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Literature and the Video Essay: Researching and Teaching Literature Through Moving Images

Abstract

In this introduction, we set out the stakes and goals of the special issue. We aim, with the special issue, to investigate the possibilities of the video essay for the teaching of literature (defined broadly), bearing in mind the digital ecosystems dwelled in by our students, and the fact that a body of scholarship demonstrates the utility of reading literature for developing critical thinking and emotional literacy. We discuss the tradition of the video essay, especially as it has emerged from film and media studies in the form of videographic criticism — the audiovisual study of audiovisual and screen media —and then consider the potential of the video essay as pedagogical resource in the teaching of literature. In the final section, we introduce the individual contributions to the special issue.

Keywords: aesthetic processes, digitalization, material thinking, videographic criticism, pedagogy

Sammendrag

I denne introduksjonsartikkelen beskriver vi problemstillingene og målene for temanummeret. Vi tar sikte på, med temanummeret, å undersøke hva videoessayet kan tilby i undervisningen av litteratur (i ulike sjangre og medier), med blikk på de digitale økosystemene som våre elever bebor og i lys av forskning som viser at å lese litteratur bidrar til å utvikle kritisk tenkning og emosjonell kompetanse. Vi diskuterer tradisjonen bak videoessayet, først og

fremst dets utvikling innen film- og medievitenskap i form av videografisk kritikk – den audiovisuelle studien av audiovisuelle- og skjermmedier – og vurderer deretter potensialet til videoessayet som pedagogisk ressurs i litteraturundervisningen. I den siste delen av artikkelen presenterer vi de enkelte bidragene i temanummeret.

Nøkkelord: estetiske prosesser, digitalisering, materiell tenkning, videografisk kritikk, pedagogikk

Introduction Article

This special issue explores how the digital video essay can function as an academic and pedagogic resource in the study and teaching of literature, understood in a broad sense to encompass narratives in different genres and media, including picture books, comics, fictional and documentary films, narrative apps and computer games. Contributors have produced their own video essays accompanied by academic guiding texts that flesh out the relevance of their topic, position their video essay in a larger academic context, and provide critical reflections on the process of making the video essay.

Generations who grow up in the digital age are often both avid consumers and producers of audiovisual content. This special issue asks what the audiovisual can afford the teaching of literature and how the audiovisual impacts literary scholarship in the digital age. These questions are important to explore if we keep in mind the following paradox facing Nordic educational systems. On the one hand, statistics show that Nordic children and youth spend significant amounts of time on social media and gaming, while the desire to read literature, as well as the amount of time spent on reading for pleasure, enjoyment, and meaningful cultural experiences, drops significantly with age, particularly among boys (Hansen et al., 2022; Ipsos, 2022; Swedish Ministry of Culture, 2020). On the other hand, a consistent body of scholarship shows how reading literature is important for developing critical thinking, democratic participation, and emotional literacy, among other skills (see Andersen, 2011; Nussbaum, 2016; Tørnby, 2020). In Norway, the 2020 educational reform seeks to address this paradox by promoting a combination of formal, contextual, and interdisciplinary

pedagogical approaches that encourage an aesthetic and critical engagement with literature (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training n.d.).

Parallel to these developments, the video essay has gained academic terrain in the last decade. *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* (co-founded in 2014 by Drew Morton, contributor to this special issue) was the first peer-reviewed academic journal exclusively dedicated to videographic film studies even as it drew on the experience of existing journals of practice-led research like *Screenworks*. In the 2020s, an increasing number of academic journals in the field of film and media studies regularly publish or even specialize in video essays. Scholars in film and media studies appreciate the video essay for its capacity to rejuvenate and enhance academic film, television and media criticism and scholarship, incite critical cinephilia, encourage film students to focus on the conceptual challenges and poetic possibilities of digital technology, and afford important reflections on the balance between poetic and explanatory modes to generate and communicate knowledge (see Grant 2014, 2016; Keathley, 2011, 2012; Keathley & Mittell, 2019; Lavik, 2012).

Christian Keathley, a founding co-editor of *[in]Transition*, argues that the best video essays are marked by a unique combination: "a simultaneous faithfulness to the object of study and an imaginative use of it" (Keathley, 2011, p. 183). Catherine Grant, who over the years has produced a uniquely influential body of video essay work impressive in both quality and quantity, further underlines that the video essay is not about the translation of *written* film studies into another medium, but is an attempt to create "ontologically new scholarly forms" that can live alongside traditional scholarly writing such as prose articles or monographs (Grant, 2014, p. 50). Be that as it may, our conviction, and the rationale behind this special issue, is that the video essay can inspire new ways of doing academic literary criticism and teaching literature in the digital age. The video essay can encourage an intimate, exploratory, and performative approach to literary studies and engage with the expectations of young generations who grow up with access to the Internet and advanced portable digital devices.

