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Metal Cultures in three Nordic Comics**

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## ”BY THE CAKE OF THE DARK LORD!” METAL CULTURES IN THREE NORDIC COMICS

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### Abstract

The article uses Stuart Hall’s thoughts on culture and representation in collaboration with Thierry Groensteen’s formal comics theory to analyze how metal is represented in three Nordic comics: Frode Øverli’s *Pondus*, Lise Myhre’s *Nemi*, and *Perkeros* by J.P.Ahonen and K.P. Alare. The study shows that metal is a multifaceted concept in these comics and that metal serves various purposes, although notably black metal is consistently ridiculed.

### ”By the Cake of the Dark Lord!” – Metal Cultures in three Nordic Comics

Figure 1: *Pondus* © Øverli, distr: www.strandcomics.no.



- Behold, oh mortal! The new cd from **Dutch Oven Massacre!**
- **By the Cake of the Dark Lord!** I have been waiting for **that one!**
- Rumors on the internet have it that it is even more **evil** than the previous one!
- Is that **possible?** The previous one was so evil I bled from my ears and slept with the lights on!
- **BÖM!**
- **THIS** bodes well!
- **Metal!** <sup>64</sup>

Two black clad, grey faced metal-heads, donning spiked leather and sporting t-shirts with upside down crosses discuss a recent cd release judging its relevance by how evil it is - as it literally explodes in their faces. In this *Pondus* comic strip by Frode Øverli metal culture is presented to readers as something perhaps not so evil after all – despite the cd’s detonation and trail of skull-shaped smoke. In doing so, the strip contributes to a discussion about how popular

<sup>64</sup> All *Pondus* and *Nemi* translations by the author.

conceptions of metal music and its practitioners is formed. What makes something “Metal!” Being evil? The fanatic fans? Its subversive character? Or a certain sonic expression? By representing metal and its followers in comics, *Pondus* adds to a complicated web of signifying practices which weigh in with the way metal is perceived, practiced and put to different uses.

Metal culture appears in comics globally, the Nordic countries with their vibrant metal scenes are no exception. How metal is conveyed in the comics is influenced by aspects of comics culture as well as metal culture in ways which are both specific to the region and more generally applicable. Taking off from Stuart Hall’s thoughts on representation in combination with Thierry Groensteen’s formal comics theory, this paper investigates how metal is constructed through the medium of comics. Hall’s comprehensible distinctions of representation and discussions of culture are still one of the most reasonable ways to access these rather broad terms and allows for an analysis that can both provide nuances to our understanding of metal as culture and specify how they are represented. In discussing how comics are constructed at a structural level, Groensteen’s theories remain the most thorough reading in structural comics theory and helps examine how structure is influential in the way comics make meaning.

The analysis looks at two Norwegian comic strips and one Finnish graphic novel and discusses how media specific aspects of comics such as style, line, color, visual elements and layout underline and re-circulate conceptions of metal. My intention is not to make general claims on the whole field of Nordic comics, nor to attribute my findings to national or regional dynamics.

Comics and metal music are parts of contemporary culture which have historically been regarded as marginal phenomena and shared a reputation of niche interest, possible with a subversive potential. The many controversies surrounding both comics and metal came about through the same anxiety concerning their potentially harmful influence on children and young adults., Metal and comics have fought some of the same battles, been involved in similar moral panics and often represented as signs of cultural decay (Hajdu, 2008; Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine, 2013).

What these debates often ignore is the complexity and diversity of both fields and in this way, the particularities of the comics medium and metal music with their different formats and genres are overlooked, ignored and levelled out in catch all-categories of generalization. There is no such thing as a homogenous, unified ‘metal culture’ or a singular concept of ‘comics’. Though we might each have an idea about what “Metal!” is, it turns out to be much more multifaceted when studied in depth, and its composite nature can be examined through the equally intricate form of expression: Comics.

