Literature as an Agent of Critical Digital Literacy

Marc-Uwe Kling's *Qualityland*

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> If we don't understand our tools, then there is a danger that we will become the tool of our tools, Plato said, which I thought was a very astute observation, especially considering how little it turned out that he actually knew about Google or really anything about the Internet. (Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex* 69)

If we were to consider which school subject might be best suited to include skills for using digital media in a critical, confident, and responsible way, the first candidate that would come to mind would probably be Technology. Surely it is technological knowledge we need to handle these media as competently as possible. In their recent study *Literacy for Digital Futures*, Kathy A. Mills, Len Unsworth, and Laura Scholes emphasize that »technical knowledge« is required to use such media astutely: »students will […] need critical understanding, backed with technical knowledge, of how algorithm-based media subtly influences their online browsing and use of social media feeds, which is driven by artificial intelligence« (Mills et al. 228). The authors point out that »AI and machine learning are predicted to be key influences on communication practices in the next five decades […], with the students requiring basic understandings of how these technologies function« (228). While it may be self-evident that technical knowledge is necessary to deal competently with algorithm-based media, it is less apparent that literature courses likewise can contribute significantly to critical digital literacy. What this article seeks to do is highlight that possibility.

The starting point here is the recognition that literature exists in a rather special relationship to new digital media: the latter's very presence challenges literature to seek out possible new foundations for its own mode of communication and to either

distinguish itself from these media or to adopt certain of their elements and structures. Furthermore, literature faces competition from newer forms of leisure such as computer games. Accordingly, it must claim its own niche in this competition – whether by adapting to the new forms or by setting itself apart from them. Whatever may be the case, literature is per se engaged with new digital media. Computers, algorithms, and artificial intelligence are therefore not merely coincidental topics of literature, but affect literature itself as it seeks to make its mark in the present-day marketplace of claims on people's attention. This is precisely what makes literature an agent of critical media literacy.

There is no hidden assumption here that literary perspectives on the new digital media possess ultimate validity or that literary works are more valuable in principle than, say, computer games. Literature does not have to be regarded as the only valid standard when viewed as an agent of critical media literacy. Rather, it is sufficient to consider its position within the array of entertainments, aesthetic attractions, and knowledge on offer. The very fact that, in its efforts to create a profile (or profiles) of its own, literature tries out different ways of dealing with digital media helps to ensure that perspectives on the new media do not remain too narrow and that a multiplicity of approaches and positions are kept open. This polyperspectivity is in itself conducive to fostering critical awareness in relation to new media: if criticism in the sense of the ancient Greek word κρίνειν presupposes the ability to make distinctions, then a range of options between which distinctions can be made is precisely what is needed. It is by reminding us of its own traditions – for example, by taking up traditional motifs, characters, genre elements, and so on, and continuing to play with them – that literature keeps such options in circulation.

One example of this, which will be discussed in more detail below, is the motif of searching. Nowadays in particular, when so-called search engines claim to save people the effort of searching, literature is able to raise the question of what searching can actually mean, thus putting the usefulness of such machines into perspective. Literature can draw attention to the fact that the critical use of search engines is not just about the technological issue of how they work, what algorithms drive them, and how they select search results. It can also address the notion of searching as a motif rooted in a long tradition, one that extends back at least as far as Plato's Eros: the Platonic philosopher who does not possess the truth but experiences an erotic desire for it and seeks it out. It is certainly worth considering such traditions, because they add further texture to the issue of searching: it becomes possible to discuss, for example, what it means to say that automata make it easier for people to search – in what sense do machines ›save us the trouble‹? When we consider how today's search engines are used and to what extent they produce their own effects, it is surely instructive to include this long tradition, because it may be that search engines narrow a given search to what is technically feasible and achievable. By recall-

ing traditions, then, literature can make its own contribution to advancing search literacy (cf. Pegrum et al. 29–31).

One example of how this happens is Marc-Uwe Kling's dystopian novel and international bestseller *Qualityland*.[1] His text draws on a long philosophical and literary tradition, against whose backdrop it articulates skepticism about digital searching and finding.

