

Remediation and attachment in the reading of e-books*

María Angélica Thumala Olave

University of Edinburgh

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‘The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be bettered’ Umberto Eco (2011)¹

Abstract: The principal question of this chapter is what kind of attachments emerge between readers and the reading they do on electronic devices. Insofar as books’ materiality is one crucial component of the love for them, this chapter is concerned with whether the differences in the surface properties of the codex and e-books lead to differences in readers’ attachment, and how readers experience the separation of content and device in electronic books. The chapter offers two answers to these questions. The first is that e-books support attachment to the practice of reading and to favourite genres as they accelerate access and expand portability. The second is that, up to this point, the experience of e-books is closely tied to the affordances of the codex. Readers’ judgment of e-books depends on their familiarity of and experiences with print books. This is another expression of the iconicity of books and it informs the objections to e-books amongst readers of print. Departing from existing interpretations of the attachment to print, the chapter argues that the accounts of those who refuse e-books are less a nostalgic

¹ Carrière J-C and Eco U (2011) *This Is Not the End of the Book: A Conversation Curated by Jean- Philippe De Tonnac*. London: Harvill Secker, p.4

reaffirmation of print's aura and more the outcome of the subjective experience of print's specific material features and books' iconic power.

Keywords: Remediation; codex; e-book; digital reading; post-print; attachment; aura; iconicity

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Introduction

Umberto Eco's remark is representative of a humanistic stance towards print that has been critiqued by media and book historians as normative, nostalgic, sacralising or elitist. The limits of utopian and dystopian accounts of the consequences of new media in history - enthusiastic or catastrophising stories about the impacts on memory, attention and social and political life of the invention of writing, the printing press, the radio, photography, cinema, television, videogames, or the electronic book- have been discussed at length by numerous authors (Striphas 2009; Bolter et al. 2006; Price 2019). It is not my goal to address the question of the future of the book. Instead, I refer to Eco's claim to highlight the power of the codex in readers' imaginations and experiences of books in the UK today. The influence of the humanist representations of the codex, part of the book's iconic power, is felt in different degrees by everybody, not only those who endorse a certain version of the history of the medium.

Digital books are remediations of the codex. A remediation has features that emulate another medium but also claim to improve on

it. In Bolter and Grusin's influential definition, remediation is 'that which appropriates the techniques, forms and social significance of other media in an attempt to rival or refashion them in the name of the real' (Bolter and Grusin 2000: 65). While this may change, a 'real book' for the readers in this study continues to be a print book, even for those who read entirely on e-readers. The principal question of this chapter is what kind of attachments emerge between readers and the reading they do on electronic devices. Books' materiality is one crucial component of the love for them. Do the differences in the surface properties of the codex and e-books lead to differences in readers' attachment? How do readers experience the separation of content and device in electronic books? I offer two answers to these questions. The first, developed in sections one and two, is that for those who use them, e-books support their attachment to the practice of reading and to favourite genres as they accelerate access and expand portability. E-books' convenience aids aesthetic immersion and its component processes of objectification and subjectification.

The second argument of the chapter is that, up to this point, the codex is the template with which e-books are evaluated by both print and digital readers. Just as the construction of the e-book emulates the print book, the experience of e-books is closely tied to the form and affordances of the codex. Readers' judgment of e-books depends on their familiarity of and experiences with print books. This is another expression of the iconicity of books and it informs the objections to e-books amongst readers of print. Departing from existing interpretations of the attachment to print, I argue that the accounts of those who refuse e-books are less a nostalgic reaffirmation of print's aura (Bolter et al. 2006) and more the outcome

of the subjective experience of print's specific material features and books' iconic power.

The taken for granted character of the codex changed between 1993 and 2009, the years of the two Mass Observation² directives which asked about reading and books. And by the time I conducted my last round of interviews in 2021 the digitisation of books was in full swing including a series of ups and downs in the popularity of e-books. This process has prompted not only various waves of moral panic about the future of the book (Birkets 1994; Gomez 2008), but most importantly for my purposes in this chapter, brought the codex into centre stage. As Katherine Hayles argues, 'the advent of the digital has catalysed the history of the book by bringing the codex back into visibility' (Hayles 2020: 6).³

E-books' remediation of print

Under half of the interview participants read on e-books in combination with print and only three use e-books exclusively. Those who prefer e-books invariably talk about convenience. E-books' convenient functionalities include access to hundreds or thousands of titles on a single, easily portable device, the ease and speed with which titles can be purchased, the ability to search up the meaning of

² The Mass Observation project is a popular anthropology project which gathers accounts of everyday life in the UK. A panel of volunteers write three times a year in response to questions about different topics. Volunteers are referred to as Mass Observers in this chapter. More information can be found in

<https://www.massobservationproject.amdigital.co.uk/>

³ This has also led to the meta thematization of print in fiction itself, a development that Jessica Pressman discusses as an aesthetic of bookishness (Pressman 2009).

words, the back-light functionality, and the lower prices or no fee at all for books, such as classics, with expired copyright.

Simon Rowberry examines the ontology of e-books from a perspective that combines book history and platform studies. Conceptualising e-books as platforms comprised of '1) technology, 2) text and 3) service infrastructure' (Rowberry 2017: 291) he defines 'ebookness' as the 'performative simulation of aspects of the book trade' (Rowberry 2017: 302) and e-books as 'a subset of digital books that focus on the manipulation of reading preferences and cross-device compatibility' for the primary purpose of reading rather than multimodal use (Rowberry 2017: 304). Rowberry writes that 'the rhetorical features of e-book branding are still forming. In order to help readers adjust, designers have incorporated skeuomorphisms or elements that refer back to the materiality of print culture, in the interface. The comfortable familiarity of skeuomorphism ensures e-books are likely to remain parasitic of print rather than exploiting experimental features' (Rowberry 2017: 298). The historical changes in the ontology and uses of the book as well as of other media like film and music call for caution regarding this prediction. For the moment, however, the iconic power of the codex is visible among book lovers.