### **Culture and representation**

When discussing representations of metal culture a word or two about ‘culture’ and ‘representation’ is necessary. As Hall has pointed out, culture is a much debated term and can be considered in different ways, which often overlap in some areas. One way of thinking about culture is as the “the sum of the great ideas, as represented in the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy” (Hall, 1997, p.2). This rather highbrow notion of culture can also be supplemented with or substituted by “the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art design and literature, or the activities of leisure and entertainment”, making culture the creations of the human mind in its many

different, often artistic, forms whether they be 'high' culture or 'popular' culture (1997, p. 2). As another way of looking at culture, Hall offers versions from social sciences, either regarding culture as "whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people, community, nation or social group" or as "the 'shared values' of a group or a society", which both focuses on culture as the ways in which people interact and imagine the rules and premises for group co-existence (1997, p. 2).

This article examines exchanges between various kinds of communities and metal cultures considered as different kinds of group practices. It does so through the analysis of how cultural products such as comics represent music. 'Culture' can refer to several the meanings and my analysis takes place with this multiplicity of meanings in mind. In this sense, the complexity of 'metal culture' is made up of the great variety of musical expression as well as its performances, fandom, and the many practices connected to the metal scene.

Representation is a contested concept and is discussed here in order to distinguish the aspects of representation at stake. To Hall, "Representation is the production of the meaning of concepts in our minds through language", and he further emphasizes how meaning is not something that originates in the object, but that "It is a result of a signifying practice – a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*" (1997, p. 16+24). How precisely this meaning comes about can then be viewed from three different angles: 1) representation as reflective/mimetic, as 2) intentional or 3) constructionist.

For the reflective/mimetic notion of representation, meaning can be found in the material being studied and the representation is considered an imitation of that which the representation refers to (1997, p. 24). When this representational position is employed in the study of comics, it will pay attention to the way in which drawings and speech balloons in comics represent characters, places and conversations in terms of likeness and reflection, looking at the way in which, for instance, the metalheads in in the strips 'look like' real ones and considering the dialogue as a reflection of 'metal speech'. In many humor strips, this mimetic representation will be distorted because caricature and excessive expressiveness are central elements in the way strips articulate their content visually. Rather than an actual likeness, the resemblance is one of excess that overemphasizes certain characteristics in the persons and situations portrayed. Representation as intentional holds that the meaning transferred to the receiver is the meaning intended by the creator and thus reads the text in terms of what meaning the author has imbedded in it. In the case of comics, this approach then interprets both images and text as deliberately arranged to convey the author's intentions and looks at the strips to parse out this intended meaning.

The constructionist approach to representation is founded in the idea that all human activity is social and that meaning is something we as human beings construct when we engage with each other and through our cultural practices, both as part of a community and in our use of cultural products. Hall underlines that "Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts" (1997, p. 25). In discussing how certain aspects of culture is represented in comics, using the constructionist approach will focus on how the meaning is constructed in the social field, in the mind of the readers and through the signifying system of comics. Looking at the comic strips, aspects of all three representa-

tional approaches contribute to the analysis, and, as Hall notes, there is some significance in all approaches, even if he himself spends most time with the constructionist approach (1997, p.15). As my interest is in how metal is constructed through the verbo-visual expression of comics, the constructionist representation is also central to this study.

### **Nordic comics**

Comics formats are significant in terms of distribution, cultural respectability and commercial interests and hence also the audiences they reach; there is a significant difference between a bestselling European album published in thousands of copies and a small artistic publication which only reaches the select few, yet they share some qualities (Beaty, 2007, p. 4–8). In discussing how comics work, comics scholar Thierry Groensteen points to what he calls ‘iconic solidarity’: “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated (...) and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*” (2009, p. 18). Central to comics are the way the panels are *simultaneously* individual panels and part of a sequence, as such the meaning created within a strip emerges *both* from the individual panel and how it is embedded in the series of panels.

