



Visible and invisible aspects of embodied reading

Aspetti visibili e invisibili della lettura incarnata

Maretta Sidiropoulou

Assistant Professor | Democritus University of Thrace | masidiro@psed.duth.gr

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a holistic theoretical understanding of reading. It provides an outline of reading as an embodied experience because, apart from being a mental activity, it is also a specific activity of the body. In particular, this paper adopts an ethnographic approach to carry out a detailed investigation of forms of reading activity in Greece. It identifies aspects of reading relating to books, the activity itself and the spaces in which it occurs, shifting attention to forms of reading that are often unnoticed or suppressed by established representations of the practice of reading in everyday life. It also draws attention to the way in which readers find meaning through everyday reading practices in contrast or in line with the dominant discourse. The above findings reinforce the discussion of a wider signification of reading, at a time when the reading landscape is continually being enriched with digital means, the traditional medium of books is expanding, and the concept of the reader is changing.

Keywords: embodied reading, reading pleasure, reading practices, ethnographic approach

OPEN  ACCESS Double blind peer review

Volume 2 | n. 1 | giugno 2023

Citation: Sidiropoulou, M. (2023). Visible and invisible aspects of embodied reading. *Effetti di Lettura / Effects of Reading*, 2(1), 92-100. <https://doi.org/10.7347/EdL-01-2023-08>.

Corresponding Author: [Maretta Sidiropoulou | masidiro@psed.duth.gr](mailto:masidiro@psed.duth.gr)

Journal Homepage: <https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/edl>

Pensa MultiMedia ISSN 2785-7050 | DOI: 10.7347/EdL-01-2023-08

Effects of Reading

1. Reading and the body

At first glance all forms of reading are similar: “The eyes move imperceptibly over the page, the hands turn pages; the body occasionally stretches and fidgets, but only to avoid the aches of inactivity” (Schoenfeldt, 2003, p. 217). One could say that it is a process that requires minimal physical activity. However, if “to read is to make our body work at the invitation of all the text’s signs” (Barthes, 2005, p. 17), then the body is a fundamental part of the reading process, and it is worth focusing on the body when thinking about reading. What follows is a more careful examination of the ways in which readers perceive, acquire meaning from, enrich and differentiate this activity in relation to its more widely ‘accepted’ form. The study reflects on what readers have to say about the behaviours, actions and practices that point to the physical nature of reading as it occurs in everyday life.

2. Ethnographic approach

The current study focuses on books, although the materiality of reading is not only related or limited to this specific material medium. In addition, it examines only the uses of books and not of other types of reading matter. It is not concerned with texts in general but with books as reading objects. Thus, while content is extremely important and in fact sometimes determines the use of books, this study is not concerned with content as that would completely alter the nature of the study.

In terms of methodology, detailed interviews are the primary source of data used in this research. The study adopts an ethnographic approach, viewing literacy as a social practice (Besnier, 1999). It is part of a wider study of reading practices and the uses of books by twenty-one urban middle-class individuals in Greek cities (Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene).

The participants were enlisted through snowball sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique also referred to as chain-referral sampling. In this method the pool of initially-enrolled participants is used to assist on recruiting additional participants who meet the criteria for the study (Goodman, 1961). Consequently, the specific criteria were established by the participants themselves, with the primary requirement being someone to identify as a «reader» or, more precisely, as a «βιβλιόφιλος» (bibliophilos), which is the Greek term encompassing a love for books and reading. Snowball sampling recognizes the importance of social network and relationships in establishing meaningful connections with participants. In our study, it clearly highlights how reading connects people (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) revealing an unfolding network of «readers».

