Film and the Intercultural Multimodal Reader: Expanding Intercultural Literary Literacy as a Theoretical and Pedagogical Concept

HILD ELISABETH HOFF[a]

JENA HABEGGER-CONTI[b]

[a] *University of Bergen, Norway*
hild.hoff@uib.no

[b] *Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway*
jena.lee.habegger-conti@hvl.no

Abstract

This article addresses key theoretical and practical concerns related to the intercultural encounter with multimodal literature. Previous efforts to incorporate an intercultural dimension into conceptualisations of literary literacy have primarily focused on competences associated with the reading of traditional, script-based texts. However, as the term "literature" is today associated with a wide range of new media texts, there is a need to take this into account in theoretical constructs as well as in pedagogical practice. The article provides insight into how the multimodal elements of *film* function as a complex meaning-making ensemble which adds layers of potential insight as well as potential misunderstanding to the text interpretation process. With a basis in the Model of the Intercultural Reader (Hoff, 2016), the article sheds light on how issues related to the narrative style and structure of a Hollywood motion picture can be navigated through an exploration of the recognisable audio-visual rhetoric of oft-repeated tropes. Drawing on Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet* as a practical example, concrete suggestions for pedagogical practice are offered. By integrating practices of script-based intercultural reading with new literacies, the article expands upon previous theorisations of the intercultural reader and provides insight into how teachers may facilitate nuanced intercultural explorations of literary multimodal texts in the 21st century language classroom.

Keywords: intercultural literary literacy, multimodal reading, film, audio-visual rhetoric, pedagogical implications

Introduction

The present article examines the affordances of literary multimodal texts in promoting competent, 21ˢᵗ century intercultural readers. This is an issue which has been largely overlooked in research on inter- culturality and reading, despite the fact that the term "literature" is today associated with a wide range of new media texts which rely on different semiotic modes to convey meaning (Abrams & Harpham, 2013; Williams & Normann, 2021; Xerri, 2018). Accordingly, previous descriptions of the compe- tences associated with literary literacy (Lütge, 2012a) may not be adequate as a comprehensive frame- work for pedagogical approaches to literature, particularly pertaining to the intercultural dimension of text interpretation. Therefore, the present article will first address some of the limitations of existing reading models before it explores key theoretical and practical concerns related to the intercultural encounter with multimodal texts. Based on the premise that the multimodal elements of *film* function as a complex meaning-making ensemble (Kress, 2010) which adds layers of potential insight as well as potential misunderstanding to the text interpretation process, the article will shed light on how issues related to the narrative style and structure of a Hollywood motion picture can be examined through a focus on the recognisable audio-visual rhetoric of oft-repeated tropes. The Model of the Intercultural Reader (Hoff, 2016) will provide a theoretical foundation for the discussion. The central issues which will be probed in the article are: How does the intercultural dimension come into play through the combination of different meaning-bearing elements in Baz Luhrmann's (1996) film *Romeo + Juliet*, and in which ways can such insight contribute to expanding previous theorisations of the "intercultural reader" and open up for more comprehensive intercultural explorations of multimodal texts in the language classroom?

Background

Previous Theorisations of Intercultural Literary Literacy

The idea that literary reading can promote intercultural learning processes has, first and foremost, been linked to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. The reason that the foreign language (FL) classroom has come to be regarded as a particularly relevant arena for this type of learning is that it "has the experience of otherness at the centre of its concern, [requiring] learners to engage with both famil- iar and unfamiliar experience through the medium of another language" (Byram, 2021, p. 3). Echo- ing this sentiment, scholars have argued that FL literature represents "the personal voice of a culture" (Fenner, 2001, p. 16), thus enabling readers to engage emphatically with literary characters whose worl- dviews and values may diverge from their own outlook (Bredella, 2006; Nussbaum, 1998). Furthermore, because the ambiguous nature of literature invites readers to consider multiple interpretations, it has been regarded as a valuable medium for promoting self-reflection, critical thinking and awareness of the subjectivity of different perspectives (Kramsch, 1993; Matos, 2012). Another argument which has been put forth is that this type of text is "neither oppositional to or representative of reality", thus "enabl[ing] the (re)shaping of reality of its reader" (MacDonald, Dasli & Ibrahim, 2009, p. 115). In other words, the intercultural encounter with FL literature may potentially take place as a transformative experience.

However, profound learning processes like the ones described above are not brought about by the inherent qualities of the literary medium alone; they are also dependent upon the way in which the reader interacts with the text. In order to concretise such matters, various attempts have been made to conceptualise the competences which are required in order to develop what we will here refer to as *intercultural literary literacy*. Some of these conceptualisations (Burwitz-Melzer, 2007; Hallet, 2007) incorporate intercultural competence as one of several sub-skills of this type of literacy, to be developed at specific stages during the literary encounter and in an ascending order of complexity (see Lütge, 2012a). Consequently, it can be argued that these models do not clearly illustrate the fact

that the intercultural dimension suffuses *all* aspects of the encounter between reader and text (Hoff, 2019; Volkmann, 2015). Other reading models (e.g., Porto, 2013; Schat, van der Knaap & de Graaf, 2021) spotlight interculturality first and foremost, being concerned specifically with the reader's ability to interpret the cultural content of the text and to use the text as a springboard for expanding their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. Due to this explicit focus, these conceptual frameworks provide limited insight into the crucial role of literary analysis as a basis for understanding the dialectic relationship between reader and text. This is an important issue to consider, because a literary text is not a neutral carrier of a "message" to be comprehended by the reader; it also shapes and manipulates the reader's emotions and response through the use of different literary devices (Volkmann, 2015). For instance, whether the reader recognises the use of irony in the text or reflects on the degree to which the narrator's version of events is to be trusted, will have considerable impact on the way in which they negotiate the cultural content of the text. Moreover, in addition to making choices about textual aspects like topic, word, tone, theme, and setting, authors also decide what to include or not include, who is given a chance to speak and who is kept silent in the text. In the context of intercultural learning, it is therefore not sufficient for the reader to be able to identify internal text characteristics; an equally important undertaking will be to explore the *effects* of such elements in order to gain an understanding of how the text positions itself and its readers. Indeed, text interpretation processes which take into consideration the impact of literary devices can be integral in developing the reader's ability to explore tensions in the form of underlying ideologies and power imbalances in encounters with literature.

