

AMAZON.COM: TAKE BACK YOUR GARBAGE

By Catalina Cortázar

With the appearance of online shopping the way we, as consumers, experience shopping has completely changed. The physical connection with the product - touching it, smelling it and seeing what it looks like in reality - is lost when buying online. But all of these, that could be considered a drawback for online shopping, have become less important with the free-shipping options and easier return policies that on-line shopping is implementing today: if your new product doesn't feel, smell or look as you thought it would, most companies allow you to return it for free and get a full refund. Going shopping has shifted from being an "outside of the house" activity, constrained to businesses hours, into an "inside of the house" activity that can be done at any time: we can now buy any time we want to, during the day or the night. With all of these changes buying on-line has become increasingly popular and every year since 2008, online shopping has increased systematically in America.¹

Amazon.com is today the largest online electronic retailer in the world.²

Founded by Jeffrey Bezos in 1994, and launched in 1995, it started as a book selling company, but today it sells a variety of objects like DVDs, CDs, MP3 downloads,

¹ Retailing in America - 'Tis the season to be frugal - Some retailers will thrive this holiday season, but most won't, *The Economist*, November 19, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21538756> (December 04, 2011).

² Amazon urges California referendum on online tax, *Financial Times*, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/61828252-ac1d-11e0-b85c00144feabdc0.html#axzz1fPgJPY00> (December 02, 2011).

computer software, video games, electronics, apparel, furniture, food, and toys.

Amazon.com has also become a service giver: Amazon Marketplace enables individuals or companies to sell used or new products together with the ones sold by Amazon.com. The buyer can choose from whom he/she prefers to buy depending on price, product condition and the rating that other customers have given to the seller. Amazon Payment is a service that allows customers to make donations or buy digital content.³ Amazon Studios is a site where users can upload their scripts, films, and storyboards; comment on others users' movies and eventually get their films shown to Warner Brothers, "which has an exclusive first look deal with the site."⁴

Thus, we can see Amazon.com as an example of Thackara's observation about the changes in the market system-taking place today.

"Structural changes to whole systems, in the way markets are organized, in the way our transport infrastructures are organized and used, and in the way we work and live, are the hardest changes to effect. But just such changes in these areas are already under way. The shift to a service-based economy is one of the most important features of this transition."⁵

Even though Amazon.com is now providing services, as Thackara suggests as one of the most important features of the already happening economic changes to a

³ Amazon.com, *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon.com> (December 02, 2011).

⁴ Amazon Gets Into Film Production With Amazon Studios, *Slash Film*, <http://www.slashfilm.com/amazon-film-production-amazon-studios/> (December 05, 2011).

⁵ John Thackara, *In the Bubble – Designing in a complex World*, The MIT Press, 2006, p.18

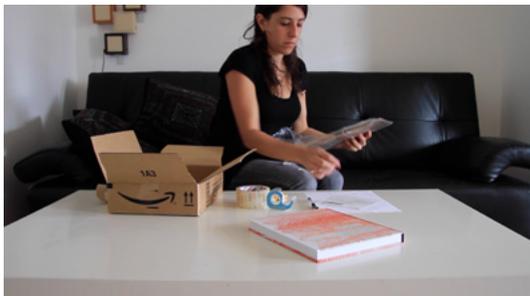
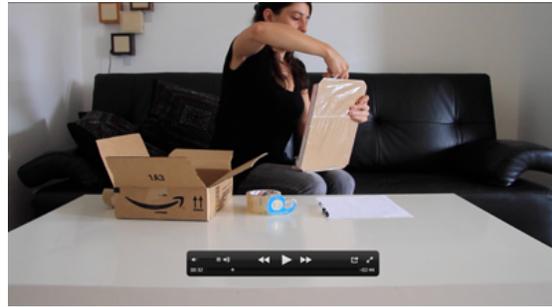
service-based economy, Amazon.com has become a combination of both: product seller and service giver company, but its biggest economic success is still as an online retailer company.

Shopping on-line has not only changed the way in which we buy today, but it also has an impact on the environment.

There are studies that have found that shopping online via Buy.com's e-commerce model (the same model used by Amazon.com) “reduces environmental impact with 35 percent less energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions than what is produced in the traditional retail shopping model.”⁶ These studies only consider energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions, but every time we buy from Amazon.com the objects we buy are wrapped in plastic and come inside huge boxes that does not have any size relation with the product itself. This new way of shopping has begun to generate what I will call a new type of garbage: thousands of cardboard boxes and plastic wrapping used to ship the on-line products we buy. When we buy the same product from a traditional retail store they do not come with these extra wrapping and box that Amazon.com uses when we buy from them.

