

# Masterclass

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IN THE SECTION MASTERCLASS, STUDENTS ARE OFFERED THE OPPORTUNITY TO PUBLISH THEIR OWN MATERIAL. THIS ISSUE FEATURES AN ARTICLE BY HANNAH ACKERMANS.



# From Letters to Vlog Entries: Truthfulness as a Literary Trope in Fictional Life Writing

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## ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the vlog adaptation is a remediation of the epistolary novel by examining the logic of immediacy. Although immediacy is often approached as a medium-specific characteristic of digital media, this article illustrates that both the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation implement narrative characteristics

of non-fictional genres to create an experience of immediacy. This experience of immediacy is taken to the next level by the vlog adaptation, in which the narrative's serialization creates a temporal experience parallel to the viewer's temporal experience. The truthfulness associated with life writing thus becomes a literary trope in fiction.

The range of existing media is ever-changing and consists of a wide variety of modes and genres at any given time in history. Any storytelling genre is always enabled by technology and the creators of adaptations draw on the means of technology available to them. So it is not surprising that with the rise of the digital age, storytellers have started using the specific tools of the Internet to create a new mode of narration. In 2012, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was produced by Bernie Su and Hank Green, introducing a new genre which I call the “vlog adaptation.” Broadly speaking, this is a genre in which novels are adapted into the format of small separate media texts called video weblogs, also known as vlogs, which are usually uploaded to the Internet. Vlogs were used marginally around the year 2000, usually as an addition to a weblog. The phenomenon gained momentum after the online video sharing service *YouTube* was launched in 2005. The vlog is defined as “a video sequence similar to a blog that a user (vlogger) shoots of him- or herself talking into a camera and, after optional editing, uploads to the Internet” (Frobenius 814). Generally, vlogs are a form of self-writing in which people tell a personal story; however, in vlog adaptations an actor playing a fictional character pretends to tell an autobiographical narrative in a sequence of short separate videos.

The vlog adaptation is part of the so-called “new media,” characterized as digital, interactive, and hypertextual. New media emerged from the mid-1980s onwards when PCs were first provided with interactive graphic interfaces (Lister et al. 2). Even though the “new media” consist of various media that emerged at different times, in popular discourse new media are considered to be an entirely new mode of communication, which is not only new but also a definite improvement over the “old media”: “the ‘new’ in new media carries the ideological force of ‘new equals better’” (Lister et al. 28). These ideological properties frame the genre of the vlog adaptation as well.

I, however, argue that it is not new to convey a fictional narrative using the narrative structure of a genre of self-writing; this was, in fact, already in fashion in the mid-1700s in the form of the epistolary novel, which tells a fictional story composed as a series of letters, published in book form. I will show how the vlog adaptation as a “new” medium repurposes narrative strategies from the older genre of the epistolary

novel. By making this comparison I am neither suggesting a linear remediation from the epistolary novel to the vlog adaptation nor do I wish to state that the creators of vlog adaptations thought specifically of the epistolary novel when making their videos; rather, I argue that their similar and different characteristics in narrative structure demonstrate that the vlog adaptation can be situated in a non-linear media history, displaying the genre's connections with the epistolary novel. This non-linear media history will serve to nuance the current popular discourse on the "newness" of new media, showing that different media in different times have similar objectives and narrative structures.

In the first half of this article, I will examine the vlog adaptation in comparison with the epistolary novel by reflecting on how their similar narrative structures contribute to the "logic of immediacy" (Bolter and Grusin 315). The commonalities between the genres here exemplify the continuing tantalizing desire for immediacy. This concept is significant in our understanding of the emergence and use of different media as immediacy is, according to Bolter and Grusin, the source for the continuing creation of new media. The concept of immediacy thus explains why we continually create different media and frame them as the improvement of old media while constantly repurposing similar characteristics. In the second half, I will take this discussion a step further by looking specifically at how the temporal experience of the narrative's serialization contributes to the experience of immediacy, both in the epistolary novel and in the vlog adaptation. Both the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation consist of a serialized narrative but they lead to a different temporal experience: the epistolary novel becomes an assemblage whereas the vlog adaptation uses the serialization to create an experience of real time. This comparison will demonstrate how the use of the same property in different media can lead to a redefinition of the "essence" of this property.

