Coming out Monstrous -

A queer reading of monsters in the two animated children's films Luca (2021) and Nimona (2023)

Tora Karoline Dahl

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«Kids. Little kids. They grow up believing that they can be a hero if they drive a sword into the heart of anything different. And I'm the monster?»

- Nimona

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2024

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the representation of the queer child's experience in the animated films "Luca" (2021) and "Nimona" (2023). I approach this matter by conducting a study of genre and a study of character. The research is based on the coming-out narrative model, which divides the coming-out process into three parts: recognition of difference, rejection of difference, and emotional declaration. This model is utilised to compare and show the contrast in the two films representations of queer experiences. Additionally, the thesis explores how the films utilise the metaphor of the monster to reflect the queer experience and examine the variation between non-straight and genderqueer representations. The analysis aims to uncover the underlying themes, narrative structures, and metaphors that contribute to the portrayal of queer identity in these films, thereby enhancing the understanding of queer representation in children's media and its impact on societal perceptions of queer identity. By applying the coming-out narrative model, the analysis revealed that the two films adopt considerably different approaches to queer representation and the degree of inclusion they depict. *Luca* employs a subtle and allegorical method to address queer identity, with the monster metaphor representing the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery and coming out. While *Nimona* takes a more direct and explicit approach, using the monster metaphor to comment on the persecution faced by genderqueer individuals.

Key Words

The queer child, coming-out, the queer monster, textual analysis

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1 Introduction

In recent years, amidst a troubling resurgence of anti-gay rhetoric, the landscape of children's media has become increasingly fraught with challenges and controversies when it comes to queer representation. This scarcity of much-needed representation in children's films remains a glaring issue within mainstream entertainment. Despite claims from major production companies such as Disney concerning their inclusion of queer characters, they are seldom main characters, and their queer relationships are rarely explicitly depicted or mentioned. Children who do not identify themselves as heterosexual or cis-gendered are scarcely seeing themselves on the big screen or any major streaming services.

With this context, I will analyze two animated children's films to see how they chose to portray queer characters within the strict borders of acceptable representation. The first film I will analyze is *Luca*[1], produced by Pixar for Disney+ in 2021, which tells the story of the sea monster Luca who dreams of living on land among humans. The second film is *Nimona*, produced by Annapurna Studios for Netflix in 2023, a story about a shapeshifting monster who teams up with a knight to get her revenge on the Institute that ruined her life. These films show in their implied or explicit queer characters that there is a change happening when it comes to representation afforded children by major film companies. Portraying the experiences and feelings children must overcome in their journey of unearthing their queerness, lays the foundation for children's acceptance of what is deemed "other" by society. Exposure to diversity is important for a child's development and understanding of the world around them.

I have chosen these two films because of their monstrous themes, as both characters Luca and Nimona are depicted as monsters within their story. Historically, the monster has been used as a metaphor to depict the queer experience, and how being queer affects our internal emotional well-being, as well as how external forces treat us. I will therefore base a lot of my queer reading of the films on the fact that they both apply the metaphor of the queer monster in their storytelling. There has been a long tradition of coding the queer experience into art made for the general public. This coding often involves the use of queer slang, symbolism, or metaphors to communicate queer themes and experiences to an audience

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[1] As the films *Luca* and *Nimona* both use the same name for their characters and the title of their movies, I will use italics when I talk about the films, while the characters will be referred to in regular writing.

without explicitly mentioning them. The queer monster is one such metaphor, serving as a symbol of the undefined and feared, much like the queer community themselves. In contemporary children's media, the metaphor of the queer monster continues to serve as a means of conveying queer themes and experiences to young audiences. Films like *Luca* and *Nimona* utilise this metaphor to explore the complexities of queer identity in ways that are accessible and relatable to children.

When looking into the representation afforded to young audiences in animated children's films, I will focus my attention on Disney characters, as both *Luca* and *Nimona* have gone through development under Disney productions. Even though *Nimona* ended up being dropped from Disney, it still had a huge part of its narrative development process there. It is also because Disney and Disney's Pixar are the entertainment companies that have had the most impact on what media is shown to children worldwide. What they chose to represent in their films greatly impacts children everywhere. Regarding the development of inclusion and representation in films made by Disney and Pixar, I will base my discussion on films that were under production by Disney before March 2022. Even though *Nimona* was not released before June 2023, it was under Disney's production until April 2021. The reasoning for this is that in March 2022 the Florida Senate passed the "Don't Say Gay" bill, officially titled the "Parental Rights in Education" bill which proposed stringent restrictions on discussions surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity in classrooms. The bill prohibits «classroom instructions on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students» (Florida House Bill 1557 2022). However, the bill does not define what is considered age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate.

When passed, the bill would severely limit educators' ability to address LGBTQ topics in schools, effectively erasing essential dialogue on inclusivity and diversity. Critics of the bill argued that this legislation would not only perpetuate discrimination but also harm LGBTQ students by erasing their identities in educational spaces. The backlash Disney received from pro-LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations regarding their silence on the legislation led to an increased focus on queer representation in their productions. This could be seen in their decision to keep a kiss shared by two women in their final version of the film *Lightyear* in 2022, and their first openly gay main character in the film *Strange World* released the same year. This would imply that their initial defiance of queer representation in their films was based on their perceived reception from their viewers. The passing of the "Don't Say Gay" bill in Florida is a clear indication that society is not as accepting towards

the queer community as one should hope. Especially when it comes to their influence on their children, the depiction of queer relationships and storylines in children's media is by many perceived as influential and harmful to a child's upbringing.

If children shall have the possibility to receive the representation they long for, creators must apply metaphors or queer coding to do so, like the metaphor of the queer monster. The goal of this thesis is therefore to explore how the two films *Luca* and *Nimona* represent the queer experience in the medium of animated children's film. I will analyze this based on how well the two films can be read as coming-out narratives, and how they employ the metaphor of the queer monster.

1.1 Research question

The preceding observations have led me to formulate my main research question:

How is the queer child's experience represented in the two animated children's films *Luca* and *Nimona*?

How do the films employ the metaphor of the queer monster, and to what extent can the films be read as coming-out narratives?

1.2 Analytical framework and thesis structure

In this thesis, I will apply a qualitative approach in the form of textual analysis. Scholar of Art, Communication, and English, Alan McKee describes the practice of text analysis as:

> When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text (McKee 2001, 3).

The media texts I will be examining are the two animated children's films *Luca* (Casarosa 2021) and *Nimona* (Bruno & Quane 2023). My analysis of these films will focus on interpreting and describing different scenes within the films that I consider significant in answering my research question, which concerns how the character's queer experience is being portrayed. Udo Kuckartz, author of «Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods, Practice and Using Software» points out the importance of providing the tools for understanding and interpreting text if one were to analyze the semantics within said text (2014, 60). We cannot naively believe that people can innately *understand* each other without providing the context needed to do so. The more we know, the better we are able to recognize that a text has different levels of meaning (Kuckartz 2014, 61). It will therefore be important for me to give a thorough introduction to the field Queer Theory and queer reading, to which this paper belongs. As there has not been much research conducted into queer representation in modern Disney films, and especially the use of the queer monster as a metaphor for the queer experience, my paper will apply research from different parts of Queer Theory to support my findings.

The paper will be divided into three distinct parts where part I begins with an introduction to the material I will be analyzing. This introduction will consist of a brief overview of the film's plot and production, as well as the circumstances in which the films were released. Part II will explain the ideas of Queer Theory and the thoughts surrounding the queer child. It will also explain the practice of queer reading, with a focus on the coming-out narrative and the metaphor of the queer monster. Part III of the paper will consist of the analysis of the two movies, where the first part of the analysis will focus on the coming-out narrative, and how the two movies fit, or do not fit, into this narrative model. This will lay the foundations of how the film's narrative allows for a queer reading. The second part of the analysis will explore the metaphor of the queer monster and how the two movies apply this

metaphor to depict the queer experience in their own way. Here I will argue that the monstrosity depicted in *Luca* is a metaphor for the feeling of coming out as a gay child, while *Nimona* uses it to represent how genderqueer people are treated as monsters in the heteronormative society.

1.3 Introducing the material

Figure 2: Luca as a monster (Luca)

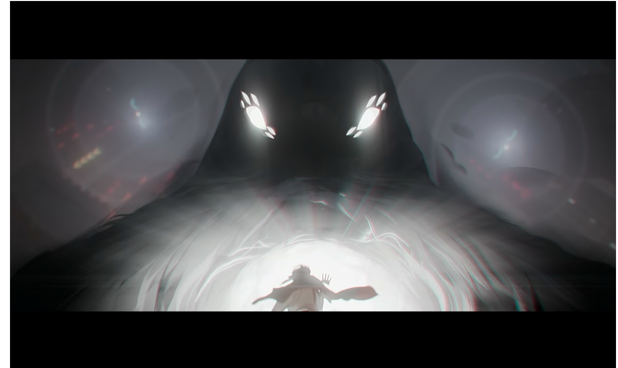

Figure 1: Nimona as a monster (Nimona)

As mentioned in the intro, I will base my analysis on the two animated children's films *Luca* (2021) and *Nimona* (2023). This decision is based on the film's use of monsters as metaphors for the internal and external struggles the characters face. Both films depict characters who are 'outcasts' in society and who long for the chance to be accepted. The exclusion imposed on them by society leaves the characters with a feeling of being monstrous. There is an underlying queer symbolism in this theme, which I will base my queer reading on. I will also be giving a brief overview of the context in which these films have been published, which includes Disney's history of including queer characters, previous queer readings of classic Disney films, and how queer staff in Disney have affected the representation afforded to queer characters.

1.3.1 Luca (2021)

Set in the summer of 1959, the story centre on the character Luca Paguro, a timid sea monster who works as a goatfish herder off the coast of the Italian town of Portorosso. His parents strictly forbid him from approaching the surface, fearing he will be hunted by the humans, whom they refer to as 'land monsters'. While herding fish one day, Luca encounters Alberto Scarfano, an intriguing fellow sea monster child living alone in an abandoned tower on land.

Alberto reveals to Luca that sea monsters transform into humans when on the surface, provided they remain dry. Captivated by Alberto and the possibility of a different life, Luca begins to sneak up to the surface to meet with him, and the two quickly become friends. Alberto shares his dream of owning a Vespa with Luca, and together they embark on a mission to build one themselves. However, when Luca's parents discover his excursions to the surface, they decide to send him to live with his uncle Ugo at the bottom of the ocean. Defying his parents, Luca flees to the human town of Portorosso with Alberto. Upon arrival, they overhear the town's bully Ercole Visconti talk about the Portorosso Cup, a triathlon for children that includes cycling, swimming, and pasta-eating, with a substantial prize for the winner. They decide to enter the competition alongside Giulia Marcovaldo the town outcast, hoping to win the money to buy their own Vespa. Having no place to stay, the boys move in with Giulia and her father Massimo, one of the town's renowned sea monster hunters.

Giulia and Luca soon develop a bond over their passion for learning, and Luca's desire to attend school with Giulia grows. Alberto, feeling jealous of Giulia and Luca's new bond, confronts Luca about his new desire to go to school, telling him that the humans would never accept him because he is a sea monster. Trying to prove his point, Alberto turns into a sea monster in front of Giulia, who reacts with fright and shock. Luca, unwilling to expose himself, feigns shock, leading Alberto to flee. Heartbroken, Alberto returns to his hideout and trashes it, while Luca in all the commotion reveals his identity as a sea monster to Giulia, who urges him to leave for his own safety. Determined to reconcile with Alberto, Luca seek him out in his tower and learns of his abandonment by his father. Though Alberto declines to participate in the triathlon, Luca promises to win the Vespa to rebuild their friendship. Participating alone, Luca successfully completes the swimming race in a diving suit and the pasta-eating without revealing himself, but rain starts to fall during the bike race. Alberto shows up with an umbrella to shelter Luca, but Ercole knocks it away, exposing Alberto as a sea monster and shocking the spectators. This time though, Luca decides to reveal himself as well, and together they ride towards the finish line. As the townspeople turn on the boys, Massimo stands up for them, insisting that they have won. Here Luca is reunited with his parents, who came to the surface to look for their son.

Luca and Alberto can finally buy themselves a Vespa, but Alberto sells it to buy a train ticket for Luca, telling him to go to school in Genoa with Giulia while he will stay with Massimo as his apprentice. Luca's family, Massimo, and Alberto see Luca and Giulia off at the station, where they all promise to stay in touch.

Enrico Casarosa's feature directional debut *Luca* (2021) was launched on Walt Disney Pictures' streaming platform Disney+ on the 13th of June 2021. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the film was released direct-to-streaming, where it became the most streamed film of 2022 (Nielsen 2022). It was not until March 12th, 2024, that the film had its official theatrical release in the United States. At the initial digital release, several of the big newspapers in both The United States and Great Britain gave *Luca* five out of six stars in their critical film review columns (Collin 2021) (Scott 2021) (Barber 2021). It was also nominated for Best Animated Feature at the 94th Academy Awards in 2022, where it was beaten by Disney's other massive release that year, *Encanto* (2021). *Luca* is an animated coming-of-age fantasy film, produced by Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, and is distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. Produced by Andrea Warren, the film is written by Jesse Andrews and Mike Jones, based on the story by Casarosa, Andrews, and Simon Stephenson. The director of the film Enrico Casarosa says the film draws inspiration from his childhood in Genoa, Italy where he grew up, and that the film is supposed to be a metaphor for feeling different (Jefferson 2021). In Disney's *first look* article about the film, they quote the producer Andrea Warren saying «We always liked the idea that the metaphor of being a sea monster can apply to so many different things. There is a theme of openness, showing oneself and self-acceptance, as well as community acceptance» (Jefferson 2021). Casarosa agreed with this saying «We hope that 'sea monster' could be a metaphor for all [manners] of feeling different» (Jefferson 2021).

Before its release in 2021, there was a lot of audience discussion regarding the themes of the film, as the talk of self-acceptance and feeling different could allude to a queer theme. There were also several comments about the aesthetic similarity between *Luca* and the 2017 film *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadragnino) which fuelled the speculations that there would be a similarity in the storyline as well. In an interview with Enrico Casarosa by *The Wrap* he comments on the response to the film by the LGBTQ+ community, where he said that there was not a lot of talk, nor focus on the character's sexuality in the making of the film (Taylor 2022). He confessed that he was surprised at the response regarding the relationship between the characters, mostly because he had pictured them in a "pre-romance" age where they would focus more on friendships. He even pointed out that they had a bigger focus on the metaphor of race than sexuality. When asked about the impact the story had on

Figure 1: Side-by-side comparison of Luca and Call Me By Your Name

the LGBT+ community he said «I feel very honoured and I don't like to say yes or no. I can say, well, that's not how I wrote it. It wasn't my experience, but I love that that metaphor is reading in all these different ways» (Taylor 2022).

However, it seems that not everyone on the *Luca* team shares his view of the film. Before the 2024 cinema re-release of *Luca*, a co-director at Pixar named Kenna Jean Harris, who had previously worked on the short film *Ciao Alberto*[2], posted drawings of Luca and Alberto on her Instagram story. The drawings pictured Luca and Alberto sharing a kiss under an umbrella, as well as other doodles of them together. In one of these posts, she revealed that she had a whole sequence in mind where Luca and Alberto would reunite four summers in a row, which would culminate in a kiss (King 2024). Even though Casarosa never confirmed this as "canon"[3], it shows that people on the *Luca* team saw them as more than just friends.

Figure 3: Drawing of Luca and Alberto kissing under an umbrella

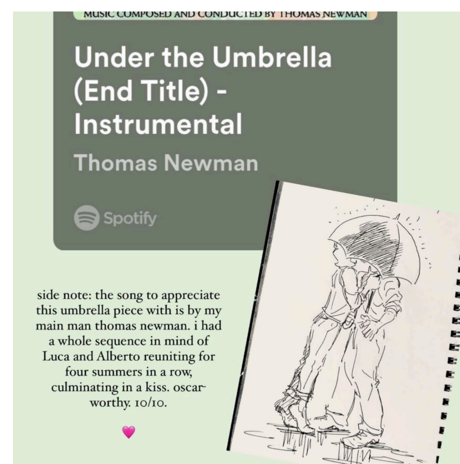

Figure 2: Screenshot of McKenna's Instagram Story

I will defend this reading of *Luca* by analysing the film according to the coming-out model, which lays the foundations for how a classic coming-out tale usually develops. The coming-out model is a narrative framework in which most coming-out stories follow. I will be using this model in my analysis because the coming-out narrative is one of the most used narratives when it comes to queer representation. As the author Rachel Giese states: «Even as queer visibility and rights have expanded in real life, for an LGBTQ film protagonist, there are only two possible narratives: the coming-out story or the queer tragedy». I will argue that the fact

[2] Ciao Alberto was released on Disney+ on November 12th and shows a brief glimpse into the life of Alberto and Massimo who live together in Portorosso.
[3] Canon refers to something that the author has confirmed as correct within the story, and not just an agreed upon interpretation by fans.

that *Luca* follows the progression presented in the model step-by-step confirms that reading the film as a queer story is a valid one.

