

“Which, Remarkably Enough, Does Not Get Anyone Anywhere” Of Cameramen, Irrelevant Structures of Relevance, and the lackened Space of Appearance

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Robert Musil,
*The Man
Without Qualities:*
Volume 1. Trans.
Eithne Wilkins
and Ernst Kaiser
(Capricorn Books,
1965).

“Which, remarkably enough, does not get anyone anywhere” is the heading of the first, short chapter of one of the most celebrated modernist novels, Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*.⁰¹ Musil begins by listing, in some detail, what are the somewhat irrelevant meteorological conditions of a fine August morning in Vienna. Soon after, we witness a traffic accident, which a generic upper-middle-class couple observes before the event sinks once more into insignificance. With this non-beginning, Musil anticipates a theme of the novel that also manifests itself in other strands of the plot: the failure—now relished, now tragicomic—to create and experience relevance, with even the failure itself struggling to attain relevance.

In this essay, I would like to focus my reading on these, the novel’s opening pages, doing so with the assistance of Alfred Schütz and Hannah Arendt. For what Musil stages here with seemingly offhand irony is a problem of philosophical concern, from their various perspectives, to both authors: What holds the world together and makes it an oriented place for people who appear and act before one another? And what is it in the development of modernity that so unsettlingly questions this orientedness, that restructures appearance? By weaving the ideas of all three authors together, I would like to approach the question of how the concept of a space or spaces of appearance might be understood. Whereas Schütz provides structures of relevance as the decisive criterion, Arendt uses her phenomenological description to develop a normative perspective which makes it possible to trace the strengthening and slackening of ‘the space of appearance’ as a space of freedom. For his part, Musil claims an author’s right to make appear, thereby making perceptible, from a mobile multi-perspectivism, how various spaces of appearance

overlie one another and how this feels to his protagonists: as a space of appearance that allows itself to be glimpsed just before once more retreating, and whose relevance is of a completely arbitrary (and hence non-existent) character. It is a (theatrical) stage of modernity, a condition in which “the world,” as Arendt would say, “has lost its power to gather [people] together, to relate and to separate them”:

The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.⁰²

It is perhaps no coincidence that Musil’s first chapter should culminate in a road accident. Not only speed, increased by technology to an unprecedented degree, causes people and machines to “fall over each other.” The world itself no longer stabilizes the interstices. This shall be explored in the following.

Schütz’s Structures of Relevance

Let us begin with Alfred Schütz and a brief excursion into his theory of relevance, which will provide a first lens through which to examine the passages by Musil. Schütz approaches the subject of relevance from the vantage point of the theory of consciousness, combining it with questions from social philosophy, particularly that of acquired and inter-subjectively shared ‘social’ knowledge. The phenomenological sociologist observes that emergence and appearance in the social field correlate with certain structures of attention and weighting. While these undoubtedly are socially transmitted and formed, their sequence is subject to biographical variation, and they are experienced in the first person. Schütz distinguishes between motivational, thematic, and interpretational relevances. In short: *why* does something become a theme for somebody, *what* is the theme, and *how*? For instance, what stands out in a space to the person entering it is a matter of *motivational relevance* (in Schütz’s example, it is a coiled rope in a hotel room that initially looks like a snake,⁰³ though, to take a different example, it may also be a

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Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition
(University of
Chicago Press, 1998),
52–53.

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Alfred Schütz and
Thomas Luckmann,
*The Structures
of the Life-World*
(Heinemann, 1974),
185–86.

Alfred Schütz,
"Some Structures
of the Life-World,"
in *Collected Papers III:
Studies in
Phenomenological
Philosophy*,
ed. Ilse Schütz
(Nijhoff, 1970), 124–25.

street scene in which one observes people flocking to a certain spot). Motivational relevance helps a person to determine their situation, which confronts them as a certain texture of significance and thereby constitutes a 'space of appearance': a space in which something is always already apprehended as something existing in a certain contextuality. Any conscious act (perception, memory, imagination, etc.) in which something reveals itself has this structure; there is no 'consciousness of something' that is not permeated with structures of relevance. Spaces of appearance—understood here primarily as mundane correlates of fields of consciousness—thus are constituted through structures of relevance that determine motivation, theme, and interpretation. Something that initially became a theme motivationally—through plans, interests, or by being affected—in the next step, that of receiving attention, acquires autonomy and thereby becomes questionable, taking on "*thematic relevancy*." This relevance guides the person's efforts to determine what is important about the theme that has now become interesting, how far they are to go in determining the object, and what is to come first—"first things first," according to Schütz, "giving thus in colloquial language an excellent definition of the thematically relevant."⁰⁴ The matter will therefore initially be one of establishing whether one is indeed faced with a snake or rather with an ordinary rope, or what happened to cause people to flock to a certain place in the streets. How something of thematic relevance is interpreted and understood, however, is a matter of "*interpretational relevance*," the angle or viewpoint with regard to which the theme may be understood. Combined with motivational relevance, it is, moreover, interpretational relevance that determines the point at which a process of interpretation can be terminated, when a problem can be considered "solved."