In the remainder of this introduction, we discuss the tradition of the video essay, especially as it has emerged from film and media studies in the form of so-called videographic criticism,

and then consider the potential of the video essay as pedagogical resource. In the final section, we introduce the individual contributions to the special issue.

Videographic criticism and the video essay as "a form that thinks"

The availability of relatively inexpensive computers and editing software, as well as platforms for publication and distribution, has led in recent years to the exponential increase in the number of video essays (however defined) made available online. Our focus in this section is on the subset of video essays that has emerged from film and media studies, a discipline that has experienced its own digital revolution in the past couple of decades. Notwithstanding the existence of mature and reflexive traditions of video essay-making in fields like anthropology and documentary, it is perhaps so-called videographic criticism that has been the most vibrant area for the innovation of the video essay in recent years.

Videographic criticism refers to the audiovisual analysis of audiovisual material and screen media using digital editing software. Videographic criticism can be considered a digital humanities method, which may or may not generate a video essay, as well as a form of publication (Mittell, 2019). It is not surprising that film and media studies has adopted audiovisual means to analyse the audiovisual: as famously noted by Raymond Bellour in an essay originally published in 1975, film was once an "unattainable text" that could be described in prose but not quoted by scholars (Bellour, 2000); now, instead, the audiovisual material being studied can be directly excerpted, integrated or remixed into a scholarly analysis that itself takes audiovisual form. As a result, videographic criticism has become increasingly mainstream and has come to be produced in a range of modes from the illustrated lecture (the scholar lecturing before a screen or superimposed in authoritative voiceover on the image) to something closer to video art, a range often distilled to an opposition, first suggested by Christian Keathley, between explanatory and poetic approaches (Keathley, 2011). As this suggests, there is not yet universal agreement among practitioners on the proper form that videographic criticism should take in order to qualify as scholarly practice. This can generate anxiety in practitioners, students and teachers, who may worry about the legitimacy or institutional status of scholarship in audiovisual form; but it also generates excitement. For some, the video essay can draw on experimental filmmaking just as it does on

standard film analysis, availing itself of the affordances of the audiovisual to the extent that it may, to quote Catherine Grant again, suggest "ontologically new scholarly forms" (Grant, 2014, p. 50).

In any case, the points of reference and origins of videographic criticism are multiple. Most obviously and immediately, it derives from film criticism (some video essays are adaptations or remediations of prose criticism, e.g. Morgan & Zoller Seitz, 2011) and from film studies in the modes of mise-en-scene criticism (Gibbs & Pye, 2022) and historical poetics (Bordwell, 2012). Audiovisual scholarship of the latter sort tends to aspire to an impersonal or "scientific" tone, but videographic criticism has increasingly admitted and deployed the personal. As such, it may be said to reprise the tradition of the essay film, and ultimately of the prose essay, that stretches beyond the work of figures like Hito Steyerl, Haroun Farocki, Chris Marker, Jean Luc Godard and Agnes Varda, to find a sort of origin in the sixteenth century writings of Michel de Montaigne, who used the French term "essayer" (that is, "to try") to refer to an attempt to outline a process of thought (Corrigan, 2011; Wall, 2019). The film essay was first identified and named in a short (prose) article from 1940 by artist-filmmaker Hans Richter, who described it as "a new type of documentary film" that "in its attempt to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than can the pure documentary film" (Richter, 2017, p. 91). Consistent with this strand of practice and thought, the influential videographic critic Eric Faden has staged elaborate scripted scenarios to propose film-theoretical concepts (Faden, 2019; see also Faden, 2008), while others like Kevin B. Lee have tended to move, in their work, from a narrower focus on the analysis of individual film texts to a consideration of systems of image-making and consumption (Lee, 2014). Lee's work, and that of others like his sometime collaborator Lého (formerly Chloé) Galibert-Laîné, has increasingly featured a performative dimension that foregrounds but interrogates the figure of the video essayist (Galibert-Laîné & Lee, 2018; Lee, 2020). Galibert-Laîné has written of their performative speaking self in the important video essay, *Watching The Pain of Others* (2019), as follows:

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> when I say "I" in the video, it isn't so much about "Chloé Galibert-Laîné" as a biographical entity as it is about whoever recognize[s] herself in that "I". Adopting the first-person is a way to guide the viewer into thinking reflexively and critically about her own act of watching. (quoted in Kiss, 2021, p. 109)

Again, this is consistent with the essay film form, the two "primary markers" of which, according to Laura Rascaroli (2017), are reflectiveness and subjectivity. According to Rascaroli, "an essay is the expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems" (p. 183), and the essay film foregrounds an enunciating subject "who literally inhabits the text" in the form of a narrator (p. 184). However, this narrator can never "un-problematically or unreflexively" be identified with "the real, extra-textual author" (Rascaroli, 2017, p. 184).