1.3.2 Nimona (2023)

In a medieval-futuristic kingdom, the citizens are safeguarded by the Institute of Elite Knights, established by the legendary heroine Gloreth who one thousand years ago vanquished a "Great Black Monster" and enclosed the kingdom with high walls.

The narrative centres on Ballister Boldheart, the first commoner to be knighted, as Queen Valerin endeavours to reform tradition to ensure that «everyone can be a hero». During the knighting ceremony, a laser shot from Ballister's sword tragically kills the Queen. Distraught and protective of the kingdom, Ballister's boyfriend and fellow knight, Ambrosius Goldenloin, disarms Ballister, severing his right arm in the process. And so Ballister becomes a fugitive of the kingdom. While crafting a prosthetic replacement arm, Ballister is visited by Nimona, a teenage outcast persecuted for her shapeshifting abilities. Recognizing a kindred "villainous spirit" in Ballister, Nimona appoints herself as his sidekick, seeing their similar treatment by society as a bond.

To exonerate Ballister, they set out to abduct Diego, the squire who had provided Ballister with the sword that killed the Queen. Upon his capture, Diego reveals video evidence implicating the Director of the Institute as the true murderer, having swapped Ballister's sword with another. When Ballister and Nimona confront Ambrosius and the Director with the evidence, the Director manipulates her knights into destroying it. Later, Ambrosius confronts the Director, who confesses to framing Ballister and murdering Queen Valerin to prevent the inclusion of commoners as knights, which she believes would lead the kingdom to ruin. However, it is revealed that "Ambrosius" is in fact Nimona in disguise, and Ballister has recorded the Director's confession. Ballister subsequently posts the recording online, leading to public outrage. Searching for something to save her image, The Director discovers that Nimona is the Great Black Monster defeated by Gloreth and uses this to persuade the kingdom's citizens to believe that Ballister had used Nimona's powers to fabricate the Directors confession. The real Ambrious meets with Ballister, revealing to him Nimona's past and suggests that Nimona had deceived him. Shocked, Ballister confronts Nimona, questioning their friendship. Feeling betrayed by Ballister, Nimona flees into the wilderness. Here she reminded of her past; a millennium ago, she wandered the world

transforming into various animals to integrate with wildlife, but was rejected by every creature she encountered. After meeting Gloreth, then a child, and showing her ability to shapeshift, they become good friends. However, when the villagers, including Gloreth's parents, discover Nimona's abilities, they deem her a monster. The villagers attack, accidentally setting the village on fire, and a confused Gloreth turns against Nimona.

Haunted by Ballister's abandonment and Gloreth's betrayal, Nimona transforms into the Great Black Monster and heads to the city, intending to commit suicide by impaling herself on the sword of Gloreth's statue. Ballister intervenes and apologizes, prompting Nimona to revert to her human form and embrace him. The kingdom's citizens witness this and are moved, but the Director remains unmoved and orders a laser cannon to be fired at Nimona. Ambrosius protests, knowing that the laser could destroy the city. The Director, using the same laser she used to kill the Queen, prepares to fire the cannon herself. To save the kingdom, Nimona transforms into a giant, red phoenix-like creature, and flies into the cannon, sacrificing herself and killing the Director. The explosion breaches the wall, revealing a beautiful valley beyond.

In the aftermath, the kingdom undergoes significant changes: the breach in the wall becomes a passageway, citizens travel freely, and Ballister and Nimona are celebrated as heroes. Ballister's relationship with Ambrosius is restored, finally shown kissing each other and embracing their relationship. In the end sequence, Ballister visits his old hideout when he suddenly hears Nimona's voice and joyfully realize that she has survived.

Nimona was originally scheduled to be released in theatres on February 14th, 2020, by Walt Disney Studios Motion, through their 20th Century Studios banner. The release was delayed several times, before it was cancelled after the closure of Blue Sky Studios in April 2021. After the film's lucky revival by Annapurna Pictures with Netflix, the film was released on streaming on June 30th, 2023. The film received favourable reviews, and at the 96th Academy Awards in 2024 *Nimona* was nominated for Best Animated Feature. Based on the 2015 graphic novel of the same name written by ND Stevenson, *Nimona* is an animated science fantasy film directed by Nick Bruno and Troye Quane from a screenplay by Robert L. Baird and Lloyd Taylor. *Nimona's* creator ND Stevenson described the film adaptation as «a phoenix rising again from the ashes» before its release on Netflix. The film was originally produced by the 20th Century Fox company Blue Sky Studios (the studio behind the Ice Age series). Still, it was delayed and later cancelled due to the Walt Disney Company's closure of 20th Century Fox in 2021. The company's closure was reportedly due to the COVID-19

pandemic and the following economic fallout. A year later, Annapurna Pictures revived the film with Netflix as the network for worldwide distribution.

When Blue Sky was shut down, staff were laid off and projects like *Nimona* were cancelled despite a large amount of the film already being complete. Director Troye Quane confirms that they were about 70 percent through with the layout when the film was cancelled, and they were supposed to present the story reels on the day the studio shut down (King 2023). At the time Disney shut down Blue Sky Studios they were affected by controversy regarding Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, as Disney CEO Bob Chapek chose to stay silent on the legislation. Talking about their time at Disney, three former Blue Sky staffers told *Business Insider* that Disney leadership had taken issue with some queer elements in *Nimona,* particularly the same-sex kiss between two of the main characters Ballister and Ambrosius (Clark 2022). The pushback of the scene started during a meeting in mid-2020 between the leadership teams, the former staffers said. Blue Sky leadership felt enough pressure in this meeting to leave the kiss out of future presentations to Disney, despite hoping to ultimately include it in the film (Clark 2022). The staffers commented on this censorship of queer stories: «When the biggest entertainment company in the world creates content for children and systematically censors queer content, they are pushing queer children to dark places» (Clark 2022). Disney has had queer minor characters before, such as a presumed lesbian couple in *Finding Dory*, as well as the first canonically gay character LeFou, Gaston's sidekick in the live action adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*. Even this subtle queerness was enough to prompt a backlash, showing that people were not ready for Disney to allow such representation yet (Abad-Santos 2017). While Pixar released an animated short titled *Out* on Disney+ with a gay male lead in May of 2020, *Nimona* would have been the first feature-length film with lead queer characters which showed gay characters kissing. After the public dispute between Disney and Pixar regarding Disney's inadequate response to the 'Don't Say Gay' bill, the latter finally got to show the first queer kiss in a Disney production, with the Toy Story prequel *Lightyear* (2022). The kiss sequence was reinstated, after it was originally scrapped by Disney's creative department (Robledo 2022). A decision that was most likely affected by the backlash they received earlier that year.

I will analyze *Nimona's* narrative based on the coming-out model, to see how *Luca* and *Nimona's* representation of the queer experience differ. Here I will argue that *Nimona* challenge the classic coming-out narrative which views the coming-out process as «a journey, starting from an uncharted shore with a host of problems, and gradually arriving home» (Plummer 1995, 83). The model describes the coming-out process is a linear one, which starts

with an unhappy child and ends with a out and happy adult. *Nimona* defies this conviction by diverging from the linear storyline, thus showing that this is not the case for all queer people, as the very meaning of queer is to be undefinable. The journey of finding oneself is unique to everyone, which means that the model will only represent a certain part of the queer community. Reading Nimona as a representation of the genderqueer experience, I will argue that her monstrosity lies in her everchanging appearance and identity. There will therefore be a contrast between *Luca*, which reads as a gay coming-out story, and *Nimona* who represents the undefinable identity of a genderqueer person.

1.4 Background

Films that appeal to children are essentially as old as film itself, but one could argue that the first genuine feature-length children's film was Walt Disney's 1937 classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.* This film was also the first animated feature, which indicates the close relationship that has existed ever since between children's film and animated film (Booker. 2009: 1). Snow White was built upon Disney's earlier animated shorts, and established many of the conventions that would dominate children's film for decades. These conventions not only involved several basic suppositions about what is appropriate for children, but also a number of fundamental assumptions about what children themselves are like – or should be like (Booker 2009, 2). These basic suppositions included the conviction that children had to be protected from any hint of sexuality, as well as the banishment of any threats, instead focusing on a joyful, happy ending. This can be considered problematic considering Disney's massive impact on the entertainment industry and what is allowed representation there.

Trying to define the children's film genre Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer writes in her article «Introduction: New Perspectives in Children's Film Studies», published in the *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, that the study of children's films is a complex and demanding issue. It involves a range of critical, educational, psychological, cultural, institutional, and textual aspects (2013, 39). According to Kümmerling-Meibauer, the term 'Children's films' can be a broad and ambiguous term, considering that there are films aimed at children, films about childhood, and films children watch regardless of whether they are children's films or films targeted toward adults (2013, 39). While the author of «Children's Film: history, ideology, pedagogy, theory» (2000) Ian Wojcik-Andrews believes that defining

children's film is «akin to untying a Gordian knot, deeming it 'something of an impossibility'» (Brown 2017, 2). Noel Brown, author of «The Children's Film: Genre, Nation and Narrative» (2017) begs to differ, and claims that it is possible to define the genre, and that such a definition is vital to understand the form (2). According to Brown, «a children's film can be defined as being a film produced and widely received as such» (2017, 2). Meaning that any film that is produced with children as their target group, while also coming across and achieving this appeal can be defined as a children's film.

When it comes to queer representation in children' film it is important to note that there have been several queer coded characters in classic children's films throughout the decades, especially in the Walt Disney Studios classics. Character like Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*), Scar (*The Lion King*), Jafar (*Alladin*) and Gaston (*Beauty and the Beast*) are all confirmed to be queer coded. With Ursula's design being inspired by the drag queen icon Devine (Griffin 2000, 146), and Scar, Jafar, and Gaston's supervising animator being the openly queer Andreas Deja (Griffin 2000, 141). In the book «Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out» Sean Griffin writes that Deja in various interviews announced that his sexual orientation had an effect on the characters he drew (2000, 141). When drawing the villainous Jafar from *Aladdin* (1992), Deja admits to envisioning the character as a gay man «to give him his theatrical quality, his elegance» (2000, 141). Even though Deja has worked on a number of different characters, Griffin points out that he has mostly been assigned two types of roles: male villains and hypermuscular men. In Griffins analysis of Deja's characters, he says that one can read Deja's "sensibility" contributing to the campy gay-tinged villainy in Disney by watching the way Jafar arches his eyebrows in distain, or the sneer that curls Scar's mouth as he witnesses the heterosexual patriarchy in which he finds himself (2000, 141). Griffins stresses the fact that Deja acknowledged the effect his sexual orientation had on his work, gives legitimacy to reading these characters through a "gay sensibility" (2000, 142), regardless of if an "homosexual author" was the formal overseer of the entire project. To Griffins this therefore means that «the "authorial" position allows a specific reading influenced by a specific identity – not a free-floating "queer" reading» (2020, 142).

As homosexuality has gotten more visibility in American culture, the «hidden coded-ness» of lesbian/gay culture has been brought more into the light (Griffin 2000, 134). Consequently, says Griffin, the reading of Disney text from a «gay sensibility» has gotten easier since the mid-1980s (2000, 134). An example of this is the reading of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) as an AIDS allegory by Dan Rather in a column for the Los Angeles Times in

1992. He writes that one can think of the spell that Beast is under as AIDS, with the same arbitrary and harshly abbreviated limitations and time. With this in mind, you will feel the loneliness and desperation that Beast suffers more deeply. Dan Rather sees the character trying as hard as he can to find a meaning – love and beauty – in the time he got left (Rather 1992). Cynthia Erb, in her analysis of the same movie in 1992, agrees with this interpretation of the film, saying that the visual contrast made between the deteriorated form of the Beast and the painting of him as a beautiful young man possibly sets up a stereotypical opposition between ugliness and beauty, which has a reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890). She points out though, that in this context the ugliness/beauty supports a tension crucial to the film's AIDS allegory, that between having health and not having it (Erb 1992, 50). To further back up this reading of the film Griffin points out that the lyrics written for «The Mob Song», in which the villagers set out to attack the Beast, add to this method of interpretation. In the song the villagers sing «We don't like what we don't understand, in fact it scares us», and therefore they must save their families and their own lives by killing the beast. This quotation, says Griffin, reverberates strongly as a parallel to the AIDS panic that many individuals, as well as religious and political groups, expressed during the spread of the disease (2000, 134 – 135). This reading of the film was accepted by a lot of people, as the films lyricist producer Howard Ashman was gay and had recently died as a result of the AIDS virus. Though the film project was already in the works before Ashman's condition was known, Griffin points out that Ashman's battle with the disease does lend credence to the reading of the film in this manner (2000, 136). The general acceptance of *the Beauty and the Beast* AIDS analogy was therefore given legitimization by the fact that Ashman could be considered the films auteur. And therefore, he had the utmost impact on the films story and the meaning behind the metaphors used.

The term auteur describes the idea that there is an individual voice controlling and creating the filmic work (Griffin 2000, 138). By applying this term viewers could find stylistic and thematic motifs that recur or develop through an individual's career as much as an art critic could follow famous painters. An auteur was said to be able to rise above the constrains placed on them by their studio bosses, to put some sort of personal stamp on their work (Griffin 2000, 138). This theory was not an all-around accepted theory among film critics though (Hess 1973) (Grant 2008) (Gerstner & Staiger 2003). Critics of the auteur theory has pointed out that the auteur analysis denies the readers power of interpretation in favour of trying to understand what the filmmakers «really meant» (Griffin 2000, 139). Even though personal interpretations of films could be considered important, race, gender, or

sexuality is important when it comes to the director's experiences and how they portray them in a film. A film like *Get Out* (2017) by Jordan Peele would not have the same underlying gravity if people went into the film knowing was written by a white man. The fact that the director in some way has experienced what the character goes through, does add a new level of credibility to the story being told. This is the reason that Quentin Tarantino made a lot of black critics mad (Ellis 2015) after his 2009 release of *Django Unchained* where the n-word is said more than 110 times (Sharf 2022).

Though one should not put all the credit of an entire film on one single person, it is still important to note that the person writing and directing a film has a lot of power as to what gets produced and presented on the big screen. The power lies in what types of stories that get told, and what is therefore deemed accepted in the society they portray. As Griffin points out, how an individual identifies (by gender, race, or sexual orientation) would tend to affect that individuals outlook on society and their place in it (2000, 140). A homosexual director, such as Ashman, will therefore have a broader understanding of sexuality and will most likely insert this into his own stories, whether he is aware that he is doing it or not. This way of adding meaning based on information given inside or outside of the film's universe, is a way to read the film. This aspect will be relevant in my analysis of *Nimona*, as the author of the original comic which the film is based on came out as trans himself only years after the comic's initial release. The exploration of queer representation in animated children's films reveals a dynamic interplay between creator's identities, societal perceptions, and audience interpretations. From the subtle queer-coding of classic Disney villains to the allegorical readings of contemporary films like *Beauty and the Beast*, the way in which queerness is depicted and received in children's media are multifaceted and evolving. Having explained the context for the material I have chosen to analyze, I will present the theory in which I will base my analysis.

2 Theorizing Queerness

When writing about the topic of queerness and queer representation, it is important to define what meaning I apply to the words. I will therefore start the theory chapters by giving a brief introduction to the words queer and genderqueer, as to narrow down the definition used within this paper. The distinctions between queer and genderqueer will be important in my analysis of *Luca* and *Nimona*, as I believe the two characters can be categorized within these separate identities. After having presented these important definitions, I will continue with a presentation of Queer Theory and its history. My entire thesis builds upon Queer Theory and its teachings, and therefore it is important to give context to how these ideas and themes have developed throughout history. An important part of Queer Theory is the idea of the 'queer child' and its developmental phases. As my paper gives considerable attention to queer representation for children via the medium of children's film, I will present current academic theories surrounding the queer child, such as Stockton's theory about the sideways growing child (2005), and Uprichard's concept of the child as a 'being' and 'becoming' (2008). Here I will introduce the debates and narratives surrounding this topic, as there is a lot of social pushback regarding the acceptance of queerness within children. This will help place *Luca* and *Nimona* in a theoretical context, as well as showing how the two films represent a change in the representation afforded queer children.

