

“Material Reading”

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When we think about reading literature, we may first and foremost think of the scenario as an encounter with a specific story or text, for instance with Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* or Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*.

While these novels were first published around 200 and 100 years ago, today’s readers still can and do immerse themselves in Austen’s narrative of a young heroine who masters the intricacies of early 19th century’s social and moral codes in England, and Mann’s tale about an old Hanseatic family’s decline in the course of four generations.

When we engage with literature, however, we do so not merely in the form of stories or abstract texts, but in form of books and other printed media, or in form of digital media and electronic reading devices. We encounter texts as *embodied* and *embedded* artefacts, in the sense of physically perceivable, tangible formats and editions, presented to us as letters, lines, and images printed on a page or displayed on a screen.

Throughout literary history, the material nature of literature has repeatedly been ‘re-discovered’. Since the onset of the age of print in the 15th century, literature developed and time and again *affirmed* the printed novel in its codex form as a powerful medium of readerly engagement – even now, in our contemporary digital age.

Around the beginning of our millennium, for example, so-called ‘multimodal novels’ put special emphasis on literature’s ‘bookish’ nature by using visual forms, typography and handwritten notations or even inserted loose materials as crucial parts of the narration. In doing so, they direct the reader’s attention to literature’s material nature, embodied in the book as printed artefact, and to the material and multisensory qualities of the act of reading itself.

The undeniable shift from print to digital reading in our increasingly digitised everyday life has equally helped us to understand to what extent reading has to be seen as an *embodied* phenomenon. As researchers interested in the relation of embodied cognition and reading have pointed out, the embodied nature of reading has two distinct dimensions.

For one thing, there is the *spatio-temporal* dimension that relates to what the body does during the act of reading. We use our different senses as well as our motor functions to perceive and interact with a textual medium, be it print or digital. Our hands hold the book or reading device, we leaf through pages or swipe or scroll on a screen.

Reading Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, correspondingly means to engage not only with the back and forth of its events, with the thoughts, conversations, and feelings of its characters; it also means to bodily interact with a materialized text, in whatever specific medium and format this may be.

For another thing, though, the embodied nature of reading also has an *imaginary* or *enactive* dimension. This dimension relates to the crucial role of the body in the imagined scenarios and the sensual and affective experiences that are created through the process of reading.

When we read, for example, about the Buddenbrook family in Thomas Mann's novel and how they gather for their traditional Christmas feast year after year, the increasing tension between the family members is as palpable to us as the richness of their sumptuous meals.

So, coming back to the beginning: If we think of reading first and foremost as a scenario where a reader encounters a seemingly abstract text that contains the story, it is easy to forget how deeply reading as a process and experience is rooted in our bodies – and that literature does not come to us as readers in a *bodiless* and abstract form either, but as a materialized and mediated text, as *embodied*, so to say.

Equally, in reading a novel, we are not merely engaging with a text as an allegedly abstract container of linguistic meaning, but also with the embodied experience of ourselves, our imagination, and the sensually perceptible world around us that all language is anchored in.