In Nordic comics culture, the newspaper strip has enjoyed particular popularity and throughout comics history, some of the greatest, most prolific and commercially successful artists have worked within this relatively constrictive format (Wivel, 2011). Because of its restricted space, it requires skill to capture places, people and situations very succinctly, and this is often done through amplified facial expressions, symbols and the reliance on the readers’ familiarity with stereotypes. We recognize the general shape of ‘dog’, ‘woman’, ‘man’ or even ‘fat man with protruding eyebrows’. In this sense it is a mimetic representation, but the exaggerated bodily features and overemphasized appearances do not resemble reality and do not relate to an object with likeness.

Because newspaper comics are published in nationwide papers and humor magazines, the humor cannot be too particular or rely on obscure references. Even when it does so, the humor often arises from a contrast with concepts of normality and how characters stray from the norm. As the strips are often constructed with humorous intent, the economy of the strip forces first images to set the scene for the gag and burdens final panels with releasing the built-up tension. In an analysis of the comics strip, it is important to look both at the iconic solidarity through patterns forming across the strip, as well as individual elements within panels such as speech balloons, the placement of characters, coloring, iconic and symbolic features and the way line and style emphasize certain points in the narrative. The meaning that emerges through such a reading is influenced by mimetic and intentional aspects, but the representation assumes a constructionist quality in its meeting with an interpreting reader who assembles the layers of meaning and references in their social context.

In Norway, a phenomenon like black metal can be raised as a cultural reference in the public sphere without problems because the controversies surrounding some of the genre’s musicians in the 1990s became front page news and made the figure of the corpse painted black metal fan (with all its connotations of violence, church burning and general evil) an easily recognizable persona (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998, p. 94–140). If we consider culture as imaginations, practices and shared values in a group, black metal has become an

integrated part of Norwegian culture. National readers are familiar with it and from the outside it is considered a particularly Norwegian cultural phenomenon. In my research so far, I have read comics from the Nordic countries in pursuit of metal music or aspects of metal culture such as t-shirt prints, concert practices or other references that convey a sense of metal to the reader; especially comics in which metal functions as part of the narrative or premise for the stories. However, this inquiry is far from exhaustive and I have yet to compile a complete list of metal references, but the examples shown here are among the most widely circulated instances of metal in Nordic comics.

### ***Pondus* – pseudo-rebellious rock and fake devil worship**

Frode Øverli's *Pondus* (1996-) is one of the most popular comic strips in Norway with several translations, a daily strip in the newspaper *Dagbladet* and its own monthly magazine. Its main character, Pondus, and his friend Jokke are at the center of events and the strip develops most jokes from their experiences with football, drinking, ladies and family life, supplemented with the escapades of a wide selection of secondary characters. In *Pondus*, metal is part of the narrative in two ways that are directly linked to specific characters and clearly tied to metal genres: on the one hand, Pondus' and Jokke's love for 70s and 80s metal/rock; on the other hand the darker metal listened to by Jokke's employee, Zlatan. Both ways of engaging with metal connects with its connotation of countercultural or subversive practice; but whereas Pondus' and Jokke's stubborn devotion to Kiss is portrayed as somewhat heroic, if a bit laughable, Zlatan is often the center of ridicule, which is targeted at the supposed evilness of the black metal scene.

Figure 2: *Pondus* © Øverli, distr: [www.strandcomics.no](http://www.strandcomics.no)



In a silent strip, the angle of the panel is placed behind Pondus and Jokke. We first watch them approach two business types and then, in the following panel, see them high five as the panel angle is reversed and reveals the two protagonists wearing AC/DC and Kiss t-shirts. The symmetry of the two panels points to the symmetry between the two pairs but through the use of the classic metal concert t-shirt signals that Pondus and Jokke are clearly not to be confused with the suits and their 'way of life'. In this opposition to a certain kind of establishment, judging by their smiles, they are victorious. It is the juxtaposition of the two similar panels and their iconic solidarity which allow for this meaning to emerge even without any words being exchanged. In this particular example, the strip relies on cultural signifiers, such as clothing and handshakes, to pit the two opposites against each other as representatives of the hardworking citizen on the one hand, and, on the other the relaxed hard rock fan as two different 'ways of life'. At play therefore, are several aspects of representation and whether or not one, as a reader, understands the strip depends upon your familiarity with the cultural codes involved.