The next part of this chapter will focus on the practice of 'queer reading' which involves finding clues or symbolism within a text to find its hidden queer meaning. In my analysis I will be applying a queer reading to both *Luca* and *Nimona* to see how such a reading can uncover a deeper and 'queerer' meaning in the films. After this introduction to queer reading, I will present two themes within queer reading that will be used in my analysis of *Luca* and *Nimona*, which is the coming-out narrative and the queer monster. The coming-out narrative models will be used to defend the idea that by following a narrative developed for queer storytelling, the film itself can be read as queer. Additionally, I will use the theories surrounding the queer monster to defend my queer reading of the two films, as the monster has a long history of being used as a queer metaphor. The theory presented will lay the foundation of my analysis of the symbolism and narrative choices in the story of *Luca* and *Nimona*, while also giving thorough introduction and context to the themes surrounding my thesis.

2.1 Defining Queer

Before we delve into the theory surrounding queer studies, it is important to define what I mean when I use the word “queer”, as there are several interpretations of what the word really entails. Among scholars, there has been a difficulty defining queer because its very meaning rejects stable categorization of identity categories, typically among sexual and gender identities (Weise 2022, 484). Originally, “queer” was a term broadly used to refer to that which was odd, strange, abnormal, or sick, and was along these lines employed as a common slur for homosexuality. In the 1980s the word was reclaimed by the LGBTQ community as an umbrella term for resistant and non-normative sexuality (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 2). Still maintaining a relation to its original meaning, queer was about being different, and unapologetically so (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 2). Professor in gender and sexuality studies Heather Love notes that when the term queer was adopted in the late 1980s it was chosen exactly because it evoked a long history of insult and abuse. She says, «you can hear the hurt in it» (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 2). This practise of taking back a word once used by the oppressor is defined as ‘reappropriation’ and means to reclaim words that was at one time pejorative, but that has been brought back into acceptable usage, usually starting with its original target. This form of reappropriation is seen in several other minorities through history as well.

2.1.1 Queer

Queer is often associated with the letter Q in LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (and sometimes the Q stands for queer/questioning). Queer is considered an identity or position that encompasses gender and sexual identities that do not align with dominant gender and sexual cultural expectations (Weise 2022, 485). These dominant gender and sexual cultural experiences can be summarized to be “maleness = masculinity = attraction to women, or femaleness = femininity = attraction to men” (Weise 2022, 485). As an identity queer describes people who hold gender and/or sexual identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming. The application of queer in education led to the emergence of queer theory and queer studies. Queer theory provided a theory to ‘undo’ the institutionalised idea of heteronormativity (Weise 2022, 487). I will be using the term queer as Weise describes it – an identity which describes people who hold gender and/or sexual identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and

gender nonconforming. While queer is to be considered an umbrella term that encompass gender and sexual identities that do not align with the dominant cultural expectations, and therefore can be used when talking about anyone who defines themselves as such, I will be using the more specific term 'genderqueer' when talking about people who do not conform to gender norms in this paper. Before I define what I mean by genderqueer, it is important to differentiate between the concepts of sex and gender.

According to the World Health Organisation sex refers to «the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs», while gender identity «refers to a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or designed sex at birth (World Health Organization 2024).

2.1.2 Genderqueer

Gender is often considered to come in two forms – male (masculine) or female (feminine) (Richards et.al. 2016, 95). This is frequently based on physical sex such that when a person is assigned a female sex at birth – through visual inspection of their external genitals – it is assumed that their gender too will reflect this; meaning that they will likely be feminine (in their gender role), and they will most likely be sexually attracted to men when they reach sexual maturity (Richards et.al. 2016, 95).

Heather L. Armstrong notes that arguments against binary models of gender - models that understand male and female or man and woman, as exclusive and exhaustive possibilities - have increased over time as binary models fail to accommodate the diversity and fluidity of all gender identities (2021, 280). These binary views of gender exclude and erase individuals who identify as genderqueer, an identity that can be understood as neither exclusively male nor female. The term 'nonbinary' is often used synonymously with genderqueer, though some individuals may identify with one term and not the other (Armstrong 2021, 280). According to Armstrong, many gender-fluid individuals, whose gender identity or gender expression fluctuates over time or in different situational contexts, identify as genderqueer or nonbinary. In a public effort to denote all kinds of subversions and resistance to the normative conception according to which a person is either male or female, today called cisnormativity, the activist and scholar Riki Anne Wilchins merged the two terms "gender" and "queer" to make the word today known as "genderqueer" (Honkasalo 2000, 58). In the 1995 issue of In Your Face,

which is a zine newsletter of the direct-action organization Transsexual Menace, Whlcins is quoted using the term for the first time:

> «It's about all of us who are genderqueer: diesel dykes and stone butches, leatherqueens and radical fairies, nelly fags, crossdressers, intersexed, transsexual, transvestites, transgendered, transgressively gendered, intersexed, and those of us whose gender expressions are so complex they haven't even been named yet» (Wilchins 1995, 4).

Professor in Gender Studies, Julian Honkasalo, states that even though Wilchins did use the term "genderqueer" on print, other trans activists and academics had similar nouns, adjectives, and verbs already in use such as "queer gender", "gender queer", "gender outlaw", and "monster" to signify resistance to the gender binary and gender oppression (2020, 58).

This definition of gender which society has been following for so long, excludes anyone who does not fit into this narrow view of gender identity. Armstrong states that the experience of genderqueer individuals is extremely diverse, as some may identify as neither male or female, whereas other may identify as both male and female (2021, 281). In general, nonbinary or genderqueer refers to people's identity, rather than the physicality at birth. There are those who have a fluid gender, those who have no gender, and then there are those who disagree with the very idea of gender (Richards, Bouman & Barker 2017, 5). Rooted in challenging these normative views of gender and sexuality, Queer Theory offers a lens to explore the complexities of human identity.

2.2 Queer Theory

There are many interpretations, applications, and uses of queer theory, but broadly, it can be seen as the study of gender practices/identities and sexualities that exist outside of cisgender and heterosexual "norms". Queer theorists and thinkers are critical of essentialist views on sexuality and gender, and view these concepts as social constructed and cultural phenomena. The Italian author and professor Teresa de Lauretis was the first one to actually unite the terms "queer" and "theory" in order to "mark a certain critical distance" from the phrase "lesbian and gay", which she understood as having become «the standard way of referring to

what only a few years ago used to simply be 'gay' […] or just a few years earlier still, 'homosexual'» (Monaghan 2016, 33). The term was coined by de Laurentis in 1990, at a conference held at The University of California, Santa Cruz (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 2), and she later published it in her introduction to a special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in 1991 (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 118). De Laurentis intention with the conference was to «articulate the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imaged as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture» (de Laurentis 1991, iiv). De Laurentis argued that queer theory could pose a challenge to stable "lesbian and gay" identity categories and could have the potential to act as a strategy allowing for the possibility "not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematise them" (Monaghan 2016, 33).

According to Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, authors of «Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Future» (2020), it is considered antithetical to the spirit of queer theory to tie it down to one single meaning as queer is a "deliberately ambiguous term" that is simultaneously a way of naming, describing, doing, and being (1). Exactly this, says McCann and Monaghan, is where queer theory finds its radical potential as a term to challenge, interrogate, destabilise, and subvert. The problem is that this also means there is a difficulty in pinpointing queer theory's meaning (2020, 1). Even though there is no critical consensus on the definitional limits of queer – as indeterminacy is one of its widely promoted charms – its general outlines have been sketched and debated. Annamarie Jagose, writer of «Queer Theory: An Introduction» (1996) states that queer, broadly speaking, «describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire» (3). Resisting this model of stability, which claims that heterosexuality is its origin, when its more proper to call it its effect, queer focuses on the mismatches between sex, gender, and desire (Jagose 1996, 3). Jagose points out that even though queer has institutionally been most prominently associated with lesbian and queer subjects, its analytic framework also includes topics like cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery (1996, 3).

Queer Theory first entered the academy during what McCann and Monaghan calls the "postmodern turn", a period marked by an emphasis on language, deconstruction, difference, fragmentation, multiple truths, discourse, and rethinking old narratives and ideas of how power is structured (2020, 7-8). Psychoanalyst Deborah Britzman suggests that queer theory

occupies a difficult space between the signifier and the signified, where something queer happens to be signified – to history and to bodies – and something happens to the signifier – to language and to representation (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 8). To put this in other words, McCann and Monaghan says, queer theory, a lot like postmodernism, "troubles" the way we talk about and understand things (2020, 8).

I want to focus on two aspects within queer theory which I will base my analysis on. The first one being the idea of the queer child. Since the films I analyse both depict children and are catered towards children, it is safe to assume that most of its audience will reflect this. *Luca* in particular, portrays the process of coming-out in a coming-of-age setting, meaning that he is still considered a child when Luca comes into his queer identity. The depiction of children as queer, especially in films meant for children consumption, is for many seen as an effort to "turn" their children gay by normalizing queer relationships and attraction. Here I will also provide a brief introduction to previous animated children's movies made for queer children, as well as non-queer movies with deeply queer coded characters. This will work as the historical framework *Luca* and *Nimona* can be placed within. The second aspect I want to introduce is the practise of queer reading, which is the method I will be applying when I analyse the two films. This is done by looking for places in the text where there is an opening for alternative readings of the narrative, for example where dialogue can have different connotations depending on your own personal experience.

2.3 The Queer Child

The queer child is, according to Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley – authors of «Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children» (2004) both defined by and outside of what is «normal» (x). The figure of the queer child is that which does not quite conform to the wished-for way that children are supposed to be in terms of gender and sexual roles (Bruhm & Hurley 2004, x). The social debate about LGBTQ+ rights often focus on how the positive queer representation in media will affect children. For some this representation is seen as necessary for the healthy development of children, regardless of them being queer or not. While for others this portrayal is seen as an effort to convert their children into sexual deviants and perverts (Kao & Eckert 2021) (GLAAD 2023b) (Stabile 2023). The debate regarding what is deemed safe for children continue to divide parents and leads to a lack of representation for queer youth.

However, in the last decade there has been a massive change for the positive when it comes to queer representation in media. In the 2023 «Studio Responsibility Index» published by GLAAD yearly, it was revealed that 28.5% of all movies[4] published that year were LGBTQ inclusive. This is the highest percentage and number recorded in this report (GLAADa 2023, 12). Even though this is a great accomplishment, we are not seeing the same representation when it comes to children's film. A big reason for this is how society view children, and especially the queer child. For years the rhetoric around gay men has been filled with associations to paedophiles and molesters, saying that they are dangerous for kids to be around. As Benshoff points out «Certain sectors of the population still relate homosexuality to bestiality, incest, necrophilia, sadomasochism, etc» (1996, 3). To apply these traits to a child just does not seem right, therefore there cannot be such a thing as a queer child. One also must take into consideration the belief that queer people are not born queer, they decide to be so. Or even worse, they are tricked and groomed into being queer by other queers.

3.2.1 Politicization of the queer child

In his article «Childlike: Queer Theory and Its Children» Michael Cobb points out that there is a lot of weight and expectations forced upon the child. They are required to represent the future, while also being tokens of the past, as they remind adults of their own stories when they themselves were young (2005, 119). Cobb thereby conclude that children remind us of time itself. They are forced to solicit our anxieties, our delights, our ethics, our love, or really any form of our attention, especially when it comes to politics and moral values (2005, 119). Children can thereby be anything – other than themselves (Cobb 2005, 119). Lee Edelman's «No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive» asserts that the image of the child, which should not be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse - and to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse (Cobb 2005, 122). In a controversial statement Edelman proclaims that

> «The figural child alone embodies the citizen as ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights "real" citizens are allowed. For the social order exists to preserve for this universalized

[4] Of the 350 films released theatrically and on tracked streaming services by these studios: A24, Amazon, Apple TV+, Lionsgate, NBCUniversal, Netflix, Paramount Global, Sony Pictures Entertainment, The Walt Disney Company, and Warner Bros. Discovery.

subject, this fantasmatic Child, a national freedom more valuable than the actual freedom itself, which might after all, put at risk the Child to whom such freedom falls due» (Cobb 2005, 122).

This could be said to be true, as we have seen the anti-gay movement using the argument that homosexuality can be equated with paedophilia and are therefore a threat to children. This led to a narrative development in the 1970s and 1989s that stated that gays and lesbians were harmful to children (Niedwiecki 2013, 127). The depiction of homosexuals in a negative light, including the emergence of HIV/AIDS, the political rise of the Religious Right, and the Catholic Church scandal where male priests were abusing boys only worked to strengthen this narrative (Niedwiecki 2013, 127-128). This led to the reformulating of the fear of the queer child by religious conservative opponents of LGBT rights in response to the rapid rise of the LGBT movement during the 1970s (Rosky 2013, 609). Clifford J. Rosky, author of «Fear of the Queer Child» (2013) points out that there was a strong fear that exposing children to homosexuality and gender variety would make them more likely to develop homosexual desires, engage in homosexual acts, form homosexual relationships, deviate from traditional gender norms, or identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. In one form or another, these are all fears of the queer child (608).

Instead of falling back on this age-old fear that children could be seduced into queerness, the anti-gay movement introduced more palatable claims of indoctrination, role modelling, and public approval into public debates over LGBTQ rights (Rosky 2013, 609). Rosky presents the indoctrination fear as the fear that LGBTQ adults actively will recruit and persuade children into queerness in a deliberate attempt to increase the population of LGBTQ people (2013, 609). The role modelling fear is presented as the fear that children will learn to imitate queerness by identifying with influential LGBTQ adults, such as parents and teachers (Rosky 2013, 609). And last the fear of public approval is the fear that by granting equal rights to LGBTQ people, the government will teach children that queerness is acceptable, and an "alternative lifestyle" that children should feel free to adopt (Rosky 2013, 609). Rosky comments that instead of referring to the risk that children will "become" lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, opponents of LGBTQ rights often speak of children as "confused", or "seduced", or "indoctrinated" into the "homosexual lifestyle". In doing so, Rosky points out, the opponents present homosexuality as a temptation to which any child could potentially yield, rather than an innate or immutable characteristic of a "small, instinct, relatively fixed"

group of children who “are”, or may be properly identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (2013, 613).

2.3.1 Growing sideways

In her book «The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century» from 2005, queer scholar and theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton states that the dominant culture has a «tendency to treat all children as straight while we culturally consider them asexual» (Cobb 2005, 120). In the same book Stockton comments on what she considers a rich problem, which is the idea that children develop in a vertical movement upwards (hence, “growing up”) towards full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childhood innocence. Stockton argues that queer children have a tendency to “grow sideways” as they are unable to reach the full stature of a grown up, within the general definition of society (2009, 4). Kathryn argues that children’s growth should not be seen purely in terms of chronological or biological advancements, but also in terms of experiences and identities that develop in more lateral or sideways directions. This concept of sideways growth includes the roles of imaginative play, fantasy, and other forms of expression that children use to explore their identities. Stockton regards these activities as crucial for understanding the lateral dimensions of children’s growth. (2005). I will use this as my argument for reading Nimona as a queer child, even though she is presented as a person who does not seem to age. This begs the question of when one is supposed to become their own person, and when one is considered old enough to decide their identity.

2.3.2 ‘Being’ or ‘Becoming’

According to sociologist Emma Uprichard, author of «Children as ‘Being and Becomings’: Children, Childhood and Temporality’» (2008), the notions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ are elemental to childhood research (303). She defines the ‘being’ child as someone who is seen as a social actor actively constructing ‘childhood’. The ‘becoming’ child is seen as an ‘adult in the making’, someone who is lacking the competence of the ‘adult’ that he or she will one day ‘become’ (Uprichard 2008, 303). Therefore, says Uprichard, perceiving the child as a human ‘being’ or human ‘becomings’ tends to involve conflicting approaches to what it means to be a child (2008, 303). Uprichard argues that the understanding of children as both

‘being’ and ‘becoming’ increases the agency that children have in the world (2008, 303). She draws this on Prigogine’s (1980) discussion of time as ‘being and becoming’ and suggests that children and childhood are always and necessarily ‘being and becoming’ (2008, 303). Uprichard presents two main issues with the construction of the ‘becoming’ child discourse. The first being that it is explicitly future orientated. This places the importance on that which the child *will be*, instead of what the child already *is*. The child is considered a future adult rather than a young human being in their own right (2008, 304). Uprichard stresses that this assumption is problematic because the temporal focus necessarily forces us to neglect and dismiss the present everyday realities of being a child (2008, 304).