Makers like those just mentioned, along with a host of practitioner-scholars too numerous to list here, but including contributors to this special issue Drew Morton, Evelyn Kreutzer and co-editor Alan O'Leary, have all been engaged in the collective development of the video essay as a form that thinks. "A form that thinks" is a phrase of Jean-Luc Godard's that has been adopted in discussion of the essay film and digital video essay (Álvarez López & Martin, 2014; Warner, 2018; Lee, 2021). It suggests that a different idiom of literacy—or rather, "audiovisualcy"—is at play in expressing (or performing) oneself audiovisually, and moreover that the formal and affective characteristics of the video work are constitutive of its meaning and impact (it is also a "a form that feels", or that allows to feel). The editors of *[in]Transition* speak of the evocative power of the video essay as a "knowledge effect" (Keathley, 2011, p. 182; Ferguson & Morton, 2024, p. 131). In that journal's guide for contributors, the editors write that submitted work should produce knowledge "through its audiovisual form" (https://mediacommons.org/intransition/how-it-works). Notice that such an understanding runs counter to a conventional idea of the academic article in which the form is intended to be transparent, if not invisible, and to be neutrally at the service of content and communication. Unsurprisingly, some are suspicious of this refusal of conventional academic modes, and of the playful and exploratory character of video work that is conceived in terms of a form that thinks. Some feel that it takes videographic criticism too far from the established protocols and standards of prose scholarship. Thus, in a valuable (if, in this fast-evolving environment, already dated) survey and critique of videographic practice, van den

Berg and Kiss (2016) regret the still inchoate outline of the "academic research video" of their (and others') ideal, and articulate their book's central question as follows:

> How can the traits and rhetoric of a traditionally text-based scholarly work, characterised by academic lucidity and traceability of information and argumentation, be optimally incorporated and streamlined into an autonomous, audiovisual container? (van den Berg & Kiss, 2016)

Underpinning this question seems to be a singular idea of proper scholarship in prose form: the authors assume that lucidity, argument and autonomy are characteristics universally cultivated in scholarly writing, perhaps unfamiliar with, or more likely unpersuaded by, creative writing practices in the academy (Dawson, 2005). They also seem to assume that video is less equipped for complexity than "text-based scholarly work"—otherwise why would "streamlining" be necessary? Most striking is van den Berg and Kiss' conception of the academic research video as a "container", suggesting some inert vessel into which the critic's pre-existing thoughts may be "poured".

This is quite different from the conception and practice of digital video-making in the work of the influential Catherine Grant, whose understanding of videographic practice as "material thinking", drawing on the work of artist-academic Barbara Bolt, has been widely adopted (Grant, 2014). Bolt speaks of material thinking as follows:

> [I]t is in the joining of hand, eye and mind that material thinking occurs, but it is necessarily in relation to the materials and processes of practice, rather than through the "talk," that we can understand the nature of material thinking. Words may allow us to articulate and communicate the realisations that happen through material thinking, but as a mode of thought, material thinking involves a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice. (Bolt quoted in Grant, 2014, p. 49)

In digital video-making, the "joining of hand, eye and mind" refers to the activity of arranging audio and visual clips on a timeline, allowing the juxtaposition of source footage to achieve resonance. In this context, material thinking is an iterative process of combining (comparing, contrasting, harmonising or causing to collide) clips by paying attention to content but also, and crucially, to formal qualities like movement, speed and rhythm, colour, texture, timbre, volume, and so on. To conceive of the activity of videographic analysis as material thinking

is, therefore, to allow agency to the source material and to the editing software even as it ascribes something like an artistic sensibility to the videographic critic. It follows that the work of Catherine Grant is not often intended to make an argument; nor does it aim at critical autonomy, in that its frequently cryptic character seems to invite further commentary (often provided by Grant herself), so that the "act of scholarship" may be said to inhere in the combination of video and prose text (see for example Grant, 2019). The idea of material thinking has, moreover, implications for pedagogical practice, because it implies that students can be encouraged to investigate their chosen texts in a hands-on way rather than necessarily to construct an argument about them.

The video essay: teaching and collaboration

Reflection on teaching videographic criticism or video essay-making constitutes a growing body of scholarship in relation to videographic criticism. Several articles and dossiers in the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* and *Screen*, two of the most internationally visible and respected journals of cinema and media studies, focus on teaching with the video essay (Becker & Copple Smith, 2013; Becker, 2017; Fowler, Perkins & Redmond, 2019; Solomon, 2019). Another important contribution is the much cited book chapter in which Keathley and Mittell (2019) describe "the now-legendary prompts" (Avissar, 2024a) used to teach videographic criticism at the annual "Scholarship in Sound and Image" workshops at Middlebury College. The special dossier in *Screen* is "aimed at instructors who might be interested in the prospect of replacing written assignments with audiovisual essays" (Solomon, 2019, p. 449). In stated intention, the ethos of the dossier is notably cautious: in his introduction, editor Matthew Solomon refuses the "neologism 'videographic criticism'" (p. 450). This is more than mere disagreement about terminology: the avoidance of the open-ended "videographic criticism", which may indicate a range of activity not reducible to the essay form, is also, and explicitly, a refusal of Christian Keathley's call, stated in Keathley (2011) and repeated in Keathley and Mittell (2019), for a hybrid "third form" between the poetic and the explanatory. Solomon's warrant for such a refusal is the conservatism or perhaps the anxiety of students themselves. He prefers the term "audiovisual essay" to "videographic criticism" because the "written form [of the essay] is generally familiar to students" (Solomon, 2019, p. 450).