Moreover, even though some of the aforementioned reading models draw on theoretical perspectives which emphasise culture as a dynamic and multifaceted concept, they simultaneously reveal a tendency to describe text interpretation as a process of negotiation between disparate cultural perspectives, that is, those of the reader and the FL text. This clashes with the recent shift in focus from "our culture/their culture" dichotomies to more complex notions of interculturality (Holliday, 2011). State-of-the-art perspectives in intercultural education research accentuate the need to take into account the experiences of multicultural and multilingual individuals (Arasaratnam, 2007; Ros i Solé, 2013) as well as the way in which we all move in and out of different roles depending on context and situation (Council of Europe, 2018; van Maele & Messelink, 2019). This means that culture is not defined by geography or national borders, and that the interplay between a wide range of identity markers beyond nationality (e.g., gender, age, sexuality, occupation and education) is relevant to take into consideration as a basis for intercultural understanding (Dervin, 2016; Illmann & Nynäs, 2017). It also means that reading models should reflect complex reader identities as well as the ways in which the literary text takes shape as a multifaceted, perhaps even contradictory, form of cultural expression. Bakhtin (2006) provides insight into this matter: Pointing out that all language is dialogic, that is, existing in response to previous utterances and in anticipation of future responses, he argues that the meaning of words will rest in a multitude of contexts and have differing intentions. According to this view, a literary text does not represent the singular personal voice of a culture (cf. Fenner, 2001) but rather a fusion of various previous, current and future voices which can be found both within and outside the text as well as within and across cultures. The reader's intercultural and literary competence will have an impact on the extent to which, and how, these voices are acknowledged and navigated.

It is precisely this complex reader—text relationship which lies at the core of the MIR (Hoff, 2016) (see Figure 1). This model draws attention to how literary analysis and intercultural explorations are mutually dependent aspects of text interpretation. Such concerns are particularly evident through the MIR's emphasis on the intercultural reader's consideration of how the *cultural/social/historical subject position(s)* of reader(s) and text(s) may affect interpretation as well as the ways in which the *narrative style and structure* of the text also play a role in this equation. The former component of the MIR avoids an essentialist approach[1] by explicitly drawing into play a wide variety of perspectives within and across cultures, whereas the latter is crucial in order for the reader to be able to navigate
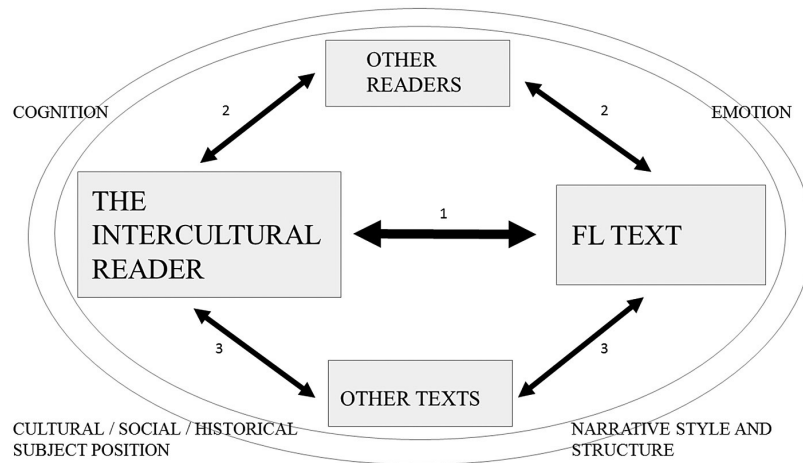
Figure 1 *The Model of the Intercultural Reader (adapted from Hoff, 2016).*

tensions and ambiguities in the textual encounter. Moreover, the MIR opens up for expansive intercultural explorations by illustrating how text interpretation processes can take place at three levels of communication, involving the competent intercultural reader's engagement with the multiple voices of the FL text (level 1), other readers (level 2) and other texts (level 3). At all three levels, the reader's *emotion* (i.e., affective response to the text) and *cognition* (i.e., a more distanced and critical approach) are involved. In this manner, the model illustrates the fact that intercultural literary reading is both an experiential and analytical activity.[2]

Multimodal Literacy

An important limitation of the MIR is that, just like the other theoretical constructs mentioned above, it primarily has relevance for the intercultural reader's engagement with traditional, script-based forms of literature. This is reflected in the description of the "narrative style and structure" component of the model, which is defined as the reader's "identification and evaluation of textual aspects related to narrative style (e.g., POV, tone, range of vocabulary, use of symbols, adherence to/breach with genre conventions) and structure (e.g., plot elements, setting, theme)" as well as "the act of considering the effects such features may have on the reader(s) and the text interpretation process" (Hoff, 2019, p. 81). Making no explicit references to the reader's consideration of different semiotic modes and their interplay, this definition seemingly relies on the original understanding of "literacy" as the ability to decode and encode script (Ørevik, 2020). As the concept of a literary text has been expanded to encompass a variety of multimodal media such as comics, graphic novels, songs, TV series, film, and video games (Abrams & Harpham, 2013; Schallegger, 2015), this is a somewhat limited representation of what literary reading can entail. The combination of different semiotic modes of meaning is not a new phenomenon (Hallet, 2018; Skulstad, 2020), however, the increasing multimodality of communication that has been brought about by processes of globalisation and technological advancement in the 21st century is today reflected in a growing body of electronic multimedia texts (Eisenmann & Meyer, 2018). In the light of such developments, scholars have emphasised the need to regard the promotion of "multiliteracies" (New London Group, 1996), that is, the skills required to interpret different sign systems and media, as an integrated aspect of intercultural language teaching and learning (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2017). Nevertheless, there remains a gap in the research in terms of clarifying how these skills have relevance in the context of intercultural literary studies.

