a.username? –
A Profile Without
Qualities
Exploring Amazon through
Art and Literature

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How to understand and read Amazon? Where to start the read-ing of this current version of the "technologizing of the word" and which kind of human character does it result in (Ong 1988)? This article will explore these questions through focusing at Joana Moll's *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* (2019), with inclusion of other art-works, and Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, published 1930–1943.

Amazon art

Amazon has grown from being an online bookstore to an everything-store – and to a general networked platform that uses the sale of physical goods to map users' choices while producing big data man-agement on a major global scale. The integration of user-monitoring into platforms and numerous devices, from Kindle e-reader to tablets and media players, voice interfaces and security devices, has become an increasingly important part of their business strategy as the lead-ing online retailer. It has been argued that Amazon and its e-books threaten the printed book, and while Amazon certainly has killed a

great number of physical book stores and forced its business models on the publishing industry, it is nevertheless interesting to consider Amazon as a continuation of certain aspects of big market book trade rather than a break from it (Striphas 2011). Seeing Amazon as the latest incident of the "technologizing of the word," Walter J. Ong's notion provides opportunities to discuss how it continues and reinforces certain monopolistic strategies around controlling the publishing market.

Several artists have explored Amazon with a critical eye and focused on the Kindle as a publishing platform, including how it reads the readers and monitors their reading in a process of controlled consumption. For instance, in *Dear Jeff Bezos* (2013/14), Johannes Osterhoff sent automated emails regarding his Kindle reading habits to the Amazon's CEO, echoing and making visible the kind of monitoring already happening in the background of the Kindle interface, and in *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* (2013), Ubermorgen.com deployed a "forkbomb" attack on Amazon by automating e-book publishing based on YouTube comments, overflowing Amazon with seemingly worthless trash-books that yet produce a certain raw realist style through its montage of YouTube comments as dramatic dialogues (Osterhoff 2013-14; Ubermorgen.com 2013; Andersen and Pold 2014). Silvio Lorusso and Sebastian Schmieg took a different look at Amazon with *Networked Optimization*, a series of three crowdsourced versions of popular self-help books where the only thing readable are the popular highlights underlined by the many Kindle users. They printed and published the books *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The 5 Love Languages and How to Win Friends & Influence People* on the Lulu.com print-on-demand publishing platform. As they argue: "Among the books with the most popular highlights, there is a striking number of self-help books. This points to a multi-layered, algorithmic optimization: from readers and authors to Amazon itself. Harvesting its customers micro-labour, the act of reading becomes a data-mining process" (Lorusso et al. 2013). If the books were not already banal, they now become reduced to mostly self-evident gibberish when treated like this. The project demonstrates how data mining of human reading potentially affects textuality. In the process of accumulating and examining what the readers mark as highlights, the text gets reduced to banality, "hit"-phrases of the lowest common denominator. Lorusso also hosts the Post-digital Publishing Archive

which includes several other artistic projects, including Jesse England's *E-Book Backup* (2009), where she photocopied the Kindle version of George Orwell's *1984*, thereby highlighting the lack of ownership and rights to copy, lend and re-sell Kindle e-books secondhand (Lorusso 2013–; England 2009). They all serve as good examples of artworks that reflect Amazon's algorithmic apparatus and its highly commercial, algorithmic post-publishing process.[1]

Plotted by amazon.com

Joana Moll's *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* contributes to this artistic discourse on the exploration of Amazon's reading of readers, but unlike the other projects presented here, it does not focus on the content of Amazon's platform or the surveillance capitalism embodied by the Kindle. Instead, it draws attention to the first thing a user meets when buying a book: the Amazon web interface. As Moll presents her work, it looks into what happened when she purchased the book *Jeff Bezos: The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success*, which is listed as written by the collective "Influential Individuals" and seems like another book ready for Lorusso's project of highlighting the Amazon apparatus' production of banality. In the project, Moll does not read the book, despite its promises to "learn from the richest man ever." Instead, she reads the twelve different interfaces that she has to go through in order to buy the book. More specifically, she focuses on the large amounts of code, normally invisible to the user as it is running in the background, that organizes the site and records the user's activity. To order a rather banal 65-page paperback, 8,724 pages of complicated code is downloaded and executed by her computer, which hints at the fact that what is printed on the pages of this book is probably the least interesting text distributed here; or to put it differently, it might only be the beginning of a great many coded scripts. In fact, throughout the 87.33 MB or 8,724 pages of printed code, she records 1,307 different requests to scripts and documents that presumably contribute to the profiling of the user.

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1 The apparatus is here understood as the full material, technical and commercial publication production process. Walter Benjamin argues that authors should care about this apparatus and "to the utmost extent possible" change it (Benjamin 1996, 774; Andersen and Pold 2018, 23ff.).