Several features of e-books seek to emulate the codex. E-book hardware development has converged on a dedicated reader with an average screen size of six inches (or 15 cm approximately) which seeks to replicate the experience of reading single-hand-held print books, such as paperbacks and some hardbacks. The size and shape of e-book screens mimic tablets' 'flat representation of a page' (Rowberry 2017: 292). At the level of software, instead of the full connectivity of a webpage, the e-book formats (e.g. mobi, AZW and

EPUB) 'wrap' and display texts in ways that evoke the analogue experience of print. E-books include pages (and the turning of pages, sometimes with sound) rather than the scrolling typical of websites, and display of the 'width' of the book in the top corner.

Features that are marketed as improvements on the codex include that the text can be customised. The text in e-books is 'reflowable – that is, it is not fixed to the concept of a page but can rather be changed to fit the reader's preferences and exact screen size' (Rowberry 2017: 292). Also, the uniformity of software and its compatibility across hardware configurations, together with cloud-based storage, means 'users can read a single ebook across devices without losing their location' (Rowberry 2017: 292). What distinguishes e-books from other book-like formats, such as PDF files, is the provision of services, such as purchasing from within the software package, word-searching or social networking (Rowberry 2017: 298). While these services are central to the stories about convenience and attachment to the practice of reading, they also appear as barriers to the attachment to e-books.

Objectification and subjectification in the reading of e-books

Aesthetic immersion is a dual process of subjectification and objectification. Subjectification happens when people draw the book into the self, making its content and surface their own. Readers remember stories, characters, and the emotional experiences triggered by them and incorporate these into their personal biographies and sense of self. Book collectors store, display, protect, mark, or mangle their copies in ways that both reflect the social life of the book and the uniqueness of whoever owns them at any given

moment. A visibly previously owned book, one that has been read and marked and then passed on to a friend or relative, is a gift in the anthropological sense of the word: an object that remains bound to the previous owner, or owners. Print books remain connected to their previous owners or handlers through signs of wear, markings or marginal notes, for example, even as the print copy can be separated from its seller via payment and the end of any obligation between the parties (Muniesa 2008; Mauss [1924] 1990). Paying for the book operates as what Muniesa calls a 'detachment device' which ends the link between seller and buyer. After exchanging money for the book/commodity the parties 'call it quits' (Muniesa 2008) and the new owner can proceed to do whatever they want with their copy. The e-book, instead, can be considered to remain tied to its makers and therefore not entirely susceptible to appropriation and subjectification. E-books are a service rather than a commodity. Buyers of e-books have no guarantee that the content they can access today will remain available in the future. This is why e-books' property status is sometimes referred to as a temporary license to read. Readers also know that both the software and hardware which makes their e-books readable today will require constant updates and will one day, like cassettes or VHS, become obsolete. This is, of course, related to a wider economic and political issue about access to and control of digital information. In his examination of e-book production and circulation, Ted Striphas warns about the 'growing power of holders of intellectual property (IP) rights to make information appear and disappear whenever they see fit—often for a fee' (Striphas 2019:23). Ownership of a lasting object is of crucial importance to readers who wish to continue reading print but is not a concern for those who value convenience over subjectification of the

book as an object. One 49-year-old Mass Observer asks ‘amazon...with an e-book, do you actually ever own it?’

Objectification occurs when readers lose themselves in the object as they read it and when they submit to its formal and physical properties. Temporary abandonment (Gomart & Hennion, 1999) or immersion and enchantment result when readers voluntarily surrender to the literary techniques that can generate emotional responses, such as sadness, disgust or elation. Book owners are constrained by their physical copies’ volume or weight and seduced or repelled by books’ covers or smell. E-books’ affordances shape the experience of reading them in ways that emulate but also depart from those of print. As the discussion will show, the varieties in the subjective experiences of control and presence work in favour and against attachment to the e-book.

I take readers’ reports of their sensorial experiences seriously.⁴ At the same time, I avoid the dichotomy material/immaterial that readers use as if it equated that between analogue/digital. As Nick Prior shows in his study of popular music and digital technologies, the boundaries between the digital and the analogue are porous. Making digital music involves touching – of screens, buttons, and all manner of concrete stuff (Prior 2018: 181). Drawing on Benjamin Peters’ examination of the embodied and indexical properties of digital technologies (Peters 2016), Prior points out that ‘a strong ontology of the digital is untenable because it ends up being analogue through the sense acts of processing information’.⁵

⁴ How readers *feel* books work is key to the meanings they make of their experiences.

⁵ Nick Prior, personal communication, 23 October 2024

Furthermore, neither e-readers nor e-books are immaterial. The first are made of plastic, glass, metal circuits and batteries. The second are data stored in computer servers. They both have carbon footprints.⁶

When people refer to print as the 'real' book it is not that they are necessarily unaware of the infrastructures that sustain e-books. What they are doing is pointing to the phenomenological shifts in their experience, including the separation of content and device and the conditions under which they access the text. As has been documented by scholars like John Thompson for academic publishing (Thompson 2005, 2021) and Ted Striphas (Striphas 2009) and Beth Driscoll (Driscoll et al. 2018) for commercial publishing, the digital and commercial environment in which e-books exist operates under different logics. The new infrastructures permit the unprecedented collection of data about the behaviour of readers as consumers and the unsettling of the idea of ownership. As Striphas writes: 'E-books portend a shift away from the widespread private ownership of sellable consumer goods to the periodic licensing of intellectual properties' (Striphas 2009: 16). As will become apparent in the

⁶ Although for years now the understanding is that the knowledge sector's carbon footprint can be reduced by digitalisation (Chowdhury 2010), according to some measurements the e-book is not necessarily the greener option. For example, the research by Tahara et al (2018) cautions that the e-book has lower carbon emissions than print books only if the comparison sets aside the fact that e-readers are not used throughout their lifecycle, and, we should add, provided we also set aside the energy consumed by servers. Beyond considerations of carbon footprint, Jussi Parikka brings geology and the non-organic to the study of the materiality of the technological world. Through the study of artistic practices this work brings attention to how natural resources such as metals enable media as well as the impact of media upon the environment (Parikka 2015).

following sections, this is not a matter of concern for those who have switched to e-books and is resisted by some of the fans of print.