## Immediacy through Narrative Structure

Bolter and Grusin define immediacy as the desire for or pretense of transparent, unmediated communication: “a transparent interface would be one that erases itself, so that the user would no longer be aware of confronting a medium, but instead would stand in an immediate relationship to the contents of the medium” (318). The concept of immediacy contains a paradox: “Our culture wants [...] to erase its media in the very act of multiplying technologies of mediation” (313). Immediacy can be experienced with all sorts of stories, fantastic and implausible as they may be, and Bolter and Grusin use virtual reality as their prime example (1). Although the concept of immediacy is often used in these high-tech and fiction contexts, I argue that achieving an immediate relationship to the content of the medium is an ideological objective that is especially foundational for non-fiction genres presented as personal stories. Even though works of non-fiction are as much mediated as fiction, readers and viewers experience it as the truth, forgetting that mediation is taking place. The fact that it is a representation, which I will refer to as a “textual construct,” is seemingly erased by the promise of truthfulness and authenticity. I will explain how the fiction genres of the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation make use of the conventions of non-fiction genres to convey an experience of immediacy, attempting to escape from the appearance of mediation.

The “postal culture” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was enabled by infrastructural developments, such as a national network of post offices and an improved road and rail network, that were necessary to send letters to other people (Whyman 1–2). It was key that this was a service not only for a selective group in society, but for the masses as well, which “allowed this population a measure of social and political agency, and that, in turn, led many of these people into the literary world as writers and readers” (Rotunno 1). This social and political agency is highlighted and elaborated on by a postal agent named James Hollbrook in 1855:

Imagine a town without a post office! a community without letters! ‘friends, Romans, countrymen, and lovers,’ particularly the lovers, cut off from correspondence, bereft of newspapers, buried alive from the light of intelligence, and the busy stir of the great world! What an appalling picture! (qtd. in Henkin 3, inconsistent use of capitals in original)

This historical source aptly illustrates both the reliance on technological means and the sense of immediacy of the letter. In the postal culture, people used letter writing as an attempt to “communicate” a direct view into the letter writer’s world to the letter reader. Letter writing was considered a non-fiction genre that gave the reader the experience of having, seemingly unmediated, insight into the writer’s world, showing that letter users believed that the letter would tell a true story. In this sense, letter writing was used for achieving truthfulness. I say “achieving truthfulness” because, as any textual construct, the medium and the narrative frame the “truth” which is conveyed. The experience is of immediacy, of unmediated truth, but essentially the medium acts as a filter for the conveyance of the content. But even though letters are textual constructs, people used letters as a means to connect with a larger community and to feel close to people that were not next-door neighbors.

This experience of immediacy also applies to the vlog. The emergence of the vlog as a popular genre for publishing a personal story can be explained within a wider “memoir boom.” This “memoir boom” refers to the increase in memoir publication, which “has now vibrated in our collective consciousness for well over a decade” (Fass 108). As the postal culture, the memoir boom too relies on technological means. The availability of cheap printing led to “the current democratizing of the genre” (Fass 108), meaning that, in theory, anyone could publish their life story. Even though the memoir is a textual construct, this genre ideally acts as a window into someone’s life: “during the long memoir boom, an unprecedented number of people have experienced varieties of fame by publishing accounts of what would have previously been considered their private lives” (Gilmore 658). The changing norms during the memoir boom, Gilmore describes, were amplified when the online blog, in the late 1990s, and the online vlog, in the mid 2000s, emerged. The costs of starting a blog or vlog are virtually non-existent and it “is the most democratized revolution in media ever” (Thompson).<sup>1</sup> Both the memoir in general and the blog and vlog in particular can be

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1. Starting a blog/vlog is “ridiculously cheap” (Thompson), but making a professional blog/vlog will, naturally, cost more money and time.

understood as the desire for direct communication in which the media are so omnipresent that the mediation becomes invisible. The postal culture and the memoir boom are paralleled in their use of media as devices for creating immediacy, though on a different scale. The postal culture is characterized by people sending personal narratives to individuals they were acquainted with, whereas the memoir boom is characterized by people publishing personal narratives for whomever wishes to read them.

