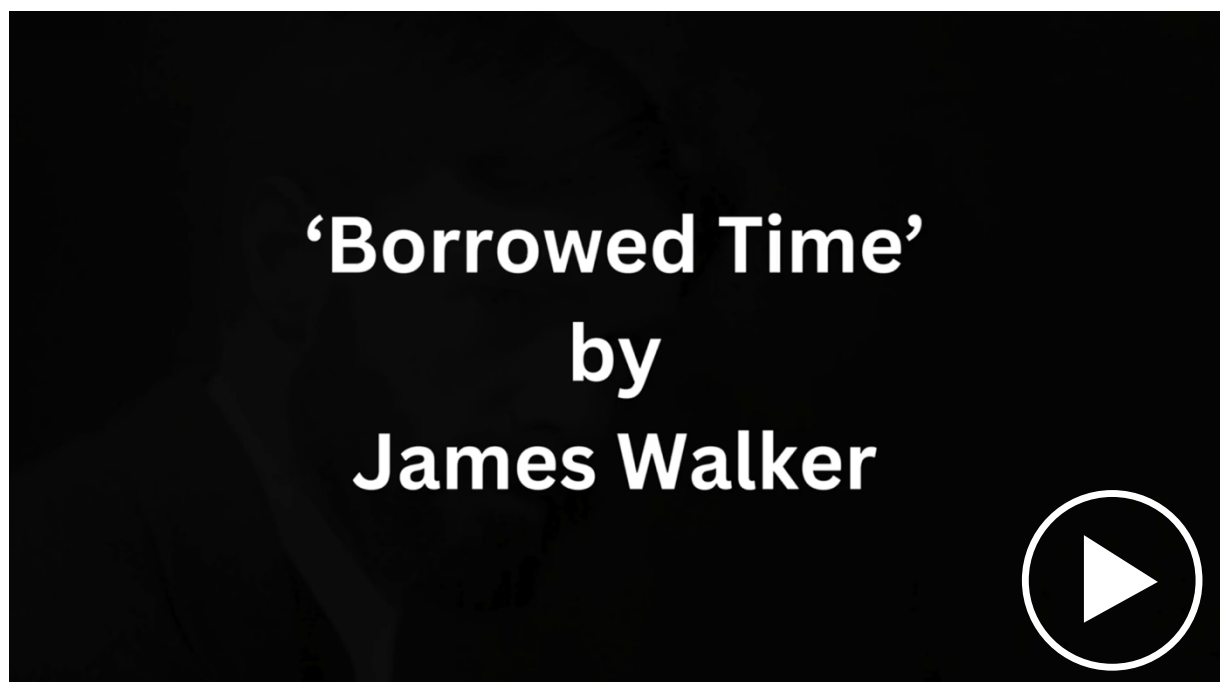


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Borrowed Time



Abstract

D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) was a prolific writer who left Britain in 1919 and embarked on a 'savage pilgrimage' across the globe, refusing to own property or settle down. To celebrate Lawrence, and to try to make his work more accessible to students, I have embarked on a digital pilgrimage, whereby I produce a monthly video essay based on his letters.

In 'Borrowed Time' I explore the various temporal paradoxes of this process. I read his letters in 'real' time, knowing what will happen, but experience them in the present. I hear him talking in the letters, but he cannot hear me. The video essay is a means of speaking back to him. Likewise, the production of the video essays are labour intensive which contrasts with

the speed with which they are consumed and (perhaps) forgotten. Underpinning this approach is the work of Wendy Chun who shows how digital reshapes our perception of time and memory through habitual behaviour.

It is the slow process of reading and making the monthly video essays that creates a sense of control over time, something that may feel absent in our accelerated times. To understand this, I turn to Richard Shusterman's concept of 'somaesthetics,' a philosophical framework that focuses on the body's role in aesthetic experience. Both slow reading and digital production have provided, for me, a deeper immersion in literary studies as well as much-needed punctuation to my life. The selection of images to convey Lawrence's feelings in 'Borrowed Time' has provided a form of intimacy and the opportunity to make emotional connections. I argue that combining reading and digital production helps develop new insights into literature.

Keywords: D.H. Lawrence, somaesthetics, temporality, immersion, intimacy, reading.

Academic guiding text

Motivation

Digital reading is a means of consuming text through electronic devices while also providing different means of interacting with that text, such as through hyperlinks that provide additional context. This often happens at speed and entails different forms of concentration due to the various distractions that emerge when the canvas is infinite. I am interested in how print and digital reading can complement each other and provide a more complex understanding of literature. My approach is shaped by Hayles (2010) whose analysis of "how we read" warns that symptomatic reading, which focusses on the underlying presuppositions of a text, can be formulaic in the quest to deconstruct meaning, and potentially produce the same conclusions. This is in contrast to the "surface reading" of digital, which focusses more on what is explicitly presented, thereby providing opportunities to appreciate the text's aesthetic values as well as introduce more emotional reading strategies that focus on affect and pleasure. Rather than privileging one mode of reading, combining both processes enables "new kinds of reading techniques, pedagogical strategies, and initiatives" (Hayles, 2010,

p. 65). Drawing on John Guillory in *How Scholars Read*, Hayles makes the point that archival research is *like* digital reading in that it also requires the researcher to scan and skim large quantities of material and so, to quote an adage; the more we change, the more we stay the same.