Jokke tends a record store alongside his employee Zlatan who is easily identifiable as ‘metal’ through his clothing: always clad in black, metal studded jewelry and t-shirts with band names. As opposed to the actual band names worn by Pondus and Jokke, Zlatan’s are made up, funny names -- for example ‘Dumme Birger’ (Stupid Birger) which resembles the name and logo of the band Dimmu Borgir, suggesting that the terminology in black metal is silly (Øverli, 2013c, p. 104). The point is furthered in discussions between Zlatan and a fellow metalhead as they debate who is the most angry vocalist, Grünhl or Brööhl -- using spelling to signify ‘metalness’ (umlaut and random letter h’s). Through iconic solidarity, the strip uses repetition to underline another central part of the jokes played on the black metal fans in *Pondus*: that their performances of angry and evil are ridiculous. “Grünhl is so angry his **teeth** have turned **black**” shouts Zlatan and his friend retorts: “Brööhl is so angry his tongue has split **in half!**”, implying that the panels could be repeated endlessly on account of the obsessive discussants. Color helps emphasize the break that occurs when Jokke’s father tries to chime in with the helpful comment that he thinks Bon Jovi is really good as well. (Øverli, 2013c, p. 58). Black metal is here constructed as a genre less concerned with vocal abilities and more with a certain trope of anger and evil appearance which as any fight between aficionados appears ludicrous and fanatical to the outsider.

This perceived wickedness is frequently taken apart, especially through the exposure of the embarrassing softness that lies underneath Zlatan’s evil and dark exterior. In a strip where Zlatan has just returned from the burial of a hamster, he tells Jokke: “Know this, even **we**... The darkest of the dark! We who everyday stir the soup of Satan! Even **we** sat there choking back tears!” (Øverli, 2013c, p. 13). In response to Zlatan’s self-important pose with crossed hands showing ‘horns’, Jokke asks: “Is it true that you sleep in Care-Bear pajamas?” Trying to protest this accusation with “**It’s flannel!**” does not convince the reader that Zlatan is really as evil as he pretends to be - should the comical mourning of a rodent named Master Disaster have escaped the reader.

### **Nemi – outsider, Goth, metal?**

*Nemi* (1997- ) is Lise Myhre’s comic strip about Nemi and her troubles with men, friends and the general public. Widely translated, it has its own magazine and is collected into 10 volumes. *Nemi* began as *Den svarte siden* (*The black side/page*) and from the beginning engaged with different kinds of metal practices in the strip’s jokes. The question of genre is always present in discussions of metal and results in endless debates of which band goes in which box and what constitutes the individual genres. *Nemi* is often categorized as ‘Goth,’ which to some listeners cannot be considered metal; but, it is an explicit point in the strip that *Nemi* does not exclusively subscribe to any metal sub-genre. As the main character, this allows her to be both set apart from the general public and able to criticize different kinds of metal cultures. The metal aspect and sub-cultural connotations are less prominent in more recent strips, but featured in many of the early strips, which cast *Nemi* as an outsider both in relation to mainstream culture and the specific genre-associated sub-cultures - something which is visualized by setting her apart as black and white, standing out from the rest of the strips colors.

Figure 3: Nemi © Nemi A/S/distr. Bulls.



