Book review of Elise Seip Tønnessen (ed.): Jakten på fortellinger: Barne- og ungdomslitteratur på tvers av medier

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What makes up a story nowadays? And a compelling one? Does it matter what medium the story is told in? Transmedial issues are the subject of Jakten på fortellinger: Barne- og ungdomslitteratur på tvers av medier (In the Pursuit of Narratives: Children’s and Youth Literature across Media, my translation) edited by Professor Elise Seip Tønnessen, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway. The volume is an ambitious survey of an emerging new media landscape, which children and young adults navigate, based on research carried out in Norway. The anthology is the result of a 3-year research project initiated at Norsk barnebokinstitutt (NBI) and led by Seip Tønnessen.

The other contributors are: Agnes-Margrethe Bjorvand, Hanne Kii, Silje Hernæs Linhart, Ingeborg Mjør, Kjersti Larsbyggen Mørk, Lisa Nagel, Åse Marie Ommundsen, Lin Prøitz, Astrid Ramsjell, Anne Skaret, Trine Solstad, and Kristin Ørjasæter. They all have comprehensive experience in media and literature studies as well as didactic practice which guarantees that the volume is well adapted to the book’s audience: people who convey literature to children and young adults, teachers, librarians, and tutors involved in teacher training. I think that some chapters in the volume might also be suitable for reading by pupils in upper secondary school, particularly chapters 6, 10, 11, and 12, as they deal with literature addressed to their age group. These chapters discuss and problematize literary competence across media from different angles. It is an excellent opportunity to raise awareness among pupils of how narrative content is transported between media as well as the mental activities that operate to understand a story and finally how different media demand different cognitive resources.

The study’s point of departure is the new media landscape and how it produces and challenges the conventional conceptions of narratives and literature. This volume examines narratives produced and perceived in different media, from codex to digital platforms. The aim is to establish a theoretical framework to be able to better describe new mediatized phenomena. It also explores the transfer of stories between media, for example, the picturebook character Alfie Atkins adapted for
The new media landscape demands and develops a media competence but does not imply an awareness of what this media competence consists of. This scenario is correctly stressed by Seip Tønnessen in her thorough and instructive introduction: “When the reader meets literary texts in new media it is not only the new medium that appears. The new medium might also shed new light on how the old media work, and what the specific medium does with the literary experience” (16, my translation). The verb might is crucial for this research as it presupposes a media competence that is able to discern media similarities and dissimilarities. But this ability depends on what grounds the comparison is made. Here lies my major critique of the project’s theoretical approach. How media are both similar and dissimilar is not always analyzed finely enough with regard to the theories at hand. This said, the ambition to cover a vast field using several theories and practices still functions on the whole very well, and therefore the anthology is a valuable didactic contribution to media discourse and practice in the new information society.

The volume is in four parts. The first part starts with a survey of the rich variety of texts and literary experiences for children and young adults in old and new media. Thereafter comes a description of the project’s background and theoretical foundations, which sets the agenda for the parts to come. The theoretical perspectives presented are applied in the analyses in the following three parts. The aim is to establish a conceptual apparatus to make it possible to express exactly what is observed and questioned in the literary media landscape. The second part explores literature on new platforms, that is, film, sculpture, and digital media. The articles show examples of the transfer from paper to new media, such as the transfer from the picturebook to the app, and the implications for the reading act and the literary experience. The third part examines how young people’s media experiences today are thematized and expressed in literature for children and young adults, such as the mass media representation of traumatic events, reality shows, and popular music. In the last part, some new perspectives on literature practices are examined. They are actualized as a result of the new aesthetic processes of literature in a mediated text universe. Here, alternative reading strategies for new picturebooks are examined.

Let me say, before I go through the individual chapters, that even though the research is restricted to the Norwegian media landscape, the findings have a universal bearing, especially the second chapter, written by Prøitz and Seip Tønnessen (20–38), which presents the text practices in the new media landscape, and the third chapter written by Bjorvand and Seip Tønnessen (39–63), accounting for the theoretical perspective on text, media, and reader. Also, Seip Tønnessen’s chapter 8 (128–148) on picturebook apps, where she explores the transfer of narrative between the picturebook codex and the variants of picturebook applications, as well as its implications for the model user, is a valuable contribution to media studies.

It is regrettable that the volume is not available in English as it gives a broad grasp of a dynamic media landscape in which literature not only travels between media but also across nations. The novelty of this project is its combination of an updated media discourse with an experience-based practical perspective.