The in-depth interviews were designed to allow the subjects of the research to express themselves freely as far as possible when discussing their experiences, opinions, views and recollections. The interviews followed the “usual character of ethnographic conversation that lies in the tension between the ‘naturalness’ of good conversation and the ‘instrumentality’ embedded in the ethnographic endeavour (Madden, 2010, p.65). This allowed the subjects to tell the stories relating to reading that were significant to them, instead of answering predetermined questions (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The interview plan adhered to an unstructured format, devoid of predetermined questions, but centred around thematic areas. The interview’s purpose was to gain a profound understanding of the intrinsic significance of reading in the lives of the interviewees, as well as to explore the biographical development of their reading experiences.

A thematic analysis followed aimed to identify and develop themes that emerge directly from the data, rather than relying on pre-established categories. Thematic analysis as more flexible allowed for an exploratory approach to understanding the data (Mason, 2002). Specifically, the thematic areas explore contextual aspects of reading, including its occurrence within specific institutions, locations, and time periods.

Effects of Reading

Through the thematic areas the analysis delves into tangible expressions of reading, such as personal experiences or memories, and examines the relationships that reading fosters. Furthermore, it investigates how the meaning of reading evolves experientially throughout the lives of the individuals being studied. Some of the main areas explored in the interviews were the following: values and attitudes related to reading, reading practices, books (as objects/content), reading spaces and autobiographical histories regarding reading and books. The interview data in many cases revealed new thematic areas and concepts such as «New Technologies in relation to traditional reading», «Book ownership» and «Relationship between books and religious practices».

3. Reading positions

“How do you read?” I asked Nikiphoros, a 50-year-old academic. “What? I open and read! I sit and read.” The interviewee’s reaction was completely spontaneous, and almost expressed a sense of bewilderment that the answer to my question was so self-evident. Actions may appear automatic, fixed, routine and ‘natural’, and yet a book can be neither open nor closed; it is always somewhere in between (Nancy, 2009, p. 2). Reading is first and foremost non-reading: it is a voluntary act of non-acquisition or closure of all the books that could potentially have been chosen (Bayard, 2008, p. 29). These words draw attention to the remarkable capacity of books to be read on any page, regardless of where they are opened (Bayard, 2008).

If we consider that the dynamics of reading are to be found somewhere between opening and closing a book, in the middle space between ‘opening’ and ‘reading’ and whatever comes between ‘sitting’ and ‘reading’, then the scope of the subject matter is vast. Daily life, with its micro-practices that seep through the cracks and crevices of official culture (Seremetakis, 2008) appears to divulge some of the secrets of reading through the narratives of the interviewees.

Reading positions are clearly linked with the context and environment in which each instance of reading occurs. It could be argued that on some level reading functions as a bodily contract. As they pick up their book, readers are perhaps thinking that considerable time will be spent on this activity. They try to find either a comfortable position so that they can enjoy the content of the book, in the case of reading as a leisure activity, or an efficient position for studying or working. The search for a position that does not strain the reader, given the time that will be devoted to this activity, ensures that the time spent reading will be productive or extended.

In the narrative of 35-year-old Victor, a teacher, we see that this may be a conscious effort: “I normally read sitting down, but I think that I manage to read longest when I am lying down”. The purpose of reading determines the forms of reading. In the narratives of the interviewees it is possible to distinguish two basic forms of reading – ‘relaxed’ and ‘serious’ reading – around which partial forms of reading revolve. Different types of reading follow different patterns in terms of bodily position.

One could say that one of the characteristic features of reading is that, after several hours spent engaged in this activity, it reminds the reader of a need for greater comfort. Thus, readers try to facilitate this activity or extend their reading time by limiting their fatigue to the intellectual level. In order to do so, they select comfortable seating or desks and armchairs that allow for greater relaxation, and try to find spaces that are suitable for reading.

I struggle to find the right combination of seating, distance between my hands and the table, head position...I find sitting down extremely tiring and I haven't discovered how my chair and desk should be. At that coffee shop I'd found the perfect environment...I mean, the way the table and chairs were, it was very comfortable for me... (Antonis, 31 years old, PhD candidate).