How can we read this text in ways that include the enormous subtext that contextualizes and produces it? How can we understand Jeff Bezos' "life, lessons & rules for success" beyond superficial clichés like the following popular highlight of the book summoning up the rule "Gather the right people around you": "Therefore, if you want to live your best life and achieve your dreams, surround yourself with people who are likely to help you achieve that dream" (Influential Individuals 2018, Location 497)? Though not many people have cared to read this book (it currently has only a maximum of 32 highlights and the above quotation has 29), it is listed as #680 in Business Professional's Biographies and #2,720 in Success Self-Help at Amazon.com. This indicates that the printed text in the book is far less interesting than the apparatus of its production. Therefore, we will in the following read Moll's work as a way of reading *The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success* that includes a reading of the apparatus behind its production.

The title of Moll's work resembles the title of a modernist novel about a contemporary "man without qualities," and its many pages suggests that life under Amazon has become even more absurd than life in Robert *Musil's Kakanien*.[2] If we could only read the many pages that our computers execute, we would realize that Moll's work is the scripted story of current readers and how they are read by big data and big software corporations such as Amazon. As Wendy Chun argues, online readers are currently controlled in their reading and, similar to how characters are controlled by the author in novels, readers become "characters in a drama putatively called Big Data" (Chun 2016, 94). Like any shopping mall, also Amazon is a "scripted space" where the customer's experience is dramaturgically framed by the system architecture so that the she or he has the feeling of being the central character in the script.[3] The interface then becomes a composite that seals of the complexity of the "algorithmic mall-apparatus"; a safe environment made for the user to indulge in the pleasures of online shopping.

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2 You can get Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* vol. 1 for $13.04 and only $5.00 for Kindle on Amazon.

3 The urban theorist Norman Klein uses 'scripted space' to describe the experience of shopping malls and other spaces that produce illusions though various effects. He also compares the experience of this to the experience of an interface (Klein 2004) see also (Andersen and Pold 2018, 91).

Consequently, and in a literary understanding, *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* makes sense as the story about how we all become characters in Amazon's drama; but it is a much harder read than Musil's 1,700 unfinished pages of *The Man Without Qualities*, and even for a code reader it is hardly readable in its fragmented totality. Whereas it was once possible to largely understand webpages through reading their code, this code refers to an entire infrastructure inside Amazon's servers to which we do not have access. Presumably, the 87.33 MB or 8,724 pages of code that we download, and which includes 1,307 requests to scripts and APIs, are only the tip of a much larger iceberg of code within the Amazon cloud. As already Susan Leigh Star pointed out in relation to technical infrastructures, "[i]t takes some digging to unearth the dramas inherent in system design creating, to restore narrative to what appears to be dead lists" and it might be "stiflingly boring" (Star 1999, 377, 378). The functioning of infrastructures mainly gets noticeable once the infrastructures break down, since normally we do not want to deal with them but just want them to work like sewers or the electrical grid. In other words, in order to hide their effects on us and function in the background, infrastructures are hidden on purpose, and in the case of Amazon, it is hidden how we as users are endlessly profiled. It seems fair to argue that Amazon does not want us to know the extent to which we become characters in their big data drama. We might enjoy Amazon's ability to recommend Franz Kafka to the readers of Musil through their profiling of our choices of reading and buying, but we do not necessarily agree with of all the tracking the company does to make such a recommendation (which would be straight forward for any slightly knowledgeable book seller), nor do we accept whatever else they do with our data. In fact, we do not even know what they are doing and we have no way of knowing; we can only look at the 8,724 pages of code gibberish and speculate on what lies beyond.

a.username?

Let us call the main character of this big data drama, "a.username?" since this variable is found 18 times in the script. Let us use this as a name for what we become in the big data drama, a character or profile without qualities, other than what is filled in to it by Amazon's profiling of us, while we are even more clueless than Ulrich, the main character of Musil's great novel. If a.username?

is a profile without qualities generated by the very purchase of *Jeff Bezos: The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success*, it is because it's purely rendered by the quantification that runs Amazon's business software. Amazon's algorithms do not run on the content or quality of their books or other goods but purely on the lists, patterns and arrays that they generate through relations to other editions and associated companies, like the audiobook "free with your audible trial," "used – like new" books sold from the network of third-party sellers on the "Amazon Marketplace," similar books "frequently bought together" like *Bill Gates: The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success* and *Warren Buffett: The Life…* or "sponsored products related to this item." Neither does Amazon's algorithms operate on the users' proper reading, what they get out of reading the book, but only on the reading behavior, consumption and purchasing, highlighting and speed if they use the Kindle e-reader software and/or hardware.