A similar tension between conventional understandings and experimental approaches may be observed in the useful "Video Essays Guide" produced by the UK charity Learning on Screen (Sendra & Meletti, 2020). The guide draws especially on the established protocols of documentary practice and an assumed distinction between pre-production, production and post-production that goes somewhat against the ethos of material thinking exemplified in the work of many videographic practitioners. At the same time, the guide states that:

> *[Y]ou can be as experimental as you wish*. Please note that *if your structure is not linear, this does not mean it is wrong.* You may prefer to leave your viewer the responsibility of finding out what your main research question is, and your main argument in the video. You will just need further reflection on such aesthetic choice in your written supporting statement, and a solid theoretically grounded rationale behind it. (https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/resources/guides/video-essays/how-to-make-video-essays/preproduction/; emphasis in original)

One of the distinctive practices of videographic criticism in recent years has been collaborative and collective projects, and such projects can be adapted for teaching video essay-making. These have often taken an exploratory or playful form that suggests that the felt need to respect or mimic inherited modes may be misplaced. In "Once Upon a Screen vol. 2", makers were invited by curators Ariel Avissar and Evelyn Kreutzer to elaborate videographically on anonymised prose texts describing a formative screen memory, with the original writer then responding to the video created. The resulting sixteen videos and accompanying texts are published in *[in]Transition* 9 (3), 2022, and 9 (4), 2023. The ongoing "Indy Vinyl for the Masses", described by curator Ian Garwood as "an open-ended collaborative video essay project, exploring [...] the relationship between moving images and popular music", involves groups of makers working together to create videos around a specific pop song and theme (see project website at https://indyvinyl.gla.ac.uk/indy-vinyl-for-the-masses/). Also ongoing, and now featuring dozens of entries, is Ariel Avissar's "TV Dictionary", in which makers are invited to "try to capture the essence of a television series using a single word, by making a short video that combines the dictionary definition(s) of that word with a clip or several clips from the series" (see the showcase of videos at https://vimeo.com/showcase/8660446). A related project, co-curated by the tireless Avissar and the journal *Tecmerin*, is the "Screen Stars Dictionary", in which makers "aim at establishing the defining characteristics of specific stars with a single, polysemic word that

crystallises his/her/their oeuvre" (see the showcase of videos at https://vimeo.com/showcase/10404168). At a smaller scale (for now), but similarly iterative in form, is Evelyn Kreutzer's "Moving Poems" project, in which makers are invited to create a short video "pairing a single poem or multiple poems (or parts of a poem) with a single or multiple moving-image media text(s) (a film, a TV show, an online video...)" (see the showcase of videos at https://vimeo.com/showcase/9576546?page=2&page=1). Note that the videos in this special issue by Drew Morton and Kreutzer herself are both contributions to the "Moving Poems" project.

Christian Keathley (2020) has argued that the individual videos in projects like these may not constitute scholarship in themselves, but that "the collection of them surely begins to": the cumulative effect of videos responding to a single prompt but adopting diverse perspectives on a common theme, Keathley suggests, is one of a significant contribution to knowledge. As mentioned, it has been shown that projects like these can be deployed or adapted for teaching videographic criticism and video essay-making. Ariel Avissar, once again, has curated a selection of student contributions to the "TV Dictionary" project in a special issue of *[in]Transition* (Avissar, 2024b), writing that he hopes to "highlight the pedagogical potential of the 'TV Dictionary' project, and [...] perhaps inspire other teachers to use it in class". Avissar's concern is with teaching videographic criticism and the audiovisual analysis of television; but of course collaborative, collective and prompt-based video exercises can have a broader pedagogical application, and can be used to access other topics.

The video essay as pedagogical resource

In education research, there is by now a significant number of studies that show how video can be used as an effective educational tool. This can take the form of student- and teacher-produced videos as well as a broad range of asynchronous and synchronous formats, from recorded video lectures, demonstration videos, and video reflections, to video feedback, video podcasts and video conferencing. Video-making especially has been shown to enhance students' communicative and digital skills as well as their motivation, engagement with and in-depth understanding of the subject matter (see for example Beal & Hontvedt, 2023; Hawley & Allen, 2018). A recurrent topic in education theory is the necessity of creating

opportunities for interactivity with video, as interactivity is known to increase learning (Belt & Lowenthal, 2021; Brame & Perez, 2016; Collosante, 2022; Noetel et al., 2021). According to Noetel et al. (2021), this is particularly important for hard and social sciences where video can be used to authentically demonstrate skills such as heart surgery or suicide assessment in a less expensive and low-tech manner than virtual reality (p. 222). Noetel et al. do suggest that "there may be no substantial difference between sitting in a class and watching a video" for students learning about the history of feminism in India, for example (2021, p. 222). But such a statement may suggest a misguided idea that learning for students of humanities is less a process of doing and performing than for their peers in sciences. It also signals an incomplete awareness of what teaching with and learning from video can offer humanistic subjects such as history and literature studies.