In her discussion of the changes to book production since the 1950s, Katherine Hayles (2020) notes that the terms in which the computational production of books and the 'postprint' separation between content and book are considered are misleading. 'The difference is emphatically not between the materiality of print and the immateriality of digital forms, as is sometimes proclaimed, but rather between different kinds of material instantiations and diverse kinds of textual bodies' (Hayles 2020: 3).

I focus here on how readers conceptualise and experience the different surface properties of print and digital books and their understandings of the ontology of the book, especially what they mean by presence. This exercise highlights further how the iconic power of the codex radiates through the interactions with paper and screen. The book's iconicity, its cultural influence, includes expectations about unity, fixity, stability and authority (Gitelman 2006; Adema 2021). These are indeed contingent and subject to change, but they hold great power in shaping the reading experience in present day UK.

Instant books! A seamless supply of fiction

Jessica lives in Edinburgh. She works in marketing and is married with two small children. She reads constantly, and 'mostly fiction', literary and genre fiction, including fantasy and science fiction, as her main form of entertainment and escape. Reading became especially important when she was breastfeeding her children. She had bought

a Kindle four years before our interview and when the 'Paperwhite' version appeared 'the one you can read in the dark, which has a back light', she switched to that. At that point she stopped buying print books. She thinks the number of books she reads per month has increased somewhat as a result. When I ask Jessica if her reading habits have changed over the years this is her response:

I think it's gotten better since I got a Kindle, it's the best thing ever. Because you don't have to physically buy a book or carry a book with you, it's just so easy to buy and everything. So I think that has really changed the way I read. It's just so easy. Before I would finish a book and I'd be like, 'oh I have to buy another book', and I'd have to wait until I bought one. Now it's just instant, everything is instant.

The interview then continues with questions about the senses in the reading experience. I ask if she used to smell books before the Kindle and if she paid attention to the texture of the paper:

Yes, I like the smell of books...I used to be not that bothered [by the paper] but now I really like cookbooks and I like nice pictures and nice smooth pages, but those get messed up anyway, but when it's all new it's nice.

I ask how the Kindle compares with the sensorial experience of print cookbooks which she appreciates:

I guess it doesn't fulfil that same thing but to me that wasn't important. It wasn't hard for me to switch. I know a lot of people won't switch, they just have this very strong connection with the physical thing but I don't have that. It's more about the ease of use, and it's just there are just too many benefits. The benefits, for me, far outweigh the whole physical connection, I guess.

I note that some people say they have difficulty going back in e-books; that when they want to re-read a certain page they find it is harder to find in the e-book.

Yes, it's harder to earmark and that is annoying, because especially if you're reading a book where it has a lot of characters and there might be one page that describes all the characters and I can never remember the names. Previously I would always just flip back to that page and maybe dog ear it or something, and now it's harder. But I still think it's worth it.

Although she has been a reader since her childhood, e-books' portability and the speed with which she can buy them, have meant that reading is now even more embedded in Jessica's routines. Over the three years she has been expecting and raising children and on and off work, the practice of reading literary fiction, fantasy and science fiction on a Kindle has seeped into ever more moments in her life; sustaining her during breastfeeding periods, small breaks in between meals and trips to the park or the supermarket, before going to sleep at night while her partner works on his tablet or listens to music next to her. The ease and speed of access afforded by her e-books have resulted in more time for the enjoyment of objectification, of being captured by a gripping story. She likes books 'that stay with you for a long time', such as *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Shriver, 2003). The novel is about a fictional school massacre perpetrated by a teenage boy and narrated from the point of view of the boy's mother. Jessica recounts the process of subjectification, of reflecting about and brining this story into herself when she explains: 'I read it years and years ago but still I think about it' and now that she is a mother she worries, 'Oh my god, what if I have a Kevin?' E-books have

strengthened her long-term attachment to the practice of reading for leisure and to the states of being which some of them stimulate.

Comfort and new beginnings

Elizabeth is a retired GP. She is married, has four children and lives in Edinburgh. She 'almost always' has something to read with her and usually has 'three or four books on the go'. She reads 'for the intellectual stimulus. I like the knowledge, the information and the way that things fit together in a network that I didn't know of different languages, different peoples'. When she was a teenager in the nineteen sixties she read 'Agatha Christie or PG Wodehouse, that kind of thing. Then when I was working, most of the time I would have John le Carré or something like that, spy stories or detective stories (...) Since I retired I find I read much more non-fiction'. She does about half of her reading on the Kindle app in her iPad. She is especially interested in travel and landscape writing which she describes like this:

I read a lot of a guy called Robert MacFarlane. I got a book as a present actually for Mother's Day, my son and his wife gave me it. I think it was called *The Old Ways*. I thought it was just the most riveting thing that I'd ever read. He had researched a lot of ancient routes and the myths and legends that surrounded him and the peoples that surrounded them. So, it's a very multi-disciplinary bit of writing. I thought it was just the most interesting thing. So, I've got some of his other books now. They're in prose but they're quite poetic, metaphorical kind of things. I really enjoy those very much. So, I read much more non-fiction now, either the travel-y stuff... Another example of one I read recently is called *Black Sea* by Neil Ascherson who is in Edinburgh. That was again a mixture of history, geography, sociology I suppose, going way, way back into prehistory of

the peoples that lived around the Black Sea, about which although I've been to Istanbul I don't know anything. I dropped history and geography in the second year at school. I did modern studies. So, I feel very undereducated in all of that and I find it fascinating now I'm older.

She offers to tell me about the books that she is currently reading on her iPad.

I've got *Rings Of Saturn* on the Kindle and *Time Of Gifts* is also on the Kindle. I'm reading another book which I'm finding very interesting, *Small Acts Of...* it's political insurrection, effectively. It's just the most interesting book, Steve Crawshaw is the name, he's some senior figure in Amnesty International. It's just the most interesting book, each episode is only maybe two pages, but he tells you about something that somebody has done to stand up to something that they thought was an outrage. A whole series of these episodes and it's just the most sensitive thing. It was probably that book that actually almost moved me to tears, I think. Something in there and I was just so impressed by what these people had done. So that's three [books on the go].