⁶ Life Cycle Comparison of Traditional Retail and E-Commerce Logistics for Electronic Products: A Case Study of Buy.com, *Carnegie Institute of Technology*, http://www.cit.cmu.edu/media/press/2009/03_03_online_shopping.html (December 02, 2011).

The following 4 images are stills from a video I did where I sent⁷ their garbage (plastic wrapping and cardboard box) back to Amazon.com as a way of protest because of the amount of waste they generate by having such a bad packaging design.



In these images you can clearly see that the book I bought comes wrapped with a totally unnecessary cardboard and plastic, inside of a huge box in relation to its size.

Amazon.com, as an on-line shopping company is perceived as a company that reduces the energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions, but we can see that it is not the exception to Neil Postman observation: “We may learn from this that it is a mistake to suppose that any technological innovation has one-sided effect. Every

⁷ The video can be seen at: http://www.catalinacortazar.com/blog/?page_id=13

technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that”⁸ In this case it is a mistake to think that this new way of shopping, the on-line shopping, is only going to reduce the energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions and that by doing so is going to contribute to reducing the environmental crisis. That is the blessing, the burden is the amount of boxes and extra wrapping that are filling our houses every time we buy a product from Amazon.com.

Why do we need these huge boxes that most of the time are wrapping a smaller box inside? As Lanier says⁹, we find ourselves once again locked in a concept that we, as human beings, created, in this case the idea of the traditional packaging system; a box. We forget that we are the creators and that things and concepts could be different. We the consumers, and Amazon.com the seller, are locked in the idea that products have to be sold and shipped in boxes; but why? Can't we, for example, send a book inside a small envelope? As designers we must be more critical and be paying attention to all the design details, and the garbage that every design is generating; the less garbage we generate the better it is for the environment and for us. As consumers we should be asking Amazon.com to enable us to choose the type of wrapping we want, or to come up with a better design. It might be time for this: to un-lock ourselves from the idea that we need a box to ship a product and create a new design for wrapping and shipping, or at least to make Amazon.com incorporate a users decision of how the product is wrapped and shipped.

⁸ Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, New York, Vintage Books - Random House, 1993, p.4.

⁹ Jaron Lanier, *You are not a gadget*. New York, Vintage Books - Random House, 2010.

Amazon.com defines it's packaging as "Environmentally Friendly Packaging" and states that: " Most Amazon.com orders are shipped in corrugated containers which on average contain 43% recovered fiber content. Once used, these containers are 100% recyclable for use in the manufacture of other paper products."¹⁰ When we, as consumers, read Amazon.com' definition of their packaging we get the feeling that they are environmental concern and it distracts us from really thinking more about this issue. The Invisible Committee explains this very well: "Tracking, transparency, certification, eco-taxes, environmental excellence, and the policing of water, all give us an idea of the coming state of ecological emergency. Everything is permitted to a power structure that bases its authority in Nature, in health, and in well- being."¹¹

In the case of Amazon.com, what does 100% recyclable means for the environment? It means that the containers they use will be destroyed and used again, so it will be used as primer material in the creation of a new product but it is far away from meaning that it won't contribute to the environmental crisis. What it should be clear to us is that there is energy consumption in the transport and process of recyclable materials, as well as in the creation of new items from the recycled ones. Recycling materials also contributes to the environmental crisis.

¹⁰ Amazon and our Planet, *Amazon.com*, http://Amazon.com/b/ref=gw_m_b_corpres?ie=UTF8&node=1378632 (December 04, 2011).

¹¹ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection, The Coming Insurrection(extract)*, Semiotext(e) Intervention series, 2009, p.3.

Even though Amazon.com has been changing their wrapping and box materials they still have enormous boxes for small products. This not only represents a bad design since it contributes to the environmental crisis and generates a huge amount of garbage, but it is a very bad design in itself: old and not innovative. We can see that their design has been grabbed from the past and incorporated into this new reality, the on-line shopping. It has not been designed for this new and specific scenario. The boxes were designed, if we can say that, without exploring the possibilities of how a new packaging design could contribute to the environmental crisis, how to do an optimum design in size, and maybe thinking in terms of re-usability.