In this connection, scholars have primarily focused on the reading of texts consisting of the combination of printed words and images, as evidenced by a growing body of theoretical and empirical

research pertaining to the picturebook/graphic novel genre (e.g., Arizpe, Bagelman, Devlin, Farrell & McAdam, 2014; Ibrahim, 2020; Lee, 2021; Rimmereide, 2021). A recurrent feature of the empirical studies, however, is that even though they are based on the premise that this type of text can promote intercultural learning, they are not specifically concerned with exploring how students navigate two modes of communication when images and words are present, nor do they examine how this process shapes the students' intercultural understanding. Indeed, the combination of visual and verbal text can have varying consequences for reading processes in general and intercultural learning in particular. While it is widely accepted that images can assist the reader's comprehension of printed words (Cary 2004; Liu 2004), they may also be complicit in obscuring it. Moreover, reading practices, at least in the West, have traditionally tended to give the verbal text the most authority when it is presented in combination with visual elements, with the result that the image is regarded as no more than an illustration of the printed words (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In an intercultural learning perspective, this is, for example, problematic if the verbal text seemingly challenges cultural stereotypes, yet it is accompanied by an image which depicts individuals in a manner that can perpetuate stereotypical views or contribute to an "us vs. them" frame of mind (see Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017).

Accordingly, being able to identify and discuss what an image says and how it conveys this message should be regarded as an integral aspect of the intercultural reader's competence. This would involve reading an image as an independent form of communication that may be connected to a verbal text, but which operates with its own coded message (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In educational contexts, such reading practices can be facilitated by prompting students to examine how a photographer makes choices about the angle, lighting, proximity of the camera to the subject, how the image will be framed, etc. Furthermore, the reader's own role in this equation should be considered. Sturken and Cartwright (2009) point out that "to explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology" (p. 22), and that practices of looking at, or reading images, are tied to ideology. Instead of simply learning to read visual codes, the reader comes to understand them through context and repetition, organising and confirming new pictures according to what they already know. Through an understanding of how the various elements in texts are positioned and seek to position their readers, students may become skilled in "reading *against* rather than reading *with* the visual text" (Newfield, 2011, p. 81) and may then accept or reject the particular version of the world on offer. This will subsequently allow explorations into other possible versions of the world and viewpoints.

When the medium contains more than two modes of communication, such as an ensemble like film, the reading process requires additional competences on the part of the reader.[3] In this case, the text challenges the reader's ability to navigate the complex interplay of different modes carrying visual, linguistic, audio, spatial and gestural meaning (New London Group, 1996) and may communicate through transmodal, intermodal or intramodal moments (Roswell, 2013). The consideration of such matters also involves aesthetic and critical competences that can enable the reader to recognise potential manipulative effects of cinematographic techniques (Lütge, 2012b). In an intercultural learning perspective, these abilities are particularly crucial because the medium of film tends to rely on a rhetoric of recurrent tropes which often perpetuate cultural stereotypes. Through years of cinematic spectatorship, people worldwide have gained a "filmic imagination" (Schweinitz, 2011, p. xiv) that has conditioned them to recognise oft-repeated schemata. Films resort to these agreed-upon tropes, which conveniently communicate large bits of information with only one shot, because audiences will quickly understand the intended message. For example, a character in dark clothing, who is also placed in the shadows or dim lighting, may signify "bad" or "evil". When a character wears a shirt imprinted with an image of the Virgin Mary, this may on its own symbolise that he practices the Catholic religion, but when this shirt is worn by a man with dark skin and a Latino accent who also carries a gun, the scene resonates with images of gang culture. Similarly, the notion that a particular character is a crime boss can be conveyed in a single shot by relying on the stereotypical depiction of the mafia in

the filmic imagination: A man with black, slicked-back hair, smoking a cigar and wearing gold rings and a well-tailored suit.

Thus, while people around the world may individually, or collectively in their cultures, take unique, local, contextual meanings from film, by and large films communicate in the realm of what Hall (1973), in his early analyses of television communication, called "dominant, or preferred meanings" (p. 13). These preferred meanings, which align with preferred or ideal *readings*, may at first seem unproblematic because they rely on common understandings, but the message is both connoted and denoted with social and cultural markers which are based in institutional, political and ideological systems of power (Hall, 1973). The reader's ability (or lack thereof) to recognise and critically examine such tropes thus plays into the power relations between reader and text and has an impact on how the reader navigates the intercultural dimension of the textual encounter. Consequently, the multimodal, rhetorical tropes of film provide an interesting basis for exploring both how texts reproduce (or challenge) social, political and cultural notions that seem commonplace or taken for granted in a particular context, as well as how culture may play a role in informing and forming readers' filmic imagination.