The *Jeff Bezos* book is clearly a product of the Amazon infrastructure apparatus or probably even a speculation on it and in it, exploiting its very name and CEO to get a quick gain. Even if its "top review," written by the apparently trustworthy "The Rebecca Review" (a "top 500 reviewer" and "top contributor" in "jigsaw puzzles"), rates the book five stars, Andrew Z from UK gets more to the point in his one-star review: "This is not a 'book' but rather a booklet (…) frankly being a rip off (…). It would be shame if *Jeff Bezos* as an entrepreneur is as shallow as this book and I can see why the authors have disguised themselves under 'Influential Individuals' alias…" The Jeff Bezos book and other similar books by "Influential Individuals" come uncannily close to the forkbomb books produced by Ubermorgen.com in their project of flooding Amazon. However, "Influential Individuals" play the game more directly by attaching themselves to heroes of American corporate culture like Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Donald Trump and Jeff Bezos. In this way, *Jeff Bezos: The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success* demonstrates how Amazon's apparatus even undermines the quality of their own brand and CEO by reducing Jeff Bezos to banality. Everything is reduced to data quantities in the construction of the Amazon market and books like this are simply products of this market game. In this case, in fact, nothing less and nothing more, which is the strange quality of this shallow booklet as it is assembled as a found object in Moll's *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User*.

From A9 and Whispernet to the Parallel Campaign

How can we understand Amazon and its apparatus? Amazon is currently one of the four biggest technology companies that is known for its disruption of well-established industries within retail and technology. While it started in 1994 as an online bookstore, it is currently the world's largest online marketplace, AI provider, live-streaming and cloud computing platform. Like the proportion between the user-interface and the large code base behind, or the shallow book and how it is a product of the giant apparatus, Amazon for most users is largely invisible, hidden in suburban warehouses, as the cloud infrastructure behind the streaming of music or television series or behind the Echo voice assistant. As pointed out by Ed Finn, "[c]ompanies like Uber, Google, and Amazon are building their empires on a particular style, an ethos of simplification that requires abstracting away complex and messy details in order to deliver a reliable and persistent set of services. These companies are engaged in a form of algorithmic arbitrage, handling the messy details for us and becoming middlemen in every transaction." But even though Amazon abstracts away complex and messy details in order to create a smooth shopping experience, this process requires an enormous infrastructural apparatus, "an entire worldview, built on an algorithm": "Amazon's transformational algorithm involved not just computation but logistics, finding ways to outsource, outmaneuver, and outsell traditional booksellers (and later, sellers of almost every kind of consumer product)" (Finn 2017, 97, 20).[4]

This idea of a world view of disruption that, by way of algorithms, outmanoeuvres the traditional book retail business leads us back to Musil. For what are the characteristics of these network maneuvres? Even though Musil died in 1942 and could not predict contemporary platform culture, his novel can be read as a complex narrative of the incoherence between the modern and conservative powers in Vienna and of how rational, scientific, quantitative data undermines

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4   This Amazon tactic of outmaneuvering and outselling was also documented by the hearing before the US congress on July 29, 2020, where Amazon was under fire for "allegedly using sales data from its third-party sellers to figure out what new products to sell and how to undercut those same independent shops on its platform" (Fung et al. 2020).

qualitative coherence.[5] In *The Man Without Qualities*, the main
character Ulrich becomes the leader of the so-called "Parallel Campaign," which is worth comparing to Amazon's algorithms, including
its product ranking algorithm A9 and its Kindle network, synchronizing and monitoring utility Whispernet.

"The Parallel Campaign" is the novel's name for the 1913 planning of a future campaign leading to the giant celebration of emperor
Franz Joseph's 70 years reign due to take place in 1918, and of Austria's alleged political, cultural and philosophical supremacy. However, as a result of its incompetent role on the losing side of World
War 1, the Austrian-Hungarian dual monarchy collapsed in 1918, and
Franz Joseph actually died in 1916. The Parallel Campaign remains
a very lofty speculation in the novel. On its birth the Parallel Campaign is described as a "vague, thrilling feeling of joy and expectancy"
uplifting the mind as "a small, brightly colored child's balloon that
had broken loose and, shining gloriously, was floating upward toward
the sun. And in the next instant it burst." Seemingly knowing what
later happened, the narrator describes the Parallel Campaign as an
affection with no real content. As the novel continues: "This is why
great, stirring ideas consists of a body, which like the human body
is compact yet frail, and of an immortal soul, which constitutes its
meaning but is not compact; on the contrary, it dissolves into thin air
at every attempt to grab hold of it in cold words." Later it is described
as incorporating the particular bureaucracy and spirit of Austria with
"a subtle barb aimed at Germany" as a "'landmark,' 'a splendid show
of vitality,' 'a commanding role on the world stage that would have a
bracing effect on the situation here at home.'" The quotes are references to the sayings of one of the main organizers, Count Leinsdorf,
arguing that these sayings were so well phrased that "one could no