Above, I have contextualized two genres of non-fiction writing within a bigger cultural trend. Neither the epistolary novel nor the vlog adaptation are non-fiction genres, but both emerged within these cultural trends of non-fiction genres and make explicit use of the conventions of these genres by doubling their narrative structure. A principal value of letter writing and the personal vlog is that the narrative told is autobiographical and based on the truth. By copying the narrative structure of these genres the value of truthfulness is projected onto the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation and consequently these narratives generate supposedly “direct” experiences into the fictional world.

By using the format of the letter to frame the narrative, the epistolary novel copies the conventions as well as the values of regular letters. The epistolary novel is a series of “letters,” each consisting of a fictional addressee (“Dear X”), who is the narratee, and a fictional addresser (“Sincerely, Y”), who is the narrator. This reinforces the readers’ perception that the letters are real, even though the reader is not analogous to the addressee. Between the letter’s salutation and closure the addresser writes about recent events in his or her life that are follow-ups of events described in earlier letters. These letters are written in an autobiographical style and from a first-person perspective. The value of truthfulness that lies in the autobiographical nature of actual letter writing is transported to the epistolary novel: even though the epistolary novel tells a fictional story, the reader feels like he or she is reading letters that have actually been sent by the addresser. The effect of using the letter format in the epistolary novel is therefore the use of truthfulness as a *literary* trope.

A similar process occurs with vlog adaptations, in which novels are adapted into a vlog format. It is noteworthy that, although it is not a

defining characteristic, vlog adaptations until now have generally been modernized versions of nineteenth-century novels which take place in the present time. The story is fictional, but the vlog format is used to make the story resemble a direct view into someone's life. This pretence of non-fiction is already alluded to in the titles of the vlogs. As has already been mentioned, the first vlog adaptation was *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, which is based on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The title refers to a diary, which is a non-fiction genre. Diaries are usually of a strictly personal nature and not meant to be read by others, but ever since the memoir boom—or more specifically, the blogging boom—the publication of personal, diary-like stories, available for everyone to read, has become normalized. This means that the sign of trust which accompanies the potential sharing of a diary disappears. Anyone, including “complete strangers” (Van Dijck 122), can watch a vlog without the personal permission of the author. In the case of the vlog adaptation, the publication also makes the narrative itself available in the story world, which means that not only real viewers can watch the videos but also, fictionally, the other characters of the narrative. Yet, despite their publication, the accounts of the vlog are still of a personal nature: “privacy and publicness appear full of contradictions: comments are personal yet readable by everyone, intimate yet public” (Van Dijck 129). After *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, other vlog adaptations followed that alluded to non-fiction genres in their titles, such as *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre*, adapting Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and *Emma's Journal*, adapting Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815).

Like the epistolary novel, vlog adaptations also include an explicit narrator and narratee. The narratee consists of both the actual viewers and the other characters in the vlog adaptation, who can also—fictionally—watch the vlog entries. The fictional narrative is told by the narrator from a first-person perspective as if it were a non-fictional autobiographical narrative, exemplified by the, now Internet-famous, utterance “My name is Lizzie Bennet and this is my life” (“My Name Is Lizzie Bennet,” 0:24–0:26).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the employment

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2. Fans of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* made the utterance into an informal “motto” of the web series. This utterance is often cited in social media posts about *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*.

of characteristics that belong to genres of self-writing, whether letter writing or vlogging, evokes a sense of authenticity and truthfulness, contributing to an experience of immediacy. This does not mean that the two genres work in the same way. In the next section, I will examine how the use of serialization leads to a different temporal experience in each of the genres.