Now, to raise this question to the level of intersubjectivity, it should be added that Schütz also distinguishes between "intrinsic" (i.e., self-chosen) and "imposed" relevances. Imposed relevances may be of a non-subjective kind to the extent that they disrupt, distract, or inhibit my own structures of relevance: a falling flowerpot or, more meaningfully, an event that astounds me and inexorably attracts my attention. But imposed relevances, to Schütz, also essentially include all

social relevances. Human encounters are encounters between systems of relevances. Although we can never fully know another person's system of relevance, it is possible to "adjust to one another" by means of responsive, perhaps cooperative, but in any case coordinative behavior, with each person acting and reacting to the other. By such means, shared, collective relevances may develop. As long as this happens as part of a communicative exchange, we may be reciprocally under the other's "control," but we are aware of the fact.⁰⁵ This, according to Schütz, changes as the social world becomes increasingly anonymous under conditions of modernity:

But the more the other becomes anonymous and the less his place in the social cosmos is ascertainable to the partner, the more the zone of common intrinsic relevances decreases and that of imposed ones increases. Extending reciprocal anonymity of partners is, however, characteristic of our modern civilization. We are less and less determined in our social situation by relationships with individual partners within our immediate or mediate reach, and more and more by highly anonymous types which have no fixed place in the social cosmos.⁰⁶

In a modern world increasingly dominated by technology, in which potential distances are reduced and the scope for anonymity accordingly increases, an increasing imbalance emerges between the relevances that we choose and those that are imposed on us. Eighty years on, Schütz may seem to describe this technological dominance in slightly dated terms, yet it still strikes at the core of the matter:

No spot of this globe is more distant from the place where we live than sixty airplane hours; electric waves carry messages in a fraction of a second from one end of the earth to the other; and very soon every place in this world will be the potential target of destructive weapons released at any other place.⁰⁷

To the extent that it prevents me from synchronizing my system of relevances with concrete others, Schütz takes this fundamental change to the reach of human action to constitute a loss of autonomy. It is indeed impossible to achieve personal coordination with such abstractions as 'the financial markets,'

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Alfred Schütz,
"The Well-Informed
Citizen: An Essay on
the Social Distribution
of Knowledge,"
Social Research 13,
no. 4 (1946): 471.

06
Schütz,
"The Well-Informed
Citizen," 472–73.

07
Schütz,
"The Well-Informed
Citizen," 473.

'the arms race,' 'the climate crisis,' or with any system described as 'too big to fail.' Nonetheless, they determine our social and political reality, they are 'imposed' relevances in the most emphatic sense. In the essay from which these observations are drawn, entitled "The Well-Informed Citizen," Schütz analyses a variety of ideal types and their different responses to imposed relevances. Whereas the "man on the street" simply accepts them unquestioningly as circumstances with which he has to deal, the "well-informed citizen" is aware that these are not mere instances of facticity but rather social structures. Yet he, too, goes no further than wanting to understand and classify them, choosing whatever frame of relevance seems fit for the purpose. "The expert," by contrast, has always already selected his frame of relevance, allowing him to encounter all events as susceptible to analysis from a certain perspective. It should be stressed that Schütz does not identify these ideal types with particular persons or groups of persons, instead assuming that all these types are realized in each of us. They are perspectives in which imposed relevances assert themselves in various ways: as a factual situation to be dealt with; as an explicable situation susceptible to a (probably one-sided) solution; or as a situation to be judged according to a range of frames of relevance and interpretation. In the modern world, the well-informed citizen, called upon to exercise his judgement, faces a number of challenges, for which he must rely on a great deal of socially mediated knowledge. Moreover, he

finds himself placed in a domain which belongs to an infinite number of possible frames of reference. There are no pregiven ready-made ends, no fixed border lines within which he can look for shelter. He has to choose the frame of reference by choosing his interest; he has to investigate the zones of relevances adhering to it; and he has to gather as much knowledge as possible of the origin and sources of the relevances actually or potentially imposed upon him. In terms of the classification previously used, the well-informed citizen will restrict, in so far as is possible, the zone of the irrelevant, mindful that what is today relatively irrelevant may be imposed tomorrow as a primary

relevance and that the province of the so-called absolutely irrelevant may reveal itself as the home of the anonymous powers which may overtake him.⁰⁸

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Schütz,
"Well-Informed
Citizen," 475–76.

There is something ominous about Schütz's account, suggesting an increasing difficulty of dealing with growing anonymity, increased ranges of action and their consequences. Schütz complains that politics has been trivialized by being increasingly responsive to "public opinion," a fabricated ideal type, modeled only on the entirely self-centered "man on the street." Merely reacting to circumstances means failing to understand and to change the underlying causes. Schütz, then, is concerned with opinion formation and hence with plural perspectives, which by virtue of their different frames of relevance produce differently weighted spaces of appearance. One might say that Schütz is concerned with making transparent spaces of appearance that are not merely to be accepted as the circumstances but to be understood as determined by relevance. On the one hand, this produces an enlightening effect; on the other, it places the well-informed citizen in the position of a spectator, who, by changing between frames of relevance at will (as one might change an optical lens), can pass through spaces of appearance in different configurations. Yet this is not entirely arbitrary, since imposed relevances do after all set a certain framework of facticity; nor is it independent of collective modes of perception, by means of which certain frames of relevance impose themselves as dominant. If, however, one ever wanted to proceed to action, one would not only have to decide on suitable frames of reference, they would also have to be harmonized with expert and above all with everyday perspectives:

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Schütz,
"Well-Informed
Citizen," 467.