Effects of Reading

One sometimes “forgets” one “has a body”, as we see from the words of Eugenia, a 31-year-old secondary school teacher: “Often when I’m reading and I’m enjoying it, I’m not at all comfortable, but I keep saying, ‘Just a bit more, a bit more,’ and I can’t...I’m stiff all over!” However, it is impossible to forget that one is embodied for a long time while reading, because there are constant reminders of this fact. And yet there is a particular point worth noting here. Embodied reading is presented in the interviewees’ narratives with a different slant. Thus, at times it appears to be trying to manage and resolve the difficulties that arise from the activity itself, at other times it offers pleasures, while at other times it functions as an obstacle. But in each of these cases, the bodily element is constantly ‘present’. Sometimes, as Eugenia notes, the mere fact that one is an embodied being and ‘has a body’ which gets tired or needs to be comfortable is perceived as an obstacle that hinders either the accomplishment of studying or the pleasure of the reading experience.

I always dream of finding the perfect chair which will allow me to read more easily. But I think it’s to do with my legs, they can’t get comfortable [laughter]. My legs and arms.

Perhaps, in fact, the closest to the ‘bodiless’ reading that is desired is a body that continually changes its position during reading. These shifts may be the product of physical fatigue or an attempt to overcome this. The focus here is a body that needs or wants to continue reading but at the same must stretch or respond to a change in mood or alertness brought about by reading. While describing these changes, some interviewees reenact the bodily positions they adopt while reading.

Yes, [my reading position] changes a lot. I mean, I’ll start reading...I may be sitting normally, like we’re sitting now, and then I’ll put my feet up here, I’ll sit like this [she demonstrates how she does this], I’ll turn around lots of times in my seat...but I’ll stay seated, sort of. Sort of seated (Fotini, 20 years old, student).

“Relaxed” and “comfortable” are the adjectives most commonly used by the interviewees to describe their position while reading for pleasure. “Sort of” but “not quite”, “as if” and limbs spread out: these are typical of the accounts given in the interviews. Most note that their goal is to find the position that affords the greatest possible ease, relaxation, and restfulness.

In that position – what do you call it when you’re in bed but somewhere between lying down and not lying down – where you’re sitting but more relaxed. A sofa position. Not lying down as if you’re about to go to sleep when you just happen to be holding a book, but not exactly sitting down. More relaxed, like this...I don’t know how you describe that... (Andreas, 25 years old, gallery owner).

Savina (30 years old, journalist,) expressed a clear preference for reading while standing up, which is how she usually reads; this is also part of her personal reading history. Other interviewees also noted that they read standing up, but this is a less likely choice for them and, when not used as it typically is to consult a reference book (for example, a dictionary), it is either a secondary option or part of a continual change of reading position.

I often read standing up. I always used to study like that at home, I mean, I would even do my homework standing up. I would constantly move while I was reading. I move because I cannot sit for long. I can’t bear the thought of me sitting in an armchair reading.

By identifying these reading positions, we gain an immediate picture of embodied forms of reading. However, in order to explore this relationship further, the daily lives of readers can offer unique insights into reading practices, while the personal sphere proves to be particularly revealing.

4. The physical practice of reading in everyday life

4.1 Cleanliness and physiological needs

Nefeli, a 32-year-old doctoral student, recently had a child and saw her personal time – and the time she devoted to reading – eroded. She nostalgically recounts her habit of reading in the bath. The ritual she describes, with the creation of an appropriate space, cigarettes, and various teas, result in a mystical atmosphere, familiar to us from the cinema.

In the past, when I could do whatever I wanted, I loved filling up the bath in the evening, I would light candles, put an ashtray next to me, sometimes I would make myself a hot drink – tea or hot chocolate – and I would dip into the bath and read my book. It was like sitting at a café with a drink, cigarette and book, just that I would be doing it in the bath. Gosh, I don't know how long it's been since I've done that... I'm sure I'll do it again at some point. Imagine how it could work: my daughter could get into the bathtub next to me with her own book! That would be nice. I definitely used to sit in the bath for over an hour. It was a special ritual for me. And I've read lots of books like that...