### **Temporal Effects of Serialization**

Some vlog adaptations that exist today are finished; these stories are completed. Others remain incomplete and have been discontinued with no sign that new episodes will be uploaded. Yet others are still running, part-way through the story they want to tell, frequently uploading a new vlog entry to continue the story. This “serialization” of the narrative in vlog adaptations is not unique, as it is borrowed from other media that utilize serialization, such as the epistolary novel, radio serials, and TV series. This remediation does not mean all media are the same, because “with reuse comes a necessary redefinition” (Bolter and Grusin 339). I will compare the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation by considering the assembly and fragmentation of the different parts of their series and discuss how this leads to a different temporal experience.

The epistolary novel consists of a series of fictional letter narratives. This means that the narrator is homodiegetic: he or she exists in the story that he or she tells. The fictional addresser writes the letters to the fictional addressee one after another. Each letter generally tells what happened between sending the last letter and the current letter and optionally tells about the near future as well. Together, these fictional letters tell one story and the epistolary novel is the assembly of these letters. In the story world, the letters appear one after another in the time frame set in the letters, indicated by the dates that often appear on them. The reader, however, has the entire epistolary novel at his or her disposal and therefore does not have to read the letters in the same time frame as the fictional narratee. The assembly of the letters in the epistolary novel therefore modifies the temporal effect of letter writing and reading in general to the temporal effect of the novel.

The narration of the vlog adaptation closely resembles that of the epistolary novel. Whereas the adapted novel generally has a heterodiegetic narrator, the vlog adaptation adapts this to a serialized homodiegetic narrative. The vlog entries are, however, not assembled in the same way as the fictional letters in the epistolary novel. Instead of uploading all vlog entries at once, they are uploaded consecutively, usually at a fixed frequency, like once a week (i.e. *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre*). As a result, viewers have to wait for a new vlog entry to find out how the story continues, instead of being able to read on as with the epistolary novel. However, the publication of the vlog adaptations is cumulative: all previously uploaded vlog entries are already there for everyone to watch and once the vlog adaptation is finished, a viewer can watch all vlog entries one after another. This, however, takes away some of the temporal experience which is a key aspect of digital media: real time. The constant updatability of digital media gives readers and viewers a real time experience when consuming digital media texts.

Real time includes both instantaneousness and simultaneousness, meaning respectively that the viewer experiences the story world at (almost) the same time as it is occurring and that the viewer experiences the story world parallel to his or her own world in time. With vlog adaptations, and vlogs in general, the story time is parallel to the narration time. When a video is uploaded once a week, for example, the viewer has to wait one week for the next vlog entry for the story to continue. As story time and narration time progress at the same speed, it is also one week later in the story world in the next vlog entry. In other words: between two vlog entries one week of story time has progressed. Coupled with the modernization of the adaptations which ensures the stories take place in the present day, this implies that the real world and the story world are progressing at the same time; furthermore, it gives the illusion that the distinction between real world and story world does not exist, thus intensifying the experience of immediacy. Especially the long running vlog adaptations use this in their storyline by including holidays in their vlog entries. For example, *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre* uploaded a video called “Happy Holidays” on 25 December 2013. This created the illusion that character Jane was celebrating Christmas at the same time, in the same world, as the viewers were. This real time

element is an important property specific to this genre. As Hank Green, co-creator of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, contemplates: “*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* can never exist the way it did when it was happening [...]. That real-time element in so many different facets, [...] I feel like that’s gone away now. I am never going to be able to feel that exact way again. And that’s kind of sad” (3:21–3:59). This reflection aptly explains the importance of real time as a facet of serialization in the vlog adaptation. Both the (fictional) vloggers and the viewers experience the narration time as intercalated with their experience of the world.

That this real-time element is an important aspect to viewers can be confirmed by the viewer statistics available for every *YouTube* video. Vlog adaptations show a very high peak in viewers right after publication, after which the number of viewers quickly reduces to almost nothing. This is especially the case for later episodes. The first few episodes of a series sometimes show a few small peaks longer after publication, but these peaks do not occur in later videos of the series. It can therefore be assumed that people who start the series late quickly catch up with the previous episodes/vlog entries or do not watch the entire series. These viewer statistics confirm that viewers prefer to watch the series in “real time” rather than watch the whole narrative as an accumulation of videos at a later time. This real-time facet redefines the serialized narrative as a property that characterizes the vlog adaptation.

