

01: What is a Reading Act?

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Abstract

Reading acts emphasize the event-like nature of reading. They are proposed as concept of research which focuses on the individual readers, groups of readers and the social, political, historical, intellectual, cultural and literary contexts under which readings take place; it also captures – if sources permit – to take the materiality of texts into the analysis.

From Reading Act to Interface Function

Reading acts are at the core of much of what READCHINA investigates. The concept is informed by earlier research into reading both on the side of literary and cultural studies and by speech act theory. A research focus on *reading acts* shifts the methodological focus of the investigation to readers as the producers of meaning, and thus as the producers of texts; it shifts the focus on the individuals, groups of individuals and the social, political, historical, intellectual, cultural and literary contexts under which readings take place; it also captures – if sources permit – to take the materiality of texts into the analysis. *Reading acts* thus emphasize the event-like nature of reading.

The ‘reading’ in *reading acts*, in turn, is conceptualized broadly as the interaction of individuals (or groups of individuals) with text through which they generate meaning from texts. Reading is an activity that consists of cognitive, sensory and emotive dimensions (Schön 2006: 1; for a similar take, see Snaza 2019). This emphasis on the generation of meaning has been put forward both within the field of cognitive research into reading, and by literary studies. In the latter, the reader was moved center-stage in connection with the debate about the “death of the author” (Barthes 1968) and with the argument by Foucault that the author is but a function of the text (Foucault 1991). Michel de Certeau moves on from this by pointing to the subversive potential of readers: As they wander leisurely through the text, they create meanings which may be entirely unintended or un-anticipated by the author of a text or by the institutions which claim authority over the interpretation of texts (de Certeau 1984 and Mandzunowski, Henningsen 2021).

The meaning that readers ascribe to a text thus may vary considerably from authorial intention. This has to do with the complexity of the cognitive, sensory and emotive dimensions of reading. (Not every reading turns out subversive or

dissident; yet each and every reading could potentially be subversive or dissident.) This insight has consequences for fields of inquiry beyond literary theory and beyond research into literacy training: For example, audiences need to be studied to measure the impact of propaganda –what if a carefully crafted propaganda movie is interpreted different from the propagandists’intentions? What about a book that is never read, but carefully displayed on a coffee table or book shelf? This book, even unread, clearly has a distinct meaning for its non-reader/owner –and here, the emotive and sensory dimension of meaning creation may prevail over the cognitive. Conceptualized as interaction with texts (as material artefacts and as words carrying meaning), reading, thus, is much more than what is commonly understood by the term. Instead, reading may include the borrowing of a book; the copying out of a text (or a passage of a text); the discussion of a text among friends, or in class; it may also include the reception of a text through other means than a printed or digitized artefact, such as a story-telling context or the listening to a text recited by someone else. Reading also includes, depending on the context of research, instances in which texts, or books are put to uses entirely unintended, such as using books as chairs, or as weight-lifting accessories.

Therefore, *reading acts* can be operationalized as meaningful units for analysis. *Reading acts* describe how people interact with concrete texts and the material objects on which texts are circulated. They point to concrete and distinct events, and to individuals who act by generating meaning in cognitive, sensory and/or emotive ways and influenced by the contexts and the material conditions of the object of reading. At first glance, the *reading act* may appear similar to the act of reading (“Akt des Lesens” in the German original) established by Wolfgang Iser (1976; 1980). While inspired by this concept, reading acts aim to move beyond acts of reading. Iser’s concept centers around the implied reader as a function of the text. He is not touching upon the concrete conditions under which texts are, were, or will be read, but instead makes rather abstract claims about implied readers within literary texts. The act of reading is a category of literary theory. *Reading acts* can be traced in real life. And *reading acts* look beyond the text, they also offer to grasp how readings acts and reading agents impact back on the texts read and on the contexts in which they take place which may be captured with the interface function inherent in some texts and *reading acts* (see below).

Reading acts can be analyzed in numerous fields of inquiry, such as, but not limited to the following examples from our research:

Digital Humanities: *Reading acts* can be operationalized into databases such as the ReadAct database, thus enabling researchers to trace reading materials, *reading acts* and variants of *reading acts* through space and time in qualitative and quantitative terms. Our data demonstrates, that –quite unsurprisingly – Mao Zedong was the most widely read author during the Cultural Revolution. The most widely read texts –in our sources –however turn out to be the Chinese classical *Water Margin* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Dumas, but non-

fictional titles such as *The New Class* (Djilas) or *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (Shirer) were also widely read. Closer analysis of the data also allows insights into how the texts were read.

History: In historical research, we may ask about the impact of reading materials or about the changing nature of reading cultures and reading acts. *Reading acts* may have impacted the individual reader as much as the societies in which they lived. Autobiographies of the Chinese Cultural Revolution contain numerous descriptions of *reading acts*. The authors of these texts narrate how reading inspired them in their own lives or proved eye-opening to them (Henningsen 2021).

Propaganda Studies: *Reading acts* can capture the impact of political propaganda. They require a shift in focus away from the producers of propaganda, from the institutions who disseminate propaganda and from the propaganda texts themselves. Instead, *reading acts* chart how propaganda is perceived by its audiences to ask, for example, about the participants in organized collective reading activities. That is, what did it mean when large parts of the audience chose to disregard the discussed content and rather use the assembly for social exchanges? Put differently, charting how collective readings were organized and how they were experienced by all parties involved reveals how they were employed as social performances by participants and as means to communicate ideas by the organizers (Mandzunowski 2021).

Sociology of reading: *Reading acts* also help to grasp what is happening in commercial bookstores. Some visitors to the Nanjing-based bookstore Librairie Avant-Garde (先锋书店), for example, frequent the store to take selfies of themselves, or to have a coffee. While they do not read in the store (nor buy books for later reading), they consciously chose the location for its carefully crafted atmosphere. The books do not serve the function of meaningless background-noise, rather, they are employed by the customers in their *reading acts* as markers of a distinct identity (Lin 2021).

Literary Studies: The concept of *reading acts* can then also be observed in literary studies. After all, similar to their real-life counterparts, fictional characters often read. These fictional *reading acts* serve multiple purposes: They are short-cuts to characterize the different protagonists in a story and/or the social, intellectual and literary contexts in which they move. The *reading acts* can sometimes aid in the interpretation of the novel at hand –and they sometimes represent (re-)interpretations of the texts read in a fictional text (Henningsen 2021a).

Fictional reading acts and the interface function: *Reading acts* in this context attain what may be termed interface function: Through the page of the book, through a tattered hand-copy or through an electronic device, the real reader accesses the text. Similarly, the reader within the fictional narrative in a book accesses the text through a distinct medium in her or his hand or before her or his eyes. The fictional thus text has an interface function through which

the “real” reader can access a second order text. Other than through an interface on the web, the full text is not readily available to click on and read for oneself. However, the real reader may gain deep insight into the second order text, in particular from elaborate descriptions of reading acts, or through *reading acts* that significantly propel the action in the story. Through the interface function, the two texts are brought into a connection that can be fruitful at its best – creating an imaginative space in which new meaning is bestowed by the reader through interpretation onto both texts.

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