It is this zone of things taken for granted within which we have to find our bearings. All our possible questioning for the unknown arises only within such a world of supposedly preknown things, and presupposes its existence. Or, to use Dewey's terms, it is the indeterminate situation from which all possible inquiry starts with the goal of transforming it into a determinate one.⁰⁹

There must, in other words, exist a fixed point in the lifeworld from which this play of systems of relevance can be set into motion in the first place—and from which something like meaningful action is even possible. Yet it is precisely this secure anchoring in the lifeworld that can no longer be taken for granted, that has become movable. With these initial thoughts in mind, let us proceed to the analysis of the first pages of *The Man Without Qualities*.

Musil's Zooming In and Zooming Out

A literary text is capable of giving a special kind of visibility to both subjective and objective structures of relevance. Texts are able to multiply perspectives or, as in the present case, to perform perspective for themselves. By so doing, they expose structures of appearance, not by approaching them as a philosophical problem, but through their literary representation. Musil, for instance, uses the devices of ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ like a cameraman, moving between the registers of scientific abstraction and human ‘common sense,’ leaving us uncertain as to how to apprehend what.¹⁰ This is something, it seems, which is no longer determined by the things themselves or by the lifeworldly context as the condition of thematization.

Beginning “over the Atlantic” in the language of science, of meteorology, we pan—taking in our sweep the planets “and many other important phenomena”—towards a place, a season, a year: “In short, to use an expression that describes the facts pretty satisfactorily, even though it is somewhat old-fashioned: it was a fine August day in the year 1913.” The perspective of the lifeworld is still reasonably certain of

- 10 Jonathan Crary argues that the various kinds of ‘focus’ were only ‘invented’ as a result of innovations in lens and imaging technology between 1880 and 1905. This also made it possible to generate new forms of attention. See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (MIT Press, 1999). Musil’s technique of zooming in and out may be seen as the literary realization of such a claim and of its subjective effects. This is also the point of my comparison with Dziga Vertov’s “Man with a Movie Camera,” which translates the acceleration characteristic of the modern age into cinematic techniques, thereby allowing it to be experienced afresh by the audience.

being best suited to “describ[ing] the facts” while aware that it is already “old-fashioned.” In this zooming in and out between the lifeworldly concern for what is important and factual on the one hand and the structure of relevance of something greater, process-driven, dynamic, and anonymous on the other, the reader continues to be productively bewildered: from the weather via the city and the walkers to the event of the accident and its interpretation. While we follow, as it were, a literary Dziga Vertov, diving into the foaming vortex of the city, we find uniqueness, unmistakability affirmed in its recognizability: an observer familiar with the city would recognize it “with his eyes shut,” averring that cities have personalities and thus “can be recognised by their pace just as people can by their walk.” However, should we deceive ourselves as to this ability to perceive, holistically and immediately, a city’s unmistakable and unique “who,” then “what does it matter? The excessive weight attached to the question of where one is goes back to nomadic times, when people had to be observant about feeding-grounds. ... This distracts attention from more important things.”¹¹

Musil plays with thematic and interpretational relevances, thereby making our (usually lifeworldly) motivational relevances seem questionable. Perhaps no longer appropriate? What are these “more important things,” anyway? Where should one stop with interpretation? Does one not settle for insufficient exactitude (“what particular shade of red ... in terms of wave-lengths” is a nose?) and, at the same time, an excess of irrelevant individuality (why Vienna when it might just well be any other capital)?¹² And in what formations of appearance does a relevant matter show itself? Is the possibility of changing perspective and the frame of relevance at will not as shattering and yet as much of a laughing matter as the gaze into space—at least, as soon as one no longer sees the sublime there or the ‘moral law within me’ (Kant) but only an infinite number of possibilities and a great deal of nothingness?

The walkers to whom our focus is directed at any rate are “far from having such an impression.” As members of a privileged social class, they are not that easily discombobulated: “in the exquisite underlinen of their minds—they knew who they were and that they were in their proper place in a

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Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
3–4.

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Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
4.

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Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
4.

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Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
4–5.

capital city that was also an imperial residence.”¹³ This knowledge of ‘who one is’ is secured in status. It appears outwardly—in posture, in dress, in status—while simultaneously stabilizing inward self-perception. Yet here too individualizing self-reassurance lapses into anonymity and irrelevance. The man and the woman might be Paul Arnheim and Ermelinda Tuzzi, two characters who will play major roles in the novel (and who are also constantly engaged in futile efforts to create importance and exude an air of meaningfulness around themselves). Yet it is not they, as we are told. We are thus “confronted with the enigma of who they were. If one has a lively imagination one is very often conscious of such enigmas in the street, but they become resolved in a remarkably easy manner by being forgotten, unless in the next thirty yards one can remember where one has seen these two people before.”¹⁴ The public space of a major city makes ‘zooming in’ a fleeting pastime. The enigma of who someone might be and how much time one can devote to resolving it can barely be kept alive until the next corner. After all, it too is irrelevant.