When I ask her to compare the experience of reading print and digital she explains:

I like the e-reader from the point of view that I can look up strange words in the dictionary, if you touch it, it allows you to look it up on Wikipedia or whatever. I like that facility. I find myself touching the page of a book thinking, I want it to start working! [searching for the word] I find books uncomfortable now, I've got arthritis in my hand as well as having a stroke and I find physical books uncomfortable, especially a big hardback book. Holding a book becomes painful for me.

Since her retirement Elizabeth has been looking after her grandchildren, volunteering in a school reading support program, gardening, learning to appreciate contemporary music through her daughter who trained as a composer, and indulging in her long-standing interest in poetry. She is a visibly energetic and curious person who wishes to continue to learn. She signed up to Twitter to be updated about books and is not afraid of technology. But she has not yet figured out how to get her Kindle to tell her how far she is from finishing a chapter:

I would like to know where the end of the chapter is because sometimes you want to go and do something, you want to put the kettle on or you want to go to the toilet or something and you think, I'll finish the chapter. I'm not very good at working it, I haven't discovered how to make it tell me how many minutes are left in the chapter.

Without the e-book Elizabeth would have trouble doing the intellectual exploration she has embarked on since she retired. The Kindle app has enabled her to sustain her reading habit and expand it in new directions, feeding her curiosity. Like Jessica, she has successfully adapted to the affordances of the e-book and appropriated it in ways that enhance her attachment to reading.

Aiding the organised (bookish) self

Stephanie is a journalist from the US who lives in Edinburgh with her husband. She is in her early thirties and combines print and digital to read 'literary fiction, satire/humour, autobiography/memoir, short stories, and young adult'. Her 'main genre of interest is young adult'. Reading is a core element of her sense of self. Stephanie illustrates her attachment to books and her bookish identity by telling me the

story of her engagement in Wigtown, 'Scotland's book town' in Dumfries and Galloway. Her partner proposed to her while they spent a weekend in one of Wigtown's many bookstores, presenting her with an engagement ring encased in a hollowed-out old book. Their story made it to the local press. Below is her reply to the question Why do you read:

It's been engrained in me. It was something I've always done. I enjoyed it as a kid, it wasn't like it was forced on me as a child but I think it's just something that's always been with me and it feels... I don't like going too long without reading because there are periods where I just don't have the time or I'll try to read in bed and I'll fall asleep two minutes later. I will have started a book and it'll be months before I get back to it. It's not a pleasant feeling for me. I love the escape of it and I love just feeling like I'm sitting in bed, I'm obviously in my home but I'm also in whatever world I'm reading. I think that's just such an amazing feeling. When people say they don't like to read, it's just unfathomable to me and I can't understand not reading. I think it's just part of who I am, which sounds really stupid. I don't know how to live without reading, I guess.

The e-book appeals to Stephanie because of the option to control the size of the font and use the backlight in her Kindle Paperwhite. Although her husband does not mind if she keeps the lights on to read at night, 'I like it on airplanes because I don't need that little tiny light, it's just there'. She goes on to explain:

I like the feel of a physical book and because I do that thing with the pages. Sometimes when I'm holding a Kindle it just feels wrong almost and tapping to turn the pages or swiping, but I don't necessarily prefer one to the other, I think, it's just a different experience.

I ask her to compare her response to the books in each medium:

I literally just finished a book, my Kindle said I had 58% left so I was like 'oh! I'm halfway through the book!' and I swiped to turn the page and it was like, acknowledgments. I was like, 'what just happened?' There were two samples of her [the author's] other books at the end that took up 40% of the Kindle thing. So I was like, that would've been very different had I been reading a physical book, I would've known I was at the end. That was the first time that's happened, that was really bizarre. Other than that, because it tells me how far I am, it tells me how much time I have left in the chapter which is quite nice because I'm a very slow reader. It's great, (...) It'll say you have nine minutes left in this chapter. It calculates based on essentially how often you're swiping to turn the page. They're getting smarter.

I ask if the fact that her reading speed is being measured is not stressful

I like it because I know if I'm reading before dinner and I'm waiting and I think, this chapter is 15 minutes, I don't have that much time so I won't even start a new chapter. Because I'm so slow I know it'll take me ages whereas if I'm just reading a physical book I'll just think, I'll just keep going. I hate stopping in the middle of a chapter. Or if it's not a break in the story. So, I quite like it. I could see how it could be stressful to some people but I think it's more organised for me in my head and I like being organised so it feels quite nice actually.

Like in the case of Elizabeth, the e-book offers increased control and enhances Stephanie's attachment to the practice of reading.

Reading for a solution

The feelings of enhanced control e-books afford, the fact that they make it easier to read, are also apparent in the case of Ifeoma. She has not completely replaced print with digital for her leisure reading, most of which is memoirs and autobiographies but mostly reads these as e-books. She combines the formats depending on the purposes of her reading and the attachment already developed with an author. For Ifeoma, reading has been a formative practice. Learning is not separate from pleasure so her account includes reading for both intellectual and spiritual development and escape. Books occupy several bookshelves in her home and she keeps hardcopies of authors she follows, such as Adiche. Reading is a part of her identity, a process that began when as a teenager she successfully used self-help and psychology books to overcome a disability. Since then she has 'always gravitated to reading as a way to escape and make sense of my situation or the world or to find solutions. (...) When I was a young mum, I'd read books about young mums and the challenges etc. Or when I decided to start a business or when I was having challenges with my kids'.