A number of scholars have highlighted film as a cultural product which allows for the development of intercultural competences in educational settings (e.g., Donaghy, 2015; Henseeler, Möller & Surkamp, 2011; Lütge, 2012b, 2013; Villanueva, 2020; Zibelius, 2016), thereby also addressing issues related to multimodal literacy. However, it is worth noting that previous empirical research on film as a basis for intercultural learning (e.g., Chao, 2013; Yang & Fleming, 2013) has often treated the issue of multimodality as an implicit rather than an explicit concern. For instance, studies may acknowledge that film is a particularly "rich resource of cultural information […]" which provides "multi-sensory inputs" (Chao, 2013; pp. 249–250), yet they fail to address how such richness is created through the combination of different meaning-bearing elements that can potentially affect the students' learning processes in specific, yet also unpredictable, ways. As a result, these studies merely scrape the surface of the unique pedagogical possibilities and challenges associated with using film in intercultural language education.

Towards a Reconceptualisation of the Intercultural Reader's Competences

Against this background, we contend that a reconsideration of the intercultural reader's competences is needed. With the aim to propose a more adequate theoretical foundation for developing intercultural literary literacy in the language classroom, we will explore what the MIR entails in the context of multimodal reading. This particular model has been chosen as a basis for the discussion due to the fact that it allows for expansive intercultural explorations as well as a critical examination of textual elements and their effects on readers. The present article posits that significant nuances related to interculturality may be overlooked if the intricate interplay between different semiotic modes is left unaddressed by readers in their encounter with literary multimodal texts. Accordingly, we regard it as particularly important to clarify what the "narrative style and structure" component of the MIR implies in this context, specifically in relation to the intercultural reader's engagement with film. However, due to the interlinked nature of the model, all levels and components will be considered. In order to illuminate some of the pedagogical implications that the concept of intercultural literary literacy may have for language teachers who wish to explore multimodal texts with their students, some practical suggestions for classroom work will be offered. For illustrative purposes, the discussion will draw on scenes from the Hollywood motion picture *Romeo + Juliet* (Luhrmann, 1996).

Narrative Style and Structure: Issues for Consideration

The scope of the present article does not allow us to provide a comprehensive overview of all semiotic resources through which meaning can be composed in film. Nor will we discuss technical terminology

pertaining to the construction and organisation of film in an elaborate manner. However, we will address some main issues for consideration in relation to the narrative, dramatic, and cinematographic dimensions (see Teasley & Wilder, 1997; cf. Lütge, 2012b; Viebrock, 2016) of this medium in order to demonstrate how such textual aspects can contribute to both enhancing and obscuring intercultural understanding. *The narrative dimension* involves elements which are associated with traditional, script-based literature (e.g., plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbolism, themes and motifs), and is as such captured by the existing definition of the narrative style and structure component of the MIR (see Hoff, 2016, 2019). *The dramatic dimension* pertains to the cast (i.e., the actors and their image, body language, gestures, make-up, and costumes) and the film set (i.e., locations and props, the use of colours and lighting, or how elements are arranged within a shot). *The cinematographic dimension* concerns film-specific elements such as the position of the camera as well as the type and angle of camera shots, in addition to the interplay between such visual cues and aural ones (e.g., voice, background noise and music).

In other words, the three dimensions of film may involve different modes in various ways, and each of these modes carries information. Therefore, rather than considering different meaning-bearing elements separately, it will be important to explore how they interrelate; i.e., whether the same information is provided in all of them (redundant), if it is only partially available in some or all of them (complementary), or if the elements contrast with one another in terms of the information they provide (juxtaposition) (Hallet, 2018). Furthermore, because the competent intercultural reader is not only capable of identifying textual devices but also of deliberating their effects (Hoff, 2016), the discussion will take into consideration how the text positions itself and seeks to position its readers through the semiotic choices which have been made (cf. Newfield, 2011). The notion of interculturality has relevance in relation to all of these considerations.

Rationale for Our Choice of Text

The Baz Luhrmann-directed motion picture *Romeo + Juliet* was released by Twentieth Century Fox in 1996 and features the American actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes in the title roles. The film is an adaptation and modernisation of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, which in turn was based on the narrative poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke. It depicts the story of two teenagers who fall in love despite their respective families' involvement in a feud. Building on the plot of the original play from 1594–1596, Luhrmann's narrative unfolds in a contemporary and urban environment in the fictional Verona Beach, and the Montagues and Capulets are depicted as warring, mafia-styled enterprises rather than as members of the new class of bourgeoisie that appeared in Shakespeare's time.

As previously noted, the MIR presupposes the intercultural reader's consideration of multiple voices within and beyond the text on the grounds that this may help them to discover "aspects of polysemy in their communication with the text that were not immediately recognisable to them" (Hoff, 2017, p. 11). With reference to level 1 of the model, *Romeo + Juliet* can be said to draw into play a broad array of concrete and abstract "literary" voices: That of Shakespeare as well as those of Luhrmann, the narrator(s), the characters, and the actors. Moreover, it is possible to make inferences about the implied reader (Iser, 1978) of the film, i.e., its intended audience. A wide range of hypothetical and actual reader responses to the film can also be considered (level 2), as can aspects of intertextuality (i.e., voices from other texts that are echoed in the film; level 3) (Hoff, 2016).

The multiple voices of *Romeo + Juliet* emerge out of diverse cultural, historical and social contexts. For example, the film retains Shakespeare's original dialogue in Elizabethan English and brings this together with audio-visual cues (e.g., costumes and music) related to various contemporary, transnational sub-cultures like the LGBT+ community and hip-hop culture, religious motifs associated with Catholicism, and aesthetic elements drawn from music videos as well as classic genres in American

cinematic history. Moreover, whereas Shakespeare sets the story in the stereotypical wildzone of four-teenth-century Italy, the film version does not specify any real-life geographical setting. Adding to this, events are frequently narrated through different news outlets, contributing to an apparent blurring of fiction and reality which opens up for the interpretation of the film as a commentary on current world events. In an educational perspective, the multivocality of Luhrmann's text thus provides a good foun-dation from which to spotlight complex, conflictual and ambiguous aspects of culture, identity and intercultural communication (cf. Dervin, 2016; Hoff, 2020; Illmann & Nynäs, 2017).