The second issue Uprichard presents is relating to competency, namely that children are incompetent and that adults are not. The child is here seen as progressing from what Uprichard calls a state of vulnerability to sophistication, from an earlier lack of skills to a later possession of abilities. She points out that this perspective not only implies that competency is something that is acquired the closer one is to becoming adult, but also that competency is only an adult characteristic that children cannot possess (Uprichard 2008, 305). Uprichard further stresses that this interpretation of competency is not only troublesome for children, who seemingly cannot be competent at anything, but also troublesome for adults who are seemingly competent at everything (2008, 305). Even so, Uprichard does not think that ignoring the concept of becoming is the right thing to do. She states that the process of ‘looking forward’ to what the child ‘becomes’ is arguably an important part of ‘being’ a child. By ignoring the future, Uprichard points out that we are prevented from exploring the ways in which this this may itself shape experiences of the children (2000, 306). The French philosopher and author Jacques Derrida compares the delay of childhood to the inescapable delay of reading along a chain of words (as in a sentence for example), where meaning is delayed, deferred, exactly because we read in sequence. We go forward in a sentence, not yet knowing what words are ahead of us, while we must take the words that we have passed with us as we go, something that makes meaning wide and hung in suspense (Stockton 2009, 4). The child is therefore to be considered a full human being, not just a current child or future adult (Stockton 2009, 4).

The notion of the queer child challenges deep-seated societal norms and expectations surrounding childhood, gender, and sexuality. Through examining the work of various scholars, we see that the queer child is often marginalized, misunderstood, and misrepresented. The persistent fear and misconceptions about queer representation and its impact on children reflect broader anxieties about identity and morality. The practise of queer

reading can offer us tools and perspectives to critically engage with these texts. By examining how queer reading illuminates hidden meanings and challenge dominant narrative, we can uncover the transformative potential of this approach. Queer reading not only enhances our understanding of literature and media but empowers us to envision more inclusive and diverse futures.

2.4 Queer Reading

The way we interpret all text that we encounter in our daily life depends on our taught way of reading them. It is therefore necessary for me to acknowledge that my own point of view and references is largely affected by my own queerness. I look for queer characters in every story I watch, treating each character as bisexual until a sexual preference or attraction is stated. This practise of reading media cannot be expected by everyone because the queer experience is not something everyone can relate to. Which means that people must make a conscious choice to read a text against that which comes natural to them. It is therefore not necessary the persons conscious decision to ignorant the queer themes in a film or tv-show, because they are not trained to do so. The same could be said about *Luca*'s director Casarosa, who all through the development of the film didn't see the queer connotations he were using while telling the story. He said himself that he couldn't relate to this thematic, and therefore he was unable to see it when presented.

To read something as queer one must have some knowledge of the queer experience. The practice of «queer readings» originated around 1990 with works like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's «Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire» from 1985, and Alexander Doty's «Making Things Perfectly Queer» from 1993. In her 1985 book Sedgwick reads literary texts including works by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Shakespeare, Alfred Tennyson, and others, to uncover traces of desire between male characters (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 137). The purpose of this was to interrogate the relationship between power and sexuality, carefully teasing the limits of a cultural system wherein desire between men emerges only under the pretence of heterosexuality (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 137). McCann and Monaghan give a brief outline of Sedgewick and Doty's use of queer reading in «Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Future» (2020). Following Sedgwick, queer reading is one key way to approach the question of queer "method" in queer theory. This involves using reading strategies to see the (otherwise heteronormative) world differently.

Alexander Doty on the other hand, deploys queer reading to re-read film classics such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) in queer ways, understanding characters in these films in terms of camp (exaggeration, artifice, queerness) (2020, 147).

The practice of queer reading sprouted from the feminist practice of resistant reading around 1990. While feminist resistant reading focused on reading against the text by male authors to reveal their inherent sexism, queer readings challenged heteronormativity, and looked for cracks in the surface of text which could reveal subversive queer connotations (Björklund 2012, 9) as well as going even further, questioning the «hierarchical organization of different kinds of readings». The «hidden» or «alternative» understandings were then given equal importance as readings that were considered as «real» or «right» (Björklund 2020, 196). Björklund defines queer readings as a kind of textual analysis with a unique character and describes it as a tension between denotation and connotation, somewhere between disability and invisibility (2020, 196).

The job of the queer reader is to emphasize and highlight the different structures, figures, relations, themes, contexts, and connotations that might not be immediately visible or understandable - much due to the fact that authors, as well as their readers, are lost to their heteronormative expectations and conventions when they read (Björklund 2020, 197). The purpose of queer readings is therefore, according to Björklund, not to produce a «truer» or more accurate reading, but rather, to activate a so called «zone of possibilities» in the practice of interpretation (2020, 197). According to this practice, the meaning of the text might just be hidden in metaphors or analogies, waiting to be uncovered by the reader. McCann and Monaghan define queer reading as the practise of over-emphasising subtext, and over-investing in queer elements of the storyline over and above the dominant reading that might otherwise emerge (2020, 147). The practice of queer readings grew alongside and as a part of the development of queer theory. It quickly became a buzzword among scholars interested in the subversive potential of text - in a broad sense: queer reading has never been limited to literary works but have been used to discover queerness in all kinds of cultural representation (Björklund 2018, 7-8). This way of reading stems from the thought that it’s the reader that decides how they want to interpret the narrative of a story, not the author.

In 1968 the influential French literary theologist Roland Barthes wrote “The Death of the Author”, discussing the role of the author and the reader. When asking the question of who is most capable of interpreting the text he writes:

> «-but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination» (Barthes 1968).

As Barthes states - the death of the author is the birth of the reader.

2.4.1 The default reader

Hannah Kubowitz (2012, 202) builds on this idea by proposing what she calls the *default reader,* which stems from Wolfgang Iser's theory of the implied reader. Kubowtiz finds Iser's theory too abstract, as she claims that the implied reader is characterized by a set of fairly concrete features, or default settings. To her, the implied settings touch upon aspects that are of crucial importance for our identity as human beings, such as ethnicity, belief systems, health and able-bodiless, and of course, sexuality. The reader is therefore not just implied, but a consequence of the default settings within society. Kubowitz (210) stresses that these settings are only, as the term default implies, *default* settings. What this means is that different variations might occur, where the actual readers deviate from the given default settings, and that the text might deviate in these default settings. Kubowitz (2012, 201) lays the foundations of a descriptive cognitive model of queer reading and writing strategies.

She bases her model upon the conviction that as a rule, readers aim to appropriate literary text, which means that they try to relate text to themselves or to make the text meaningful to themselves. She refers to this as the text appropriation hypothesis. The reader will ask themselves questions like «What does this text tell me, or do to me?» or «What can I do with the text?». (Kubowitz 2012, 205). With this hypothesis she also assumes that the more marginalized a reader is, meaning the less they generally find themselves represented in text, the more they become used to reading themselves into the text they read. Which means, according to Kubowitz (205), that the readers who are habitually excluded from text, in all probability tend to devise and employ strategies that enable them to feel included in text that might at the first glance exclude them. This differs from the non-marginalized reader, who may simply turn to another text better suited to them, if the text they first encounter excludes them from the narrative. The marginalized reader does not have the luxury of choosing. On this basis, Kubowitz (210) suggests that if the actual reader differs in any, or sometimes

several, of the default settings they are more likely to employ reading strategies which enable them to feel included in the text. Kubowitz presents a continuum for queer reading possibilities where she emphasizes the readers role in these readings and interpretations. On the one end of the continuum is the «extremely non-queer reading» (Kubowitz 2012, 212), in which the reader adheres to the default heterosexual, cisgender character assumptions even when other inferences are possible (Crawley 2022, 561). This is the strategy of reading that Kubowitz calls the «downplaying queerness» strategy (2012, 211). On this side of the spectrum, the reader might be oblivious to the potential queer aspects of the text, or they are even intentionally avoiding or ignoring them. On the other end of the continuum is the «extremely queer reading» of the text, with readers suspending these default settings set by society, and uses any numbers of interpretations possible regarding sexual and/or gender identities and actions (Crawley 2022, 561). This reading strategy is what Kubowitz calls the «foregrounding queerness» strategy (2012, 211).

2.4.2 Reading the borders

In her book «Making Things Perfectly Queer» Alexander Doty agrees with the statement that it's the reader who decides how they will interpret a text by stating that «Queer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful, or wilful misreading's, or 'reading too much into things'. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audience all along» (1993, 16). If someone relates to the story that is being told, you cannot tell them that their experience of the text is wrong. The queer community are marginalized readers, who must depend on their own reading strategies to be able to see themselves represented in text. As Andy Medhurst points out:

> «Denied even the remotest possibility of supportive images of homosexuality within the dominant heterosexual culture, gay [and/or queer] people have had to fashion what we could out of the imageries of dominance, to snatch illicit meanings from the fabric of normality, to undertake a corrupt decoding for the purposes of satisfying marginalized desires» (1991).

Dependent on queer textual structures or signals, queer readers are practiced at interpreting art, never taking anything at face value and locating themselves within text which on first glance might seem to exclude them (O'Connor 1998, 8). They have no choice but to read themselves in works written about heterosexual relationships. By being born and cultivated by straight parents, alongside a heteronormative society, they understand the language of heterosexuality and thereby become what O'Connor calls 'culturally bi-lingual' (1998, 8). Medhurst agrees with this sentiment stating that «From birth we are relentlessly socialized into a heterosexual identity that we may later choose to reject but which remains an always familiar landscape - those on the margins of a culture know more about its centre than the centre can ever know about the margins». (1991, 204). Meaning that even though you identify as queer, your upbringing and conditioning will have forced you to also perceive the world from a heteronormative viewpoint.

As mentioned previously, this paper will focus on two different practises of queer reading – one being the coming-out narrative, which depicts the journey from being closeted to being and out and 'free' queer individual. The coming-out storyline is a central trope in queer films and literature, reflecting the process of self-discovery and disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identity. The other queer reading practise is the 'queer monster' which works as a metaphor for the queer experience, with all its horrors and fear. It symbolizes the marginalized queer experience, embodying themes of societal rejection, otherness, and fear.

2.5 The Coming Out Narrative

Closeted – *the experience of living without disclosing one's sexual orientation or gender identity (also referred to being "in the closet").*

Coming out – *becoming aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others. A person may be selectively "out" in some situation or to certain people without generally disclosing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. "Coming out" is a process that takes place over time, in some cases over many years). (Rasmussen 2004, 144).*

Scholars and activists have for a long time noted that the practice of coming out, and more specifically, the process and experience of revealing an LGBTQ+ identity, is a central part of sexual and gender identity formation and for the queer culture more broadly (Monaghan 2021, 353). Because of this the act of coming out is often seen as the singular most momentous act

in the life of an LGBTQ+ person and is something you need to overcome before one can settle happily as a homosexual or bisexual person (2021, 353). There is therefore only natural that this has become a central topic in films and stories about queer youth. The coming out storyline is such a central trope in queer films that it could be considered its own genre of storytelling, much like the coming-of-age genre[5], which oftentimes overlap with the coming-out storyline. As the understanding of the queer experience has developed in recent years, there has been an insurgence of more diverse and including portrayal of coming-out stories in film. With this comes a need for a broader understanding for how the coming-out process can differ according to how someone identifies. I will thereby present several models developed over the past decades, showing how the understanding of queer experiences has changed even within queer studies. Ken Plummer's classic model for the coming-out narrative published in 1995, mainly focuses on the coming-out process for people who identify as gay or lesbian. Here the only active act of coming-out is revealing the sexual and romantic attraction to the same sex.

2.5.1 A linear journey

In his 1995 book «Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds», Ken Plummer presents a model for the genre of coming out writing, and argues that all coming-out stories do the following in one way or another:

1 It starts in childhood and follows a linear progression.

2 Childhood is often seen as an unhappy time, the source of this often being gay or lesbian.

3 A crucial moment appears - often in early adolescence - where problems appears that leads to a concern - or a discovery - of being gay. Problems abound and are usually documented in secrecy, guilt or shame, fear of discovering or suicidal feelings.

4 Problems are resolved in some fashion, usually through meeting other lesbians or gays in a community.

5 A sense of identity of self is achieved as gay or lesbian, along with a sense of community.

[5] Coming-of-age is a genre of literature, theatre, film, and video games that focuses on the growth of a protagonist from childhood to adulthood.

Plummer sums this model up as «The narrative can be seen as a journey, starting from an uncharted shore with a host of problems, and gradually arriving home» (1995, 83). One could say that according to Plummer, a queer person will only be happy once their sexuality is out and known. Plummer also argues that there seem to be a consensus that a queer person's story is always linear, meaning that the coming-out narrative always starts in childhood, and follows a linear path towards an out and happy adulthood.

Plummer's coming-out model was later challenged by several scholars, as his model was deemed too rigid when it came to representing a diverse coming-out story. In the article «Complicating the Coming Out Narrative: Becoming Oneself in a Heterosexist and Cissexist World», Kate Klein (et.al) challenges the coming out model as presented by Plummer, saying that it is not always as linear as previously thought. In their discussions they use a coming-out model presented by Eliason and Scope in 2007. This model was made after conducting a thorough review of the various stage models of LGBTQ identity development (Plummers model being one of them), where they noted that these linear stage models vary mostly in subtle details and argued that there were several key themes that span them all (Klein et.al. 2014, 298). The common themes from these models can be summarized as follows:

1. *Feeling of differentness:* Youth begin to feel that they are different from their peers or that their behaviours or attractions are incongruent with their heterosexual identity.
2. *Identity formation as developmental process:* Stages later in the models are considered to be healthier or more advanced than earlier stages.
3. *The need for disclosure:* A coming out process is integral to living a healthy queer life.
4. *The need for a stage of pride/cultural immersion:* This stage is often characterized by what is considered to be outrageous and unthinkable behaviour and a rejection of heterosexual society.
5. *The need for identity integration/synthesis:* The stage is often characterized by a decreased anger against societal norms and increased emotional balance. (298).

This model is very similar to Plummer's own, moving linearly from being closeted to out and proud, from childhood to adulthood. This discourse of coming out has gained a lot of critique, especially its assumption of a static and coherent final subject. One such critique is based on the question regarding gender. Judith Butler, author of «Gender Trouble» argued that gender is not something that a subject has; rather, it is something created by what the subject does. Gender is therefore constantly created by performative acts rather than existing as a constant (1990). The idea that you will reach a coherent final subject is therefore impossible for someone who identifies as genderqueer in any way. Lal Zimman, author of «'The other kind

of coming out': Transgender people and the Coming Out Narrative Genre» therefore stresses that the practises that appear to unify LGBTQ+ speakers, like the coming out narrative genre, cannot be fully understood through the study of lesbians and gay men alone (2009, 55), because their experience of the coming-out process differs so much from those on the genderqueer spectrum. It is also argued that these models fail to consider the fact that not everyone who identifies themselves as queer want to participate in a heteronormative society. Meaning that their goal isn't necessarily to achieve the same rights as heterosexuals have when it comes to marriage and gender roles. This viewpoint is relevant to present, as the character of Nimona represent some of these viewpoints. In the intro to her book «The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects» (2017), Mari Ruti writes that the dawn of the twenty-first century has witnessed an escalation of the queer theoretical idiom of opting out, something that has driven a wedge between mainstream LGBTQ activists who are fighting for full social inclusion, and the radicalized queer critics who see gay and lesbian normalization as a betrayal of queer politics.

By opting out she refers to the practice of not wanting to participate in the heteronormative society which sets the standard for gender identity. Instead of trying to follow the standards set by society, a lot of queer people would rather follow their own set of values and beliefs, instead of the one made by heterosexuals and their ideals. On one side of the queer liberation there is the LGBTQ+ activists who want to be considered «normal» and who are demanding the equal civil rights that follows. On the other side are the queer critics who are asking: Why would we want to be normal? Isn't the normal what has always oppressed us? (2017, 1). Ruti comments on the fact that queer critics accuse the LGBTQ+ movement of pandering to the desires of the most domesticated - and usually most privileged - members of the gay, lesbian, and queer movement. From the critics' perspective, says Ruti, the relatively affluent, mostly white gays and lesbian are using marriage as a way to purchase their way into «normalcy» at the expense of those who cannot be as easily assimilated: like poor queers, radicalized queers, gender variant queers, immigrant queers, and so on.