Nemi directly addresses the moral panics and the supposed causality between listening to metal and doing evil deeds in a strip where her friend Cyan rifles through Nemi's CD collection: "Laibach, Ministry, Slayer, Mayhem...have you got **anything** that is a shade brighter than your wardrobe? If a person who didn't know you that well saw your record collection, they might think you were not all that nice!" To which Nemi promptly answers, "Stop it! Everyone knows that all the loonies out there listen to Radio 1", as the fourth panel reveals a connection between Britney Spears songs and murderers. Apart from testifying to Nemi's broad taste in metal, this strip is also a refusal of any connection between a preference for metal music and a proneness to violence. Rather, it posits that the people we should be worried about are those who prefer pop music, suggesting that the innocent music might hide something more sinister in its listeners. Nevertheless, even if Nemi is a staunch supporter of many kinds of metal bands, she does not miss the chance to expose the hypocrisy of the way metal fans police the boundaries of their culture. In a strip where she asks a guy, "Didn't you say suit & tie people were so narrow minded and uniformed?" And then the following panel is enlarged and shows a row of identical metalheads with matching spiked belts, long black hair and metal-plated boots (Myhre, 2004, p. 62). Again, the juxtaposition of posing the question and the panoramic view in the panel through iconic solidarity establishes the meaning which, in this case, is one of very thick irony. Thinking themselves outside the norm, metal fans just follow another equally rigid set of rules, which potentially excludes people and hampers free thinking.

In *Nemi*, metal is represented in constructionist terms through what music Nemi listens to and the social communities she is (and, more often, is not) part of. Metal can, on the one hand, signify something that shapes your identity as an outsider and, on the other hand, as something that is potentially just as normative as the culture it aims to differ from.

### ***Perkeros* – can music be evil?**

In the graphic novel *Perkeros* [English title: *Sing no Evil*] (2013) by J.P. Ahonen and K.P. Alare, the guitarist Aksel struggles to get gigs with his avant-garde metal band Perkeros and ends up battling the indie-band Diablotus, who in a genre cross-over between coming-of-age-comic and horror-fantasy turns out to be demonic creatures. Despite being published very recently, it is translated into many European languages and is in its third printing in Finnish.

Black metal with its easily identifiable codes is the metal genre which offers up the most opportunities to be made fun of in comics. It is central to the jokes made in Jokke's record shop, often singled out as vainglorious in *Nemi*. In

*Perkeros* one of the first scenes portrays a backstage scenario where the protagonists follow the stage show of Rotten Troll, whereupon they encounter another black band called Nelum Lucifera.

Figure 4: *Perkeros* © J.P. Ahonen and K. P. Alare



The first band’s lyrics are shown in gothic looking white writing in black speech balloons with embarrassing lines like: “Satan. Swallow his fury into your heart. I’m not worthy (...) of thy bestial bulimia, your diarrhea of plague.” (Ahonen & Alare, 2013, p. 14). According to Aksel’s bandmate Lily their music sucks: “We’ll take these guys down. Even the devil himself couldn’t save these apes. (Ahonen & Alare, 2014, p.10). In *Perkeros*, black metal is unsophisticated and its musicians are stupid, egotistic, male chauvinist brutes.

*Perkeros* is by no means without humorous scenes, but compared to other more humor-driven strips, the music remains the center of the narrative, concentrating on how to stay true to oneself and one’s music, when not everyone agrees that one has chosen the right path. Because music plays a leading role in this comic, many pages are devoted to the representation of music, which is, in some sense, paradoxical since comics are forced to use text and images to represent auditory phenomena. For this purpose, the creators use iconic con-

ventions from the medium of comics, and also its structural composition, such as panels, layout and color changes, to convey a sense of the music being played. In his everyday life, where Aksel has trouble convincing his girlfriend about the potential of his musical career, the colors are subdued brown, beige and orange. The action is neatly parceled out in square or rectangular panels with a classical white background, suggesting order, regularity and peace (Ahonen & Alare, 2013, p. 23). In the last panel on the page, Aksel's horned hand breaks the frame and points to what we can expect as the intro of his demo initiates the track, which then hits the next page full on. Big notes fill the room which expands to encompass the whole page, laying panels upon a bigger background panel, making the apartment shake and listeners cringe (Ahonen & Alare, 2013, p. 24).

