open, explorative attitude the interpreter is able to use their own knowledge of the world

and relate and compare *Twig* (2022) to their own experiences. How are the roads similar or different to the real world, and why do they seem empty and relatively void of civilization? On the other hand, they are obviously made by sentient creatures, as are the creepy monument buildings with open mouths featuring sharp teeth. Iconic, symbolic and indexical signs are used to *frame* an adventure in a foreign world which is fundamentally different from what the reader and interpreter is used to. Critical cultural awareness is thus important to employ and train, to compare and contrast in a critical manner. Can these creature monuments be compared to something the reader is familiar with? Are they religious? Do they serve as pit stops for travelers? Are they used to create fear, thus fending off potential visitors? Depending on the answer, it tells the reader much about the culture they inhabit. Hibbs mentions how knowledge of culture can be taught through different “C” words, such as comparison; “able to identify similarities between their first language/culture and the target language/culture” (Hibbs, 2016, pp. 7–8). Simply exploring, discussing and reflecting on how landscapes are featured in fantasy graphic novels should provide a basis for increasing cultural and intercultural competence. Cooking and food are also pertinent themes when discussing culture.

Cooking and food in general are viewed as vital parts of any given culture. Cultures, using Kress’ terminology, focuses on “socially made values... knowledge... society is the field of human (inter)actions in groups” (2010, p. 14) Utilizing values and knowledge affords survival; as evident in figure 16’s final panel when Twig is eating what looks like salmon. Iconic and symbolic signs along with experience can contribute to this reading. Twig sits by a river with purple water, and there are multiple purple slugs or fish that jump up. One might assume that Twig caught one of these creatures and prepared it for consumption, as energy and nutrients are vital for survival. Cooking and hunting/fishing stem from cultural heritage and are passed from generation to generation as a part of cultural heritage. Hibbs’ notion of comparison can also be applied to this situation, as food is an affordance of either hunting and gathering or farming. Figure 17 also features foraging of mushroom and cooking them over an open flame. Since Twig mentioned how he studied to become a cook, the interpreter of the graphic novel can reflect on how society functions; they utilize many of the same methods to produce food, such as hunting, fishing and foraging, and schools for cooking are implicitly mentioned. This can be tied to Kramsch; “[c]ulture as the idea of meaning and imagined communities” (2011, p. 355). The fantasy world of *Twig* (2022) is sprawling with culture and heritage as evident by Twig’s travels and cooking experiences.

Poaching is the act of hunting down animals and creatures to gather tusks, horns, pelts etc. to sell for profits. This can result in species becoming endangered, or even outright extinct. Poaching is an issue of culture, as it is the result of a desire for monetary gain. A poacher earns money because they sell parts of the animals for large sums, such as ivory which is used as a luxury resource in high culture societies. Examples of its use are as piano keys and jewelry, along with some medicinal uses. It is also “viewed as a status symbol” (IFAW, 2021), hence why poaching is tied to culture, and thus knowledge of poaching is a part of cultural competence. Rhinos are a real life example of this, where habitat loss and poaching are the primary reasons their numbers shrink yearly (World Wildlife Fund, 2024). Rhinos are present in both *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) as it is a narratively important creature in the former, and a strong creature Nimona can shapeshift into in the latter. The theme of poaching can be integrated into the LK20s core elements of the English subject as a part of “cultural diversity” by “reflecting on, interpreting and critically assessing” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b) fantasy graphic novels such as *Twig* (2022). Figure 19 fits perfectly for reflection, interpretation and critical assessment and thinking as the rhino is surrounded by the bones of his dead kin. Poaching has horrible consequences, and the pros and cons can be explored by the reader, or pupils in a classroom. A focus on pros and cons can provide intercultural learning as “learn[ing] to understand divergent opinions or habits” (Hecke, 2011, p. 654) is an important part of increasing intercultural competence. Poaching for profit is fundamentally wrong, but what if in a hypothetical setting the poacher needs to provide for their family? Not all cultures and societies provide welfare benefits or safety in the job market, so perhaps poaching is one of few options. To further understand discuss poaching it can be fruitful to mention eco-criticism.