Ruti also points out that the queer critics of homonormativity question the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement's desire to «make it» in dominant culture in the first place (2017, 14). The term homonormativity refers to a strand of advocacy that argue for "full inclusion" and "equality" for gays and lesbians, but against "progressive" visions that clash with the prevailing social and economic order (McCann & Monaghan 2020, 157). Professor and editor of several Gender and Sexuality journals, David Eng suggests that there is something problematic about gays and lesbians asking for legitimation, sanction, and authorization from

the very entity - the state - that has historically excluded them (Ruti 2017, 15). José Muñoz has similar views, chastising the LGBTQ movement for seeking membership in a corrupt and bankrupt social order (Ruti 2017, 15). Ruti boils the entire debate around homonormativity down to the rift that has always complicated progressive politics, namely, the battle between those who want to improve the existing system by making it more inclusive and those who want to blow this system into smithereens and replace it with something completely different (2017, 15).

2.5.2 The practise of passing

In a more modern take on the coming-out narrative, scholar Whitney Monaghan, author of «Queer Theory Now» (2021), wrote a model for the coming out narrative used in modern tv-shows, which goes through three main stages:

1. It begins with a recognition of difference, where the queer character is visually coded as non-normative through costuming and performance.
2. It often stages a rejection of difference through a 'passing' storyline which reflects belonging or 'fitting in' as a central concern for queer youth.
3. After the conflict that usually ensues in the 'passing' storyline, as the characters can't keep up the facade of being someone else, theres an emotional declaration, disclosure, or confession (2021, 354).

This model puts a lot of weight on the 'passing' trope in coming-out narratives, and it is therefore important to define what this entails. Professor in psychology at Harvard, Kimberlyn Leary defines the practice of passing as a cultural performance where a member of a defined social group masquerades as another in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group (1999, 85). Leary points out that passing occurs when there is a perceived danger in disclosing who you are, and that on the most extreme it is a form for camouflage to protect oneself against expected trauma (1999, 85). There can therefore, as Harrison and Cooley describes in the intro to «Passing/Out: Sexual Identity Veiled and revealed», be tempting to pass as a member of the oppressing group (2012, 1). Even though the practice of passing is meant for one's own protection, Leary argues that it usually disables or even destroys the self it is meant to safeguard (1999, 85).

Mark Chekola and Nancy Arden McHugh, authors of «The Ontological Foundations of Passing» point out that a lot of homosexual passing occurs passively, as people in most social

situations assumes that others are heterosexual as long as they are not given evidence that prove otherwise (2012, 14). In my analysis I will use the same meaning of the word 'passing' as Harrison and Cooley introduce in their discussion, which entails that there is some degree of intentionality or deliberateness involves in the character choice to pass. This means that at the minimum, the passing character accept the fact that they are passing, they approve of its occurring, and they avoid doing anything that could give away any information that the assumption (being heterosexual or cisgender[6]) is incorrect (2012, 14). The reason for passing is, as Harrison and Cooley point out, often done for sheer survival, while can also be resorted to in order to avoid forms of discrimination lesser than being killed, but where the outcome is still considered to be so severe that the passer would prefer it over coming-out (2021, 14). The act of hiding aspects of oneself to fit in with society for protection has been present all throughout history. When a black person with a light complexion pretends to be white to access privileges afforded to them. When the polish Jews hid among the Christians during World War 2, and when a homosexual must hide the sex of the person their dating while conversing with their co-worker (Chekola 2012, 13). According to Monaghan the practise of passing is motivated by a desire for the 'easier' life of heterosexuality, even though this entails the active denial of their authentic self (2021, 354). The choice to intentionally pass is not necessarily so easy for people who identify as genderqueer because physical characteristics are not as easy to hide as internal ones.

According to Monaghan the coming out narrative is premised on an initial assumption of heterosexuality wherein all LGBTQ+ characters are automatically 'in' the closet and must be 'outed' by themselves or others (2021, 356). As the coming out narrative is the dominant means of representation of LGBTQ+ stories on screen, Monaghan comments that it has a significant power in shaping norms of sex, gender, sexuality, and identity. However, Monaghan points out that when it is channelled through a singular narrative form, stories of coming out have a limited capacity to explore the complexities of LGBTQ+ identity and experience (2021, 356).

[6] Cisgender describes a person whose gender identity corresponds with their sex assigned at birth.

2.6 The Queer Monster

An important factor in the process of queer reading, is the use of queer coding and metaphors. Queer coding involves attributing stereotypically queer traits to a character without explicitly stating gender or sexual identity. This is done by using traits and stereotypes recognizable to the audience. Metaphors are used in many of the same ways, as it often portrays a storyline or theme often associated with queer experiences, without stating that it is in fact the meaning behind the story. The queer monster is one such metaphor, as it depicts an outsider to society being hunted or chased out by the masses. The monster and the homosexual have a long history of co-existing in both society and literature, and the monster has often been used as a metaphor to describe the queer experience. The term «Queer Monster» or «queer monstrosity» refers to the queer readings of horror films, and in particular monster films. Harry Morgan Benshoff writes in his book «Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film» from 1996, that both movie monsters and homosexuals exist in shadowy closets, and that when they do emerge from these prescribed places into the sunlit world, they tend to cause panic and fear (1). Their closets are what upholds and reinforce culturally constructed binaries of gender and sexuality which structure the Western thought. The monster is to "normality" what the homosexual is to the heterosexual (Benshoff 1996, 1). He continues that for many people in the English-language culture, homosexuality is seen as a monstrous condition. He bases this accusation on a study on anti-homosexuality from 1984, which broke heterosexuals fear of gay and lesbian sexuality into three topic areas:

1) Homosexuality is a threat to the individual - that someone you know (or you yourself) might be homosexual.
2) Homosexuality is a threat to others - homosexuality have been frequently linked in the media to child molestation, rape, and violence.
3) Homosexuality as a threat to the community and other components of culture - homosexuals supposedly represent the destruction of the procreative nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and «family values».

With this distinction Benshoff compares the fear of homosexuality to the monstrous, as these fears are prevalent in classic monster films. Like the evil Mr. Hyde, or the Wolfman, where a gay or lesbian-self inside of you might be striving to get out. And how like Frankenstein's monster, homosexuals might run rampant across the countryside, claiming «innocent» victims. Or what he deems as worse off all, like mad scientists or vampires, who dream of revolutionizing the world through some startling scientific discovery or preternatural power.

The fear of the homosexual is a central trope in most classic horror films. Or at least they can be read as such. Benshoff puts a lot of weight on the affect the AIDS crisis has had on the «homosexuals are monsters» rhetoric. The decease made gay men contagious – like vampires - with just a single mingling of blood, and they could infect pure and innocent victims turning them into the living dead (1996, 2). While some people have always considered anything that opposes or lies outside the ideological status quo as monstrous and unnatural, Benshoff comments that the ideological approach to fictional monsters frequently bleed into an accounting of real-life horror such as AIDS (1996, 2-3). Critical essays on mass media have demonstrated how the representational codes and narrative tropes of the monster movie, like plague, contagion, victimization, and panic, have been used in a lot of television and newspaper coverage of AIDS (Benshoff 1996, 3). In his book discussing exactly this, Simon Watney warns that:

> «AIDS commentary does not 'make' gay men into monsters, for homosexuality is, and always has been, constructed as intrinsically monstrous within the heavily over-determined images inside which notions of 'decency,' 'human nature,' and so on are mobilized and relayed throughout the internal circuitry of the mass media marketplace» (Benshoff 1996, 3).

Benshoff points out that multiple social meanings of the words "monster" and "homosexual" are seen to overlap to varying, but often, high degrees. He thereby makes the bold analogy of saying «monster is to 'normality' as homosexuality is to heterosexual» (Benshoff 1996, 1). According to Benshoff there are still certain sectors of the population that relate homosexuality to bestiality, incest, necrophilia, and sadomasochism. The very things that define the classical Hollywood monster movies (1996, 3). The concept of monster and homosexual in and of itself share many of the same sematic charges and arouse many of the same fears about sex and death (Benshoff 1996, 3). Benshoff refers to one bibliographic review by Eric Garber and Lyn Palei on the fantastic genre which says:

> «Fantastic literature has always contained depictions of homosexuality, both female and male. It has also contained portraits of androgynes, transsexuals, gender switching people, and alien sexuality that is clearly not heterosexual. In the centuries before writers could deal explicitly with homosexuality, they used fantastic literature's various forms to disguise homoerotic passions» (1996, 7).

With this respect, says Benshoff, horror stories and monster movies, perhaps more than any other genre, actively invoke a queer reading. This is because of their obvious metaphorical forms of narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo (1996, 7). A classic example of the queer monster can be found in the character of Frankenstein's monster. In Mary Shelly's novel Frankenstein (1818), and its subsequent film adaptations (33 and counting), the monster is portrayed as an outsider. Rejected by society due to its monstrous appearance and unconventional creation. The monster can be read as a manifestation of Dr. Frankenstein's inner feelings, representing what he needs and wants, but cannot have. There is also, as Harry M. Benshoff points out, something very queer about the idea of making life without the help of the reproductive organs of a woman, challenging traditional notions of reproduction and gender roles (1996, 49). In *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) Dr. Frankenstein makes life with another man, his hunchback assistant and then his counterpart Dr. Pretorious respectively. The monster is monstrous in the fact that it was not conceived in a traditional way, and therefore it cannot be human like the rest of us. Frankenstein's monster portrays the queer experience in a raw and unfiltered way, showing everyone how people will treat someone they do not understand, and that they will never put in the effort to understand. The metaphor of the queer monster is still in use today, and we see it in how homosexuality is presented to children. The monster's existence outside of normative structures and its subsequent rejection by society parallel the experience of many LGBTQ individuals who have been marginalized and stigmatized for their identities.

By the late 1960s, the signifier "monster" had undergone a radical shift, according to Benshoff, splitting into at least two opposite constructs – a traditional one which kept the monster as a threat to the moral order of society, and another which saw the monster becoming increasingly domesticated (1996, 157). Monsters were now turned into cartoons and plush toys for the amusement of children. We still see this in today, with the popular film franchise *Hotel Transylvania* (2012) – which has four films and counting (2012, 2015, 2018, 2022). In these films we meet all the classic movie monsters – Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, mummies, and werewolves. Though in these films aimed at children, the queer aspects of the characters are not in focus, and you follow a heterosexual romantic storyline throughout the films. You are also made to root for the monsters, who are considered the protagonists and the good guys in the franchise.

3 Analysis of *Luca* and *Nimona*

When delving into the analysis of *Luca* and *Nimona,* several key concepts from the theory become highly relevant when decoding the representation of queer childhood experiences in these animated children's film. Firstly, the coming-out narrative model presented by Ken Plummer and Whitney Monaghan offer valuable frameworks for understanding the narrative progression of the characters in both films. Plummer's model, which outlines the stages of secrecy, fear, and eventual self-acceptance can be applied to Luca's journey of self-discovery and his struggle to reveal his true identity to his family and community. Similarly, Monaghan's model, which emphasizes the stages of recognition of difference, rejection of difference, and emotional declaration, can shed light on Nimona's defiance of societal norms and her assertion of her authentic self. By employing these models in the analysis, nuanced depictions of queer identity formation and coming out in the films can be uncovered. Furthermore, Mari Ruti's critique of the coming-out model, particularly in its applicability to transgender, bisexual, and non-binary individuals, becomes relevant in analysing *Nimona*'s narrative defiance and rejection of conventional gender roles. Nimona's journey challenges traditional narrative structures and offers a nuanced portrayal of genderqueer identity, aligning with Ruti's argument against the limitations of the coming-out model in capturing the complexities of queer identity. Incorporating Ruti's critique into the analysis can explore the ways in which *Nimona* transcends traditional narrative boundaries to depict the multifaced nature of gender identity.

Even though *Luca* and *Nimona* are films released within a time period of only two years, they portray queer representation in two very different ways. In *Luca*, the story focus on the feeling of being different and the inability to reveal your true self to your family or community. The feeling of not fitting in and of being different manifests in the image of the monster. *Luca* shows what fear does to a child when they fear how society will treat them once their secret is revealed. While *Nimona's* narrative focuses on how society treat someone who do not fit into the 'normal' perceptions of gender. The physical changes that come with her internal perception of herself is considered monstrous to those who do not understand it. Nimona fear of how strangers will treat her has ostensibly disappeared, as she already knows that people will shun her for what she is. Having gone past the stage of fear, Nimona represent how persecution can lead to hate toward the oppressors, and what happens once that hate consumes you. Both movies portray the isolation and fear that being queer often brings

with it, while also showing that there is a big difference between sexuality and gender struggles.

Additionally, the notion of the queer monster as a metaphor for the outsider and societal fears associated with non-normative identities is crucial. Drawing from Harry Morgan Benshoff's exploration of the queer monster in horror film, it is possible to analyse how both *Luca* and *Nimona* utilize the concept of the monster to depict the experiences of queer characters. In *Luca,* the monster represents the fear of societal rejection and the struggle for self-acceptance, while Nimona's transformation into a monstrous figure reflects the societal condemnation faced by individuals who deviate from normative gender roles. Applying Benshoff's analysis to the films, can therefore help uncover the underlying themes of societal fear and persecution inherent in the portrayal of queer identity. As the queer community has gotten more accepted in society, and consequently film and tv, there is no longer the same necessity for the metaphor of the queer monster. Today, anyone who wants to tell a queer story can do so – it being filmmakers or showrunners. Or at least one would assume so. The producers of both *Luca* and *Nimona* has proven that this is not necessarily the case when you work at a big productions company like Disney. The main reason seems to be that their content caters to young children. As discussed in the chapter about the queer child, the child is viewed as the very representation of the moral side of humanity, something innocent and pure. It is therefore not "suitable" to portray a child as a queer person, as its impossible for the child to be queer and pure at the same time. Because of this anti-queer rhetoric against queer representation in media targeted at children, filmmakers will have to insert queer subtext or metaphors to imply to their queer readers what the story is actually about. One of these metaphors is the monster, as presented in the introduction. The monster has a long history of working as a metaphor for the queer experience and the queer self. Especially in times when there were strict laws, and therefore restrictions, against homosexuality and explicit depiction of homosexuality on film.

As I have already established, *Luca* and *Nimona* represents two different aspects of the queer identity. The monster portrayed in *Luca* can be read as a metaphor for the experience of gay youth, as it follows the narrative progression of a coming-out tale within the restrictions of a narrative aimed at gays and lesbians. The treatment of the monster within the film reflects how gay youth are treated within the heteronormative society. In this analysis I will talk about Luca and Alberto as an entity, as their both their monstrosity represents the gay child. In the making of *Nimona*, the monster was used as a deliberate metaphor for the genderqueer experience, depicting how people who do not conform to one gender is treated by not only the

heteronormative society, but also people within the LGBTQ+ community. While there are several queer characters depicted in *Nimona*, she is the only one with the label as a monster, and I will therefore only analyse Nimona as a monster in this film. The monster therefore has a different purpose within the two films, even though they are both used as a metaphor for the queer experience.

Overall, by drawing on these key concepts from the theory chapter, the analysis of *Luca* and *Nimona* aims to illuminate the nuanced representations of queer childhood experiences in animated children's films and deepen our understanding of the complexities of queer identity and the importance of diverse and inclusive representation in children's media. Through this analysis, I seek to address the question regarding how the queer child's experience is represented in the two movies, as well as exploring how the films employ the metaphor of the queer monster, and to what extent the films can be read as coming-out narratives. By exploring these questions, I aim to uncover the underlying themes, narrative structures, and metaphors employed in *Luca* and *Nimona* to portray the queer experience, offering insight into ways in which animated films contribute to shaping societal perception of queer identity and fostering inclusivity in media representation.

3.1 *Luca* as a coming-out story

Presented as a coming-of-age story, *Luca* depicts the experience and feelings of growing up and finding oneself. The film tackles classic coming-of-age themes like friendship, independence, and identity. *Luca* stands out from the classic Disney and Pixar movies, as the main storyline revolves around a friendship between two boys – *Luca* and *Alberto*. Disney is most famous for their princess movies, where the story focus on the romantic relationship between a princess and her prince, Pixar on the other hand has always had a big focus on friendships in their movies, with characters like Woody and Buzz from *Toy Story*, and Mike and Sully from *Monsters Inc*. The biggest difference between these classic friendships and the one depicted in *Luca* is that Luca and Alberto's friendship is the main drive of the movie, it is the very plot of the movie. Their relationship swivels somewhere between friendship and love. Alberto is the very representation of Luca growing up, as he's the reason that Luca dares to leave his parents to seek out the life he really wants to live. Without Alberto, Luca would probably spend the rest of his life underwater, fearing the "landmonsters" above. More than

just being a coming-of-age movie, where you struggle with the ordinary trials of being a teenager, Luca must overcome something bigger – what he really is, and what he identifies as. His struggles are more akin to those of queer youth, compared to what a non-queer child must overcome. Luca is a representation of the queer child, forced to conform to the expectations of his parents.