Then, suddenly, something happens. A pedestrian is hit by a lorry. A crowd soon gathers around the spot “like bees round the entrance to their hive.” The general feeling among the bystanders is that the pedestrian has only his own lack of attention to blame. They listen to the driver’s expostulations, examine the unfortunate man lying on the pavement, and make a halfhearted effort at giving first aid. Attention is heightened all round, there can be no doubt as to the relevances: after all, a human life hangs in the balance and questions of guilt and responsibility are raised. But thanks to the modern division of labor, the bystanders can rely on the swift appearance of an ambulance on the scene, bringing professional medical help. The lady and her companion move closer, step back again, hesitant in their reactions: “The lady had a disagreeable sensation in the pit of her stomach, which she felt entitled to take for compassion; it was an irresolute, paralyzing sensation.” Thankfully, her companion is at hand with a rationalizing, technical explanation, bringing the conversation around to lorries and their excessively long braking distances. Although she knows nothing about braking distances, the lady is somehow reassured, finding “that by this means the horrible happening could be fitted into some kind

of pattern, so becoming a technical problem that no longer directly concerned her.” The ambulance appears, the injured man receives first aid and is carried off, and everything looks so clean and orderly that “[p]eople walked on with the almost justifiable impression that what had occurred was an event within the proper framework of law and order.”¹⁵ This is the moment for the gentleman to make a remark about American accident statistics:

“Do you think he is dead?” his companion asked, still with the unjustified feeling that she had experienced something exceptional.
 “I should think he’s alive,” the gentleman replied.
 “It looked as though he were when they lifted him into the ambulance.”¹⁶

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 Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
 5–6.

16
 Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
 6.

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 Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
 5.

The opening chapter, “Which, Remarkably Enough, Does Not Get Anyone Anywhere,” closes with this generically compassionate statement of compassion for the nameless fellow citizen. Did something out of the ordinary just occur? In statistical terms, certainly not. Nor even in personal terms, the affective response being too “irresolute, paralysing.”¹⁷ But was this not a public event, or at least an event that took place in the public realm and garnered appropriate attention? Do we not find a ‘shared reality’ actualized here?

We certainly do, albeit a reality marked by powerlessness and irrelevance. With this first chapter, Musil lifts the curtain on a stage that, as it were, collapses into itself. It is a meta-space of appearances, rendering different spaces of appearance visible. By zooming in and out, it throws light on the structures of relevance in which what appears either takes its place or disappears again. This is not a morally concerned diagnosis of the alienation of modern man, his indifference and his inability to express feelings or form relationships, etc. Rather, it is an analytic view of how the world and meaning are constituted in an everyday situation. The participants do not lack social, actional, or communicative dispositions: the occurrence (the accident) receives appropriate notice, the situation is discussed, help is offered, a functioning order is in place. The anonymous male protagonist even tries to shift from the perspective of the literal “man on the street” to that of the “well-informed citizen” (possessing expert knowledge),

Musil Seen Through the Lens of Arendt's Critique of Modernity

Allowing Hannah Arendt as well as Alfred Schütz to assist us in our reading of Musil deepens the diagnosis of modernity beyond structures of relevance and affords a systematic perspective on what a ‘space of appearance’ might mean (I shall discuss the second point below). At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Arendt’s finding that “the world ... has lost its power to gather [people] together, to relate and to separate them.”²⁰ What is this supposed to mean—and, specifically, what aspect of “world” does she mean? Surely there can be no question that the world (still) appears and that the things, life-forms, and persons within it appear in some coherent arrangement. Arendt is not claiming that some kind of collective psychosis has taken hold. But the opening passages of *The Man Without Qualities* offer an unruffled explanation of what might be amiss: the lifeworld appears as a

scene contemplated from a distance, one in which no real involvement is possible. This lifeworld of a modern society lacks “reality” because of a shift in perspective, which makes the world be seen from space and the individual in their function in the greater life-process of society. This is a perspective that even the individual is unable to escape: “The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society.”²¹ In this context, Arendt also discusses the affinity between atomic, planetary, and social “systems” as they present themselves to us:

[T]he reason ... why the behavior of the infinitely small particle is not only similar in pattern to the planetary system as it appears to us but resembles the life and behavior patterns in human society is, of course, that we look and live in this society as though we were as far removed from our own human existence as we are from the infinitely small and the immensely large which, even if they could be perceived by the finest instruments, are too far away from us to be experienced.²²

Musil, it might be concluded, anticipates both this diminution of experience (“*Erfahrungsschwund*”²³) and the paralysis of the spectrum of action. For the manifold possibilities that become palpable in his descriptions tend to be mathematical rather than motivational, tied to action. Arendt accordingly finds “world-alienation” rather than “self-alienation” to be the great problem of the modern age.²⁴ There are also economic reasons for this: besides all the technological developments that shift the ‘Archimedean point’ from the Earth itself into space (e.g., the telescope), the early modern era witnesses an accumulation of capital that results in the capitalist mode of production and its preoccupation with adding value. The “world” and all questions of politics thus come to be understood primarily in economic terms, as a great productive household. Economic theories such as that developed by Adam Smith postulate the existence of an ‘invisible hand,’ furthering the common good through the pursuit of private interests:

21
Arendt,
Human Condition,
322.

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Arendt,
Human Condition,
323.