Algorithm-Based Searching in *Qualityland*

So how is the motif of searching used in the novel? The main character Peter is accompanied by a so-called »WIN assistant«:

> WIN, an abbreviation for »What I Need,« was once a search engine, into which you had to enter questions – very laboriously – by speech command, and before that by *typing by hand*! In essence, WIN is still a search engine, but you no longer need to ask it questions. WIN knows what you want to know. Peter no longer has to go to the effort of finding the relevant information, because the relevant information goes to the effort of finding Peter. (Kling, *Qualityland* 4, emphasis in the text)

This explanation, with which the narrator introduces the machine in the novel, highlights the extent to which the machine's search functions preempt human action: humans are increasingly relieved of the burden of searching. Initially, Peter still has to enter his questions by hand, then just by speaking until, finally, the machine saves him the bother of having to ask questions at all. The search engine does the asking for him – its operations go hand in hand with its claim to be able to determine in advance what information is important to him: »What I Need.« The abbreviation »WIN« is suggestive of declaring the user of the machine a winner. The novel's readers are thus confronted with an interfering and presumptuous machine that claims to know a person's needs and wants in advance and to fulfill them.

Peter calls his digital assistant »Nobody«: He »picked out the name himself, because he often feels as though Nobody is there for him. Nobody helps him. Nobody listens to him. Nobody speaks to him. Nobody pays attention to him. Nobody makes decisions for him. Peter has even convinced himself that Nobody likes him.« (4) This play on the word ›Nobody,‹ which is capitalized in the text as a proper name but can also be read as an indefinite pronoun, is rich in relationships: it makes clear the dubiousness of any promise of interactivity by digital machines – if »Nobody is there

1 In the following, quotes are taken from the 2020 English translation of the first part of Kling's novel.

for« Peter and »Nobody likes him,« then the device is clearly a poor substitute for a human being, since the dual meaning implies that Peter feels lonely. What is more, the word ›Nobody‹ used in the novel's English translation also raises the issue of the corporeality of digital constructs – in what respect do they have ›no body‹? At the same time, the play on words recalls a literary tradition that goes back to Homer's *Odyssey*,[2] in which Odysseus tells the Cyclops Polyphemus that he is named Nobody (Οὖτις). Later, when Polyphemus has been deprived of his eyesight by the Greeks, he screams that Nobody is killing him (book 9, 408; cf. Graziosi 77). The other Cyclops misunderstand him and think that no one is doing him any violence. The indefinite pronoun ›Nobody‹ thus proves to be a very cunning assumed name in the *Odyssey*. If we now consider Peter's digital companion against this literary backdrop, the device takes on sinister connotations: it could turn out to be a dangerous trickster, one that might even make him blind. The real mode of operation of such machines and what they can do to humans might remain invisible to the latter – this is hinted at by the allusion to the *Odyssey*. In addition, given that, in Homer's account, the Greeks defeat the Cyclops by virtue of their superior intelligence and technology (Myrsiades 116), the question arises as to whether machines – in the role of the Greeks – might not also be superior to humans in intelligence.

The passage quoted above additionally reveals what makes the opaque operation of the machine so disturbing: the device »pays attention« to its human counterpart and »makes decisions for him.« The novel can thus be linked to current debates about digital surveillance, panoptism, and algorithm-driven action (Huber 76–78; Kelsch; Müller). This includes not least the question of what such a search engine might withhold from humans: how does it ›decide‹ which results can be taken into consideration at all? To what extent does it predetermine what can be searched for and how? In the novel, such problems arise in various social spheres; Jakob Kelsch (378–385) provides an overview of them, starting with the fact that Nobody chooses a restaurant for Peter and his friends and orders food for them right away – »according to their calculated preferences.« (Kling, *Qualityland* 4). However, the food does not taste good to Peter. As a possible explanation for this, the narrator suggests that the machine had to take account not only of Peter's »tastes, but also […] his bank balance« when searching for a suitable restaurant (4f.). Even if this explanation is a likely one, a discrepancy remains between the search engine's calculations on the one hand and what Peter really likes on the other. Similarly, the machine is said to have »found« friends »for him. But sometimes […] his mood turns sour when« he meets them – »he's not sure why« (5). It is precisely the explicit reference to this uncertainty that enables the reader to think of possible reasons for Peter's bad mood: they may

2 A corresponding reference to Homer is made explicit in the second part of the novel: Kling, *QualityLand* 2.0 97; 108–111.

begin to suspect that the computer's algorithms are failing to fulfill his needs and desires.