I ask Ifeoma to describe her experiences of reading digitally and to compare that to reading print. This is her reply:

I read different books digitally. I would read more fiction or things that...if I didn't want to particularly, if I don't have an attachment to a particular author, then I would choose digitally or if I was studying, where it's textbooks and it's potentially quicker and cheaper to get it digitally. If I want it immediately for something, a reference book or there's some texts that might not be available in print. So there are many reasons. For me it depends on availability but if I wanted to keep a book (...) or if I'm reading a particular author and I'm following what they're doing and I want to

keep it, then I would go for a hardback. Typically, digitally I would buy things that I don't... authors that maybe I'm either exploring or it's not available in print, or if I'm not particularly fussed or have an emotional attachment to (...) or if I'm travelling on holiday.

When I ask her to elaborate on the comparison she replies:

I think if you're not used to it, at the very beginning it takes some getting used to [e-books] but once I get lost in the story, because especially if I'm reading the fiction then the story carries me and then the physicality of how I'm reading it doesn't really matter. To be honest, if I'm reading a type of non-fiction text on it then, actually, I find it more convenient because I can dip in and out. I can be wherever, on the bus, on the train. So, depending on what I'm reading, it's actually more convenient. But as I said, it depends on if I want to read to get lost or if I'm reading my favourite that is just coming out.

The convenience of digital books support Ifeoma's quest for knowledge and spiritual enlightenment. She is what the sociology of religion would call a seeker (Roof 1993; Barker 1984) and, like many other interviewees, a highly reflexive one.

As I've gotten older I've just gravitated to autobiographies and memoirs (...) where I can draw inspiration and also to deepen my knowledge on a particular interest. I mentioned I'm reading a lot about Buddhism because I'm reorientating myself spiritually. So, it's really about self-knowledge, discovering, growing. I don't read as much genre fiction like romance or crime, except when I really want to switch off and get lost because that then is a different experience, literally, because find I can completely get lost in a story, whereas if it's non-fiction or memoirs, it's a different feeling.

The ease with which she can access new titles on her e-reader has assisted Ifeoma in her work on herself and her spiritual journey. Like in the case of Charlotte, below, her e-reading is a complement rather than a replacement for her reading of print.

The joys of serial reading

Charlotte is in her late forties, works as an accounts assistant and lives in Barbados. She reads every day on a Kindle and her favourite genres are 'romance, mystery and paranormal'. She describes herself as:

a reader with no exclusions. I am one of those people who can take a book to a concert and read (...) We had a concert here with Fantasia and I went with my sister, we were all dressed up, we took the requisite pictures and everything. We were sitting probably early, so we get a good seat, an hour before the show. I reached into my bag and pulled out my Kindle and she looked at me with horror on her face.

When I ask her why she reads she explains:

It transports me into another world. That's not to say that my current world has anything wrong with it, but there are people who play sports because that's where they get their energy. Reading gives me my energy. And there are people who have some hobby that takes their mind off whatever stresses they're going through. Reading does that for me. So a lot of the things that other people have that do these things for them, reading does for me. Reading is multi-faceted where I'm concerned. There are times when I have things to do when I get home and instead of doing them I will pick up the book and read because my mind has recognised that I need to disconnect. And so I will immediately reach for the book.

Charlotte was raised in a religious household. Her father is a deacon in a protestant church and she continues to attend Bible study sessions. The reading of the Bible and religious books is a chore whereas her romance and mystery reading is her 'calming, downtime hobby'. Unlike her sister, who she describes as more progressive, she avoids books with 'black writer style of swearing'. Describing her preferences she tells me:

I've read a lot of books like Dick Francis and John Gresham. I like books that have meat in them and for me, a novel should be fairly thick. Anything less than 250-300 pages isn't enough book for me, really... Harlequin is a little bit better than Mills & Boons. But I am more of a romance with mystery. Somebody got kidnapped, you have to figure it out, they fall in love. Stuff like that. I like some sort of meat. Or I like lawyer types series or a book not necessarily murder but it may have some murder in it. As long as it involves solving something. I like mystery, along with the romance.

Charlotte reads series and does so intensively. When a new book in the series she is reading 'comes out I reread the whole series before I read the new book because I will read it so fast that it will go quickly. Then it takes months to see another one, so if it has 20 books in the series I will reread all 20'. The Kindle is instrumental in keeping a fast pace. But the intensity is also emotional. One of several stories she tells me in order to convey how central reading is to her is the following:

I had a miscarriage that year when I went to England. It was at the beginning of the year and I went to England in the middle of the year, and I wasn't sleeping, I was binge reading. I would literally read a book, no matter what time of the day or night it was, I would get up and pick up

another book. It didn't matter if I had read the book before or not, I just got up and got another book and then I would see morning has started and I'd be like, 'oh I have to go to work, I have to get ready for work' and go to work. I did that consistently for weeks and weeks because my mind just would not let me rest. Eventually you read everything you have in your house but it didn't stop me from going back and rereading the books because I just could not shut my mind off. I was handling it very badly and I guess psychologists or psychiatrists would have some really classy explanation for it but for me it was just my way of dealing with it. If I didn't read, I probably would have committed suicide or something. Reading saved my life.

I share with Charlotte that some of my other interviewees say that depression prevents them from reading because they cannot concentrate.

No, that is not the same for me at all. If I am depressed, I will read. If I'm hungry, I will read. It does not matter where I am, what I'm doing, how I feel. Reading takes that pressure off of my body. I transport myself into a different world and I've a great imagination so reading has always been that place to go. It is very difficult to explain it to others but it's the thing that keeps me from going crazy. One would think that if you live alone, you have no children, no man in the house, no pets, you don't really watch television, then you must be bored to tears. But I'm kind of... how do you put it... I'm not necessarily an outgoing person but I can enjoy myself when I'm out. I am more of a homebody. They don't get that I need to recharge. Reading is a recharger for me. I can be in the middle of the noisiest party and I will read. And I'm fine, you may think there's something wrong with me but I'm fine in that environment.

While Charlotte's vivacity is unique, the practice of intense reading of e-books in series form, especially of romance and fantasy, is

widespread. As McAlister et al. (2023: 2018) note, romance 'was a principal factor in the uptake and popularisation of e-books and e-readers' from the 2010s onwards, part of a burgeoning publishing ecosystem that includes also crime and a blend of traditional and self-publishing (Driscoll et al. 2018). Other participants in this study who read series also do so digitally as the e-book version is cheaper, faster to acquire and occupies much less space.