23
Hannah Arendt,
*Vita activa oder
Vom tätigen Leben*
(Piper, 1981), 412;
Arendt,
Human Condition,
323.

24
Arendt,
Human Condition,
254.

25
Hannah Arendt,
*The Origins
of Totalitarianism*
(Harcourt Brace
Jovanovich, 1973),
145.

26
Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
5.

27
Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
7–8.

Private interests which by their very nature are temporary, limited by man's natural span of life, can now escape into the sphere of public affairs and borrow from them that infinite length of time which is needed for continuous accumulation. This seems to create a society very similar to that of the ants and bees where “the Common good differeth not from the Private; and being by nature enclined to their private, they procure thereby the common benefit.” Since, however, men are neither ants nor bees, the whole thing is a delusion.²⁵

It is no coincidence that both ants and bees should be mentioned in the first pages of *The Man Without Qualities*. Musil describes people flocking to the scene of the accident “like bees round the entrance to their hive,”²⁶ and in the next chapter, which introduces Ulrich, the titular protagonist, he gives himself over to thoughts that paradigmatically anticipate Arendt's late modern man, the *animal laborans*:

The expenditure of muscular energy made by a citizen [*Bürger*] quietly going about his business all day long is considerably greater than that of an athlete who lifts a huge weight once a day. Physiologically this has been established; and so doubtless the social sum-total of little everyday exertions, as a result of their suitability for such summation, does bring far more energy into the world than do the deeds of heroes; indeed, the heroic exertion appears positively minute, like a grain of sand laid, in some act of illusory immensity, upon a mountain-top.

The idea appealed to him. But, it must be added, it was not really because he liked a life of urban respectability [*das bürgerliche Leben*] that he liked this idea; on the contrary, he was merely choosing to create difficulties for his own inclinations, which had once been different.

Perhaps it is precisely the common man [*Spießbürger*] who has an intuitive prophetic glimpse of the beginning of an immense new, collective, ant-like heroism? It will be called rationalised heroism and will be regarded as very beautiful. But what can we know of that today?²⁷

Without, at this point, drawing conclusions regarding the figure of Ulrich, Arendt would surely have had something to say about the *Bürger* as well as the *Spießbürger*/*Spießer* (“ordinary philistines”²⁸) who feel restored to comfort only in a totalitarian framework that gives them direction in their feeling of superfluousness in modernity. The premonition of monstrous violence, which is also concealed in the ant and bee metaphor, remains hidden from the novel’s protagonist, perhaps remaining in a state of “delusion.”²⁹ Blithely philosophizing in the shadow of the First World War, he can toy with the idea that, in the face of a world of uncertain meanings, it would perhaps only be logical to prefer the sense of possibility to the sense of reality.

A ‘man without qualities’ may on the one hand be somebody who refuses to be pinned down, who avoids situations in which his true colors might emerge. On the other hand, he may be a person in whom the modern process of anonymization is taking place and who is looking for a way to cope with it as an individual. According to Arendt’s final somber analysis in *The Human Condition*, this is symptomatic for a world that has lost its power to gather and relate, in which the “experiences of worldliness escape more and more the range of ordinary human experience.”³⁰ Instead, “the society of jobholders demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species.”³¹ What to Ulrich is still an “interesting” speculation “may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.” When Musil, with delicate irony, describes this increasingly transparent space of possibility as a meta-space of appearance, this is quite appropriate to the subject, for the ironist must preserve his own light-heartedness if he is to

- 28 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 368.
The translation does not render Musil’s play with the terms “*bürgerliches Leben*” (bourgeois lifestyle) and “*Spießbürger*” (petit bourgeois type). The latter is translated as “common man,” which could be connected to Schütz’ “man on the street.” But Musil’s expression is more clearly judgmental and ironic, and does not simply mean the common man.
- 29 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 145.
- 30 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 323.
- 31 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 322.

32
Arendt,
Human Condition,
323.

keep matters suspended in the air. But does that mean that all scope for action is foreclosed? That would be going too far, also running contrary to Arendt's diagnosis: "Needless to say, this does not mean that modern man has lost his capacities or is on the point of losing them."³² The question is only whether these capacities can be actualized and preserved for long enough to form and sustain a space of appearance. Let us then consider, in the final section, Arendt's understanding of the space of appearance and what to make, from that perspective, of situations which, remarkably enough, do not get anyone anywhere.

Arendt's Space of Appearance

Arendt can help us to better understand the powerlessness of the space of appearance that Musil hints at. This, however, first requires certain conceptual clarifications before we turn to the complementary concepts of 'potentiality'/'possibility'/'*dynamis*' and 'actuality'/'reality'/'*energeia*.'