In literature didactics, there has been an increased interest in practical and creative methods of approaching literature that activate the learner's body, senses, and emotions and which require cooperation with others. Commonly subsumed under the umbrella term "aesthetic learning processes", such learning methods lay the foundation for in-depth learning and help students develop cultural identity, social skills, imagination, and creativity, all of which are essential resources in our societies (Austring & Sørensen, 2012). From this perspective, the video essay is particularly interesting to assess as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of literature. The video essay can engage with the expectations of young generations without simply relying on the technical affordances of the medium. Educational theorists have noted that many of the asynchronous videos produced for educational concerns do not sufficiently promote active and immersive learning beyond pausing, rewinding, downloading for offline access, and editing tools that optimise clarity of message (Belt & Lowenthal, 2021, p. 416; Collosante, 2022, p. 176). In contrast, as suggested above, the video essay prioritizes the conceptual challenges and poetic possibilities of digital technology (Keathley, 2011). To put it differently, it is not about having the most updated and advanced technology to make a video, but about using technology to transform an impression of the literary text into a coherent aesthetic form of expression with affective and epistemic goals and/or (where appropriate) arguments.

This way of doing literary analysis by making one's own video essay can address important challenges facing literature educators. Some, and perhaps an increasing number of students experience the reading of literature as words they need to fight through rather than an aesthetic experience that can move them in significant ways (Tørnby & Stokke, 2022, p. 361). The video essay as a practical-analytical exercise in the literature classroom can foster an aesthetic and emotional engagement with literature by favouring an intimate, exploratory and performative approach to literary studies. Student video makers need to pay attention to the formal qualities of the text and at best use these qualities as a platform to launch their own engagement with or arguments about the literary work. To use the term introduced above, they need to engage in material thinking. This also addresses the pedagogical challenge of anchoring the literature classroom in the literary text rather than in more or less peripheral and private student observations (Johansen, 2011), which has been a consequence of years of dominance of reader response criticism in literature education.

The sharing of teacher- and/or student-made video essays can also stimulate interaction in the literature classroom. Most evidently, sharing can pave the way to exploratory conversations about literature in different genres and media, including poetry, comics, animation, and computer games, to name a few examples of literary text types used by the authors in this special issue. By watching and talking about a video essay that in itself models a scholarly response to literature, students learn to engage in a dialogue with other existing interpretations in the field and are encouraged to develop their own arguments and reflections about the literary text. This is after all the main goal of the literary conversation as a pedagogical tool in literature education (Hennig, 2017; Aase, 2005). The video essay can provide a platform for such scholarly conversations to happen in the classroom. Perhaps it can also prompt a written response that blurs the distinction between the literary and the scholarly, whether in the guiding text composed (by scholars or students) to accompany a video essay, or as creative writing that emerges from the encounter between literature and audiovisual media practice.

Finally, the "moving" and "showing" of literature through cinematic techniques such as juxtaposition, superimposition, split screen, fast and slow motion, pausing, zooming or mixing sound opens up new possibilities of doing literary criticism both for scholars and

students. As Grant (2023) points out, the video essay is just as much a method of exploring theoretical aspects as it is a critical-analytical piece. It makes room for unpacking the affective and multisensory experience of literature , but also for expressing creativity and engaging in material thinking. In this sense, as a method of literary criticism, the video essay is also particularly equipped to flesh out the intimate connection between the doing and reception of art, which according to John Dewey (1934/2005) is defining for an aesthetic experience. As Dewey explains, the artist "embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works" (1934/2005, p. 50), while the perceiver "must *create* his own experience" (2005 [1934], p. 56; emphasis and pronouns in the original). The making of the video essay is literally a (re)creation based on the subject's attentive perceptions of the literary work they are experiencing.

Overview of projects in the special issue

Scholars from the fields of literature, literature education and screen studies have contributed to this special issue on literature and the video essay. While some of the contributors are video essayists with established reputations and seniority in the field of videographic criticism, the majority of the contributors had little or no experience with video essay-making prior to their work for the special issue. It has been important for the project to adopt a hands-on approach whereby those scholars who ordinarily work solely theoretically and in written form in the fields of literature, literature didactics and film would make their own video essays. This is because we wanted to understand and explore for ourselves the possibilities of the video essay format before moving a step forward and possibly adopting the video essay in our teaching practice.