For e-book readers convenience is experienced as an increase in control that enhances the subjectification of the practice of reading and the objectification involved in getting lost in the book, because it enhances their ability to mould the reading to their circumstances.

Unlike with mobile phones, which users tend to personalise with cases, stickers, backgrounds and ringtones (Bell 2005), in a clear process of material subjectification, no participant in this study refers to customisation of their e-books or tablets.

Refusal

The focus of this chapter is on the kinds of attachment that emerge between readers and the reading on e-books. So far, I have shown that while there is no attachment to the device of the e-reader or the object of the e-book, which together work as replaceable instruments for access to fluid content, attachment to the practice of reading is enhanced by e-books. This is evident in the accounts in the previous section of readers who are stimulated by the possibility of a virtually instantaneous and uninterrupted supply of reading material. In this final section I discuss the preference for print books over e-books. The point of the contrast is to illuminate the mechanisms of attachment

that this study is concerned with, in particular the iconic power of the codex and the interplay between surface and depth, action and passion. Love and the desire to possess converge easily, the drive to be in the constant presence of the loved object/subject easily understood in common language and experience, even when problematic. This section's stories of a drive to own, to touch, to point at, to pass on, exhibit this same attitude towards print books as loved objects. In these accounts, the full exercise of this love is curtailed by digital books. The affordances of the e-book provoke these readers to revert to ideas of presence and reality as co-presence in space and time which only print can provide them.

Closeness and immediacy

Angus is a journalist in his mid-fifties who lives in Edinburgh. Reading has been crucial for his career and his personal development. He reads science and history during the day and fiction in the evening. He does not read digital books because:

Somehow it feels a bit more distant when it's online. You're conscious this is on a website somewhere out there, whereas the book is right in front of you, you feel directly linked up with the author of the book. You feel almost as if the author is there with you. Whereas if it's online you feel rather detached looking at it. (...) It's that intimacy I think, when you've got the book, the author with you, on your lap or wherever, compared with online.

We know that screens' intrinsic features do not preclude intimacy or closeness. The ethnographic work on video-gamers, for example, describes in detail the immersive experience of near incorporation between the human body and games' interfaces and narratives

(Murray [1997] 2017; Keogh 2018). Arguably, there is no radical break between the sensorial experiences involved in holding a print book, touching a page, reading the script on it and being 'absorbed by the story' on one hand, and the actions and sensations afforded by certain videogames on the other. There may be some phenomenological overlaps here with the experience of the 'half-real' in video games. This involves the simultaneous engagement with the real rules of a game, which determine whether the player wins or loses, and the fictional worlds of the game (Juul 2011).

For readers formed in a print culture the event of reading a book is tied to a type of presence that demands analogical rather than digital or virtual interaction. Print books' presence *appears* more 'real' than e-books' presence. Readers who refuse e-books have felt the weight and bulk of the e-reader or tablet on their hands and seen the e-book clearly on display in a decodable format, co-present with their own bodies in the same room, at the same time as they are, and yet the remediated presence of the electronic book is either too opaque (I don't like not being able to turn the page back and find the character's name) or too transparent (where is the book?). The disconcerting feeling of e-books' virtuality is apparent in the account by Amber, a 26-year-old marketing executive. She explains her dislike for e-books by reference to tangibility, presence and 'real' ownership.

I can definitely see. Like there are times, like, for going on holidays and stuff, where you can just, like, you've just got one light thing and you can have as many books as you want on it. I can definitely see why it would be useful. But for me, it's just not the same. And I don't know, I could maybe see myself one day getting one to use for holidays and stuff, but I don't particularly want to look for convenience.

When I ask her to tell me more about the appeal of print for her, she adds:

Just having that specific copy of it, like, you know, that that's your copy and it's like... [the -e-book] 'is it really there in front of you?' Whereas if it's online, like it's less tangible, like you don't feel like at least for me, like, if I'm listening to... I don't know, if I've like, downloaded an album on my iTunes or something, I don't feel like that's like *my* album like *my* CD, you know? It feels like it feels different to me. And yeah, I think it's like having that attachment to a physical object. I just don't get it with digital things.

The e-book makes it harder, if not impossible, for Amber and readers like her, to make the book her own, its virtual presence an obstacle to the subjectification of the object. Striphos (2009: 181) notes how 'some e-book technologies literally have been programmed with locks, time limits, usage caps, and more, all of which allow hardware developers, software engineers, and digital content providers to oversee the circulation and longevity of e-books'. These 'locks' are a barrier to attachment because by tying the e-book to its developers they prevent its full incorporation into the reader's life and sense of self. Although most readers do not often consider the political economy of the technology, the phenomenology of the e-book is strikingly patent to them: they perceive what feels, aesthetically, as detachment devices (Muniesa 2008) embedded in the e-book as a service platform (Rowberry 2017).

Very much like the readers who relish what they perceive as a more active involvement with reading print, Hellen, an interviewee in her mid-forties who reads crime and romance as well as literary fiction explains that she sometimes will read first on the kindle and then on print: 'because I love them [the print book] so much'. In her case, e-

books are convenient but not the preferred medium. Her interpretation of this is that more of her senses are engaged in the reading of print.

I wonder whether it's because you engage with it more you've got the smell and the feel of it. Rather than just reading the screen just reading the screen or something I kind of associate with work, I read a lot of reports and stuff on the screen. With a book you've got more of your senses engaged, you can smell it, you can feel it, if you're really weird you can taste it, I don't do that, but you could and maybe that's why I prefer I prefer a real book, it's a tangible thing. And I think that is quite important to me it's, it's a thing, it's something that I own, that I like, that is attractive to me, it's, it's like a piece of art and it's yeah.