Arendt does not use the term 'space of appearance(s)' in the manner in which I have introduced it, as an appearing world that assumes a different texture according to the structure of relevance through which it is viewed. I also wish to avoid the misunderstanding that what I have spoken of so far is a 'bubble model,' in which every subject or consciousness inhabits its 'own' world, and that a world of sociability had entered the scene only with the discussion of Arendt. Rather, Schütz makes it clear from the outset that the world is public, social, and intersubjective. This basic idea can be found in the work of all phenomenologists. What Schütz's work lends itself to emphasizing and analyzing, however, is that while a shared world appears through shared structures of relevance, it can also come into view from different angles and through different structures of relevance without ceasing to be a shared world. A good many shared relevances are the result of our physical constitution. Beings altogether differently constituted physically would accordingly have different relevances and affordances. Other shared relevances are socialized through culture, technology, and language, being thereby subject to conditions of plurality and historical change. Additionally, relevances may be produced, interpreted, and politicized. This, then, is a dynamic

and intersubjective process in which some things are pushed to the front and others to the back. It is a process that takes place in the field of collective ways of perceiving, historical constellations, paradigm shifts, and (not least) power relations. It therefore makes sense to speak of ‘*spaces* of appearance’ in the plural here, for they may intersect as well as overlap or conceal one another.

Arendt, however, only ever speaks of the ‘*space* of appearance(s)’ in the singular and in the highly specific sense of something that can occur, within the appearing world, as a *mode* of the web of human relationships. If one prefers to adhere to Arendt’s terminology (which there is no obligation to do), the process described above might be fittingly described as “the ‘web’ of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.” Arendt also uses the synonymous terms “second in-between” or *Mitwelt* (with-world). This “second in-between,” with which “the physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown,” is a constantly changing web of action and speech that precedes all individual action and speech.³³ For Arendt, this is the decisive component that holds the world together, providing it with orientation. This *Mitwelt* may be subject to various modes, it may be illuminated or darkened, for instance “in times of corruption, disintegration, and political bankruptcy”:³⁴

In such times, the realm of human affairs darkens; it loses the radiant, glorious brightness that is only appropriate to the public sphere, which is constituted in the togetherness of people, and which is indispensable if action and speech are to unfold fully, i.e., if those who act and speak are to appear beyond what is acted and discussed. In this twilight, in which no one knows who another is, people feel alien, not only in the world, but also among themselves.³⁵

Already at this point, in the twilight of modernity, where “no one knows who another is,” we might return to Musil. However, I would like to dwell on conceptual matters a little longer, for it is here that we see a first idea of the space of appearance taking shape: it is a *mode of the brightness* of the realm of human affairs, which can also exist in darkness or

33
Arendt,
Human Condition,
182–83.

34
Arendt,
Human Condition,
180.

35
Arendt,
Vita activa, 170.
This passage is
only to be found in
Vita activa, the
German version of
The Human Condition.

36
Martin Heidegger,
Being and Time
(Harper & Row, 1962),
56.

in twilight. But what exactly does Arendt mean by this metaphor of “brightness?” It is a medium that renders visible something that goes beyond, that represents a surplus over the appearing world. Action and speech manifest *perspectives on the world*, showing something that transcends the merely visible. How can they do such a thing? Arendt initially follows Heidegger’s definition of the *logos*, of language, to which she adds action, the capacity to make beginnings. The *logos*, according to Heidegger, “lets something be seen (*phainestai*), namely, what this discourse is about; and it does so either for the one who is doing the talking (the *medium*) or for persons who are talking with one another.”³⁶ Speech—or *logos* as a form of being together in the world—reveals the world and the speakers in a particular way. Already Heidegger notes that those who speak are the “medium” of “letting things be seen.” Speech can only “let something be seen” when it is perceived by others (regardless of whether what is perceived is “correct” or coincides with what was intended; what matters is only *that* speech be perceived and that speech and action continue). If speech and action do not take place in the “space” that is the “brightness” of reciprocal being heard (attention, recognition, and uptake), they not only go wide of the mark, they may as well not have happened. Hence, they need this specific space of “brightness” that can only emerge where people come together in this quite active sense. This is a distinctive feature of Arendt’s formulation of the space of appearance. In *The Life of the Mind*, where Arendt draws a clear distinction between the “appearing world” and the “space of appearance,”³⁷ it can be seen that this distinction follows “degrees of manifestation”:

If we consider the whole scale of human activities from the viewpoint of appearance, we find many degrees of manifestation. Neither laboring nor fabrication requires display of the activity itself; only action and speaking need a space of appearance—as well as people who see and hear—in order to be actualized at all. But none of these activities is invisible.³⁸

“Degrees of manifestation” can thus be understood as degrees of necessary reciprocal actualization—necessary to being considered “existent” at all. Appearing beings, such as we are, may be oriented towards others to whom they appear and experience themselves as real only to that degree. But they and many of their activities do not depend for their existence on whether somebody happens to be taking notice at any given moment. Only action and speech and what appears through these activities require this highest degree of manifestation—the brightness of reciprocal and continuous togetherness.

It is among Arendt’s principal insights that this togetherness does not always and automatically produce the same brightness. On the one hand, it is hard to prevent a space of appearance from emerging wherever people congregate—Arendt cites, for instance, the church and its efforts to keep the gathering-places of the faithful from becoming spaces of appearance, which would immediately face accusations of vanity.³⁹ On the other hand, the space of appearance is so fleeting that it evaporates as soon as joint speech and action cease:

- 37 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Volume One: Thinking* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 21, 27, 29, 60. The “appearing world” confronts each person (and species) differently, and all appear within it. This very basic concept of “world” was developed by Arendt, particularly in *The Life of the Mind*, in order to distinguish the “visible” world from the “invisible” realm (of thought) and to insist that we are at home only in the visible world. This happens by appearing in it and to one another (i.e., by being ‘of’ it). But this visible world, which as such might well be identified with the “space of appearance,” is not what Arendt means by that term. This may be surprising, but it is due to the fact that the appearing world is not necessarily structured by language and that we share it with beings that do not speak. The logic of appearing and showing oneself—and hence also that of sociability and intersubjectivity—thus applies at a very basic level and is the domain of all living creatures, not just of humans. A web of human affairs, by contrast, and hence a historical space, can exist only at the level of language.