These sentiments have provided a framework for my attempts to find a marriage between digital and print in the teaching of English, specifically the work of D.H. Lawrence (1885 – 1930). It is unrealistic to expect students to comprehend the entire oeuvre of such a prolific writer in a twelve-week module and so I produce a monthly video essay that tracks Lawrence's movements one century ago. These videos are based on his letters and include archival footage to help learners visualise his life. Students create their own video essay for the assessment. This requires a broader range of skills than the traditional essay, including research, scriptwriting, audio recording, sourcing images, video editing, and uploading (Walker, 2018; 2023).

The traditional essay encourages a receiving approach whereby the lecturer disseminates knowledge, and the student is encouraged towards *correct* interpretations of the text. The video essay changes this power balance and enables students to develop their own systems of inquiry and interpretation of the text through exploration (Stommel & Morriss, 2018). Development is shared in seminars, encouraging collaborative feedback and skill sharing. Talking through their progress clarifies ideas, deepens subject knowledge, and raises confidence.

Presentation of video essay

Borrowed Time is a personal account of how combining print and digital reading has enabled deeper immersion with D.H. Lawrence and through this, conveys the experience of being lost and needing to connect in our accelerated times. It immediately plays on viewer expectations of time by painting a biographical sketch of a troubled *friend* who has many seemingly modern anxieties only to slowly reveal the face of Lawrence.

Archival images provide historical context but a traditional documentary style is avoided through abstract interludes that demand a more empathetic relationship with Lawrence, by

asking the viewer to imagine what it must be like to ‘be in his head’. Selecting appropriate footage forced me to think not so much about the words on the page, the close reading, but the *affect* - what he was *feeling* when he wrote them.

Dyer suggests that Lawrence was “nomadic to the point of frenzy” (1997, p. 157) whereas Carswell observed he “disliked an air of everlastingness about a home. For him it must have something of the tent about it” (1932, p. 26). It was as if Lawrence was constantly moving to escape the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him. This fear is represented through Robert Pattinson in *The Lighthouse* (2019). He is staring head on, offering his hand out to the viewer, attempting to connect. Later he screams, forcing us to confront his pain. The screaming has two functions. It represents Lawrence’s notorious rage while also representing the psychological impact his health had on his mental wellbeing. It is cut with a dissolve so that Patterson appears to fall inside Lawrence’s former cabin where his ashes were interned. There is the additional intertextual signifier of *The Lighthouse* being based on a story by Edgar Allen Poe who Lawrence critiqued in *Classical American Studies* (1923).

The video narrative develops into a broader mediation on time and how it feels as if this is disappearing in our constantly connected lives and that, consequently, intimacy has been lost. In this sense, reading Lawrence is helping *me* to heal. We are *both* ill. This is a paradoxical friendship whereby I hear him, but he cannot hear me. I speak back to him through the monthly video essays. Another temporal paradox is that although I know his fate, it is as if I am experiencing it for the first time. My daily reading of Lawrence’s letters enables a form of direct presence in his life, and the illusion that I am sharing each experience chronologically. It has provided a “feeling” of intimacy that is lacking in networked contemporary life and is a strategy for re-establishing the self as something discrete from contemporary network culture. The video essay is broken up by the recurring ticking of a clock to allow ideas to settle and enable viewers to reflect on their own relationship with time.

Slowing down time

The reading and the production of the monthly video essays are slow processes that provide a healing aesthetic experience. They have created a much-needed punctuation to my life. Shusterman’s (1999) concept of somaesthetics, which combines elements of aesthetics,

philosophy, and somatic practice, is influential here. Somaesthetics provides a philosophical framework that focuses on the body's role in aesthetic experience. It highlights the importance of bodily awareness and cultivating sensory perceptions. From this perspective, the embodied experience of reading is more than just an intellectual activity - holding his letters and turning the page engage my senses, providing awareness of the body in space and time. Reading Lawrence's letters one hundred years from when they were written draws attention to the rhythms of his life and the gradual unfolding of ideas. This slow pace allows for deeper engagement with the material, similar to meditation, providing an antidote to the immediate gratification of our digital lives.

Chun (2016) provides a useful critique of how digital reshapes our perception of time and memory through habitual behaviour. Temporal paradoxes are created where the labour-intensive process of creating the monthly video essays contrasts with the relatively brief time it takes to watch them. The promise of immediacy and ease of access mask the complexity of the creative process. Creating the video essay can be seen as a disruption of the habitual time dictated by digital media, where the user steps out of an accelerated consumption loop and engages in a slower, more reflective process. In terms of digital memory, the video essay is both ephemeral and permanent. The time and effort invested in creating are preserved in the completed video whereas the act of watching may be forgotten when it ends. This dynamic reflects the overall sentiments of the video essay whereby time is always present and predictable while feeling absent and precarious.

About the author

James Walker is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Nottingham Trent University, UK. He specialises in digital storytelling. Recent work includes the online comic series *Whatever People Say I Am*, *The Loneliness of the Lockdown Runner* on Instagram, and the series of monthly video essays, *Locating Lawrence*, on YouTube.

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