Further, in the spirit of collaborative practices in videographic criticism, and in order to foster an academic community around the video essay as a form of research and teaching in literature studies, we structured submissions in several phases and organized two immersive work-in-progress workshops in which we shared and discussed our projects as a group together with the co-editors. Two of the projects also involved interdisciplinary collaborations: a film and comics studies scholar (Dancus) together and a psychology researcher (Coman) for the video essay *Monsters*, and two literature education

scholars (T. Samoilow and Dagsland), a music student (H. Samoilow) and a videographer (Eltervaag) for the video essay *Composing the Spring Tune*. Also in line with developments in videographic criticism, deploying the personal has been an important rhetorical strategy for several of the contributors, for example when adopting an emotive and/or confessional voice rather than an impersonal and "scientific" one (see for example Kvistad and Walker), when placing themselves in front of the camera (Samoilow and Hagen), or when involving family members (children) and deploying the family archive in the project (Norendal, Samoilow and Walker).

Exploring the intersections between literary theory and the video essay as a method of research has been an important dimension in the project, with video essays approaching complex literary theory and phenomena such as multilingualism in picture books (Villanueva), adaptation and intertextuality (Kreuzter, Marklund, Morton, Zhu), empathy, identification, engagement and disengagement in reading (Kvistad, Samoilow et al.), rhythm and duration in literature and reading (Hagen, Walker), literary time and space (Samoilow et al., Walker), body and body language (Dancus & Coman, Brandal & Brandal), the multisensory and affective dimension of reading (all). Besides addressing theoretical concerns in literary studies and literature education, several of the contributors use the video essay as a call for action and/or intervention in socio-political debates regarding environmental concerns (Norendal), family violence (Brandal & Brandal), and eating disorders (Dancus & Coman).

The range of registers and modes of the video essay adopted by the different contributors is similarly broad. If all contributors deploy a rhetoric native to the audiovisual, attempting to offer experiences or to make points by showing as much as telling, some place themselves towards the argumentative or explanatory pole of the video essay described by Keathley (Brandal & Brandal, Hagen, Samoilow & Eltervaag, Walker), others are located at the poetic pole (Kreutzer, Morton, Noredahl, Zhu), and others again adopt a mode somewhere between the two (Dancus & Coman, Kvistad, Villanueva). The visual material drawn on includes self-created footage (Kvistad, Noredahl, Samoilow et al., Villanueva) including animation (Dancus & Coman), archival materials (Kreutzer, Noredahl, Walker), stock footage (Walker), animated or feature film (Brandal & Brandal, Morton), recordings of app and game footage

(Hagen, Kvistad), and illustrations from picture books (Villanueva), while one avoids nearly all visuals apart from text (Kvistad). Most use onscreen text in indicative, suggestive or diagrammatic ways (often simultaneously), as well as for transcription, while music tends to be used to set a contemplative disposition or another mood, or for poetic purposes, and is occasionally accompanied or (in the case of Dancus & Coman) displaced by sound effects. Samoilow et al.'s video contains composed music that is a focus of the video itself. Voice can be drawn from the source material (Brandal & Brandal, Zhu), can be used as monologic voiceover (Hagen, Kvistad, Walker), can be dialogic and/or multilingual (Noredahl, Kreutzer, Morton, Villanueva, Zhu), or conversational (Samoilow et al.). Consistent with the issue's concern with literature education, several videos contain the voices of children or young adults (Brandal & Brandal, Noredahl, Samoilow et al., Villanueva).

In developing the video essays in this collection, contributors were encouraged to move away from a purely "expressive" mode of video making, in which a position or argument established beforehand is simply illustrated in the video essay, to an "exploratory" mode, in which the interpretative collaboration of the spectator is sought. Contributors were encouraged to perform rather than to report their analysis of, or engagement with, source materials understood as having their own agency and affective power. As set out in the previous paragraph, the form that this dialogue between source and output will take differs from contribution to contribution. But the distinctive qualities of a contributor's source material (be it a gaming interface or the disposition of frames in a comic) will tend to assert themselves, wherever an individual video essay may be located on the explanatory/poetic continuum. For example, the vivid images of picture books filmed by Maria Casado Villanueva for her video *Doing Multilingualism* insist on the tactility of the books' words and pictures in a manner distinct from and exceeding the purposes of argument to which they are put in the video. Not dissimilarly, even if assembled in a more abstract idiom, the archival materials contained in Evelyn Kreutzer's "Moving Poem" video make a haptic appeal to the viewer that exceeds and enriches the thematic offered by the video's opening poem. What is discovered in the performance of the video essay — in the material dialogue between source and output – in each case is ultimately for the spectator to determine; and in that spirit, we

invite the reader-spectator to treat the presentation of the special issue contents that follows as an invitation to engage with each of the videos on its own terms.

