

”... one cannot tamper” with the form of the book ”without disturbing everything else ...” (Jacques Derrida)

”wellllllll we all said how pornstars were bad actors but I think we found something worse” (Tahir in Rrixxx Kokuzno: *David was* – published by Ubermorgen.com through Amazon)

The Printing Press of Ebooks

Where to Shelve the Gutenberg Galaxy in the Amazon Cloud?

Søren Pold & Christian Ulrik Andersen

As argued by the historian of print, Walter J. Ong, the printing press was indeed the first conveyor belt and thus a ground-breaking technology for industrialized capitalism: "Alphabet letterpress printing, in which each letter was cast on a separate piece of metal, or type, marked a psychological breakthrough of the first order. It embedded the word itself deeply in the manufacturing process and made it into a kind of commodity" (116). The printing press led to a new circulation of text, which resulted in mass produced books, publishers, book-trade, newspapers and magazines with their journalists and critics, but it also renewed institutions around the study and production of text such as the university and other learning institutions. Finally it led to specific modes of subjectivity related to reading – e.g. close-reading in silent privacy.

Some of these things are explored in Honoré de Balzac’s great novel *Illusions perdues* (1837-1843) which is a novel about a young romantic and flabby poet, Lucien de Rubempré, who full of illusions and belief in his talent travels from provincial Angoulême to Paris and changes his attitudes and friendships several times in order to make it as a poet. But his illusions are ruined by realizing how the book trade and the literary world is controlled by a blatant capitalism where everything, including bodies, ideas,

critics and words are for sale on the market for the highest bid. Simultaneously we follow his old friend, the printer and inventor David Séchard, who tries to develop new printing technologies back in Angoulême. According to the Marxist literary critic, Georg Lukács, the novel explores how changes in the base (“Unterbau”) of reproduction technologies affect the superstructure (“Überbau”) of culture, economy and thinking, and how art can respond to this. Lukács sees it as a novel about how literature becomes part of a capitalistic production process – portrayed in details in the novel – and he discusses how this becomes a theme in term of both form and content in the novel. In these ways it is a novel about the commodification of literature and the capitalization of the mind and spirit (“Geist”). It is, however, not just a product of this, but rather a critical, realistic, disillusioned and also clear-sighted, literary exploration demonstrating relations between the base, the superstructure and literary strategies in this changing economy. It does this through the literary form of the novel, for example the way it portrays its main characters through a dialectic, ironic identification making Lucien de Rubempré both a tragic hero and a romantic fool. Furthermore, as pointed out by Christopher Prendergast, it subverts the commercial language and melodramatic form in order to sell criticism as literary consumption. The main character and poet, Lucien, becomes disillusioned and betrays everybody around him, including his old friend, the printer David Séchard, who as a consequence is almost ruined and has to sell his invention of a cheaper way to produce paper to his business rivals in Angoulême. However, through the novel, we develop a detailed and intricate understanding of the literary market and the society in Paris during the Bourbon restoration around 1821-22 when the novel takes place.

E-books and other literary machines

It is clear that we are in the middle of a similar breaking up of the technologies of the word and the way they can be exploited – of course with the networked computer in the centre being itself a “literary machine” through its alphabetic programming and a prime motor for new forms of text such as networked hypertext. However digitization also opens up for an exploitation of reading through technologies of automated reading such as the tracking and monitoring used in for example search engines; and as a motor for

new ways of producing and distributing books such as we see with for example Amazon.com's many activities.

Already twenty years ago the media and literary theorists, Jay David Bolter, argued that we live in the late age of print and that "the evidence of senescence, if not senility, is all around us" {Bolter, 2}. However, the printed book as we know it, is not quite dead yet, though it has been doomed for long, but the ecology and infrastructure in and around books are changing dramatically. If we look at Amazon.com, we find a good glimpse into what is happening and how several things are connected. We find for example:

- A global book store distributing books to the world through tracking and profiling your tastes and choices.
- The e-book platform Kindle which is a tablet e-book reader which includes a store and closely controls your reading through massive surveillance, limiting licenses and built-in obsolescence. All this is handled through Amazon's Whispernet, which is a cloud service that you connect to while reading and which stores your reading data, including what, when, where you read and which notes and underlinings you might make.
- The print-on-demand manufacturer and publisher Create Space, which lets you manufacture your own POD-books and sell them on Amazon. Furthermore, other publishers are part of Amazon Publishing, publishing both printed and electronic texts.
- Various computing and cloud services such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Whispernet, Amazon Cloud Drive, etc. using central servers to host data in the cloud for users and companies.
- Furthermore, Amazon.com is the world's largest online retailer selling all kinds of stuff from books, games, music to electronics, shoes, clothes, jewellery and even automotive parts and accessories like tires and wheels.

Besides Amazon.com we have several other technologies and businesses that are part of the current developments of the technologies of the word – from Apple to Facebook, Microsoft and Google and from programming languages to hypertext and web technolo-

gies including the current conquering of the urban, physical space by ubiquitous and mobile computing.

It is so fun!:)Bieber I ♥ You

In Ubermorgen's *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* robots harvest YouTube comments on videos and upload them in vast quantities as e-books in Amazon's Kindle shop. As the diagram (<http://uuuuuuuntitled.com/>) shows, this is a new kind of literary technology – an amazonian printing press – producing a whole literary ecology including authors, crowd, books, titles, pricing and metadata. It is ideal post-print capitalism delivering lots of cheap goods in the form of e-books to fill the endless shelves at Amazon's electronic warehouses, thus encapsulating the move to informational capitalism. With this and other examples like the prolific author, Philip M. Parker, who is currently the author of 106577 books on Amazon produced from databases and internet searches, we now see a form of fully automated book production, which can fill the still growing storage space on consumers' Kindles. However, while Philip M. Parker produces titles like "The Official Patient's Sourcebook on Narcolepsy" with endless boring reports, *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* produces a new kind of literature with staged dramas. As we read in Rrixxx Kokuzno's *David was* – one of the books published by the project – the starting point, a Justin Bieber video on YouTube, quickly develops into harsh allegations and flame wars between fans and haters, including homophobic rants, and a new poetic language with inventive abbreviations and peculiar online idioms are developed in the process. A mixture between absurd drama, plain swearing and a fast online lingo is developed full of strange spelling, onomatopoeic imagination and intertextual memes. Amazon tries to weed their Kindle shop of this strange drama, but the Ubermorgen bots are as pervasive as capitalism itself. The books are hard to find, since they are injected secretly into the Amazon machinery, published by different author-pseudonyms and deleted if found by Amazon's monitoring system, and most of them remain just as un-read as the books by Philip M. Parker or many other obscure writers. Nevertheless, they enact the drama of contemporary publishing and how it is commoditized.

Note: a longer version of this essay is currently being prepared for a printed book.

References:

- Balzac, Honoré de. *Illusion perdues* IN *La Comédie humaine - 5 Études de moeurs : Scènes de la vie de province [fin], Scènes de la vie parisienne*. [Paris]: Gallimard, 1977.
- Bolter, J. David. *Writing space the computer, hypertext, and the history of writing*. Hillsdale, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991.
- Kokuzno, Rrixxx. *David was*, 2012.
- Lukács, Georg. *Georg Lukács Werke 6 - Probleme des Realismus III - Der historische Roman*. Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965.
- Prendergast, Christopher. *Balzac : fiction and melodrama*. London: Edward Arnold, 1978.