Passing on and gifting books

Heather, an avid reader of fantasy and science fiction, explains the importance of being able to share physical copies of the books she has enjoyed with her loved ones. I include below a section of our dialogue:

H: For me there is real pleasure in enjoying the book and then being able to say to somebody else, 'I think you'd really like this'. It gives me a real kick, knowing the sort of books that would appeal to friends or family, to be able to say, 'you'll love this', and then they come back and say, 'you're right I did love that'. So, as well as being able to pass books on, so it's not that I'm anti-e-books at all, it's just for me that's not how I've really chosen to interact with books because obviously you can't just go, 'here read this', or something.

A: Unless you send them a...

H: I think for some you can share, yes. But depending if that other person has got the right device and blah, blah, blah, so for me it's really about being able to share the books. I think what's kind of interesting is that you still get these articles in magazines and newspapers which are, is the book dead. Before it was like, is the book dead because now we've got television and now it's, is the book dead because now we've got e-readers. It's like well, not really, because it's not either/or. A lot of the people that I know that read using an e-reader or their smartphone, whatever, they still sometimes buy hard copy books and they're still sometimes reading hard copy books. It just depends where and how they're reading.

A: Would you under any circumstance switch to an e-reader?

H: Never say never. At present I'm quite happy with my reading habits. I'm able to read that stuff that I want to read. I think the thing for me about the e-reader is that I wouldn't just be able to go, I've read this book, now here you go, I don't need this copy anymore, you can just... it's not quite the same.

A: You mentioned that at the beginning, so that's important to you, the sharing of it after you read it?

H: Yes.

A: What you seem to be saying is that your reading would be incomplete if you couldn't share, is that correct?

Yes, my other friends who readers and stuff, I like to tell them what I've been reading, I like to hear what they've been reading, so I like the discussion part of it and I actually like the swapping of books.

The acute importance of subjectification of print books as objects that can be touched, held, stored and then given to loved ones which is evident amongst this type of reader, contrasts with experimental conceptions of publishing in digital environments, alternative models to individual notions of property that imagine literary and academic work as open, collective and virtual (Adema 2021).

Ownership

Like Striphas (2009) and Rowberry (2017), cited earlier, scholars have for some time now been mapping the new forms of property and access brought about by digital books. Alexis Weedon and collaborators have noted that the:

systematic classification of these emerging forms of the book by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions has sought to categorise books, artworks and media for retrieval and access. The Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR), originally developed in the 1990s, has an underpinning conceptual framework based on a relational database. FRBR is a conceptual entity relationship model that, at its top level, identifies a distinct intellectual and artistic creation: a work, expression, manifestation and item (IFLA, 1998) ... The relationships describe the link between the entities: the draft is the realisation of the story, the e-book is the embodiment of the story, the item is one particular example such as the e-book download or the on-demand printed paperback (Bennett et al. 2003; Eden 2006; Hickey et al. 2002). Significantly the FRBR distinguishes between the responsibility or custodianship of the different entities identifying who – person, family or corporate body – is the creator of the work, the realiser of the draft, the producer of the e-book form and the owner of the download. (Weedon et al. 2014: 112)

This type of networked or diversified ownership is obviously not aesthetically equivalent to that of print and is not part of the phenomenology of the reading experience for e-book readers.

Katrina reads fantasy and young adult novels intensely in both formats. She treats her print and digital books differently.

K: I highlight them in my Kindle. But if I have a book, I put bookmarks in, I don't write in my books. With the Kindle it's easier because it's easier to carry 100 books around than actually carrying 100 books around. But I love books still, I still buy books, the physical copy of my favourite books.

A: When you read something on the Kindle, do you then buy the printed copy?

K: If I really love the book, yes.

A: If the material book disappeared entirely would you care? If they were available on the digital version, would it matter to you at all?

K: I suppose it could be good for the trees but I would care, yes.

A: Why?

K: Because books are books, this is knowledge. This is something... a book can never break down or something, a book is a book. Kindle can die, a computer can die and not work anymore. The electricity can be gone in 15 years, then we would have books, and no books, no knowledge. In the electronic version, we would be all dead.

A: By dead, you mean...

K: No way of gaining knowledge except talking. So, books are important, they should stay.

Katrina's view brings us back to the remark by Eco at the start of this chapter, his claim that the print book cannot be improved upon, that it is already 'perfect' (Carrière and Eco 2011: 45, 122), a device that has survived for hundreds of years and is an efficient way of carrying information which does not need electricity or to be plugged in. The idea that print appears to be less ephemeral⁷ is often also invoked alongside the sensorial experience of print books. Invariably readers talk about their 'solid feel'. A retired Mass Observer explains: 'It is unlikely that I would ever enjoy reading books on a computer screen, however clever the technology, as the solid feel of a real book is part of its pleasure'. But this is also the case for younger readers in this study. Elizabeth, who was 19 at the time of the interview, and who reads young adult series and literary fiction explains why she prefers print and, in her account, gathers together several of the features favoured by others in this study:

[I prefer the print book] because I like to hold it. It's also being able to see your progress instead of seeing a percentage or something. I don't know how, but it does feel different, looking at the thing. Although the more I get used to it, the less difference there is on the e-reader. But yes, I do prefer to hold a book and being able to turn the page physically and touch the paper and experience it. And also being able to loan it to somebody and have them read it and have their thoughts and return it. I feel a little bit more connected to the book and the story and then to other people who might want to read it, on paper rather than the on the e-reader.

⁷ In the conversation with Eco, Carrière points out that given how quickly they become obsolete 'long-term media formats', such as the CD-ROM for example, have proven more ephemeral than print (Carrière and Eco 2011: 12-35).

Although research comparing reading on paper and screens is inconclusive regarding the impact of screen reading on readers' ability to find their way around the text, that is, their spatio-temporal experience (Mangen and Kuiken 2014),⁸ readers frequently invoke this as an important difference, even those who have switched to e-books. When I ask Heather, cited above, what is the most appealing thing about the hard copy for her, this is her response:

Sometimes if you're reading something and you get to the point and it makes you think about something you've read in that book earlier, it's much easier to flick through and go, oh yes that was the bit I read earlier that I want to revisit. I just like the physical element. Also, I think the other thing that I really like in terms of hard copy books is picture books, so I get real pleasure in choosing those for younger children that I know. I think that is something about, I suppose, when you're first encountering books and understanding how they work, having that understanding there is a beginning and a middle and an end, and that's how you get from one to the other, just that understanding of that physical format.