Tatjana Samoilow, Sindre Dagsland and **Carl Eltervaag**'s "Music and Place in 'The Spring Tune': Interpretation as Improvisation" is a collaboration between two literature education scholars (Tatjana Samoilow and Sindre Dagsland), a music student (Henia, Tatjana's daughter) and a film maker (Carl Eltervaag). It starts off as an exploration about the connections between place, sound and music as incited by Tove Jansson's text "The Spring Tune" in which Snufkin wonders through the woods with a melody under his hat. The video essay follows Henia, who is given the task to compose Snufkin's melody, and includes conversations in which Henia explains how she went about composing the music, and footage of nature which the filmmaker was inspired to make as he listened to Henia's music and the conversations between her and Tatjana. Besides making visible how a reluctant reader enthusiastically delves into literary interpretation when given the task to do something with a literary text, the process of video essay making also enables an altered interpretation of Jansson's story and new epistemic arguments about composition as improvisation.

In **"**Once Upon a Time There Was a Piece of Wood: The Adaptations of Pinocchio", **Anders Marklund** focuses on interpretation and creativity in his discussion of adaptation, presenting a case study on Carlo Collodi's 1883 classic *Pinocchio* and two recent film adaptations by the major directors Matteo Garrone (2019) and Guillermo del Toro (2022). Marklund's aim is to offer an introduction for teachers by presenting some key ideas on adaptation and how this concept and practice may be productively used in the literature classroom – not only for the understanding of literature and audiovisual media, but also to facilitate critical thinking and creativity. Exploring the two recent films of the *Pinocchio* story, it becomes evident that adaptations, and studying adaptations, involve some of the central aspects of literary teaching – textual analysis, imagination, critical thinking, and creativity – that schools should facilitate.

Erika Kvistad in "A Story About You: Feeling with Interactive Fiction Games" brings attention to what have been controversially called "empathy games": small-scale, often text-based digital games that focus on capturing the creator's own experiences. By superimposing

excerpts from gameplay footage and a female voiceover that is emotional, unexpectedly inquisitive, and even directly manipulative, Kvistad unsettles and complicates one of the central mantras in literary criticism and literature pedagogy: that the reading of fiction enhances our empathy skills and in the long run can make us better persons. As the title of her project suggests, "A Story About You", Kvistad demonstrates that playing empathy games is ultimately about the recognition of the distance between player and the game creator rather than the erasure of it.

In "Fortellingens puls: utforsking av rytme i narrative apper", **Anette Hagen** brings attention to the complex literary phenomenon of rhythm in conversation with multimodal semioticians like Theo van Leeuwen and reader response critics like Wolfgang Iser. To illustrate what rhythm in literature is and how it works, Hagen offers examples that are anchored in her own bodily and aesthetic experiences, first and foremost readings of the narrative apps *Florence* (Wong et al. 2018), *Pry* (Gormann & Cannizzaro, 2015) og *The fantastic flying books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* (Joyce, 2011), in which the story unfolds as the reader, in this case Hagen, touches, presses, and swipes through text and icons on the screen. Using the affordances of the video format, Hagen further experiments with editing in the video essay as a way to "bring to life" rhythm as an idiosyncratic and aesthetic phenomenon.

Adriana Margareta Dancus and **Alina Coman** in "Monsters: Comics and Eating Disorders" use the video essay as a platform to explore interdisciplinary collaborations, in this case, between a literary and film scholar (Dancus) and a psychologist researcher (Coman). The aim of the project is to illustrate how comics can offer phenomenological insights about living with an eating disorder that are relevant in both pedagogical and therapeutic settings. Using the affordances of both comics and the video essay, the project uses hand-drawn animation and panels from two Norwegian comics to make visible, audible and tangible how comics depict complex and muddy sensations and feelings that are hard to articulate and make sense of. It also showcases how teachers can use aesthetic processes that combine analytical and creative skills to enable learning in the literature classroom.

In "Når valden visest utanpå: animert kroppsspråk i *Sinna mann",* **Solveig Ragnhild Brandal** and **Simon Oskar Brandal** point attention to how animation is a medium particularly interesting to assess when addressing the taboo topic of family violence in the literary classroom. The example they use is the critically praised Norwegian stop-motion animation *Sinna Mann* (*Angry Man*, 2009) by Anita Killi, which is an adaptation of the picture book with the same title by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus. The video essay uses digitally animated frames of key scenes in *Sinna Mann* and other animated text to make visible how the animated body language of the main character Boj, whose father beats his mother, externalizes inner states, automatic emotional reactions, as well as interpersonal family relations. As such, the video essay sets up for further discussion about body language in animation, but also about the process of critical interpretation of and analytic distance to what are commonly perceived as highly sensitive topics in the literature classroom.

James Walker's "Borrowed Time" argues that increased digitalization has changed our relationship with time, including how we study and learn from literary texts. On the one hand, Walker calls for the importance of analogue reading and archival research, which necessarily demands slowing down the pace and creating intimate spaces for immersion and connection. To showcase strategies for motivating analogue reading, he draws on his project "Locating Lawrence", in which he reads the letters of D.H. Lawrence at a distance of a century from their composition. Walker does more than simply mourn the loss of the analogue, he goes back to the digital and reflects on how the making of a video essay, which requires constant rewatching and reediting, allows new forms of slow immersion in literary topics and perspectives.