However, following this drastic change in her life, at several points in the interview Nefeli seems to realise that the reading practices she has adopted will change over the course of her life as a result of the shifting demands on her time and interests (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.12). In her case the magnitude of the change in her life means that it is easier to see how her reading practices are changing, with old habits falling away and new habits emerging. Throughout the interview we see how she experiences her reading practices evolving and opening up through the dynamic of welcoming another person, her child, into her reading space.

Pausing for a moment in the bathroom, in this space we also see physiological needs combined with reading. “From the nooks of all sorts of ‘reading rooms’ (including lavatories) emerge subconscious gestures, grumblings, tics, stretchings, rustlings, unexpected noises, in short a wild orchestration of the body” (Certeau, 2010, p. 387). Here we see a variety of opinions. All the interviewees who take reading materials into the lavatory note that they can read anything indiscriminately. Most do not have specific books for the lavatory, although some prefer magazines or (somewhat less frequently) newspapers.

I read compulsively on the loo. It's impossible for me not to read on the loo... From the Ikea flyer to Dostoyevsky or anything else (Andreas).

Antonis offers a different perspective as he explains how he feels:

I've basically read books anywhere apart from the loo. That never crossed my mind. In fact, I find it vulgar. Well, no... I won't read a book like that! I don't like it. Basically, I'd only seen that in films and it seemed... I didn't like that image. It seemed to cheapen the book. I wouldn't... no!

Other interviewees, too, mentioned that they had “never thought of” reading in the lavatory, but Antonis' reaction and his somewhat irritated tone of voice when questioned about the possibility of reading while satisfying his physiological needs was striking. However, the lavatory remains a privileged reading space (Bollman, 2007; Manguel, 1997; Perec, 2005; Holbrook, 2001). Nevertheless, when reading is linked to physiological needs, there is a violation of the symbolic order, reminding us that where there is dirt there is a system. The perception of dirt as a by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter leads to the realm of symbolism (Douglas, 2006). It is clear that there is a kind of control over the activity of reading, an indiscernible ‘protection’ of it because of its association with the highest level of lit-

Effects of Reading

eracy, which is the result of cultural processes and has been achieved gradually through the process of socialisation (the expression of codes of behaviour), rationalisation (a strengthening of the boundaries between the conscious and impulse) and individualism (sense of isolation and distance from others and reflection on the body and the self) (Makrynioti, 2004). These relationships function as a foundation, they establish perceptions displacing forms of reading that, although popular, are normally suppressed or not recognized. Instances of reading that are connected with bodily functions are considered ambiguous. This was clear from some of the discussions with readers, who seemed to avoid touching on certain points or brushed over them with an oblique reference.

4.2 Climax

In defiance of a respectability that deprives reading of its material quality, it is the traces of the body that lead Antonis' narrative to a description of climactic reading events of a sensual nature, recounted through a filter of sexuality. His words highlight both the embodied and the potentially hedonic nature of reading, which is an innate action. These events fall within the pleasure zone of reading – “that moment when my *body follows its own ideas* – for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (Barthes, 1977, p.30).

I have also read while having sex. One girlfriend and I had got Embirikos' book... We've done it with Embirikos and Apollinaire – Don Juan in comic book form. She was lying face down, and I was on top, reading the book next to her neck...

At first Antonis is reserved, but as he elaborates on his experience, he develops a narrative that is almost celebratory, based on the argument that what he is saying is 'risqué'. He is aware that he is expressing something considered provocative – perhaps he, too, believes to some extent that it is provocative – while, as he speaks, I feel that we are entering the unspeakable and forbidden territory of reading, a zone of secrecy. It is possible to speak of an erotic space of reading (Barthes, 2005) where we encounter the “body of bliss...at the conclusion of a very complex process of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements (education, social class, etc.”. In the context of reading, however, we encounter the concept of pleasure more than the concept of bliss, the former being an embedded concept, a cultural concept (Barthes, 1977).