Figure 5: Perkeros © J.P. Ahonen and K. P. Alare



- Ah, sshhit.
  - Pretty awesome, right?!
  - Aksel! I meant background music!
  - Yeah, I was quickly gonna show
- (Ahonen & Alare, 2014, p. 20)

Irregular layouts can serve other functions than the mere telling of the story and when a layout is ‘ostentatious’, its presence is noted by the reader and can add further meaning to the sequence (Groensteen, 2009, p. 98).

Figure 6: Perkeros © J.P. Ahonen and K. P. Alare



This is what happens in the scenes where Perkeros plays: the panels are tilted to diagonal and the colors explode in warm, intense yellow, green and orange (Ahonen & Alare, 2013, p. 126–131). The aesthetic experience of the band and the audience is linked to the aesthetic functions of layout, coloring and panel shapes, setting the mood and conveying the massive musical flow through spreads covering several pages.

When asked to put on some casual music, Aksel suggests Meshuggah and then later offers to play Type O Negative as response to “something down tempo” (Ahonen & Alare, 2013, p. 25). Clearly, Aksel is metal to the core and, because of his love for the music and his unrelenting pursuit of his dream, he loses his girlfriend and is estranged from other people, who do not share his values. Aksel is, like Nemi, represented as an outsider who is not included in the normative ‘way of life’ and his cultural references are not aligned with the surrounding culture.

## Conclusion

The representation of metal both as a cultural phenomenon and as music genre in the comics analyzed here are dependent upon both format and expressive qualities. The way metal appears in the panels contributes to the way metal is perceived by the readers. Because *Pondus* and *Nemi* are strips that run in big newspapers, their humor needs to fit a larger audience and, as a consequence, the humor is never one that challenges the status quo in ways that are irreparable. The metal that Jokke and Pondus revere is portrayed as an endearing trait, something that shows their rebellious rock ‘n roll attitude, but also something that is kept at bay by their everyday lives - where the Kiss records seldom find their way to the record player and the metal culture is best per-

formed through the insistence of wearing band t-shirts. In *Pondus*, metal is an opportunity to make jokes; as with fat, ugly women, farting dogs, unattractive bus drivers and various kinds of facial hair, metal is material for puns that can be rendered in Øverli's characteristic expressive lines. There is sympathy for the characters in *Pondus*, but when surveying the way the jokes are constructed, it seems a preference for glam metal in middle aged men is looked upon more favorably than black metal culture. Certainly, most of the puns in *Pondus* involving Zlatan and his friends are aimed at disarming the supposed evilness of the genre and exposing its fans as black-clad cuddly teddy bears who secretly wear flannel.

Nemi favors bands from all ends of the metal spectrum, but metal sub-cultural trends are also used as the foundation for making fun of the ways people practice group affiliations. Nemi is represented as 'metal' in some way and therefore she often finds herself in opposition to the general public. She is also hard to place within metal genres and the strip frequently uses insider knowledge to make points that require at least some familiarity with metal music. In comparison, *Perkeros* has a wider range of formal and structural strings to play because of the larger format of the graphic novel, and because its audience is not that of a large newspaper. Apart from modes of production, the story also represents metal in different ways, most notably because it has a musician as its main character and uses many pages to set the scene for music performances and executes them through the silent mode of drawing. Though black metal once again offers rich opportunity for ridicule, the avant-garde metal Aksel and his friends play is something powerful that can engage and develop readers, leaving them stronger. In this fantastic tale, music *can* be satanic and conjure up *real* demons, but it has less to do with the genre of metal than with the evil intent of its creators.

Metal in the comics discussed here is represented as something that cannot be unified into a single, all-encompassing concept as they have different incarnations and serves various purposes. It can be empowering as a means to achieve one's dreams and attain confidence as in *Perkeros*. It can also support readers who wish to set themselves apart from the rest of society, as in *Nemi*, or assist readers in conveying certain rebellious attitude as is the case with *Pondus*. And black metal never ceases to be funny – "Did you know that your earwax turns black, when you listen to black metal?" (Øverli, 2013a, p. 20).

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