- 38 Arendt, *Thinking*, 72.

- 39 See Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß* (Piper, 1993), 164–65.

- 40
Arendt,
Human Condition,
199.
- 41
The original German
has “*aufleuchten*,”
see Arendt,
Vita activa, 198.
- 42
Arendt,
Human Condition,
204.
- 43
Arendt,
Human Condition,
200.
A merely potential
power potential is not
a power. Though
such power potential
may be potential
wherever human be-
ings congregate, it
need not necessarily
actualize itself. The
same applies to the
space of appearance:
in a merely potential
space of appearance,
nothing appears.
- 44
Arendt,
Vita activa, 252.
- 45
Arendt,
Human Condition,
200; “im Dasein hält,”
Arendt,
Vita activa,
194, 198, 199.

Its peculiarity is that, unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men ... but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.⁴⁰

For the space of appearance not only to “light up” briefly and then “fade away” but to stay in existence, something more is hence required than merely the actualization of activities.⁴¹ What is needed is a shared project that goes further. This is what Arendt calls power: “without power, the space of appearance brought forth through action and speech in public will fade away as rapidly as the living deed and the living word.”⁴² Power, according to Arendt, “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.” This sounds suspiciously like the emergence of the space of appearance itself. Where then does the difference lie? By its nature, power is not a positive, realized force but a potential. Whenever power “springs up,” this potential is realized. This does not mean that there is constant action all around but rather that everybody around would be ready to act, for instance in a situation laid down by a pact. On the one hand, Arendt stresses that power “cannot be stored up and kept in reserve” but must be actualized.⁴³ This is not contrary to its existence as a potential; indeed, a potential power “exists only to the extent that it is realized.”⁴⁴ Power is thus a form of actualization that extends further than something fully actualized (e.g., action and speech themselves). Power can be used to project a future into time and space, to realize shared plans and enterprises. This is why Arendt consistently emphasizes that the space of appearance must be sustained by power, since it is power that keeps the space of appearance “in existence.”⁴⁵ Elsewhere, Arendt distinguishes between the *space* of appearance that gathers people, the *power* that keeps it in existence as a public space, and the *force* that holds the people together once gathered:

We mentioned before the power generated when people gather together and ‘act in concert,’ which disappears the moment they depart. The force that keeps them together, as distinguished from the space of appearances in which they gather and the power which keeps this public space in existence, is the force of mutual promise or contract.⁴⁶

46
Arendt,
Human Condition,
244.

47
Hannah Arendt,
“What is Freedom?,”
in *The Portable*
Hannah Arendt,
ed. Peter Baehr
(Penguin, 2000),
446–47.

What this passage makes clear is that the question is ultimately one of the *political form* that can bring to life the space of appearance as a stable entity. The point here is that an otherwise fleeting, evanescent phenomenon is condensed to form a *stage*. Although we are sometimes told that ‘All the world’s a stage,’ stages do not simply appear like natural phenomena: they require architects, furniture, and institutions. What is more, it takes a play and it takes an audience for stages to really be stages. Arendt follows the metaphor of the stage in order to grasp the purpose of founding a polity:

Performing artists—dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like—need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work,’ and both depend upon others for the performance itself. Such a space of appearances is not to be taken for granted wherever men live together in a community. The Greek polis once was precisely that ‘form of government’ which provided men with a space of appearances where they could act, with a kind of theater where freedom could appear.⁴⁷

And here we approach the heart of the matter: a space of appearance does not exist as a natural given just because we are appearing creatures in a world of appearances. Rather, it is a particular kind of stage that has to be erected, visited, played, and protected so that a way of existing that might otherwise appear only fleetingly or not at all is given a place: the possibility of *relating freely to what is given*—by judging or changing it, or perhaps simply by using words to reject it—and thereby appearing before others. This also implies the ability to freely shape the world with others, in concert or conflict with them, through words and deeds instead of force and compulsion. This is a highly specific meaning that goes far

beyond the relevance-related spaces of appearance discussed earlier. The existence of relevance by no means implies that of freedom, for relevance may be created by all manner of necessities, which take effect without requiring a space of appearance. Only something that *lays claim* to appearing, that wants and needs to be perceived in order to 'be,' requires a space of appearance.

Arendt considers the Greek polis to have been the original foundation or institution (*Urstiftung*) of such a space of appearance, one that allows freedom to take the stage for its own sake. She reads the history of humanity, insofar as it is accessible to recollection, as a history of alternating light and darkness within the web of human affairs (all of this happens, to be sure, in Eurocentric orientation). As the actions of the great revolutions of the 18th century illuminate the world's stage ("for better and worse"), so we also hear of "dark times."⁴⁸ These are conditions dominated by (seemingly) inextricable necessity in which human action appears futile or as the eternal repetition of the same, or in which the revealing power of language is consciously abused and the capacity of action to form beginnings and relations is put to destructive ends:

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by 'credibility gaps' and 'invisible government,' by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality.⁴⁹

48 Although Arendt principally considers 'great' events and applies her analytic categories to political developments, this dynamic may equally be observed in smaller, everyday matters. Here too words and deeds may create possibilities and illuminate a shared future, just as they may destroy and darken it, see Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harvest Book, 1968), viii.