The novel raises similar doubts about love relationships that are proposed, initiated, and organized by computers. The algorithm-based system »QualityPartner […] takes over« – as its top representative says – the »onerous task« of selecting a partner; the »users don't have to waste time thinking about who they like the look of. QualityPartner tells them who their best fit is.« (32) This goes so far as to »even« match up »the life expectancies of« the »customers«; there is talk of »QualityPartner couples who didn't just die in the same year or month – of which there are many – but on the same day or even in the same hour« – this is put forward as »a lovely feature, especially for older customers« (33). This example shows how algorithms in Qualityland promise to overcome the unpredictability of life. In the same vein, the novel states elsewhere that in Qualityland »chance simply no longer exists« (9). The computed result seems able to displace anything that is not covered by it and does not conform to it. Indeed, the same goes for searching per se: if »chance simply no longer [existed]«, then the whole world would be subject to being computed. Under these conditions, people would no longer need to experience the world, they would not have to wait until happiness or love came their way; rather, a computer algorithm would find the most suitable partner for everyone straight away.

In Qualityland, it is considered »both bizarre and a little embarrassing« if a person has found their lover not via a system like QualityPartner but »in the analogue world.« (20) This is the case with Peter and his ex-girlfriend Mildred, so »they rarely spoke about it in public.« (20) A love relationship not proven by QualityPartner to be the best one possible is supposedly flawed, strange, and dubious. When Peter and Mildred log in to QualityPartner and compare »their profiles,« the »system« indicates to them that they are not »a good match,« which they both »eventually« concede. (20) The machine's calculations are to be relied upon. Love, then, as Kelsch puts it, must be »the result of data matching.« (378, author's translation)

Trust in the reliability of algorithms is also demonstrated in the novel by those who use a certain »premium service« at the online store TheShop**:** »Anyone who registers« for it, »will from that moment on receive all the products they consciously or subconsciously desire, without the inconvenience of needing to actually order them. The system independently calculates what its customers want and when they want it. Since the beginning, TheShop's slogan has been, ›We know what you want.‹ No one disputes that anymore.« (9) Here again, the computer's output claims to be unquestionably valid – although it is apparently irrelevant whether the individuals are actually happy when they open up the parcels delivered to them. Here is one example: »Peter opens the package. Inside is a brand-new QualityPad. […] Peter hadn't been aware of wanting a new QualityPad. […] It must have been a subconscious wish. Completely devoid of emotion, he takes the tablet out of the packaging.« (9) It is clear that Peter is not delighted to receive the product – he unpacks it with no expression

of emotion; yet at the same time it becomes apparent that he considers TheShop's slogan to be credible: if he feels no desire for the merchandise, he is left to assume that he must have had »a subconscious wish.« It is only later, when Peter receives a sex toy through the post, which he is at a loss to know what to do with, that this credibility is shaken: At that moment, we are told, »a surprising sentence escapes his lips. ›I don't want this.‹« (117) By describing this »sentence« as »surprising«, the narrator indicates how the system of algorithms is hermetically sealed against doubt. A person who does not accept what the machine seeks out and selects for him challenges the very foundations of the system.

Machines follow the principle of personalization not only in the provision of goods but also in the dissemination of information, news, and advertising (Kelsch 381–383). In the novel, the abbreviation »www« stands for the company »World Wide Wholesale« (Kling, *Qualityland* 2; 30), whose boss declares »›I want the first genuinely personalized advertising campaign in the world! […] I don't want *a* campaign. I want eight billion of them!‹« (33, emphasis in original) This is about targeting and tailoring advertising to each individual (Kelsch 378). An example of this is »personalized literature,« »Books Tailored Just For You,« which – according to the advertisement's promise – the individual consumer is »guaranteed to like« (Kling, *Qualityland* 82): Texts such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* are labeled »FOR YOU« and offered in adapted versions – ones with a positive outcome in line with the person's individual desires (guaranteeing pleasant feelings), ones that are abbreviated and easy reading (82–84).

In a playfully ironic way, the novel refers to itself as also being a product that is subject to such mechanisms. An additional ›title page‹ placed between the publisher's title page and the main part of *Qualityland* displays the words »FOR YOU«, and the first edition of the German novel appears in a dark- and a light-coloured version, thus satisfying at least two broadly different tastes. The way the books are presented is ambiguous: on the one hand, their materiality is emphasized especially, which highlights their difference from screen texts. The cover of the German first edition, for example, does not have a flat surface: the title appears embossed in shimmering golden letters, so that it can be experienced haptically and visually as three-dimensional. Sabrina Huber notes: »The total digitality of the narrative stands in contrast to a highly haptic cover, high-quality book binding, and a graphically striking page design« (78, author's translation). On the other hand, this design is in turn subject to personalization, as is particularly evident in the contrasting nature of the two simultaneously published versions of the first edition mentioned above (78). In a video on the website Qualityland.de, Kling also plays with the idea that, far from existing apart from the digitalized world it describes, the book itself is part of it. The video shows the author giving a ›press conference‹ on the novel with the logos of »TheShop« and »WIN« visible in the background (https://Qualityland.de/ql 1/, 04/19/2023). What is more, the questions posed at this press conference are asked

by machines – another example of how algorithms, rather than humans, are responsible for searching for and asking questions.