At the same time, *Romeo + Juliet* conforms to many of the conventions of a typical, box-office hit Hollywood film, with its recognisable cast (the actors playing the two leading roles were international teen idols in the 1990s and remain well-known today), its linear narrative style, predictable plot struc-ture, and its reliance on stereotypes that function as a short-hand for depicting setting and character in Hollywood films. As a work made and distributed for mass reception, its aesthetic elements guide the audience's beliefs and emotional responses towards a single, common interpretation and sense of completeness (Berliner, 2017) which operate to reinforce a normative mode of communication. The Hollywood aesthetic of *Romeo + Juliet* thus *positions* its audience as preferred, or ideal readers, and the codes with which this aesthetic operates may actually prevent the types of multifaceted understand-ings of characters, and indeed people and cultures, that are integral to intercultural learning.

This paradoxical duality makes *Romeo + Juliet* an interesting case illustration for our discussion of inter-culturality and multimodal reading. In order to develop students' awareness of other ways of seeing, and to open spaces for different subject positions and interpretations, educators must help them to deconstruct the multimodal, rhetorical tropes of *Romeo + Juliet*. This can be done on the one hand by exploring how these tropes may serve to reinforce "dominant interests" (Hall, 1973, p. 20) through their appeal to an ideal, implied reader, and on the other hand by seeking out contradicting voices within and beyond the text itself. Key to this process will be the teacher's role in drawing the students' attention to how the complex interplay of semiotic modes in the film simultaneously serves to reinforce and subvert a number of cultural stereotypes, as this may have considerable consequences for intercultural learning processes.

Developing Intercultural Multimodal Readers in Practice

The practical approach described below may have applicability in any language course which aims to develop the students' literary, multimodal and intercultural competences. However, the complexity of the MIR presupposes that the students have a fairly advanced level of language proficiency as well as the ability to explore quite convoluted aspects of the textual encounter. Consequently, we believe educators would find our suggestions appropriate for courses at the last year of upper secondary school or at undergraduate university level. It would be beneficial if the students are already familiar with Shakespeare's original play. Additionally, teachers should ensure that the students have been intro-duced to the concept of multimodality and understand basic technical terminology pertaining to the construction and organisation of film.

Phase I: Raising students' awareness of multimodal communication in film

To enable students to explore how the intercultural dimension governs their encounter with *Romeo + Juliet*, they must first become aware of how different semiotic modes work together to convey its message. It may therefore be useful to initiate classroom discussions about the narrative style and structure of the film by directing the students' attention to instances of redundant, complementary and juxtaposed elements (cf. Hallet, 2018). An example of different modes providing redundant (i.e., corresponding or reiterating) information, can be seen in relation to the imagery of darkness and light which colours the verbal text taken from Shakespeare's original play: Romeo uses the words "stars,"

"twinkling eyes," "brightness," "daylight," "lamp," and "bright angel" to describe Juliet when he sees her on the balcony in Act II, scene ii, whereas Romeo himself is described as light's opposite by his friends: "Come, he hath hid himself among these trees To be consorted with the humorous night: Blind is his love, and best befits the dark," in Act II, scene i. Luhrmann uses both costumes and lighting to mirror this verbal imagery: Juliet is dressed as a white angel at the costume ball, while Romeo comes as a dark knight; bright neon lights or candles glow in completely dark rooms (such as in the final church scene), not so much as to highlight "good vs evil," as is often the case with symbolism of light and darkness, but rather for the effect of visually coupling opposites like the Capulets and Montagues.

Some discussion prompts which might help students to reflect on the effects of these semiotic choices are:

- The imagery of darkness and light is central in these scenes – find examples in the verbal text as well as in the visual elements (for instance costumes, colours and lighting) which illustrate this.
- How do the visual elements and the verbal text work together to create meaning in these scenes?
- Do you think this imagery of darkness and light meant the same to theatre audiences in England at Shakespeare's time as it does for you today? Would people in other parts of the world interpret it similarly? What is the basis for your assumptions?

As the visual cues echo the verbal text in these examples, students are likely to find that the interplay of modes presents a unified message. One possible interpretation would be that this serves to underpin the universal meaning of the imagery, and that the use of darkness and light in the film thus illustrates the prevalent and timeless allure of Shakespeare's original text to readers across historical and cultural contexts. However, classroom discussions can potentially also provide insight into the fact that colours may convey different messages to people of different cultures (e.g., whereas the colour white symbolises purity and happiness in Western contexts, it is traditionally associated with death in Asian cultures; see He, 2009). In the context of such considerations, students may be encouraged to ponder whether the use of imagery in these scenes appeals to a very specific reader (i.e., someone who is familiar with the Hollywood aesthetic) and, consequently, if this serves to exclude certain contextual interpretations.