While done out of parental love for Luca, the choice to banish him to the depths of the ocean is used to stifle the 'being' in hope that it will change the 'becoming'. In Uprichard's framework, the concept of 'being' refers to the present state of an individual, while 'becoming' signifies the process of transitioning or developing into something else. This duality is relevant to understanding childhood and identity formation, as children are simultaneously experiencing their current existence while they are also evolving and shaping their future self. Initially, Luca's 'being' is characterized by his life underwater, where he feels isolated and constrained by the expectations of his family and community. His existence as a sea-monster is defined by fear and secrecy, as he hides his sea-monster identity out of concern for his safety and acceptance. However, Luca's encounter with Alberto opens a world of possibilities and challenges his perception of himself and his future. Alberto serves as a catalyst for Luca's 'becoming', encouraging him to explore his curiosity about the human world and to envision a different life beyond the confines of his underwater existence. As Luca embarks on his journey of self-discovery, he grapples with the tension between his present 'being' and his future 'becoming'. He faces obstacles and conflicts as he navigates his identity, including the fear of rejection from his family and the human society above. These challenges highlight the complexity of childhood and the dynamic nature of identity formation. Throughout the film, Luca oscillates between moments of 'being' and 'becoming' as he learns more about himself and the world around him. His experiences with friendship, love, and acceptance shape his understanding of who he is and who he wants to become.

3.1.1 Recognition of difference

By analyzing *Luca* according to the coming-out models proposed by Monaghan and Plummer respectively, I will show just how much *Luca* follow this narrative. The reasoning for using both these models is that *Luca* follows the classic coming-out model that Plummer presents completely, while still having some elements that Monaghan presents in her analysis of the coming-out trope. As presented in the previous chapter Monaghan's analysis for the coming-

out narrative begins with a recognition of difference (2021, 354). Plummer also describes this part of the story as an unhappy time, where the source of this discontentment being that the character is gay or lesbian (1995, 83). In *Luca* this is represented in the first scene when you see a pair of human fishermen being «attacked» by a sea-monster, to then skip to a scene of Luca herding fish underwater. He is thereby introduced as an «other», and because of this the humans fear him. By switching from a scene where the sea-monster is the perpetrator to then introducing him as a main character, its established that he does not belong to the rest of the world.

Plummer's model splits this part of the coming-out story into two points. The first one being that the story starts in childhood and follows a linear progression. *Luca* is defined as a coming-of-age story, meaning that when Luca is introduced, he is at the start of this journey. He is living at home with his parents, while still being old enough that he is trusted with the responsibility of herding their fish, which we could assume is a part of the family's income. From here we follow Luca on his linear journey from being "closeted" to coming-out to everyone he knows. Luca is presented as a character who is curious of the world around him, but afraid of the world above water. Almost like the little mermaid Ariel, he gets an affinity for the human possessions he finds at the bottom of the sea. While he may dream about what lies above the water's surface, his mother taught him to fear the so-called «land monsters» that reside there. There is a sense of isolation present in the depiction of Luca and the life he lives, like there is something missing in his life. He is not necessarily depicted as unhappy, but there is still a lack of content with the life he's living. This gives the impression that he would like something more from his life than what he is currently experiencing. There is an overall feeling present that Luca is lonely, as there is no indication that Luca has anyone else than his fish to keep him company. As Luca swims through the underwater town that he lives in, there does not seem to be anyone his age that might resemble something close to a friendship. He spends the entire day talking to his fish who cannot answer him, and when he talks to other people outside of his family its only pleasantries passed with his neighbours. This perpetuates a sense of isolation when it comes to Luca's life. He longs to be free, and to spend time with likeminded people. There is an urge in him to go out and discover himself.

3.1.2 Rejection of difference

This leads us to the second stage of the coming-out story, which Plummer defines as the crucial moment in the story, where problems appear that leads to concern - or discovery – of being gay. Here problems abound and are usually documented in secrecy, guilt or shame, fear of discovering or suicidal feelings (1995, 83). Monaghan defines this part of the story as the 'passing' storyline, which reflect belonging or 'fitting in' as a central concern for queer youth (2021, 354). Luca's journey of self-discovery starts when meets fellow sea-monster Alberto, who introduces him to a new world of discovery and wonder. Luca's entire worldview is shaken when he realises that there is a place for him above the water, and Alberto stands at the very centre of this revelation. After this momentous revelation, Luca must come to terms with his feelings for Alberto along with his concerns regarding what it entails to pursue this life he wants to live with Alberto. At first Luca decides to hide his newfound feelings for his parents, pretending to do his daily activities as normal. When he does not share this part of himself with his parents, he continues to 'pass' as heterosexual, never giving away any signs to his parents to assume otherwise.

Figure 5: Luca in his home under water (Luca)

Figure 4: Luca above water (Luca)

Luca's passing is here done intentionally, as he is still meeting up with Alberto daily, even going as far planning out ways he can trick his parents into thinking he is still going about his daily established routine. The reason for this seems to be what Plummer describes as secrecy, guilt or shame concerning coming out. Luca fears that his parents will find out what he has been doing, because he feels guilt in doing something that he knows his parents would disapprove of. He must keep his new identity a secret because he fears that it will be taken away from him if they were to find out. The film portrays Luca as someone who is out and proud of who he is when he spends time with Alberto, something that gives the impression of returning to the closet when he goes underwater to spend time with his family. Meaning that

he retreats into the version that his parents know and adore while he is at home and can only be his true self whenever he reaches the surface. The visual representation between his cold and dark life under water, and the bright colourful scenes spent with Alberto above are staggering. The fact that Luca and his family live in a dim and gloomy cave at the bottom of the ocean, portrays a high contrast to Luca and Alberto's hideaway at the top of a tower looking over the entire ocean. The visual representation of the dark versus the light continues when Luca's parents threaten to send him to the bottom of the sea, where we are told that no light accumulates. This threat of sending him to live with his uncle Ugo could give readers connotations to stories about queer kids and teenagers being sent to conversion therapy or treatment to rid themselves of their queer inclinations. Conversion therapy, often taking place at conversion camps, is the practise of attempting to change the sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression of an individual so that it aligns with heterosexual and cisgender norms. Luca's parents decision to send him to his uncle is based on their fear that Luca will continue to spend time at the surface with Alberto. They want to put a stop to this new fascination Luca has found himself in, and the only reason they see fit is to isolate him as far away from Alberto as they can. Instead of admitting that she wants her son to change, Luca's mother defends her decision by telling him that what she is doing is out of love for him.

Luca's mother: *The world is a very dangerous place, Luca. And if I have to send you to the bottom of the ocean to keep you safe, so be it!*

Luca: *You don't know what it's like up there!*

Luca's mother: *I know you! And I know what's best for you. It's done.*

Luca's mother: *Hey. Look me in the eye. You know I love you, right?*

This dialogue can be read as a parent who fear the unknown, and that wants to protect their child out of love for them. The safest thing for Luca is therefore to adapt to the heteronormative society. As Luca and Alberto starts planning their dream of owning a Vespa, Luca can no longer contain his excitement for what the future can bring. When portraying this growing friendship between Luca and Alberto there is an underlying impression that there is more than just feelings of friendship being represented. As the two boys discuss their future together - where they will finally own a Vespa - Luca pictures a perfect fantasy of them one day riding together. The visual picture of Luca and Alberto riding through a field of flowers reads as a representation of the blossoming love between the two characters. The fact that both characters are riding on the same Vespa shows that the two of them being together is an important part of Luca's dream. There is clearly a longing to spend time together, and there does not seem to be anything more important in this moment than these boys being together. Never once in Luca's fantasies do you see his parents represented. Showing that to him, right now, the most important person in his life is Alberto. These feelings seem to be mutual, as Alberto at one point tells Luca:

Figure 6: Luca and Alberto riding a Vespa in Luca's dream (Luca)

> *«Luca, think about it. Everyday we'll ride somewhere new. And every night we'll sleep under the fish. No one to tell us what to do. Just you and me out there. Free».*

The use of the word 'free' tells us that there are some restrictions that they both want to overcome in their current lives. Luca feels trapped by his parents, who want to keep him locked away where he is safe. While Alberto is all alone, trapped by the memories of his father that left him, hoping he will one day return. The passing storyline in the film continues as the boys set out for the town of Portorosso. They get a rude awakening when the town they set their hopes for the future in is decorated with murals and statues dedicated to the killing of sea-monsters. The boys have the privilege of passing as humans as they have the ability to turn into humans once they are dry, which gives them the opportunity to stay in Portorosso, as long as they do not come in contact with water. For Luca and Alberto, the passing is now done for sheer survival, as Harrison and Cooley reasoned. The boys have every reason to

Figure 8: Mural of a man killing a sea-monster (Luca)

Figure 7: Statue of man killing a sea-monster (Luca)

believe that if they were to be discovered, they would be killed. The need to pass is no longer based on the fear of consequences from his parents as it once was, now it is a question of life and death. Luca and Alberto know that they are not safe among the humans, but it is the only chance they have as to secure the means to be free – a Vespa. As Luca tells their new human friend Giulia when they ask her to help them with their mission:

> *«Please. My family was gonna send me somewhere horrible. Away from everything I love. But if we win this race, we can be free».*

For Luca and Alberto, the Vespa is the very symbol of their freedom. Once they have it everything will work itself out. It is also worth noting that Luca uses the plural "we" when he talks about being free. Even though there is nothing holding Alberto back from going wherever he wants. The freedom lies in them being together because their relationship is the thing that will be taken away once his parents find him. Alberto is as Luca says, everything he loves. It is quite hard to see how Luca is supposed to mean this any other way, as all the things that Luca has gotten to know on the surface are all linked to Alberto. The world he loves above sea is nothing if it were not for Alberto presence in it. A huge part of the film is spent in this state of passing as the boys tries to hide their identity around Giulia and her monster-hunting father, Massimo.

As Luca builds a closer relationship to Giulia and learns more about her life as a human, his feelings of guilt and shame surrounding his true identity worsen. He fears that he will never participate in the wonders of the human world because of what he is, fearing that they will never accept him once they know what he really is. As Monaghan (2021) describes, this state of passing cannot continue forever and often leads to a conflict that needs to be resolved. In *Luca* this conflict does not arise between the boys and the people they are hiding

from, as one might expect. Instead, the conflict arises between the two boys, as Alberto's fear of abandonment becomes increasingly prominent when Luca's interest in Giulia and her life at human school grows. It is clear that Alberto's intentions with exposing his true identity to Giulia is to show Luca that he will never be accepted by the humans, and thereby his only option is to stick with Alberto. This act is done out of desperation in the fear that Luca will abandon him the same way his father did. When Luca decides to turn his back on Alberto, refusing to state his true identity, it is because he is not ready to give up the comfort of passing as a member of the oppressing group, as Harrison and Cooley (2012) states it. Luca knows that once he reveals himself there is no chance that he can pursue his new dream of going to school. He is intentionally deceiving Giulia to keep her perception of him intact.

3.1.3 Emotional declaration

According to Monaghan this conflict leads us into the next stage of the coming-out narrative, which often stages an emotional declaration, disclosure, or confession by the passing character. While Luca decides not to come out when he is confronted by Alberto, the guilt of betraying Alberto soon forces him to reveal his identity to Giulia. There is a realisation within Luca that his relationship with Alberto is more important than the acceptation received by the humans. If he were to stay in Portorosso without Alberto, he would live an isolated life of secrecy and fear. This drives Luca in his mission to resolve the conflict so he can return to Alberto's side. The entirety of the Portorosso Cup and Luca's participation in it portrays his declaration of love towards Alberto. He is willing to go out of his comfort zone, risking being outed to the entire town just so he can show Alberto how sorry he is for betraying him. It is no longer important to him whether he can stay in Portorosso or go to school in the city with Giulia, he only wants his friend back. As the two boys shapeshift into their monstrous bodies, they accept the fact that they will no longer be welcomed by the humans, they can only belong to each other.

Plummer describes the time after the confession as one where the problems that occurred are resolved in some fashion and where a sense of identity is achieved along with a building of community. This can also be described as the 'happy ending' for the queer character. Though it is not necessarily the case that every coming-out story ends in this way, which is probably the reason Monaghan decided against keeping this stage in her own narrative framework. In Luca's case this happily ever after is achieved, as he and Alberto is

accepted by the town of Portorosso. The reasoning for this acceptance being that the inhabitants of Portorosso, and especially Giulia's father Massimo, realize that they were misinformed about the creatures living in the ocean. Once they spent time with them and was able to get to know them, the fear they once felt were no longer there. By exposing themselves to what they once feared, they realized they had nothing to fear after all. This scene is presented as the very moral of the story, showing that acceptance of everyone is important. As is only natural in a film produced by Disney and Pixar, the characters also get their long-awaited happy ending. While it did not include a Vespa as the boys once thought, they achieved their new dreams which had developed while on land. Luca was able to go to human school where he could experience everything being a human entailed, fully investing himself in this new version of himself, promising he would one day return to Alberto.

This could be a bittersweet ending, if not for the fact that Alberto's biggest wish was to restore his loss of a father figure. When Alberto was first introduced in the film, it is implied that he has been abandoned by his father. Though Alberto claims that his father would return to him, there is no sign of him throughout the movie. Later, Alberto reveals that his father indeed did abandon him at the tower where Luca once found him. This fear of abandonment is a major reason why a lot of children and teenagers chose not to tell their parents and family about their queer identity. This fear is also what drives Alberto throughout the movie as he is afraid to lose this new feeling of family he found in Luca. Building on Alberto's fear of abandonment, the end of the film provides him with the family he once lost. While Luca leaves Portorosso to follow his dream of going to human school, Alberto chooses to stay behind because he has already gotten what he dreamed of – a father. While the boys stay at Massimo's house it is clear that he develops a soft spot for Alberto, as he is the first one to volunteer to find him when he learns that Alberto has run away. This bond between them becomes even clearer when Massimo drops his harpoon and urges the townsfolk to accept Luca and Alberto once they learn that they are sea-monsters.

For Massimo, his love for Alberto is much stronger than his fear of the creatures of the sea. The relationship between Alberto and Massimo is such an important part of the story that Disney even released a short film called «Ciao Alberto» (McKenna 2021) where they portray Alberto and Massimo's life while living together in Portorosso. Set sometime after the events portrayed in *Luca*, Massimo now completely accepts Alberto as he is,

Figure 9: Alberto and Massimo fishing together in Ciao Alberto (Luca)

and he spends his time switching back and forth from his monstrous and human form. The short film ends with Alberto calling Massimo «dad» for the first time, revealing that this is how Alberto view Massimo - as his own father.

As shown by analyzing *Luca* according to the coming-out model, the films storyline follows the classic narrative structure of the model. It starts in childhood and follows a linear storyline, then it goes through a passing stage which ends in a conflict because of it, until the conflict is solved with a declaration of identity which then leads to acceptance and a sense of community. By following a narrative model based on queer theory, *Luca* can also be read and understood as a queer story.

3.2 *Nimona* and the defiance of definitions

While we must apply a queer reading to see the queer aspects of *Luca*'s story, *Nimona* is undeniably queer. The film is based on a graphic novel by the same name written by ND Stevenson. Stevenson, who came out as non-binary and transmasculine after the comic was finished, commented on how he wrote the comic before he himself realized that the themes in it also reflected his own feelings of otherness. There is therefore no denying that *Nimona* is a queer story, as the author of it has confirmed that this reading is correct.

Figure 11: Ballister and Ambrosius holding hands (Nimona)

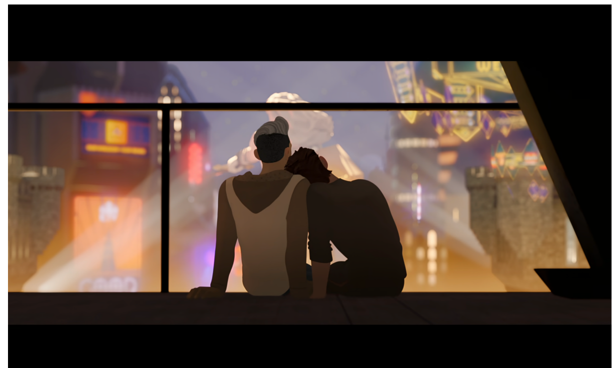

Figure 10: Ballister leaning his head on Ambrosius (Nimona)

Before I start my reading of *Nimona* using the coming-out narrative models, I want to comment on how the already established gay relationship in the film helps promote a queer reading of the character Nimona. Ballister and Ambrosius romantic relationship is established in the films intro, when Ambrosius comments on his love for Ballister while holding his hand, and with Ballister later leaning his head on Ambrosius shoulder for comfort. With this scene they confirm that this is a queer story from the very start, and therefore opens for a queer reading of the entire film and with that the possibility that Nimona herself is queer. In my

opinion Ballister and Ambrosius relationships function as a way to point out to the viewer that yes, this is a queer story, and these characters are queer. There is no way for the readers to push away or downplay the queerness of these characters, as it is so clear in both the visual representation of them as well as the dialogue.