In the novel, Peter struggles with the fact that »algorithms […] present us with content based upon our interests« (Kling, *Qualityland* 262). The problem he identifies is that these »supposed interests« are tied to »[p]reviously accessed content that [he] only accessed because it was suggested to [him] as being appropriate for [his] supposed interests« (262). In this circular regression, Peter laments the lack of any »chance to change, because [his] past« predetermines, indeed »dictates what's available to [him] in the future« (262). Kelsch explains: »By suggesting to all the inhabitants of the country only those products, cultural tips, news, etc. that match their computed interests, no new information, no new preferences, no unexpected discoveries, etc. penetrate the stock of information on the basis of which the algorithms make future recommendations.« (381, author's translation) Kelsch thus concurs with Armin Grunwald, who points to the downside of Internet services that offer us products seemingly tailored to us: Grunwald too considers it problematic that »the Internet's knowledge of our preferences is based solely on data from the past, especially past consumption processes.« (42, author's translation) The effect of this, as Grunwald makes clear, is that we are

> stuck in the past. We no longer have the chance to be unsettled or at least surprised by offers that are precisely not included in our past profile. We may experience such moments of unsettledness and surprise, for example, when browsing the shelves and displays of a bookstore. This is where we occasionally come across something that opens up a new perspective, a new interest, but which would have been rigorously filtered out by the Internet service […]. If we rely on being spoiled by Internet services that use data from the past to fulfill our desires, then we remain caught in a structure of past preferences: no more development, only stagnation. (42f., author's translation)

Grunwald associates the comfort of such Internet services with »human convenience.« (42, author's translation) His considerations are influenced by Eli Pariser, who coined the term »filter bubble.« Pariser compares the effect of filter bubbles to the effect of the drug Adderall:

> »With this drug,« an Erowid experimenter wrote, »I become calculating and conservative. In the words of one friend, I think ›inside the box.‹« […]
> On the Internet, personalized filters could promote the same kind of intense, narrow focus you get from a drug like Adderall. If you like yoga, you get more information and news about yoga – and less about, say, bird-watching or baseball.
> In fact, the search for perfect relevance and the kind of serendipity that promotes creativity push in opposite directions. »If you like this, you'll like that«

> can be a useful tool, but it's not a source of creative ingenuity. By definition, ingenuity comes from the juxtaposition of ideas that are far apart, and relevance comes from finding ideas that are similar. Personalization, in other words, may be driving us toward an Adderall society, in which hyperfocus displaces general knowledge and synthesis.
> [...] Finally, the filter bubble encourages a more passive approach to acquiring information, which is at odds with the kind of exploration that leads to discovery. When your doorstep is crowded with salient content, there's little reason to travel any farther. (Pariser 93f.)

It is not the aim of this article to figure out how dominant such personalization functions are on the Internet. It can hardly be denied that cookies (which enable individuals' movements on the Internet to be tracked and personalized advertising to be provided) are one of the factors that shape today's Internet. The catchphrase »If you like this, you'll like that« quoted by Pariser undoubtedly comes into play not only in numerous online stores such as Amazon, but not least also in Facebook and other social media. Yves Citton (74) notes that »thanks to the ubiquity of cookies, the singular history of my searches and previous responses personalizes (and ›improves‹) what the machine shows on my screen,« although »each cookie only [notes] my singularity so as to better place it on the standardized measure of a consumer profile.« Quite clearly, the question of how we search and what we search for is being posed anew in our current digitalized age: What does it mean to search? What determines our searching, how is it pre-structured? To what extent does a search remain bound to its starting points, or is it possible to search ›into the blue‹?