In other instances, the modes of the film complement one another by providing additional information. For example, audio-visual elements in *Romeo + Juliet* play a central role in creating the emotional impact of the film. This is an important issue to explore, not only because students' emotional involvement is integral to intercultural learning (Byram, 2021), but because stylistic and narrative choices which have been made to create an affective response can, in various ways, have a manipulative effect on the reader (Hoff, 2017). At the beginning of the film, the sounds of a helicopter quietly thump behind the narrator's voice, giving a sense of urgency or emergency to the narration. Choral music rises in intensity and pace, the scream of a child is heard, and an intense drum roll turns into the hip-hop music played in the car of the Montague boys, mixing the sounds of violence with carelessness. The opening of *Romeo + Juliet* also uses graphics extensively: First in the prologue (shot as a television news brief), followed by the words "IN FAIR VERONA" which appear in white on an all-black screen. Moreover, narrated phrases from Shakespeare's original prologue, such as "Ancient Grudge" and "New Mutiny", are reinforced visually with photos of newspaper headings. In this connection, students might be asked to ponder questions like:

- List some of the sounds you hear in these scenes. What do you associate with them?
- What kind of feelings does the music invoke in these scenes? How and why does it achieve this effect?
- What new meaning does Luhrmann's use of audio and visual cues bring to Shakespeare's text here, and how is this related to culture?

Students can be expected to recognise that the aural and visual cues both reflect the verbal text and provide further information, thereby adding weight to the emotional and dramatic impact of the narrative and enhancing its overall persuasive effect. Moreover, as their attention is directed towards the ways in which the film director's semiotic choices recontextualise and reframe Shakespeare's text in order to appeal to contemporary audiences, they may be incited to reflect on how cultural and historical point of view factors into the power dynamics between text and reader. Classroom discussions might also shed light on how the subject positions of different readers can influence the emotions at play (e.g., students who have experienced war- or violence related trauma may have a much stronger response to these sounds and images than someone who is merely familiar with cinematic conventions for portraying a disordered and turbulent environment).

Examining these introductory scenes further, students may be helped to discover that the different meaning-bearing elements not only relate to one another in a complementary manner, they also carry *contrasting* information. For instance, by juxtaposing sacral choral music with tough hip-hop beats, Luhrmann brings together two very different musical genres; one frequently associated with compositions performed in church, and the other with rebellious youth culture. Moreover, when words from Shakespeare's original text pop up across a black screen ("A pair of star-crossed lovers/Take their life", Shakespeare, 1597/2008, 1.1.16), the style of lettering is significant: "Take their life" is spelled with a font that depicts the letter "t" as a cross, calling attention to a repeated religious motif in the film and creating a contrast to the "journalistic" reporting of events. Further ambiguity can be detected in the introduction of the members of the two warring families, as they are presented through freeze-frame shots of each of the characters, accompanied by printed text identifying them and their relationship to the family: "Fulgencio CAPULET Juliet's father". This metafictional device, recalling the title sequences of older films in which stars were introduced, draws attention to *Romeo + Juliet* as a product of Hollywood, while simultaneously pointing to the story as spectacle (which, incidentally, Shakespeare also does in his prologue: "Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage"). Consequently, the multifaceted interplay of semiotic modes in these scenes serves up a cryptic commentary on the events that are about to unfold: Is this fact or fiction, a Biblical tale or an account of modern-day rebellion and crime, a news report or entertainment? To explore such complexity, students may be asked to deliberate the following questions:

- Which clues do the various meaning-bearing elements (for example the different types of music, the use of graphics and religious imagery) in the opening scenes of *Romeo + Juliet* give us about what type of narrative this is?
- What effect do you think the film director wanted to create by putting these multiple and sometimes contrasting elements together?

By pondering such issues, students will inevitably discover that the different modes in these scenes present rather dissonant information. While this arguably serves to foreshadow the notion of *conflict* which is central to the plot of *Romeo + Juliet*, the combination of contrasting textual elements can also be interpreted as Luhrmann's way of circumventing people's expectations about genre, context and characters. Accordingly, students might recognise that the semiotic choices can lead to feelings of uneasiness or confusion. This is an apt point of departure for letting go of preconceived notions, which is an important condition for intercultural learning (cf. Byram, 2021).

As these examples indicate, pointing to the various ways semiotic modes are combined in *Romeo + Juliet* can potentially help students to discover connections and tensions which operate beneath the surface of the text and which have an impact on how the text positions itself and its readers. The questions proposed for Phase I involve levels 1 and 2 as well as all components of the MIR, but students may not necessarily recognise interculturality as a central concern during this phase. Nevertheless, addressing

issues like the ones described here can lay the groundwork for questioning who the "implied reader" of a Hollywood-style film is, and for more explicitly seeking out diverse and contradicting cultural, social and historical voices within and beyond *Romeo + Juliet* at the next phases of the classroom deliberations.

Phase II: Exploring rhetorical tropes

A central premise of the MIR is the Bakhtinian notion that "[e]ach word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 293). With respect to a multimodal medium like film, each *mode* may relay other contexts, particularly because films often rely on audio-visual rhetorical tropes that are used in other films and text genres to quickly and effectively convey large amounts of information. We have already pointed to some examples of recognisable tropes in the film, e.g., the use of elements from newscasting. However, because these tropes can reveal social, cultural and aesthetic imaginaries, an important undertaking for students will be to reflect on which implications intertextual connections in *Romeo + Juliet* have for intercultural learning (cf. level 3 of the MIR).

One example of intertextuality in *Romeo + Juliet* can be found in relation to the introduction of Tybalt, Juliet's cousin (at approximately 00:03:25 in the film): The camera hones in on a blue car which pulls up to a gas station, revvs its engine and parks. The camera then focuses street-level on two black cow-boy boots stepping out of the car, with silver heels and a silver emblem depicting the face of a wildcat. The boots stomp out a cigarette that was thrown to the ground as the music imitates the sounds of old Western movies.