In the introductory chapter, Seip Tønnessen gives her personal experience of stories printed in books that later turn up in new media. This is followed by an account of current statistics (2013).
from the Norwegian book market. The presence of e-book is still marginal apart from the picturebook that emerges on new platforms such as e-books and apps. Even though Norwegian youth still prefer the codex, the media landscape is changing because of commercial forces. A film or book release has become an event, and often the reading or viewing experience is shared with others, via the Internet and social media. The literary story flows between different media and amplifies the literary experience partly because of the great variety of cultural expressions, and partly because of the amount of impressions that simultaneously meet a large audience.

Chapter 2 deals with textual practices in a media context and is written by Prøitz and Seip Tønnessen. They sketch a positive trend of media consumption by youngsters in Norway in 2013: library loans of books, audiobooks, films, and other media are steadily increasing as well as theater visits. The authors distinguish between digitalized and digital literature with reference to Øyvind Prytz (2013). The former denomination refers to the digital storing of texts while the latter refers to texts relying on digital technology, which provides a range of additive functions. I think a reference to Lev Manovich (2001) would have been more appropriate.

Chapter 3 by Seip Tønnessen and Bjorvand presents theoretical perspectives on texts, media, and the reader. The theory and its conceptual apparatus is a synthesis taken from several acknowledged media scholars. There is a vast vocabulary for the reader to keep in mind though: text, media, multimodal texts, genre, convergence, adaptation, remediation, reader, player and user, affect, emotion, and cognition. The framework demands an informed reader, and this chapter would gain by being published in a more didactic version aimed at teachers’ training and tutoring. The glossary at the end of the book is also a welcome support.

Given the theoretical framework that embraces several research fields that share notions with different meanings, it would have been beneficial for the project to take a more critical and clarifying stance toward the central notions of adaptation, text, media, modality, and genre. The terms adaptation and remediation are used with reference to Bolter and Grusin (1999) but the concept of adaptation is applied in a wider sense with reference to Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2013). I do not think their crude distinction between telling, showing, and interacting is applicable in a study of this calibre if the aim is to catch the modal differences between media.

One of the most interesting subjects of the volume is the exploration of the borderline of digitalized media, “the in-between,” where literary experience and “game” experience is blurred. The mapping of this field by Seip Tønnessen, based on the distinction between digitalized literature and digitally creative texts, is convincing enough (21). The picturebook app belongs to the digitally creative texts. She divides the picturebook app into three major groups depending on the amount of modalities and the type of interaction involved: (1) the picturebook app with sound, which can be assimilated with or without auditory text, (2) the picturebook with additive components (animation), (3) the interactive picturebook in which the story is organized similarly to that of a video game and therefore demands the reader’s active intervention.

The categorization of the picturebook variants is informative and adds valuable information to the exploration of the gray area between the literary story and the video game. To this discussion, I propose that Louise Rosenblatt’s reading strategies might be helpful to understand what triggers the alternation between literary experience and game experience. Rosenblatt (1938/1994) differs in short between the efferent, and the aesthetic reading strategy.

Part two, “Literature on new platforms,” is the most extensive section in the volume and also the most innovative as it includes research on the development of picturebook apps and the implications for the reader/user. In chapter 4, Ramsfjell analyzes the spectator’s role with particular emphasis on the narrative devices in the television series Ta˚rnagentene og den mystiske julegaven (2010) (The Tower Agents and the Mystic Christmas Gift, my translation). The series is based on the biblical Christmas gospel. The emphasis of the interesting analysis lies on how narrative devices create different approaches for the viewer and what effect it has on the remediated gospel. I miss, however, a discussion of the genre impact on the viewer as the program belongs to a Nordic phenomenon, the televised Advent calendar.

In chapter 5, the reception of a filmatization is the subject. Mjør analyzes the relation between the chapter book Hokus Pokus about Alfie Atkins and the animated feature film with the same title screened in 2013. She has an intermedial perspective, arguing that the feature film format demands that the story be prolonged. She scrutinizes the
narrative expansion strategies in a convincing manner. I must, however, correct Mjør when she erroneously claims that the new edition of the book from 2012 is a chapter book version of an older picturebook version from 1987. The new and the old versions are both chapter books with black and white illustrations, in contrast to the rest of the works about Alfie Atkins, which are picturebooks. With this taken into consideration, the adaptation analysis could have been enriched with a more thorough discussion of the complex relation between target text and source text.

In chapter 6, Kiil treats the Norwegian short film *Skylappjenta* (2009) (Eye-Flap Girl, my translation) by Iram Haq and Endre Skandfer on the fairy tale about Red Riding Hood set in a multicultural context. The story was simultaneously published as a picturebook, we are informed, but this picturebook is regrettably not included in the analysis. Kiil argues in her thought-provoking analysis that the film’s blend of genre (fairy tale, adventure, and realism) and play on clichés in a postmodernist manner reflects allegorically the challenges and conflicts in a new country from a female immigrant’s perspective.