49 Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, viii.

Although the light of the space of appearance can be “extinguished,” this implies the disappearance neither of the appearing world nor of the collective ‘how’ of appearance—the space of appearance, in its singular form, is but one possibility within the appearances that occur in human togetherness and must therefore be conceptually distinguished from the latter. But Arendt is also interested in the ‘spaces of appearance’ referred to and discussed earlier in the plural form: *how* the world is collectively given in various structures of relevance. In terms of both its content and its systematic structure, I would read *The Human Condition* as an analysis of how spaces of appearance (now in the plural and not in line with Arendt’s terminology) historically unfold, intersect, and overlap according to the logics of work, labor, and action.⁵⁰ Without going further into Arendt’s analysis, these constellations may facilitate or impede the emergence of collective action and hence the evolution of power. Only this, in turn, would permit the realization of a space of appearance of freedom in the appearing human world. But this space of appearance, according to Arendt, may not only evanesce or darken, it may even “atrophy” and “wither away.”⁵¹ The period of human history that witnesses the triumph of the *animal laborans* treats the light of publicity primarily as a means to sustain vital interests and to provide entertainment. Everything is drawn into the seemingly unending logic of production and consumption. Arendt is concerned that this will deprive the world of its remaining capacity to gather us all upon a stage, since it “harbors the grave danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption”:⁵² “This alienation—the atrophy of the space of appearance and the withering of common sense—is, of course, carried to a much greater extreme in the case of a laboring society than in the case of a society of producers.”⁵³ A laboring society, according to Arendt, is a society in which the world has largely lost the capacity for being the stage for freedom, since every stage is prone to becoming a consumer object and to evanesce in anticipation of the next spectacle.

Let us return to the starting point of these reflections, to *The Man Without Qualities*. At the beginning of this essay, I referred to a stage that opens the novel, a stage on which, remarkably enough, nothing (of relevance) occurs.

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See Sophie Loidolt, *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity* (Routledge, 2018), 123–48.

51

Arendt, *Human Condition*, 209, 60.

52

Arendt, *Human Condition*, 133.

53

Arendt, *Human Condition*, 204.

Following on the mutually limiting structures of relevance identified in Musil's technique of zooming in and out, another observation may now help us to dive deeper into the novel's political atmosphere. Musil shows us a stage that is “seething, bubbling,” one that consists of “irregularity, change, sliding forward, not keeping in step” but, for all its dynamism, seems somehow stricken with impotence. The force-lines are drawn by machines; among them wander anachronistic 19th-century people who, while still relying on their finely embroidered undergarments, are already emitting statistical platitudes. The next moment, they are interchangeable shadows or swarm like bees around the entrance to their hive. To be sure, collective curious gazing produces little, nor is the site of an accident usually freedom's space of appearance. If there is a protagonist here, it is more likely to be the clean ambulance that arrives in time, a symbol of public order. Yet, however well administered the public order may be, there is an air of political fatigue, of loss of energy to this opening scene. Anyone familiar with the interminable pompous chatter about the “Collateral Campaign” that appears later on in the book will know that neither are revealing words uttered in the novel's salon public nor do any actions follow.⁵⁴ In the end, the protagonist retreats, not without reason, into a form of privacy that has mystical elements. Though it may be a fine August day, there is no “light” in the public sphere. And when we are told of a “seething, bubbling fluid in a vessel consisting of the solid material of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions,” the obvious question is how long it can last.⁵⁵ The

54 The “Collateral Campaign” forms a plotline in *The Man Without Qualities*, albeit one in which, as Philip Sarasin rightly observed in his brief analysis of the novel, “nobody acts and indeed nothing happens. The Collateral Campaign is an effort of leading circles in Vienna to prepare for the seventieth anniversary of Emperor Franz Joseph I's accession to the throne in 1918—‘collateral’ with reference to the anniversary—also in 1918 but fortunately, for Austria, only the thirtieth—of Wilhelm II, head of state of the unloved Prussian neighbor.” (Philipp Sarasin, “Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften: Robert Musils Klassiker entschlüsselt die Moderne,” *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, September 4, 2022, <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/der-mann-ohne-eigenschaften-robert-musils-klassiker-entschluesselt-die-moderne/>).

55 Musil, *Man Without Qualities*, 4.

scene presented by Musil is one of suspended animation, one that may yet be stabilized. Arendt's 'atrophy of common sense' is set against the 'sense of possibility' as an alternative form of freedom—given that any attempt at action within the novel founders on the slackened space of appearance. It therefore seems more rational to come to terms with the new conditions and the limitations they impose on relevance. After all, "ant-like heroism" may be good enough. And it looked as though the unfortunate pedestrian might have survived. "But what can we know of that today?"⁵⁶

56
Musil,
Man Without Qualities,
8.