Whereas the character of the Capulet Boys is reinforced through Old Western music and clothing, the Montague street gang is characterised by the music and attire associated with hip-hop culture. Of note here are the two different ways in which the groups hold their guns (or "swords" in the Shakespearean language of the film): The Capulet boys wear visible holsters on black leather with silver buckles, and Tybalt twirls his gun by its trigger, just like an outlaw of the Old West. The Montague boys, on the other hand, have guns hidden in their shirts, and point the end of their pistols towards the audience with gestures and posturing that connote a more contemporary bad-boy image.

While both families are seen as contributing equally to the violence, they are not portrayed in the film as "equals". The idiocy of the Montague boys and their carefree nature is suggestive of a white, rich boy culture that can afford to not care about anything. They dress in flashy colours, have dyed blond hair, and drive a bright yellow car. The casting of the Capulet family as darker in appearance (in skin color, clothing and scene lighting) reinforces stereotypes about race and crime. When one of the darker Capulet boys grins, the word "Sin" appears engraved on a silver plate over his teeth. In other words, these are hardened, and obviously dangerous, criminals. The white Montagues seem ridiculous, clown-ish, and harmless in comparison, a notion which is further underscored by the use of hip-hop music, a musical genre which was originally developed as an outlet for disenfranchised, young African Americans: These boys are *poseurs* rather than real thugs.

This loaded difference in the families is further emphasised in the courtroom scene (at around 00:09:30 in the film). The scene visually establishes the Capulets and Montagues as binary opposites, even to the extent that Tybalt's chest is covered by his shirt while Benvolio's chest is bare. The spatial organisa-tion of the scene also symmetrically divides the Capulets and Montagues in two, with a large door and central aisle between them. Lord Capulet sits to the left of the room, in the shadows. He has dark hair, darker skin than his nemesis, and wears a black shirt. His look connotes "Mafia boss", reminiscent of characters from The Godfather and other mob movies. In contrast, Lord Montague connotes a brighter look of white corporate crime with his white shirt, silvery hair, lighter complexion, and better-lit face.

Luhrmann's visual portrayal of opposites quickly categorises the families as antitheses to the reader. While providing complete character descriptions of the family members in only a few, shorts seconds of film, this depiction simultaneously perpetuates stereotypes that may also lead to discrimination. At a superficial level, the scene strengthens the motif of duality in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, however the film positions the reader to accept a stereotypical representation of these two families, along with the old, wornout prejudices and social customs that lead differing cultural groups to hatred and war.

To provide insight into such matters, the following questions might serve as a point of departure for classroom deliberations:

- How does *Romeo + Juliet* draw parallels to other multimodal texts like films, TV series and music videos in these scenes? Give examples of different audio-visual cues that you associate with specific genres and motifs. What is the effect of these intertextual references on how you understand the plot?
- Which adjectives would you use to describe the Montague and Capulet boys? What evidence in the film do you base your interpretation on?
- How is the imagery of darkness and light reflected in the film's portrayal of the Montagues and Capulets (for example in the courtroom scene)? Which clues does this give us about how we are supposed to perceive their character traits as well as their respective roles in the feud?
- In what ways can these scenes be said to convey ideas about race and crime? In your opinion, are there any problems with these depictions?

By delving into such dimensions of *Romeo + Juliet*, students may be pushed beyond the simple reading of "a pair of star-cross'd lovers" (Shakespeare, 1597/2008, 1.1.6) who commit suicide because their families cannot agree to the union. They may develop an awareness of how the film version sets up the tension as cultural and social difference, ascribed to whiteness and darkness, and of how it relies on a number of stereotypical ideas about ethnic groups and antisocial behaviour to illustrate this tension through audio-visual elements which have been "produced within dynamics of social power and ideology" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 22). This potential realisation will rest upon the students' consideration of oft-repeated schemata that they have been conditioned to recognise through their prior encounters with similar texts. In this connection it is worth noting that teenagers or young adults may be well-versed in the aesthetics of hip-hop music videos, but they may be less familiar with older Western films such as *High Noon* or *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. It is nevertheless possible that they will be able to recognise the characteristic sounds of the saloon piano, tom-tom drum or high whistling of the ocarina flute as suggestive of a gun-slinging Western because of the continued use of the trope in 21st century films like *Django Unchained* and HBO's *Westworld*. An important dimension of the classroom work will thus be to develop the students' awareness of intertextual connections beyond the text sphere they are used to navigating.

Phase III: Deconstructing the tropes

Shakespeare's original text repudiates the duality it sets up thematically by putting opposites together in the verbal text: "Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical!/Dove-feather'd raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!" (Shakespeare 1597/2008, Act III, Scene ii). As previously noted, Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is also fraught with contradictions, since the interplay between different modalities creates a complex message to be deciphered by the reader. Parallel to the ostensibly stereotypical representation of the Capulets and Montagues, Luhrmann gives the characters and their surroundings some unexpected attributes, which are expressed predominantly through different visual cues. Consequently, the film's treatment of issues pertaining to culture and identity may not be as clear-cut as they appear at first glance.

For example, scenes from the prosperous Capulets' mansion show that their staff are mainly white, and the film thus offers up an alternative social order to the one typically presented in Hollywood films (e.g., people of colour have often been portrayed in subservient roles, cf. Dyer, 1997; Manasan & O'Connell, 2021). Moreover, Romeo's friend Mercutio (played by a black actor) unabashedly turns up in drag at the costume ball, then morphs into a dreadlocked and fierce rebel who serves as an instigator for the (all-white) Montague boys and even fights the notorious Tybalt later on in the film, thereby challenging traditional perceptions of gender roles. Tybalt, on the other hand, appears to be both a murderous gangster and a devout Catholic, judging by the portrait of the Virgin Mary which is emblazed on his clothing and guns. The latter example might be an indication of a hypocritical and deceitful personality rather than Tybalt's inclination to move in and out of different, seemingly incompatible roles, but it nevertheless contributes to the film's overall representation of human nature as multifaceted and inconsistent. In this sense, "Fair Verona" may not only be a site for power struggles between different cultural and social groups; it also appears to be an inclusive community which provides its citizens endless possibilities to express who they are and to define who they want to be. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that there is no clear geographical setting for the story: We are invited into a universe with which no reader will be completely familiar, yet in which most can recognise themselves in some way or other.