The confirmed relationship between Ballister and Ambrosius follows the evolution of queer representation in media made for children. There has been a massive change in the quantity of queer representation on screen the last decade, especially in shows meant for children consumption. Shows like *Steven Universe* (Rebecca Sugar 2013), *Adventure Time* (Larry Leichliter 2010), *The Owl House* (Dana Terrace 2020), *The Legend of Korra* (Michael Dante DiMartino & Bryan Konietzko 2012), and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (ND Stevenson 2018) have all had important main characters represented as queer and participating in a queer storyline. This goes to show that the children's entertainment industry is not necessary opposed to airing queer narratives. While several other animation studies have the opportunity to produce inclusive and progressive stories, Disney must uphold the standard of what they consider moral and right to show children. If they stray from what is perceived as right, ideologically, or religiously, they will receive a mayor backlash for exposing "innocent" children to the dangers of the world (GLAAD 2023b) (Kao & Eckert 2021) (Stabile 2023). The fact that *Nimona* was under Disney production for years, reveal the determination that storytellers had to depict more queer stories on the big screen. Ballister and Ambrosius relationship could also be seen as a narrative decision that would open the viewers up for a queer reading of *Nimona's* entire narrative. By using a queer reading, I see *Nimona* as a comment on how society are willing to accept queer people as long as they adhere to the social norms set by the heteronormative society. You might be queer, but you still have to fit inside the box made for you, and you should not push your "agenda" upon the "normal" people you surround yourself with. People like Nimona are not able to do this, because of the very way they define themselves. I will defend this interpretation in detail in the following section.

3.2.1 The heteronormative Institute

The film starts off with an introduction to Ballister's history while he is preparing to be knighted by the queen. This introduces the world and regime within the story. The Institute that Ballister believes in and has dedicated his life to works as a metaphor for the

heteronormative society we see in our own world. Heteronormativity is the concept that heterosexuality is the preferred or normal sexual orientation. It follows the belief that there are only two distinct, opposite genders, and that sexual and marital relations are most fitting between people of these opposite genders. The Institute has a strict policy against allowing "commoners" into their ranks, as they cannot be trusted in the same way as the nobles can. The commoners in this setting can be read as anyone that does not fit in with the established heteronormative society. When the queen decided she wanted to give Ballister a chance, to bring progress and inclusivity into their ranks, she did not receive much support from the rest of the Institute. Even though Ballister continued to prove himself worthy of the title of a knight, he was never accepted as one of them. His only comfort being the warm friendship of Ambrosius. No matter how far Ballister went to prove himself a great knight, it did not matter as the fear of what he represented was too strong.

The inability to accept change and inclusivity drives the Director as far as killing her own queen to stop it from taking hold. The old words of Gloreth, the founder of the city, were so engrained in the belief of the Institute that the people following her were willing to kill for it. Much in the same way that people are willing to kill or persecute people in order to uphold the idea of a heteronormative society. It does not matter how hard Ballister tries to assimilate, his history defines him, and he is not permitted the comfort of passing. Ballister is shunned from this society because he is not good enough to mask his true self – a gay man - in the same way that Ambrosius is. Ambrosius also has the privilege of being born into a powerful family, which means he can afford to defy the Institute in a way that Ballister cannot. It is easier for people of influence to be accepted.

When Ambrosius severs Ballister's arm off, he severs his connection to Ballister, showing everyone that he is not the same as him. He will not be outed in the same way that Ballister just got, he wants to continue to be a part of the society that has admired him for so long. He cannot let people think that he accepts Ballister as the man he is, so he chooses to instead lead the pursuit to capture him, afraid that the Director and the Institute will think that he and Ballister are the same. Ballister's maimed arm marks him as an outsider, and he can therefore no longer participate in society without everyone seeing him as a villain. This works as part of the passing stage in Ballister's journey. Ambrosius is able to pass because he does not have the same visual markings of a gay man, and as long as he severs his connection to Ballister, he can uphold this vision of himself. Nimona differ from Ballister in the way that she was never able to be a part of society from the start, as her condition is not something she can hide. If she wants to live life as her true self – a shapeshifter – she will not be able to

participate in a heteronormative society, as the very Institute they live in was built on the fear of people like her. She does not have the luxury of blending in, while Ballister can conform to society, blend in with the rest of them. This is not possible for Nimona as she sticks out like a sore thumb wherever she goes. And the act of keeping it hidden physically hurts her.

By depicting Ballister and Ambrosius as openly and confirmed gay, ND Stevenson opens for a queer reading from the get-go. The queer reading of the movie thus lies in Nimona's character and what she is supposed to represent. The relationship between Ballister and Ambrosius is not the main plot, as it is not supposed to take all the attention away from the real protagonist – Nimona. Her story, and her battles are the real driving force for the narrative.

3.2.2 The sideways growing child

Where *Luca* followed the coming out model in great likeness, *Nimona* differ from it in almost every way. As Plummer presents the coming out model, it is a linear story which starts with a closeted and scared character and ends with them out and proud surrounded by a community. *Nimona* on the other hand, would not be possible to read linearly, because Nimona's story is not told linear. Though Nimona choose to present as a child/young adult, it is made clear that she is far older than the city itself, giving the impression that she has lived a long life in isolation.

Her choice to present herself in this way can be attributed to Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of the sideways growing child. As Nimona was hindered by her society to grow up to full stature of what they defined as adulthood – marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childhood. She is forever stuck in the body of a child because she is still defined as a child by society. Stockton's idea of children growing 'sideways' rather than 'up' reflects Nimona's non-linear narrative and development. Nimona's shapeshifting abilities and her choice to present as a child/young adult despite being far older indicate a deviation from traditional developmental trajectories. She embodies Stockton's concept of queer temporality, where growth and identity formation do not follow a linear path but instead move laterally, defying conventional markers of maturation like age and social milestones. Nimona's shapeshifting can be seen as a form of imaginative play, a key aspect of Stockton's sideway growth. Her ability to take on various forms is a literal manifestation of the fantasy and imagination children use to explore their identities. The power also allows Nimona to navigate her world

in unique ways, resisting the limitations imposed on her by a society that fears her difference. Her refusal to hide her true self and her struggle against the Institute's norms reflect Stockton's critique of societal pressures to conform. Nimona's growth is 'sideways' because she cannot and will not fit into the predefined categories of the Institute.

Nimona's journey is not about becoming acceptable to society, but about challenging and changing societal norms to make space for identities like hers. The truth about what happened to her in her assumed childhood, and which led her to this eternal place of childhood, is revealed towards the end of the film. Here it is made clear that she once tried to come out in the hope that someone would accept her for who she was. In her search she meets a human child named Gloreth - and Gloreth accepts her. Nimona is for the first time able to live as a shapeshifter, having a companion who accepts her in every form she wants to be. They are eventually discovered by Gloreth's parents, whoconvince her that Nimona is a monster and therefore dangerous. Gloreth turns on Nimona, taking her parents word over her own experience, and shuns Nimona from their town. Feeling betrayed by Goreth's actions, Nimona leaves the humans and does not try to make another friend until she decades later meets Ballister – an outsider like herself. With this, her coming-out journey starts again.

3.2.3 A different kind of coming out

As previously stated, Plummer fails to include in his model the difficulties genderqueer people face regarding their coming out. For a lot of genderqueer people, the practise of coming out is a lifelong struggle as they do not fit into one set distinction. A gay or lesbian person will only change their sexual preference from one gender to another, and once they come out their decision is generally final. A genderqueer person on the other hand will continue to undergo changes their entire life, never conforming to one set standard. Plummer's main idea that the coming out process is linear therefore does not apply to their story. As it is never stated how old Nimona is, we do not know if her first "coming out" experience with Gloreth happened while she was young, or if she had already lived a lifetime before she met her. The aftermath of her coming-out is presented as scarring and seems to have formed her new identity. When Nimona is introduced, she has already been through the entirety of the coming out narrative, which did not end in self-acceptance or a feeling of community. This means that Nimona had already reached the 5th stage of Plummer's coming out model before the story begins. As Eliason and Scope's (Klein et.al. 2014) model defines

the 5th stage, Nimona's anger for societal norms has not decreased and her emotional balance certainly has not increased. Her story is not linear, because the community she found did not support her in the end, she was back at square one. This time around though, she is not embarrassed by what she is, she is angry at a world that refuse to accept her. She does not want to be a part of a world run by the Institute in the same way that Ballister do, she wants the entire Institute to change.

At the time in Nimona's life where the film takes place, the rejection she experienced has long since festered and shaped her into what she is today. Nimona's story is in of itself queer, as it will not be defined by one singular reading model. Klein (et.al) comments on their findings that the linear model falls short when it comes to the stage of finding one's community as this is not as easy for trans or non-binary people as it is for gays or lesbians (2014, 317). Where gay/lesbian-centric literature often painted the queer community as a welcoming an open set of chosen families, this was not true for a lot of youths, especially those who identified as trans or bi. The reason for this being that transgender people who refused to conform to any normative gender were considered too queer by the community (Weiss 2011, 498). This is what Nimona experience when she «comes out» to Ballister. Even though he is a part of the queer community, being gay himself, he has a hard time understanding Nimona and why she «chose» to be the way she is. Even though he himself has been cast out from the realm and is living in exile, he still does not see them as equal. While Ballister might be different, looked down on by the citizens of the kingdom, Nimona is still perceived as more different than him. While a large part of the world has come to accept gay and lesbians at a higher rate, a lot of genderqueer people are still fighting for representation. Ballister might not be accepted by the society and therefore is forced out by the ones in power, but Nimona is considered a literal monster. She will not fit in anywhere, not even with other people of the community she is supposed to be a part of. The relationship between Nimona and Ballister illustrates this difference. Even though Ballister is not accepted by the city and society, he still feels like he is more a part of it than Nimona is. Because at least he can be defined. The thing about Nimona that is most scary is that she cannot be put in a box, no one knows what she is - and therefore she must be a monster. This difference between them is highlighted in a scene where Ballister tries to understand what Nimona really is, not satisfied with the answer that she is just "Nimona":

Ballister: «Can you please just be normal for a second?»

Nimona: «Normal?»

Ballister: «I just think it would be easier if you were a girl»

Nimona: «Easier to be a girl? You're hilarious»

Ballister: «I mean, easier if you looked human»

Nimona: «Easier for who?»

Ballister: «For you. A lot of people aren't as accepting as me»

Ballister has a different view of what is normal because he fits into the gendernormative world of the Institute. If he follows the laws and instructions imposed by the Institute, he will be able to be accepted as one of them, and he will be able to pass as them as long as he follows their heteronormative views. He points this out to Nimona several times and has a hard time accepting it when she states that the only thing the Institute is protecting the realm from are villains like him, and monster's liker her. Ballister does not necessarily want the same changes that Nimona does because he is able to survive and live within the borders of the Institute rule. And for most of the film he has the impression that Nimona could fit in as well, if only she chose to hide the things about herself that define her. Though Ballister can be said to fit into the passing storyline of Monaghan's coming-out model, Nimona never does. She refuses to keep her identity as a monster hidden, even when Ballister asks her to do so. Instead of a conflict occurring because of the choice to pass, the conflict between Nimona and Ballister happen because of her refusal to pass. One could argue that the conflict is based on her initial decision to deceive Ballister and withhold information about herself that would turn him against her, but I do not see this as an effort to pass. She knows that Ballister still believe in the foundations of the Institute, and she does not want him to know that those foundations are built on the idea that Nimona does not belong there.

3.2.4 A sense of community

The only part of the coming-out model that is achieved is the sense of community that Nimona finds in the end when Ballister and the people within the city accepts her for who she is. Ballister, having realized that all Nimona ever wanted was to be seen, prevents her from taking her own life. At the end Nimona is accepted, not only by Ballister and Ambrosius, but also by the entire city who realizes that in the end Nimona was not the villain after all. This can be seen as a very progressive ending, considering that the rest of the film is critical to society's treatment of genderqueer people. I would argue that the reason for this is the fact that *Nimona* is a film targeted towards children, and there is therefore an expectation of a happy ending.

As this reading of *Nimona* as a coming-out story shows that the classic narrative structure of the coming-out story does not fit every queer story. The model does not consider that just as being queer is different to everyone in the community, their journey will also differ. While it is fair to assume that those that define themselves as gay will have some similarities when it comes to their journey, their stories will also differ depending on race, age, family situation etcetera. Those that do not define themselves within one binary will have far more variables to account for. So, if the coming-out narrative model wants to depict a greater part of the queer community, it must expand its borders.

3.3 The Purpose of the Queer Monster in *Luca*

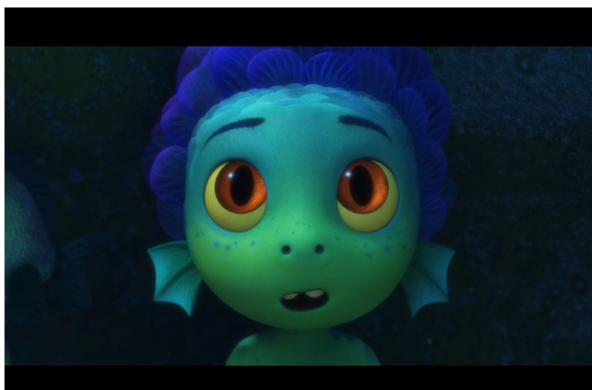

Figure 13: Close-up of Luca as a sea-monster (Luca)

Figure 12: Close-up of Luca as a human (Luca)

Having established that *Luca* can be read as a queer coming out tale, I will look closer at the use of the monster metaphor in the movie. As discussed earlier the monster has historically been used as a metaphor to portray the queer experience, and for *Luca* it serves the same

purpose. The movie does not just portray the queer experience in a social setting, but also in a familiar one. Luca's parents are afraid of him going on land because they do not think that the people there will accept him, but at the same time they have a prejudice about Luca joining them. They do not accept that their son is someone who would like to spend time on land, and who enjoys doing "land monster" activities, this is the reason that they threaten to send him to the bottom of the ocean. They wish to change the part of him that longs to live a life above water. One could also stretch this part of the storyline as far as comparing Luca's parents to someone who is embarrassed by what their child is, and do not want the rest of society to know. This reading would be harder seeing as Luca's parents are depicted as sea monsters themselves, and for this to make sense it would be more fitting to have a scene showing Luca's parents trying to hide his human form from the rest of the people living under water.

Figure 15: Massimo showing his tattoo of a dead sea-monster while holding a butcher knife (Luca)

Figure 14: Massimo throwing a knife into a picture of Alberto as a sea-monster (Luca)

The real monstrosity of Luca first arrives when he and Alberto goes into the town of Portorosso, where he is undeniably an outsider. As mentioned earlier, one of the first things that Luca sees in the city, and which bursts his bubble of happiness after seeing the city, is several murals and statues depicting the people of Portorosso killing sea monsters. Apparently thinking that his mother warnings about the "land-monsters" was just a trick to make him stay, Luca has a rude awakening when he realizes that what his mother told him was true. I believe that Luca's monstrosity lies in the unknown. The inhabitants of Portorosso fear the creatures living in the ocean, because they are unknown to them, the same way the sea creatures call the humans for monsters. Casarosa comments on the use of the sea monster metaphor saying that the intention of it is to represent something that is «different». I would argue that the connotations around «monster» is something more than just simply being different, it is something that is feared. Casarosa points out that the story is based on his own life and childhood with his best friend Alberto (Taylor 2022). But being labelled as

«outsiders» or «geeks» (Taylor 2022) does not make you a monster in the eyes of others. Being something that goes against someone's core values like heteronormativity or religion on the other hand, might invoke these sentiments. It is therefore apparent to me why people would see Luca and Alberto as representations for something bigger, something queer.

For me *Luca* is a perfect example of the restrictions set by Disney regarding what can be shown and represented on their platform. Not once in the entirety of *Luca* is there a scene where someone can stop and say explicitly that Disney has made an intentionally queer movie, the use of the monster can be seen as a wink to the queer community saying, "hey this one is for you". With Casarosa stating that no, it was not *meant* as a queer film, but you are allowed to read it anyway you want. Disney thereby distance themselves of any meaning, saying it is the reader's choice how they interpret the text. Using the monster as a queer metaphor for the queer experience ingeniously sidesteps potential censorship or resistance from the production company toward directly addressing LGBTQ themes. Similar to the classic monster movies, where queer storywriters and directors used this technique to tell their own stories without having to explicitly state the underlying theme of the film. The fact that there is still a use for the queer monster metaphor in film over 100 years after the classic monster of Frankenstein was introduced, says a lot about how little progression there has been in children's movies. Where the classic film monsters had to sensor queer storylines for adults, today its used to sensor queer storylines for children.