Given that these forms of reading have the senses and the concept of pleasure at their core, it is no coincidence that the signs of impurity and dangerousness can be ascribed to them (Douglas, 2006). The notion of control – of the body, movements, positions, behaviour, emotions – is at the heart of this process. However, let us turn to forms of reading that are considered more social.

4.3 The book and reader as dining companions

The relationship between reading and food – apart from being a common metaphorical trope (Schoenfeldt, 2003) – is a literal juxtaposition of stimuli which some interviewees enjoy.

I read while I eat. And that's a bad habit, my mum tells me...Because you don't notice the food...how much you're eating, you just keep eating...you get the books dirty, and the books themselves are dirty because you take them here and there...that's what she says. But I suppose it's just like other people who watch television. But I think it's not a good thing. Yes, I do it. But maybe not even for the book... it's doesn't show respect for the book. I don't know... (Anna, 29 years old, archaeologist).

Effects of Reading

Some interviewees are so absorbed in their book that they forget to eat, or put off eating for short intervals (“a chapter before I have something to eat or three more pages”), staving off their hunger pangs. However, some like to enjoy a book while they eat or vice versa.

The issue returns to a discussion of reading and its benefits, or in other words, the avoidance of its dangerousness. Carruthers observes that metaphors that use digestive processes as a vehicle to describe reading “are so powerful and tenacious that ‘digestion’ should be considered another basic functional model for the complementary activities of reading and composition, collection and recollection” (Schoenfeldt, 2003, p. 219). Just as eating involved the necessary separation of nutritive matter from dross, so did proper reading entail the continued discrimination of what is harmful from what is beneficial.

4.4 On/Off

Some readers associate reading with alertness. Nefeli notes that her reading time reduced significantly after having a child. She therefore mainly reads at night before going to sleep, while her daughter sleeps next to her in her crib. She implies that this change is a compromise as regards her typical reading practices, because for her reading places the body in a state of alertness.

Now I have to do it, because I would have liked to be fully alert while I’m reading, if you understand what I mean. Completely awake...

Tasos (32 years old, writer) shares this view of reading as an activity that produces a state of physical alertness:

I read to wake up, not to sleep. I have never understood why someone would read to fall asleep.

However, most of the readers I spoke to are not looking for a cure for insomnia. They read because they derive pleasure from reading (Holbrook, 2001). Nevertheless, some ‘use’ reading as a means of preparing themselves for sleep. Thus, another form of reading that was extensively discussed in the interviews was reading before sleep, or in order to sleep, or because sleep was proving elusive. The process of reading, combined with the body’s relaxed position, induced an intense drowsiness, as some interviewees noted.

I can’t fall asleep without reading. OK, I may read very little and fall asleep straightaway, but I always want to read something. Not because I have difficulty sleeping, but I’ve got used to reading before I fall asleep...I can’t help it. In ten minutes, I know I’ll be asleep...but I think to myself, what can I do in those ten minutes? I’ll read! (Anna).

The interviewees note other internal or external factors that represent barriers or obstacles arising as a result of the embodied nature of reading, leaving the activity unfinished. Marios discusses some of these:

If I don’t read for two days...I lose track of the storyline. For example, if I don’t have enough light, I may stop reading a book because the light above my bed is broken...

Physical limitations as ‘technical weaknesses’ are mentioned by Savina as reasons that discourage her from stopping a book midway or not choosing it in the first place:

If something is very difficult to read, I’ll probably reject it because my eyes get tired. I have astigmatism.