Due to the intercalated storytelling and physical existence of the narration in the story world of the vlog adaptation, other characters can (fictionally) watch the vlog entries in the time between narrations. In the epistolary novel, this is also possible but less likely because a character would have to be able to find the letter. In the vlog adaptation, however, the vlog entries uploaded to *YouTube* are public both to the characters in the story world and to the real viewers. In both cases, the reader or viewer can only find out about this when it is included in a later part of the narration. This factor is treated to various extents in the vlog adaptation. One example of a vlog adaptation that features a character watching the vlog is *Emma’s Journal*. In the original Jane Austen novel, Emma insults Miss Bates, but does not realize that she was wrong until she gets scolded by her friend Mr. Knightley, after which she apologizes to Miss Bates. In *Emma’s Journal*, Emma jokes

about Patricia (Miss Bates in the novel) in her vlog. The result is similar to the novel, but there is one difference: in the vlog adaptation, Emma's insults, Knightley's scolding, and Emma's apologies to Patricia are necessarily public. Knightley asks Emma to turn off the camera before rebuking her, but Emma does not do that and instead decides to publish his verbal criticism in her vlog, after which she states her apology to Patricia, also in her vlog entry: "I should not have said all those things about you and I should not have put them on the Internet, that was very, very wrong, I'm apologizing to you and I'm putting this on the Internet so people know that I was wrong" ("Forgive and Forget," 5:10–5:25). This aptly shows the role of the narrative in the vlog adaptation: telling the story becomes part of the story itself. By making fun of Patricia in one of her vlog entries, Emma has insulted Patricia, angered Mr. Knightley, and lost the respect of other people who watched the vlog entry. By making a vlog entry in which she apologizes, the narrative itself becomes the apology, reflecting that vlogs "are not just commentaries on someone's life but materializations of it" (Zylinska 62). Without the fragmentation of the narrative, it would not have been possible to have a previously published part of the narration as the cause for a later part of the narration. This is an element that could only happen because of the story's serialization and the cumulative nature of the publication.

### Concluding Remarks

The creation of new media and the development of older media always consist of a process in which the properties of other media are remediated (Bolter and Grusin 315). The interaction between different media shows that new media do not evolve in a linear fashion. As I have shown, the narrative structure of the genre of the vlog adaptation can be understood by creating a media history that displays its non-linear connections to the genre of the epistolary novel, which had its peak in popularity nearly three hundred years ago. Both the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation are fictional, and explicitly so, but employ the characteristics of self-writing genres to achieve immediacy. Both the postal culture and the memoir boom rely on truthfulness, the understanding that a story is true, which Philippe LeJeune calls

“the autobiographical pact” (Popkin 781). Non-fiction stories are also mediated “textual constructs” and not necessarily altogether true, making the pact “necessarily something of a myth” (Popkin 799), but they are closest to achieving immediacy because they invoke the values of truthfulness and authenticity. Every, or nearly every, reader of the epistolary novel and viewer of a vlog adaptation knows that they are reading or viewing a fictional story. Strictly speaking, there is no presence of truthfulness or an autobiographical pact. By employing the narrative structure of a non-fictional genre, however, these fictional genres create an experience of authenticity, an erasure of the mediation of the storyline.

Both in the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation, there is a serialization of the narrative structure. Yet their temporal effects are different, as the epistolary novel consists of an assembly of a series, whereas the vlog adaptation consists of a fragmentation of the series in real time. This shows how narrative properties can be appropriated for different media, leading to a redefinition of the “essence” of this property. Both the epistolary novel and the vlog adaptation use serialization by way of a homodiegetic narrator who uses intercalated narration to tell a story. But the vlog adaptation uses the real-time element of the Internet to contribute to the story, increasing the experience of immediacy. This temporal experience only occurs when the viewer watches the vlog entries simultaneously to their publication. Afterwards, this temporal experience becomes hidden when a viewer has the entire narrative at his or her disposal, just as the reader of the epistolary novel. As I have demonstrated above, the truthfulness associated with life writing thus becomes a literary trope in fiction, which resonates in different media at different times: from letters to vlog entries.

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