The flow of it and it's easier to see that, I think. Sometimes if you're reading something that's a really huge, fat book it can be a bit heavy but it's also quite nice to go, yes I can see how far I've got through this now. You can't really do that with an e-reader in such a satisfying manner.

Like Heather, for whom recommending and passing on to loved ones is essential, Elizabeth the university student cited earlier, plans to keep her print copies in order to gift them to her younger cousins. Some of the books she has now were given to her by her older cousins

⁸ The data about other dimensions of reading on screens also appear to be inconclusive (Hakemulder and Mangen 2024).

and other relatives. Both accounts illustrate how closely tied the aesthetic experience of reading is to the maintenance of important social relationships. These readers' social bonds are sustained by print books through the sensorial enjoyment which they wish to share with others.

The material presented so far shows two things. First, that e-books support subjectification and attachment to the practice of reading and to favourite genres as they accelerate access, expand portability and give a sense of enhanced control. Second, that for those who prefer print, books as objects that can be touched, held, smelled, stored and then given to loved ones as a form of sustaining their reading as well as meaningful social connections, these are affordances specific to the codex which are highly valued. These evaluations of the e-book vis-à-vis the codex revolve around key elements in media history and aesthetics: aura, presence, and remediation. I conclude with a reflection on these themes within the framework of books' iconicity.

Conclusions

In their discussion of the applicability to new media of Walter Benjamin's ideas about the loss of aura in art (Benjamin 1968a, b), Bolter et al. (2006) write that 'Benjamin was wrong if he thought audiences and producers would accept a final and irrevocable loss of aura in their popular media forms. What Benjamin identified was not the end of aura, but rather an ongoing crisis, in which the experience of aura is alternately called into question and reaffirmed' (Bolter et al 2006: 22). In their summary of Benjamin's argument in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin 1968a), the

reverence elicited by works of art that Benjamin called aura belongs to works of art that are unique. Reproduction is a threat to the experience of the 'here and now' afforded by traditional art where the physical presence of a painting or sculpture paradoxically produces a sense of remoteness and reverence towards its unique history (Bolter et al 2006: 24). The automatic, reproductive technologies of film and photography, on the other hand, mean the decline of aura. Noting that the concept of aura in Benjamin's later work about lyric poetry shifts away from nostalgia and sentiment (Benjamin 1968b), Bolter et al. point to the ambiguity in the definition of aura as the 'unique phenomenon of a distance, no matter how near' (Bolter et al 2006: 26). They do this to highlight 'the tension between the unapproachable and the approachable both at the psychological level and at the cultural and economic level (...) [which] ensures that aura as our collective or individual reaction to art can never simply disappear' (Bolter et al 2006: 26). Their overall argument is that the media landscape is characterised by a state of constant crisis of aura and aura's concomitant desacralization: the non-hierarchical co-existence of an auratic and a reflective style in media production and consumption ('reflective, because they reveal, rather than conceal, their own representational techniques'). Discussing VR technologies Bolter et al. (2006) remind us that 'any medium can potentially generate a sense of presence, if the user is made to forget the technology (...) [which becomes transparent] (Bolter et al 2006: 26). 'A media technology's capacity to generate aura depends on the degree to which it convinces the user that she is in the presence of the authentic' (Bolter et al 2006: 29).

The accounts by readers seeking to explain their adoption or resistance to e-books presented in this chapter show that the e-book

is a reflective/opaque digital object, one not different enough to be apprehended with independence of the light radiated by or the iconic power of the codex. These readers' stance might have things in common with that of video gamers' dual response of immersion and scepticism (Jansz and Martens 2005), enchantment and distance. While transparency and immersion are achieved for the reading event, especially for readers of romance, fantasy or science fiction series, the device and the e-book as an object remain opaque, its features remarked upon and considered in relation to the familiar codex.

The implications of this for attachment are significant. Insofar as the stories or the 'content' read on e-books is experienced as fluid and recognised as virtual, real but located 'somewhere on a server' aesthetic immersion will be partial when compared to the aesthetic experience of print. There is a structural limitation to attachment in the e-book itself which, so far, makes it a lesser version of print every time subjectification is at stake. Insofar as iconic experience involves the interaction with a material surface which affords also deep meanings through the imagination, then the bond between readers and their e-books will be weak even as the attachment to the practice of reading is reinforced.

Readers display a highly reflexive stance that ties in with the reflectivity of the e-book itself. However, I depart from Bolter et al. (2006) to propose that the language used and the aesthetic experiences invoked show the opposite of the desacralisation of aura.

This brings me to the final point. Can these readers' experiences be meaningfully understood in terms of a nostalgia for the book in times

of digitisation? I propose that there is attachment to the book icon across the board, in the case of e-book readers as an evaluative framework, and as attachment to the medium of the print book for those who prefer print. I suggest that this is not simply a nostalgic defence of auratic experience triggered by the opacity or failed remediation of the e-book. What readers are holding on to when they continue to read print is a rewarding and meaningful aesthetic experience which is tied to the materiality of the print book.

In their study of the vinyl record Dominik Bartmański and Ian Woodward (2015) note that:

Not all things analogue have lasting appeal just because our cultural reality got digitalized. Obviously there is more to the vinyl's enduring attractiveness...we believe vinyl's survival and revival to stem from a series of genuine cultural and sensual motivations nested alongside the material features of the object itself, rather than from an ephemeral retro mania inspired by a digital ennui. A particular lifeworld, a taste for certain experiences, and an embedded lifestyle, not a mere vintage fashion or nostalgic craze. (Preface)

Books have had a different trajectory to that of the vinyl record because they have not gone underground and then re-emerged. However, they share with vinyl in the significance of the material surfaces, and the subjectification and objectification that these surfaces afford.

The attachment amongst committed readers is not a simple matter of nostalgia but grounded in an actual experience that is rewarding and valued in its own right.

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