5. Is reading pleasure a purely mental act?

Having covered somewhat difficult ground through this discussion of pleasure, we see that reading is a field characterised by an active web of negotiations, whereby old practices are rejected and new ones adopted. Reading is not uniform: it can be processed, changed, organised, supplied with more or less connected actions. Readers reappropriate reading, creating new forms of this activity by incorporating both embodied and mental practices. Research highlights that reading activity is not restricted by bodily conditions; rather, possible limitations give rise to greater resourcefulness, making reading an activity that presents considerable variety (Sidiropoulou, 2015). At the same time, readers underline the social dimension of reading, since it incorporates values, ideas, conventions, identities and assumptions. This study followed autobiographical reports, which describe the content of the activity of reading through memory and the senses. The readers I spoke to found meaning in their reading, which is for them a sensual experience, and they focused on senses and desire. Their accounts attached particular significance to reading as an activity that accompanies physiological needs and bodily functions. It appears that this combination enhances the pleasure of the principal activity. Despite this, it is often difficult to specify with certainty which of the two activities is the principal one. Does reading serve as the pretext for the other activity or vice versa? Is the person who is reading in a public square on a spring day there to read, or reading because they are there? Although the subjects of this study attach greater weight to reading, it appears that these activities are complementary. These questions help to form a framework within which it is possible to understand the wider meanings of reading in modern life.

References

- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image Music Text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Fontana Press, Harper Collins.
- Barthes, R. (2005). *Απόλαυση, Γραφή, Ανάγνωση* (A. Korkas, Trans.). Plethron publications.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. Routledge.
- Bayard, P. (2008). *Πώς να μιλάμε για βιβλία που δεν έχουμε διαβάσει* (E. Lupaki, Trans.). Pataki publications.
- Besnier, N. (1999). Literacy. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 9(1/2), 141-143. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43102449>
- Bollman, S. (2007). *Επικίνδυνες οι γυναίκες που διαβάζουν* (P. Tsinari, Trans.). Potamos publications.
- Certeau, D. M. (2010). *Επινοώντας την καθημερινή πρακτική, Η πολύτροπη τέχνη του πράττειν* (K. Kapsampeli, Trans.). Smili publications.
- Douglas, M. (2006). *Καθαρότητα και κίνδυνος: μια ανάλυση των εννοιών της μιαιρότητας και του ταμπού* (A. Hatzouli, Trans.). Polytropon S.A.
- Goodman, L. A. (1961). Snowball sampling. *Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 32(1), 148–170. <https://doi.org/10.1214/aoms/1177705148>
- Holbrook, J. (2001). *The Reading of Books*. University of Illinois Press.
- Madden, R. (2010). *Being Ethnographic-A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Makrynioti, D. (2004). *Τα όρια του σώματος, διεπιστημονικές προσεγγίσεις* [The limits of the body, interdisciplinary approaches]. Nisos publications.
- Manguel, A., (1997). *Η ιστορία της ανάγνωσης* (L. Kalovrynias, Trans.). Livani publications.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching* (2nd ed.). Sage Publication.
- Nancy, J. L. (2009). *On the Commerce of Thinking-Of Books and Bookstores*. Fordham University Press.
- Perec, C. (2005). *Σκέψη/ Ταξινόμηση* (L. Tsirimokou Trans). Agra publications.
- Schoenfeldt, M. (2003). Reading Bodies. In K. Sharpe, & S. Zwicker (Eds.), *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* (pp. 215-244). Cambridge University Press.

Effects of Reading

- Seremetakis, N. (2008). *Παλινοδότηση Αισθήσεων, Αντίληψη και Μνήμη ως Υλική Κουλτούρα στη Σύγχρονη Εποχή* [Restoration of Senses, Perception and Memory as Material Culture in the Modern Era] (3rd ed.). Pedio Publications.
- Sidiropoulou, M. (2015). *Η ανάγνωση ως πολιτισμική κατασκευή- Τρόποι διαπραγμάτευσης στη χρήση των βιβλίων* (3rd ed.) [Reading as a cultural construction: negotiations of the use of books] (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of the Aegean. <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/35744>