Eco-criticism theory deals with the encounter between humans and nature, and the branch called wilderness eco-criticism deals with how wilderness in particular is connected to human interaction. Two schools, old school and new school, portray wilderness as either scary and outside civilization for the former, or as a sort of sanctuary and safe-haven for the latter (Brizee et al., 2017). Both figures 18 and 19 provide an interesting perspective for the wilderness as both a horrible place and a beautiful, serene area to explore and find oneself in. The aforementioned urgency and terrifying creatures in figure 18 indicate an old world reading where wilderness and creatures should be feared. Figure 19, on the other hand, takes a different approach where Twig, the “civilized” interacts with creatures negatively by

attempting to poach, or kill the rhino creature. Admittedly, this happens in light of trying to save the world.

Cultural competence is vital for ethical and moral understandings; is it morally right to sacrifice one to save many? Some cultures would probably agree, whilst others would disagree. Within each culture there would also be disagreement as culture is complex and does not inherently create identical opinions and values. What would the reader and interpreter do, if put into the position of Twig? Rimmereide concludes in her studies of the graphic novel *Persepolis* that “by re-defining the constructs of Self and Others” (2022, p. 107) can lead to increased intercultural competence, as the multimodality of graphic novels grants a good platform for discussion. Furthermore, she focuses on critical literacy as “the ability to see text, not as a transparent window on reality, but as constructed from a viewpoint” (Rimmereide, 2022, p. 112). In context of figure 19 in *Twig* (2022), taking a life through poaching is not something that should be done for no reason, and it should emotionally impact the person committing the act. What is Young attempting to convey? Magnussen and Kress agree that the interpretant is more important than the original message itself. The message is interpreted differently depending on the cultural background of the interpretant; whether sacrificing one for many is the best choice, and if one would be able to sacrifice their own life or take another, by utilizing the rhino and Twig as proxies; “it is literature that opens up ‘reality beyond realism’ that enables readers to live other lives – by proxy” (Kramsch, 1995, p. 85). Empathy, critical literacy and cultural and intercultural competence are related competencies which both impact and is impacted by themes in fantasy graphic novels.

The theme of identity fluidity indicates that identity is dynamic rather than static, and is a complicated topic which can be argued is culturally or socially constructed. This notion is becoming more commonplace, as “[g]ender scholars have increasingly conceptualized gender as a social construct, viewing it not as a fixed or static identity but as a product that is constructed and performed in interaction” (Berkowitz et al., 2010, p. 133). An example of how gender specifically is constructed is how boys and girls from a young age are assigned “boyish”, or masculine, and “girlish”, or feminine colors and things. Furthermore, the performative nature of gender is stereotypical and generalized, where more females work as health care workers, whereas more males work as for instance mechanics. This arbitrary gender divide is being constructed and maintained by the culture we inhabit, and according to Berkowitz et al. both power and privilege have historically favored males in various cultures (2010).

In relation to *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015), gender is treated differently. *Twig*'s journey has a heavy emphasis on the creatures and species, where gender is rarely specified or even mentioned. The mention of *Twig*'s father through Young's *framing* of the mode speech is the only specific indication of gender, otherwise most creature appear to be male or non-gendered and might be interpreted as such. However, reader interpretation is ultimately what decides the genders of the creatures in *Twig* (2022), as they make decisions and interpretations based on the iconic and symbolic signs and their own experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Nimona (2015) subverts expectations as the primary antagonist, the leader of the institution, is a female. *Nimona* herself, at least in her "normal", preferred form, is also a female. However, *Nimona* also subverts gender expectations considering the fact that she shapeshifts into both dragons and sharks. These creatures can be argued are more associated with males and masculinity, as young boys are assigned dragons and sharks as action toys to play and interact with, indicating that gender is both socially and culturally constructed. Perhaps *Nimona* is able to subvert these arbitrary gender roles by the fact that she can shapeshift into anything, including burly men? Furthermore, the quote "It must be stressed that 'culture' is not a thing, but a social construct vaguely referring to a vastly complex set of phenomena" (Jahoda, 2012, p. 300) posits that gender is not the only construct created by humans, but culture itself is constructed. Gender and identity is, in other words, a part of a socially constructed notion of culture, and *Nimona* (2015) specifically functions as an entrance into discussing and acknowledging the social construction of gender and culture as a whole. Cultural identity and bodily perception are two parts of this potential discussion.