Romeo + Juliet thus opens up for more nuanced explorations of culture and identity and for further challenging the notion of the "ideal" reader. Classroom discussions might revolve around the following questions:

- Find examples of audio-visual cues which provide contrasting information about the different characters in *Romeo + Juliet*. In what ways do these textual elements serve to nuance, or even challenge, some of the cultural stereotypes which are reproduced through the film?
- How do the different meaning-bearing elements in the film illustrate who are in possession of power, and who gets denied it? To what extent does this reflect power relations in the real world? How can the film be said to offer a critique of societal norms or cultural and social differences which exist in today's societies?
- How would you say that the audio-visual representation of characters and their environment in *Romeo + Juliet* conforms or breaks with your expectations of a Hollywood film? Give examples. Do you think that having prior knowledge of Hollywood films helps along or hinders a nuanced reading of *Romeo + Juliet*?
- What did this exploration of different meaning-bearing elements in *Romeo + Juliet* reveal to you about the characters and their environment that you had not noticed previously? Give examples. How might such insights help you in real-world intercultural encounters?

As they are encouraged to pay attention to multiple, contradictory and inconsistent representations of culture and identity in the film, students may be helped to recognise how the interplay of semiotic modes in *Romeo + Juliet* serves to subvert a number of the social, political and cultural notions that have seemingly been established through the film's reliance on well-known rhetorical tropes. Furthermore, students' critical examination of their own expectations and outlook may provide further insight into the ideological forces which have shaped their filmic imagination. Amongst the discussion prompts we have suggested here, the last one arguably sums up the very reason why the development of competent, intercultural multimodal readers is such an important educational concern: Not only can this help students to gain a deeper understanding of texts which rely on different semiotic modes to convey meaning, it can also promote their ability to navigate 21st century intercultural encounters in the real world as they become aware of the complexities, conflicts and ambiguities which lie inherent in this type of communicative process.

Conclusion

The present article has highlighted the need to incorporate multimodal texts more explicitly in theoretical conceptions of intercultural literary literacy. Pointing to some limitations of previous theoretical models in such respect, the article has used the MIR (Hoff, 2016) as the basis for a discussion of what it means to interact interculturally with multimodal literature, thereby clarifying how the "narrative style and structure" component of the model pertains to the reading of this type of text. By drawing on scenes from the Hollywood motion picture *Romeo + Juliet*, the article has demonstrated that the reader's consideration of various combinations of meaning-bearing elements is crucial to their understanding of how the intercultural dimension is reflected within the text itself as well as how it comes into play in the reader – text relationship. Due to the film's simultaneous reproduction and subversion of stereotypical tropes, *Romeo + Juliet* provides opportunities both to explore prejudiced and biased perceptions of culture and identity and to establish more nuanced, and comprehensive, understandings of these concepts through an investigation of multimodal communication.

Some practical suggestions for classroom work have been provided, however, it should be noted that because the focus of this article has been to delineate the implications of a particular component of the MIR in relation to multimodal texts, other aspects of the model have not been dealt with as thoroughly. For instance, whilst the suggested discussion prompts have touched on how the notion of an "ideal" reader of film can be challenged in order to open up for more diverse reader perspectives, the question of whether and how the meaning-bearing elements of the film may carry disparate connotations for different readers depending on their cultural, social and historical points of view is an issue which would be worth exploring in more depth. Furthermore, because students' engagement with the film and the tasks will be highly subjective and contextual, classroom discussions are likely to elicit learner insights as well as pedagogical challenges that have not been exemplified here. The degree to which teachers will be required to guide the process (e.g., by asking follow-up questions, challenging students' interpretations, steering their attention towards specific textual elements or providing additional information), will thus vary. In other words, the prompts suggested here should be understood as a potential *starting point* for classroom deliberations, and it will be important for educators to consider how the material can be adjusted according to the educational context, background knowledge and competence levels of the student group at hand. Finally, the present article has only examined a few, select scenes from *Romeo + Juliet*, and consequently we acknowledge that it represents the film in a limited and somewhat discerning manner. It is our hope that teachers will find our practical suggestions useful as a springboard for further explorations of the film and other literary multimodal texts in the language classroom.

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Author Biodata

Hild Elisabeth Hoff is Associate Professor of English didactics at the University of Bergen (Norway), where she teaches and supervises student teachers of English. Hoff's research focuses on the intercultural dimension of language teaching and learning, and her work on intercultural competence and literature studies has been published internationally.

Jena Habegger-Conti is Associate Professor of English at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (Norway) where she teaches and researches in intercultural education and multimodal literacy. Her most recent publication is "'Where am I in the text?' Using positioning in refugee comics for intercultural education" (2021).

Notes

[1]   Essentialism entails seeing people as defined and constrained by the nation in which they live and culture as a static and coherent phenomenon (Holliday, 2011). This reductive view of culture and identity does not align with more recent theoretical perspectives within the field of intercultural education research.

[2]   See Hoff (2016, 2019) for a more detailed description of the various components/levels of the model and how they relate to one another.

[3]   Based on the premise that the concept of literature includes moving image texts like film, we will here use the term "reader" rather than "viewer" about someone who engages with this type of text.