This is where *Nimona* can be considered radical in its representation. The makers of *Nimona* does not see the queer experience as something that needs to be hidden, which is made clear in their decision to portray two gay main characters kissing. The monster is not used to hide the queer representation, it is used as a means to portray the systematic hate towards genderqueer people in a way that children and non-queer adults can understand.

3.4 The Purpose of the Queer Monster in *Nimona*

Figure 16: Nimona in her chosen form (Nimona)

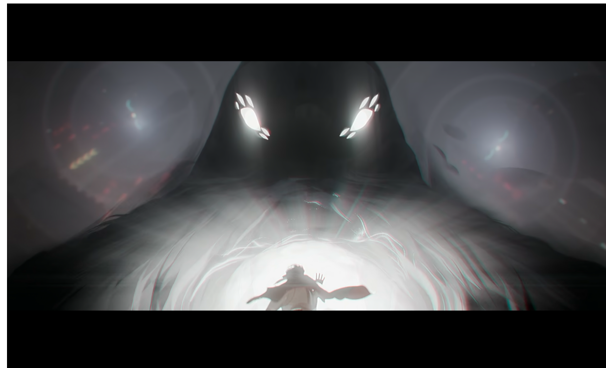

Figure 17: Nimona as a monster (Nimona)

Figure 19: Nimona in the form of a girl (Nimona)

Figure 18: Nimona in the form of a boy (Nimona)

In *Nimona*, the use of the monster metaphor is more deliberate. ND Stevenson, the author of the graphic novel the movie is based on, comments in an interview with the National Public Radio that Nimona's character is a reaction to the very rigid and perceptive kind of world view that Stevenson grew up with, having come from a very conservative and religious background (Yu et.al. 2023). Stevenson, who came out as transsexual several years after the comic was published, says in the same interview that the one thing he wants people to take out from the movie is that you can love someone, and you can accept them without having to understand everything about them. Much like what Ballister does with Nimona at the end of the movie when he stops her from taking her own life. He tells her that he *sees* her as she really is, the only thing she wants in life - someone to see her and accept her just as she is. You do not have to understand everything about a person right away, all you need to do is to know that how they express themselves is important to them or else they would not be doing it (Yu et.al. 2023). The persecution of Nimona, and the willingness to destroy the whole city just to kill her can be seen as an allegory for how incomprehensible it sometimes feels that society is willing to go to great lengths to deny LGBTQ+ people the simple right to exist.

In the film Nimona's shapeshifting is perceived as monstrous. Even Ballister asks her why she does not just present as a girl all the time, stating that it would be easier for her if she did so. Nimona rebukes him and says that being a shapeshifter is a part of her identity, and she should not have to be palatable to be accepted by society. Ballister has spent his entire life making himself palpable to the Institute, where he had to be an exceptional knight to be accepted. Especially considering that he was not one of them to begin with, he had to work to get the entitlement the other knights were born with. Unfortunately, his achievements did not matter, because his origin as a commoner was enough for the city to accept him as a murderer.

The use of the word monster in the world of *Nimona* is not to disguise what she really is, but a comment on how this is the only representation queer people were afforded for so many years. Nimona is a representation for genderqueer people, and this is confirmed by both visual and dialogue choices. The creators of *Nimona* does a great job of giving non-queer viewers a nod in the right direction of how they want you to interpret the film. The clearest example of this is the scene where Nimona explains to Ballister that she would not die if she chose not to shapeshift, but she sure would not be living. While Nimona presents this dialogue you can see the trans pride flag on one of the billboards behind her. This is a clear nod to the true meaning of her words and helps the viewer with their interpretation of the film.

Figure 20: Nimona with the trans pride flag in the background

The use of the monster metaphor drives the narrative focus on how society "trains" children to fear that which is different. Much in the same way as the child is seen as something innocent and pure, they have to be taught from a young age what this entails. In a scene after Nimona has been threaten with a sword by a little girl calling her a monster, Nimona shares this sentiment with Ballister. Clearly upset about what she just experienced;

> *Nimona:* *«Kids. Little kids. They grow up believing that they can be a hero if they drive a sword into the heart of anything different. And I'm the monster?»*

> *Nimona:* *«I don't know what's scarier - The fact that everyone in this kingdom wants to run a sword through my heart… or that sometimes, I just wanna let 'em».*

Figure 22: A girl pointing a sword at Nimona (Nimona)

Figure 23: Gloreth pointing a sword at Nimona (Nimona)

Later, we learn that this exact scenario occurred in Nimona's past as with her only friend, Gloreth. Young Gloreth accepted Nimona until her parents convinced her that Nimona was a monster, prompting Gloreth to reject her. This is a clear reference to how prejudice and hate is not something you are born with; it is something that is taught. One generations ignorance and fear turn into the very truth our society is built on. Gloreth shows us this when she as an adult ends up founding an Institute whose sole purpose is to protect its citizens from this one monster that she met when she was a child. The entire city is built around the idea that outside the walls there are dangerous monsters that wants to harm you, and you are right to fear it. It reads as a comment towards how our own society is stifled with our very narrow view of what is acceptable and right.

Figure 24: Gloreth trying to defend Nimona (Nimona)

Figure 25: Gloreth's mother calling Nimona a monster (Nimona)

While Ballister and Ambrosius representation is clear, and there is no denying their relationship as they share a kiss at the end of the film, it is not as obvious what Nimona is supposed to represent. There has been a massive surge in films for adults representing gay couples in the last decade, so you recognize what they are because you have seen it before. The character of Nimona on the other hand, you need more knowledge to decipher the clues left by the writers. A reader who practices what Kubowitz called the «downplaying

queerness» reading strategy will most likely not pick up on the fact that Nimona is a representation of a genderqueer character. She can be interpreted just a normal storybook monster. They will rather be more focused on the fact that there is a confirmed gay couple in the movie. A person practicing a «foregrounding queerness» reading strategy on the other hand, will most likely pick up on the use of monster analogy which is so common in the queer communities. Since there is already a gay couple in the movie, this interpretation of *Nimona* will also stand stronger, considering that queer people are accepted within the world of the film.

3.5 Coming Out Monstrous

In both *Luca* and *Nimona,* the coming-out narrative and the use of the monster metaphor intersect to explore queer themes within their respective narratives. While *Luca* employs subtlety and allegory, *Nimona* takes a more direct and explicit approach, yet both serve to shed light on the struggles and triumphs of LGBTQ+ individuals. In comparing *Luca* and *Nimona* there can be observed two distinct approaches to the exploring of queer themes and narratives. *Luca*, while not explicitly queer, relies on subtle subtext to depict the journey of its characters as they navigate identity, secrecy, and acceptance. The monster metaphor serves as a symbolic representation of otherness, with Luca's parents fear of him venturing onto land reflecting the societal pressures and prejudices encountered by queer individuals. Similarly, in *Nimona*, the use of the monster metaphor is deliberate and explicit, directly confronting issues of persecution and discrimination faced by genderqueer individuals. Nimona's shapeshifting abilities, perceived as monstrous by society, serves as a metaphor for the struggles of gender non-conforming individuals who defy societal norms and expectations. The rejection and fear Nimona experiences mirror the systemic discrimination and violence faced by members of the genderqueer community.

Both films offer unique perspectives in the coming-our narrative and the monster metaphor. The coastal town of Portorosso serves as a microcosm of society, mirroring the heteronormative world where individuals like Luca and Alberto must conceal their true selves to avoid prejudice and discrimination. This relationship between Luca and Alberto depicts the experience of falling in love and coming out in childhood, with the use of fear, secrecy and the desire for acceptance within a heteronormative society. While the film does not explicitly label the characters as queer, their bond is rich with symbolism and metaphorical significance.

The narrative aligns with traditional coming-out models, following a linear trajectory from realization to acceptance, and ultimately finding solace within a supportive community. Luca's realization that he can turn into a human reflects the initial stages of self-discovery common in queer narratives, while his fear of societal rejection mirrors the anxieties faced by LGBTQ+ individuals when contemplating coming out. Similarly, Alberto's mentorship of Luca represents a form of queer mentorship, where older LGBTQ+ individuals guide younger ones through the complexities of identity and acceptance. The climax of *Luca* sees the characters embracing their true selves and finding acceptance within a supportive community, symbolizing the culmination of a coming-out journey. However, the film stops short of explicitly labelling Luca and Alberto as queer, opting instead for metaphorical resonance and allegorical storytelling.

In contrast, *Nimona* takes a more direct and explicit approach to queer representation, as the film is unequivocally queer, with its author ND Stevenson confirming the intentional inclusion of queer themes. The story features an explicitly established gay relationship between Ballister and Ambrosius, which sets the tone for a queer reading from the outset. Nimona's character serves as a metaphor for non-binary and genderqueer experiences, challenging societal norms and the limitations of traditional narrative models. Unlike *Luca*, *Nimona* deviates from a linear coming-out narrative, reflecting the complex and ongoing journey of genderqueer individuals. Nimona's rejection and subsequent anger underscore the broader societal struggle for acceptance and systemic change, offering a critical perspective on heteronormativity and the need for expanded representation in children's media.
While *Luca* and *Nimona* both explore queer themes, they do so through distinct approaches. *Luca* relies on allegory and traditional narrative structures to explore its queer subtext, *Nimona* explicitly embraces queer identities and challenges conventional models, highlighting the diverse and multifaceted experiences within the LGBTQ+ community. Both films contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in media, offering unique perspectives on identity, acceptance, and the power of storytelling.

Mari Ruti and her theory of the ethics of opting out is a great example of the difference between the narrative element of *Luca* and *Nimona*. They represent the two sides of queer activism, where the one side wants to be considered «normal» and demands the equal civil rights that follows with it. While the other side does not want to be considered normal, as the «normal» people are considered the oppressors. In *Luca* the queer characters Luca and Alberto long to be accepted, to be normal. Luca wants to be one with the humans, he wants to be a part of the world they have established where he can teach and learn from them. While

Alberto yearns to be accepted for who he is, hoping one day he will have a father who loves him despite his queerness. Nimona, on the other hand, do not want this. Yes, she wants to be understood, to be liked, but she does not want to be different from what she is. To her the entire system (the Institute) needs to change if there could ever be a possibility for her to be accepted. This dynamic unfolds in the scene where Ballister and Nimona discover that the Director of the Institute framed him for the queen's murder. Ballister argues that the Institute as a whole is not to blame, but rather the Director alone. He questions the necessity of reforming the entire Institute due to the actions of one corrupt individual. As long as they follow the rules of the Institute, there should not be any reason why they would put an end to its power. The rest of the Institute might have disliked Ballister, but they accepted him because he was desperate to fit in and adhere to every rule. Had he been ordered to kill Nimona while he was a knight, he likely would have complied without hesitation. In contrast, Nimona cannot and will never fit within the confines established by the Institute. She urges Ballister to recognize that the issue extends beyond just the Director, prompting him to question everything – the will of Gloreth, the Institute, and even the wall surrounding the city. Nimona's does not have the same opportunities as Ballister, as her genderqueerness cannot be easily assimilated, as she does not conform to the norms of homonormativity.

Luca represent a classic queer coming-out story about a gay character finding himself and his search for acceptance. In *Nimona* the monster metaphor represents the feeling of not conforming to society's expectations of gender. While most of the western world has reached somewhat of a consensus when it comes to the rights of gays and lesbians, the question about gender is not as easy to solve. As *Nimona* shows with the gay character of Ballister, and the genderqueer character of Nimona, there is a big difference between the understanding and respect offered to the different groups. Like I stated previously – people fear what they do not understand. While there is only two years between the release of two films there is a big development in the representation they are portraying. While the coming-out story depicted in *Luca* is not revolutionary in any way, as its theme is quite common in modern films depicting queer characters, *Nimona* is radical in comparison.

The use of the queer monster metaphor in both *Luca* and *Nimona* serves as a powerful tool for exploring queer themes within the narrative, albeit in different ways and with distinct intentions. In *Luca*, the monster metaphor is intertwined with the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and coming out, where the characters Luca and Alberto feels like monsters in their own bodies. Luca's effort to hide his identity as a sea-monster reflects the internal struggles many LGBTQ+ individuals face in accepting and embracing their true identity. His

parents fear of him venturing onto land symbolizes the societal pressures and prejudice LGBTQ+ individuals encounter, where the unfamiliar and different are viewed with suspicion and hostility. Luca's monstrosity, therefore, lies not in his inherent nature but in the fear and ignorance of those who perceive him as such. By subtly weaving queer subtext into the narrative, *Luca* allows viewers to interpret the film through a queer lens while avoiding explicit labelling or confrontation with potential censorship.

Nimona, in comparison, takes a more deliberate and explicit approach to the monster metaphor, using it as a direct commentary on the persecution faced by genderqueer individuals. Nimona's shapeshifting abilities, perceived as monstrous by society, serve as a metaphor for the struggles of gender non-conforming individuals who defy societal norms and expectations by not fitting into any gender category established by the heteronormative society. The rejection and fear Nimona experiences mirrors the systematic discrimination and violence faced by genderqueer individuals. Unlike *Luca*, where the monster metaphor operates on a more symbolic level, *Nimona* confronts the audience with the harsh realities of queer existence, challenging them to confront their own biases and prejudices.

The treatment of the monster metaphor in *Luca* and *Nimona* reflects the evolution of queer representation in media. While *Luca* utilizes subtlety and allegory to convey its queer themes, *Nimona* embraces explicit representation and tackles societal issues head-on. Both films contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in children's media, offering nuanced perspectives on identity, acceptance, and the power of storytelling. Ultimately, the purpose of the queer monster in each film is to provoke thought, spark conversation, and advocate for greater visibility and understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences.

4 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to determine *how the queer child's experience is represented in the two animated children's films Luca (2021) and Nimona (2023)* through the use of the queer monster metaphor. By applying the coming-out narrative model, the analysis revealed that the two films adopt considerably different approaches to queer representation and the degree of inclusion they depict. *Luca* employs a subtle and allegorical method to address queer identity, with the monster metaphor representing the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and coming out. Luca's internal struggle and the fear of societal rejection reflect the experiences of many LGBTQ+ individuals as they grapple with their true identity. The film uses the narrative of passing and the eventual acceptance of one's true self to explore themes of otherness and acceptance within a heteronormative society. Luca's journey from secrecy to self-acceptance, and the subsequent acceptance by the town of Portorosso, underscores the importance of genuine relationships and community support in overcoming prejudice.

On the other hand, *Nimona* takes a more direct and explicit approach, using the monster metaphor to comment on the persecution faced by genderqueer individuals. Nimona's shapeshifting abilities symbolize the struggles of those who defy societal norms. The film confronts the audience with the harsh realities of queer existence, challenging viewers to confront their own biases and prejudices. Unlike *Luca*, which operates on a more symbolic level, *Nimona* addresses societal issues head-on and emphasizes the importance of visibility and understanding for genderqueer individuals.

In *Luca* the child's experience is presented through fear and the wish to fit in with the rest of society, displayed through his desire to live above water and go to human school. *Luca's* narrative follows the classic coming-out model as it portrays him as a scared child who is driven by his fear of discovery, which forces him to hide himself and 'pass' as one of the humans. While *Nimona* the experience of the queer child is presented through anger and mistrust towards society, which is based on her horrible treatment by the people she once trusted. Her storyline is fuelled by her desperation for inclusion and acceptance.

The treatment of the queer monster metaphor in both films highlights the evolution of queer representation in media. While *Luca* uses subtilty and allegory to convey these themes, *Nimona* embraces explicit representation and tackles societal issues directly. Both films contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in children's media, offering nuanced perspectives on identity, acceptance, and the power of storytelling. Ultimately, the use of the queer monster metaphor in *Luca* and *Nimona* serves to provoke

thought, spark conversation, and advocate for greater visibility and understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences. These films reflect the progress and challenges in queer representation, demonstrating the diverse ways in which animated films can shape societal perception of queer identity and foster inclusivity in media representation.

Future research into the themes discussed in this paper, would be to explore how the discussion surrounding the "Don't Say Gay" bill have affected how Walt Disney Pictures, and its companies portray queer characters. Additionally, will the acceptance of queer representation in children's film make the monster metaphor a thing of the past?

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