Previous research on a performative play manages to compare ice touching skin as a part of a performance act towards cultural identity and bodily perception (Tait, 2013, p. 81). Tait also writes about how identity fluidity is tied to queerness and shamelessness (2013, p. 87). In other words, identity fluidity can be described as when one's many identities as a human, or creature, are in a state of flux. *Nimona*'s character is a phenomenal example of identity being fluid, in regard to form and shape. Figure 20 is intriguing in terms of gender identity, as *Nimona* shapeshifts from a girl to a shark, and the bottom three panels feature the shark with iconic and symbolic signs which resemble female breasts. The interpretant is left to make sense of this situation as Stevenson frames it in a particular fashion. Why would Stevenson choose to feature female breasts as a part of *Nimona*'s transformation into a shark? What is the communicative purpose from the author? Kress posits that identity is an attitude to be performed (2010, p. 77), which could tie identity to role. There is potential meaning behind

Nimona shapeshifting into an anthropomorphic shark with human breasts, which can perhaps be tied to culture. After all, Nimona shapeshifts into a burly man in figure 21 with no apparent female features. Nimona's shapeshifting can function as an introduction to a discussion of identity, role and gender – perhaps indicating her preferred gender.

Role is a vital aspect of identity fluidity. Dynamic changes to identity might be a result of the role a person is required to take on. Nimona changes her shape and gender depending on the situation; she becomes a shark to convince Sir Alistair Blackheart, she transforms into animals such as a fox or a rhino to combat enemies, she turns into a dragon to spread fear and gain the ability to fly with Sir Alistair Blackheart on her back, she turns into a bird to scout ahead from an aerial view, she turns into a little boy as a disguise during the science fair, and finally into a burly man to fit the atmosphere in a bank and have the strength to carry heavy bags. Ultimately, her shape shifting performs roles, and her fluidity and dynamic nature treats her as if she is a tool. Porto et al studied the graphic novel *Maus* and noted how dehumanization of someone contributes to making them be seen as “objects but also inferior and subhuman” (2019, p. 5). Nimona's ability to shapeshift might make her seen more as an object or tool, and removes her agency despite shapeshifting being her own choice.

Through cultural lenses, this character agency within identity fluidity might result negatively, as someone's “true” identity might be discarded or hidden. Cultural and intercultural competence are important to combat dehumanization and objectification of others, and by reading into Nimona as someone who struggles with their identity, a classroom discussion can provide insight into the way identity is viewed in various cultures. LK20's English curriculum for study specialization in VG1 provides a competence aim which states “discuss and reflect on form, content and language features and literary devices in cultural forms of expression in English from different media in the English-speaking world, including music, film and gaming» (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020a). *Nimona* (2015) is a phenomenal graphic novel where a focus on themes such as identity fluidity can provide the scaffolding to discuss these features and also provide a platform to increase cultural competence, as identity and gender are vital aspects of any culture.

Twig encounters identity fluidity in a slightly different manner than Nimona. Where Nimona struggles with finding her true identity, Twig on the other hand is forced to inherit the role of *placeling* from his father, when he truly wants to be a cook. Juxtaposition between *placeling* and cook is evident in figure 22, as Twig's memory showcases a happy moment with his father when they happen to be eating food. The iconic sign resembles a pizza, which through

cultural associations can create a happy interpretation from the reader as pizza is often used as food during celebrations, such as during a class trip, a birthday party or something similar. Twig's identity as a cook is a happy and safe one, whilst his identity as a *placeling* is riddled with difficulties and sadness. Firstly, his father died, so he associates the profession as something negative in his relationships. Secondly, he must travel long distances where he encounters gloom, death and horrible situations. Bland's article emphasizes that "[d]eep reading frequently involves encouraging the reader to contemplate ethical issues while empathizing with the protagonist" (2020, p. 75). Cultural and intercultural competence can be trained by having the reader empathize with what Twig is experiencing, and discussing whether or not he should be forced to inherit status and position from family, and whether this impacts identity negatively or positively. Depending on the cultural background of the interpreter, both options are possible, as ethics change depending on cultural background and experience. One can however, train intercultural competence through empathizing as one can learn how and why some choices are made, such as Twig becoming the new *placeling* in place of his father, rather than a cook which was Twig's original dream.