5 Already the very first paragraphs of the novel demonstrate this with its combination
of metrological data and the feeling of the weather: "A barometric low hung over the
Atlantic. It moved eastward toward a high-pressure area over Russia without as yet
showing any inclination to bypass this high in a northerly direction. The isotherms
and isotheres were functioning as they should. The air temperature was appropriate
relative to the annual mean temperature and to the aperiodic monthly fluctuations
of the temperature. The rising and setting of the sun, the moon, the phases of the
moon, of Venus, of the rings of Saturn, and many other significant phenomena were
all in accordance with the forecasts in the astronomical yearbooks. The water vapor
in the air was at its maximal state of tension, while the humidity was minimal. In a
word that characterizes the facts fairly accurately, even if it is a bit old-fashioned: It
was a fine day in August 1913" (Musil 2017, 3).

more refuse them than refuse a call for every man who desired the Good to step forward." However, the Parallel Campaign was not yet in existence and Count Leinsdorf had no idea what form it would take. In other words, it was pure networking of influential nodes and links: "It meant that even at this stage, without anyone needing to have a clear conception of anything, a network of readiness that covered a great many connections was in place" (Musil 2017, 113, 114, 143, 144).

Amazon's algorithmic apparatus has a similar character of splitting the quality of books, goods, users, etc. for a lofty coherence created by data points, monitoring, ranking and recommendation algorithms, etc. Only people inside Amazon know exactly how all the algorithms work and cohere, but as argued by search engine optimization (SEO) consultants, the A9 ranking algorithm determines the rank of products through measuring, e.g., relevancy, click through rate, sales performance rate, customer feedback, product reviews, etc. (Dod 2020; Lynch 2020). The algorithms all relate to monitoring users/buyers and presenters/sellers behavior, but obviously none of them present a qualitative description. It is an algorithmic market, which is plotted by the 87.33 MB that a random Amazon user downloads, how they interact with the profiling of an Amazon user we are calling a.username? here and with the big codebase in Amazon's cloud. This algorithmic market is a game, played by anybody who wants to sell something through Amazon, with rules laid out by interpreters such as PR managers and SEOs of which the ultimate result might be shallow booklets such as *Jeff Bezos: The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success*.

Robert Musil's novel is the sublime portrait of a European reality on the brink of World War I, through literary means demonstrating some of the clashes between regressive and modernistic perceptions of the modern reality of 1913 Vienna that partly led to the war. In the more or less blind belief that it will change the rules and lead to new sovereignty, the Parallel Campaign resembles Amazon's transformational algorithm and a company praised by entrepreneurial commenters who argue that "[n]o other organization in the world better embodies the power of audacious and continual disruption than Amazon" (Furth 2018). What is really inside the Amazon warehouses, how they treat their employees, subcontractors or users and how their algorithms work is hidden behind the current Parallel Campaign of endless disruption.

Amazon still grows and the megabytes of nonsense are executed while we grasp for sense when entering our lives into a.username?. In Musil's novel, Ulrich, the man without qualities, is characterized in a way that today seems like a perfect description of a.username? and his or her profiled brothers and sisters:

> [But] today responsibility's center of gravity is not in people but in circumstances. Have we not noticed that experiences have made themselves independent of people? (…) A world of qualities without a man has arisen, of experiences without the person who experiences them, and it almost looks as though ideally private experience is a thing of the past, and that the friendly burden of personal responsibility is to dissolve into a system of formulas of possible meanings. Probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view, which for such a long time considered man to be at the center of the universe but which has been fading away for centuries, has finally arrived at the "I" itself, for the belief that the most important thing about experience is experiencing, or of action the doing, is beginning to strike most people as naïve. (Musil 2017, 158–59)

Books and other goods get sent, we read and are read, we click, stream and pay, our qualities are emptied into the variable a.username?, and Jeff Bezos collects the fortunes as the retail business and local shops are disrupted and outmaneuvred. As consumers, we do not just pay for the books and other goods we purchase, but also for the download and running of the extensive code on our devices. Even though we do not see them on our screens, all of these infrastructural elements are real and have effects that, as demonstrated in *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User*, can be counted in MB, Watt and kcal. In other words, besides grabbing our data and disrupting our qualities, Amazon also grabs our electricity, and both our consumption and Amazon's consumption produce carbon pollution. In fact, Amazon Web Services (AWS) are among the worst polluters with only 17% clean energy and 30% coal consumption and "continues to remain among the least transparent in revealing the energy footprint of its rapidly expanding global infrastructure" (Cook 2017, 47). We even

pay for the hidden script and its harvesting of our qualities, since a website without all the scripted monitoring would be infinitesimal in size.

Does this make sense, dear a.username?, character and profile of the big data drama? Is a.username? the profile of disruption without qualities? To paraphrase the Amazon reader Angus M. Kennedy's review of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* is a "stupendous creation of insights and introspection."

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