How is it that a company considered the biggest one in its area doesn't come up with a better solution for packaging, a better design? Thus, The Invisible Committee makes the following observation: "We won't let ourselves be led astray by the ones who've brought about the "catastrophe." Where the managers platonically discuss among themselves how they might decrease emissions "without breaking the bank," the only realistic option we can see is to "break the bank" as soon as possible and, in the meantime, take advantage of every collapse in the system to increase our own strength."¹²

One of the reasons for not designing a new type of packaging might be that having a better design means having to spend money on it, and because Amazon.com is a retail company, which is part of the private industry, to make as much money as they

¹² The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection, The Coming Insurrection(extract)*, Semiotext(e) Intervention series, 2009, p.5.

can is their goal. They will do everything that they can in order to save some dollars even if this means having a horrible design that contributes to the environmental crisis.

Why a box inside a box? When we go to a retail store we can decide if we want our product inside a bag or not. Why can't we decide how we want our on-line products to be packed? Why do we need all this extra wrapping and boxes? Amazon.com can argue that it is to protect the product from being damaged through the shipping process, but we as buyers should be able to decide how much damage we are willing to accept in our products versus how much we want to contribute to the environmental crisis. On the specific case of the book shown on the still images from my video, it is a hardcover book; it could easily be sent inside an envelope if they would have chosen to or if they would have allowed the buyer, in this case myself, to choose the packaging.

A good example of packaging design for an on-line service company is Netflix.¹³ Netflix was founded in 1997, 3 years after Amazon.com, and at the end of June 2011 has 25 million subscribers worldwide, becoming the world's leading Internet subscription service for enjoying movies and TV shows.¹⁴



Exactly opposite to Amazon.com, Netflix has created an innovative design for packaging and shipping their DVDs. The packaging consists of two envelopes. One is

¹³ Designed by Riley Design Associates, LLC (RDA)

¹⁴ Netflix revolutionizes the way people watch movies, *Netflix*, <https://signup.netflix.com/MediaCenter> (December 05, 2011).

the DVD cover, where the renter can read the technical information about the film such as synopsis, length, and director name, among others. The other envelope is the outside packaging, where the shipping address and postage stamps are placed. Both of these envelopes are re-usable. The inside envelope comes with the DVD and it will be used until it's torn and becomes useless. The outside envelope is used by Netflix to send the film to the renter. After enjoying the film, the renter will use the same envelope to return it to Netflix. Both envelopes are also made of recycling material.

In this case, Netflix has changed the way we receive and send the films to watch at home. But not only that, it has introduced a new way of packaging, and with it a new concept: reusing the same envelope to ship and return. As Neil Postman wrote: “A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything.”¹⁵ With this new packaging the impact on the environment decreased because of a well thought design; in this case the blessing is bigger than the burden.

Jamer Hunt¹⁶ talked about how the scale of an event can make the difference. Because of the scale, a blessing can become a burden, or a burden can become a blessing. When on-line shopping began, because of the less energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions, was considered better for the environment than traditional retail shopping. Today, with the increase in online shopping, the new forms of waste produced by this new trend have become a big problem. At the beginning, when online-shopping appeared, fewer people were buying online, and fewer boxes were being

¹⁵ Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, New York, Vintage Books - Random House, 1993, p.18.

¹⁶ Hunt, Jamer. “Scalar Shifts of Space and Time and Design's Potentialities”, *Lecture Design for This Century, Parsons The New School for Design*, December 01, 2011.

shipped. On October 2011 the number of unique visitors to Amazon.com was of 83,927,992¹⁷. The number of people buying online from Amazon.com has drastically increased and so has the amount of waste produced.

This new technology, which was once considered less contaminating than traditional retail shopping, is today generating a new type of garbage because of the increase in the scale of use. As Neil Postman writes: “Unforeseen consequences stand in the way of all those who think they see clearly the direction in which a new technology will take us.”¹⁸ With the appearance of on-line shopping there were two types of unforeseen consequences. The first one is the scale of use, and the second one is the waste generated because of the bad design of packaging used by some of the companies that sell on-line, such as Amazon.com. The scale of use will grow bigger each year as countries from Latin America start incorporating on-line shopping. There is not much that we, as designers, can do to change this consequence of this new technology, but for the second unforeseen consequence, the new type of waste that it is generating there is a lot that we can do.

As designers we are responsible for the products we create from the beginning until their end: until they are transformed, re-used or recycled. We have to be able to adjust to the changes that are taking place today in the world and come up with innovative solutions to the new problems that come with changes, as Netflix did. We have to be able to be critical and to “un-lock” ourselves from old design concepts, such

¹⁷ Amazon.com, *Site Analytics*, <http://siteanalytics.compete.com/amazon.com/> (December 04, 2011).

¹⁸ Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, New York, Vintage Books - Random House, 1993, p.15.

as the need of a box for shipping, in order to be able to fight the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves today.

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