Conclusion

Fantasy graphic novels such as *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) are capable of impacting someone's cultural and intercultural competence through interacting with the texts, reflecting on them and discussing themes and form. This has been explored through formal analysis based on McCloud's *Understanding comics* (1994), C. S. Peirce's semiotic triangle of *interpretant*, *sign*, and *object*, and Kress' theory of social semiotics against a background of previous research on the potential benefits of using graphic novels within the area of cultural and intercultural competence (Ghatak, 2023; Hecke, 2011; Porto et al., 2019; Rimmereide, 2022). This thesis, however, has turned the focus towards the fantasy genre within graphic novels to see if they can provide similar and additional benefits, despite (or because) taking place in fantastical worlds with made-up cultures, creatures and characters. Using such texts is supported by LK20, the Norwegian curriculum, which states that using a variety of texts and learning intercultural competence in a globalized world are important parts of the English subject in VGS as evident by the core elements (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). Furthermore, Byram's model of intercultural competence has helped to anchor the discussion in a pedagogical setting.

Whilst not the focus of this thesis, Byram's model of intercultural competence is pertinent in explaining how graphic novels can contribute to improving both intercultural competence and cultural competence. His notion of skills of interpreting and relating can co-occur with the posited theory of this thesis, especially regarding the triangle of semiotics, where one aspect on the triad is the interpretant (Guynes, 2014; Magnussen, 2000). The connection between Byram and the semiotic triangle is evident in their focus on the interpretant. Thus, Byram and Peirce have a coexistent set of thoughts which allow a better understanding of how multimodal texts such as graphic novels can impact cultural and intercultural competence, which has been relevant in discussing *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015). Moreover, Byram's work has inspired UNESCO's list of skills and competences regarded as the minimum requirements for attaining intercultural competences; "respect, self-awareness/identity, seeing from other perspectives/world views, listening, adaptation ("being able to shift temporarily into another perspective"), relationship building and cultural humility" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 24), indicative of intercultural competence's importance on a global scale. The development of intercultural competence can be achieved through working with themes, as highlighted by this thesis.

Intercultural competence might prove difficult to fully develop through reading and decoding fantasy graphic novels, if following Bland's description of intercultural competence which states "promoting dialogue" (2020, p. 69) as a key feature. Simply reading, in other words, might not suffice for all students. However, by discussing features of a book in class, such as the topic of exploitation, pupils are able to discuss these cultural specificities, and more importantly how they manifest in the graphic novel by focusing on Kress' *framing* of various signs. Additionally, pupils gain insight into potential and fantastic but authentic ways of thinking and living, which is an aspect of intercultural competence in the core elements of the English language subject in LK20 (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). Furthermore, a student's critical literacy develops by reflecting on what they read, and how culture is presented in these graphic novels through both *symbolic*, *iconic* and *indexical signs* (Magnussen, 2000). Areas of discussion that can increase cultural and intercultural competence based on the graphic novels of *Twig* (2022) and *Nimona* (2015) can be moral ambiguity and conspiracy theories, exploitation, and prejudice, as these are vital themes in the graphic novels. These themes might also serve an additional purpose, by being interesting for pupils to discuss.

Themes of creatures, identity and representation provide grounds for discussion which can also provide a better insight and understanding of cultural and intercultural competence. As

evident in Young's *framing* of his panels, particularly in regard to colors and lights, one can interpret ambiguity as a partially culturally dependent phenomenon. How one interprets a situation depends on one's own experiences and cultural values, and by discussing this, one can utilize empathy (Nussbaum, 1997) and critical literacy to discuss and explore culture. Additionally, in *Twig* (2022), the protagonist lacks prejudice when meeting creatures and people from other cultures, despite experiencing hardships and threatening situations which could sow negative expectations in the meeting with new cultures. Kress' mode of color is integral in graphic novels as *Twig* encounters many threats often colored purple, yet he still manages to not form negative stereotypes or prejudices against purple creatures and characters when meeting new cultures. Through critically assessing the students' own interpretation of a fictional culture, they might learn more of their stereotypes of real-life cultures and are able to combat these, thus improving cultural and intercultural competence through fantasy graphic novels.