In chapter 7, Skaret explores the reception of a child’s experience of a sculpture representing Alf Prøysen’s fictive character Mrs. Pepperpot. The analysis compares and identifies the different modal expressions and their implications with the help of Ellestrøm’s model of modalities. This analysis is then used to structure the interview of the case study. One of the interesting conclusions is that sculpture as adaptation demands new reading strategies to discern between the narrative, the character, and the form (122).

In chapter 8, Seip Tønnessen contributes with valuable research on picturebook applications, as already mentioned. The categorization of the apps in operation with the notions of model reader and model user is elucidating, as this perspective emphasizes the interactive function. The first part examines adaptations of printed picturebooks and the second part picturebook apps that only exist in digital format. The author calls the app a film event with tasks, as the story, instead of being presented on spreads, is organized in scenes. The author predicts that what might be crucial for the development of the app as a literary medium is that it manages to arrange the story so that it interacts with the user in a creative way. A clarification in what aspect the picturebook combines two “heavily different modalities” (130) would however have been welcome.

In chapter 9, Solstad and Seip Tønnessen examine the aesthetic experiences from the book or on the digital screen. It is an empirical study carried out in a preschool where children’s reception of picturebooks read aloud to them is compared to their reception of the digitalized version. In short, the authors draw the conclusion that the app seems to hinder or restrict the interpretation potential compared to the more flexible option of reading aloud. These findings have a didactic import not only for preschool learning but also in a broader societal context as reading ability shows a downward trend in many European countries.

The third part, “Media experiences in children’s and youth literature,” explores how contemporary phenomena, mass media texts, reality shows, and popular music are thematized in literature. In chapter 10, Ommundsen scrutinizes how the national trauma caused by the Utøya massacre in 2011 is dealt with in different genres, from mass media to literature. The analysis shows that the trauma is depicted differently depending on the medium. The literary texts examined add new dimensions and explanatory models to the trauma and open it up for reflection. Ommundsen has written several articles on the incident but unfortunately her findings have not yet been published in English.

Literature inspired by the formula and setting of cynical reality shows is the subject of Lersbyrgen Mørk’s study in chapter 11. She examines how young people relate their own experience of reality and identity to the existential and ethical dilemmas experienced by the characters in *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008–2010) by Suzanne Collins and *Barneregeringen* (2008) (Children’s Government, my translation) by the Norwegian Aleksander Melli. In chapter 12, Hernæs Linhart explores the use of references to popular music in narratives as a characterizing device. She finds that in the books examined, there is a tendency to differ between the authentic and the phony and between characters that use the music to create an image and those that have a genuine opinion of it.

The fourth part, “Aesthetic Practices,” analyzes the reading and performative strategies put into play in fiction realized on different media platforms. In chapter 13, we meet *Bukkene Bruse på Badeland* (2009) (The Billy-Goats Bruse Going to the Baths, my translation) by Bjørn F. Rørvik (text) and Gry Moursund (image), a postmodern adaptation of a Norse fairy tale, also translated to Swedish. Lisa Nagel carries out a performative study by reading the book to her 4-year-old son.
In her analysis of the performativity of image and text, she also includes form, color, typography, and layout. It is an interesting study as she treats the text as a reading instruction, for example, of how to modulate the voice.

Ørjasæter, in chapter 14, explores the reader’s position as an implicit part of the narrative structure in some contemporary picturebooks. She identifies different positions depending on the openness of the structure and the perceived relation between image and text on a single spread as well as between spreads. An “åpen sanseposisjon” (273) characterizes the new picturebook according to the author and she draws examples from Shaun Tan. I translate the expression by “an open perceptive/cognitive position” required to interpret picturebooks with unconventional narratives. Interesting in her analysis is the discussion of the engagement of the reader. However, her method could also be applied to conventional picturebooks to shed light on and pinpoint the conventions involved in picturebook reading.

Chapter 15, written by Prytz, discusses the new challenges the digitalization of literature provides for research to identify the effect on literature, reading competence, and the production process. Prytz reveals a fear shared by many: the extinction of printed literature. She interviewed young readers from Norway as well as staff in different positions at publishing houses. It seems as if readers are still conservative and prefer the book medium, foremost because of its materiality. At the same time, digital technology influences the form and content of the codex. Therefore, concludes Prytz, it is of importance to understand the interaction between technology and literary texts with regard to format and materiality.

Before I end the review of this interesting volume, I would like to say that I agree with the editor that the new media forms hopefully will not only help us understand what new media do to the literary experience but also better understand old media. Reading this anthology is a good start!

WORKS CITED