Traditional Associations with Searching: Eros and the Longing for What Is Distant

It is worth taking a step back and examining such questions in the light of a longer literary and philosophical tradition. Today's debates about convenience and stagnation in searches personalized by machines resemble a point of controversy in Plato's dialogue *Meno* (80e, 880). Plato's Socrates challenges the claim »that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know«. The argument runs thus: »[h]e cannot search for what he knows – since he knows it, there is no need to search – nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for«. Socrates rejects this argument as something that »would make us idle« and that is pleasing to »fainthearted men« (81d, 880). The claim that it would be either unnecessary or impossible to search for something appears to Socrates as a pretext for convenience and indolence. One might ask whether today's filter bubbles could be seen as a practical instantiation of this claim about searching from Plato's *Meno*. Accord-

ing to Pariser, in filter bubbles we stick to what we already know, to what fits with it and matches it directly, to what is associated with it; equally, we are tempted to ignore what lies outside this narrow range. In such a context, we tend not to search for anything that diverges far from what we are offered. For Plato's Socrates, however, ›searching‹ means moving further away from our existing knowledge. This becomes particularly clear in Plato's *Symposium*: here, Socrates speaks of Eros and of desire and longing for what one does not have. Socrates explains that we can only desire what we lack (199c–201d, cf. Muthmann 43). From Diotima he has learned that Eros is not exclusively wealthy: Eros is the son of Poros and Penia, of abundance and poverty. Accordingly, he occupies a position in-between (μεταξύ) the two: He is »shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt without a bed, sleeping at people's doorsteps and in roadsides under the sky,« but at the same time »he is a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life« (203b–e, 486). Further it is said: Eros is neither wise nor ignorant, but in his intermediate position a philosopher (204b). If Eros were a god, he would already be wise and would no longer seek wisdom; and someone who is ignorant without feeling his lack has no desire for wisdom (203d–e). In this text, therefore, an argument from the dialogue *Meno* appears in altered form: people do not search when they already possess complete knowledge, nor do they search when there is a complete lack of knowledge, which they do not then notice as such. People only set out on a search when they find themselves somewhere in-between.

The vivid description of Eros from Plato's *Symposium*, quoted above, can be compared, at least in part, to the figurative expressions Pariser uses when he speaks of ›filter bubbles‹ (itself a figurative term). In both contexts – in Plato as well as in Pariser – notions of space are evoked, either closed or open spaces. In addition to the »filter bubble,« the quote from Pariser includes expressions such as »think ›inside the box,‹« »narrow,« »far apart,« and the sentence »When your doorstep is crowded with salient content, there's little reason to travel any farther.« And in Plato Eros appears homeless, he is »sleeping at people's doorsteps and in roadsides under the sky«. He does not settle down in an already closed and finished ›house of knowledge,‹ but is on the move.

In both cases, real searching is associated with wandering. This association of searching with wandering has a long literary tradition. One might think – as just one example among many – of wanderers searching for something in fairy tales: »It is often said at the beginning of fairy tales: ›I want to go out and seek my fortune!‹« (Horn 3, author's translation) This search is often triggered by a situation of scarcity (Horn 2) and is usually associated with the experience of being without a home (cf. Karimi 233f.). Such searching can entail either going out to find something already determined – in this respect, paying attention to something that is limited and being oblivious to other things (Leyendecker 54–63) – or else striking out ›into the blue‹,

a search characterized by openness – blue being the color of the unmeasured and uncharted horizon (cf. Grimm & Grimm 82).

From this it can be seen how closely searches and horizons correspond with each other. When the stars that are visible in the sky are all counted, searching loses one of its horizons. Similarly, horizons are shut down by the system by which computers calculate individual desires. So in *Qualityland* it is not only the romantic mood that suffers when the seemingly innumerable stars become countable; rather, the motif of the search is also touched upon. In one passage, Peter and his partner Sandra are looking up at an »astonishingly clear night sky«:

> »Look at that,« he says. »Have you ever seen so many stars? There must be too many to count.«
> »From your viewpoint and with your eyesight, there are exactly 256 stars visible,« says Nobody.
> »Great, Nobody, thanks very much,« says Peter with irritation. »Very romantic.«
> »Too many stars to count,« says Nobody, »is the kind of inexactitude that human beings frequently let slip, even though it's no longer necessary in today's world, where everything is quantifiable.« (Kling, *Qualityland* 21)

Searching and longing cannot strike out ›into the blue‹ if everything is immediately measurable digitally. The computer can determine exactly how many stars Peter sees from his ›point of view‹ and given his visual acuity. The machine (re)constructs the perspective of the individual and establishes it as fact; this in turn is reminiscent of how software programs compute individual consumer profiles and filter bubbles – the use of such profiles ultimately enables horizons of desire and searching to be digitally determined.

Thus, the novel *Qualityland* plays with notions of searching and longing from tradition and shows how endangered these concepts are by digitalization: digital search engines turn out to be limited in terms of what they can do even as they also place limits on human desires. This is an example of how literature promotes a skeptical and self-reflective attitude when dealing with computers and their programs. As we have seen, then, literature is more than a worthy counterpart to Technology when it comes to conveying critical digital literacy skills.[3]

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