Furthermore, when focusing on landscapes such as the incredible nature seen in *Twig* (2022) and discussing them in light of iconic, symbolic and indexical signs, *framing*, Byram's *savoirs* of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997, 2020) and Hibbs' notion of cultural insight through comparison (2016, pp. 7–8) one can manage to further increase cultural competence despite not seeing any civilized creatures. Architecture, landscape and nature can provide cultural knowledge as cultures around the world take inspiration and live alongside nature to some extent. Furthermore, cooking, foraging, fishing and hunting, are different manners of preparing food and nutrients. The topic of cooking, in other words, is vital to survival and culture and provides yet another perspective on the imagined communities constructed by culture (Kramsch, 2011, p. 355).

Poaching as a theme is one not many are familiar with. It involves the murder of animals to gather either skin, horn, ivory or something similar for monetary gain. *Twig* (2022) asks the question; would poaching and killing be the same if the creatures hunted were sentient and could communicate with humans? Ethical and moral dilemmas and questions are impacted by cultural and intercultural competence, and provide a perfect platform for discussing, analyzing reflecting on and exploring these topics. Eco-criticism also provides insight into different perspectives, as positive and negative human interactions occur on every level, including wilderness (Brizee et al., 2017). Interpretation is probably the most important part of the triad which is the semiotic triangle (Magnussen, 2000), as the cultural competence of the interpretant is vital to how one comprehends a story, and what one simultaneously learns from

the narrative. Furthermore, *Twig* (2022) can function as a stepping stone to discuss contemporary rhino poaching and endangerment. This alone provides cultural competence in the form of learning more about a different cultural way of life and habitat, along with preservation attempts both nationally and globally (World Wildlife Fund, 2024). Finally, by approaching pros and cons around poaching, one can explore the cultural reasonings for why someone resort to this, despite not necessarily agreeing. This establishes an understanding of divergent opinions, strengthening intercultural competence (Hecke, 2011, p. 654).

Identity fluidity and ambiguity is explored heavily through the protagonist Nimona as she shapeshifts into different characters and creatures to perform various roles. Porto et al. note how this dehumanization can cause someone to be viewed as an object (2019, p. 5), which fits neatly into the narrative as Nimona struggles to find her true identity. Additionally, gender and culture as products of social construction are important to acknowledge when discussing cultural and intercultural competence as they highlight the origins of our interpretation on culture as a phenomenon (Berkowitz et al., 2010; Jahoda, 2012) Through discussing and reflecting on form, content, language and literary devices of the graphic novel, one is also able to adhere to the LK20 English curriculum's competence aims to further develop pupils' competences, especially cultural and intercultural (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020a).

Furthermore, through empathizing with characters in graphic novels, such as with *Twig*, one can explore ethical issues in light of culture (Bland, 2020, p. 75). Identity fluidity as result of inheriting a position from family can result in straying from one's true identity, but might also be both ethically and culturally the "correct" option. In other words, culture impacts what is determined as right or wrong.

Research on this topic has not been through an empirical study. To better see how fantasy graphic novels can be utilized to provide an increased cultural and intercultural competence in a more practical sense, the next step would be to research how pupils in a classroom situation are able to discuss, reflect and learn. By providing some basic terminology and concepts from McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Peirce's semiotic triangle and Kress' social semiotic theory pupils will be better equipped to utilize the graphic novels in a productive fashion to work on cultural and intercultural competence. It has previously been established that graphic novels can indeed be used in the fostering of both cultural and intercultural competence (Bland, 2020; Hecke, 2011; Porto et al., 2019; Rimmereide, 2022). However, this thesis concludes that by reading and analyzing graphic novels with a fantasy setting, one can still foster cultural and intercultural competence, along with empathy and critical literacy. This is

despite the graphic novels being removed from our real world, as the authors draw inspiration from cultures and history in the creation of their graphic novels, consequently making them great for discussing and reflecting in the classroom, also showcasing its relevance to the core English curriculum in LK20.

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