In "Virginia Woolf Through Ingmar Bergman: In View of the Stream of Consciousness", **Jialu Zhu** demonstrates in audio-visual form the cross-media dialog that occurs between Virginia Woolf's novels and Ingmar Bergman's films. In the video essay, Zhu's own readings from Woolf are juxtaposed with a selection of clips from Bergman's filmography, which incites a comparative approach. The parameters of comparison are both formal (the use of cinematic techniques such as camera angles, light, movement, and montage) and thematic (the depiction of trauma and memory). The critical connections that emerge from the juxtaposition

of Woolf's modernist literature and Bergman's arthouse cinema become both concrete and tangible in the video essay, which makes Zhu's project an illustrative case study for comparative analysis.

Audhild Noredahl's "Artslære gjennom lyriske tekster" is seen as an intervention in the environmental debate about accelerated biodiversity loss, which she further ties to alarmingly low levels of species knowledge among younger generations. According to Norendahl, nature poems offer young generations both a language to name species that they may not otherwise recognize in nature, a sensuous experience that defamiliarizes default unawareness, and, inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, a face to which young readers can feel ethically committed in so far much of nature poetry relies on personification and making plants and animals alive, active, and communicative. The video essay consists of footage of the video essayist's own children and their explorative walks in nature to identify plants common in Nordic flora. This footage is interspersed with drawings of these plants and voiced by the children's readings of and reactions to older nature poems written by Norwegian poets like Olav H. Hauge (1908–1994) and Aslaug Vaa (1889–1965).

Maria Casado Villanueva's starting point in "'Doing Multilingualism': Aesthetic, Multimodal and Multilingual Encounters in the Language Classroom" is the observation that many language and literature teachers are unsure about and/or lack sufficient knowledge about how to use multilingualism as a pedagogical resource to develop literary literacy. Using examples from multilingual picture books that promote the interplay between poetic language and visual images, the video essay adopts a playful and colourful aesthetic to celebrate diversity and multilingualism in the classroom and to showcase how such books afford a sensorial, affective, and cognitive engagement that can inspire multimodal and multilingual creative responses.

Evelyn Kreutzer's "Moving Poems: The Most Beautiful Sea" is an audiovisual meditation on nostalgia, memory, and time, inspired by the poem "En Güzel Deniz/The Most Beautiful Sea" (1945) by Nazim Hikmet. The video essay reproduces and superimposes archival amateur footage from across the Twentieth Century, showing (white) bathers and leisure-

seekers, seascapes, horizons and coastlines under a musical soundtrack of excerpts from Benjamin Britten's instrumental "Four Sea Interludes" from the opera *Peter Grimes* (also 1945). Like Drew Morton's video in this special issue, this work is part of Kreutzer's "Moving Poems" project. Notwithstanding the strong sense of loss communicated in the encounter of the longing expressed in the poem with the past in the found footage, the video essay demonstrates how the juxtaposition of sound, image and text can dynamically suggest sense without insisting on a particular meaning. Kreutzer's video essay models for students (and others) how to make their own dynamic acts of literary interpretation through the combination of multimodal elements.

In "Contemptous Chess ('In the Script It Is Written and On the Screen It's Pictures': Teaching Intertextual Adaptation in Alberto Moravia and Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempts* via Rosario Castellanos' 'Chess')", **Drew Morton** explores the topic of adaptation, which in literature education has commonly been approached within the framework of the fidelity of the adapted work to the original text. Drawing on Robert Stam, Morton conceives of adaptation as a dialogue between networks of texts, some of which are recognizable, others less so. In the project, he puts in dialog three texts which all address the gradual degradation of a relationship: Alberto Moravia's novel *Il Disprezzo* (*Contempt*, 1954), about a struggling playwright who is forced to "sell out" and adapt for screen Homer's *The Odyssey*, Jean-Luc Godard's film adaptation of Moravia's novel, *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), and Rosario Castellanos's poem "Chess" (1972). He pairs readings of Castellanos's poem in four different languages with clips from Godard's film, which according to Morton, circumscribes the misogyny in Moravia's novel by engaging polyphony, multilingualism, and providing the female character with interiority. In this way, Morton illustrates the Russian nesting doll nature of adapting and how creative adaptation assignments can make adaptation theory more tangible to students of literature.

In closing, we will state that if the possibilities for the video essay in pedagogical practice have been the central focus in this special issue, we have also been concerned to demonstrate something of how the video essay allows the researcher a novel means to gain knowledge of the object of study and to communicate research insights. We do not see the purposes of

education and research to be in contradiction in the practice of video essay-making. Indeed, several of the videos explore practices of interpretation or feature creative practices of engagement (such as James Walker's iterative reading of D.H. Lawrence or Tatjana Samoilow daughter's musical interpretation of Tove Jansson) that suggest the potential for parallel or converging practices of pedagogy and scholarship enabled by the video essay as a form.

About the authors

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