

Book Review

Inge Van de Ven, *Big Books in Times of Big Data*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019. 251 pp.

Big Books in Times of Big Data examines the stylistics of monumentality by reading novelists, including Karl Ove Knausgård and Elena Ferrante, through the lens of contemporary cultural phenomena such as digitization, quantification, and datafication. Inge Van de Ven engages in a critical reflection on what it means to write a novel over one thousand pages long at a time when enormous and ever-increasing amounts of information are “vying for our eyes and brains” (1). The book is not only a reflection on our frantic times but also a contemplation on the rise of the popularity of these novels and explores the connections between these two developments.

The introduction clarifies the correlation between the numerous declarations of the death of the novel and the latest metamorphosis of the book in terms of materiality, narration, and stylistics. According to Van de Ven, these declarations of the death of the novel did not result in a decreased interest in literary works. On the contrary, in the last decade we have seen a renewed popularity of interminable novels. According to Van de Ven, this development testifies to the plasticity of the novel rather than its death.

The first chapter, “Monumentality and the Novel,” reviews the rise of monumentality in nineteenth-century music and literature. Van de Ven argues that the historical circumstances that gave rise to the aesthetics of monumentality in the twenty-first century resemble those of the nineteenth century. In both cases, we see profound societal and technological changes accompanied by attempts to conserve cultural values through a literature

that emphasizes durability, longevity, and remembrance. Art in these turbulent times becomes a means for avoiding the timely and for generating stability by synthesizing past and future. Artists that embraced this aesthetic ideal, such as Richard Wagner and Roberto Bolaño, created artworks that aim to encompass everything. From their personal lives, which they mythologized, to time itself, which they wanted to encapsulate, it all becomes synthesized in their monuments. In our times, according to Van de Ven, it is digitization with its immense online databases and techniques for networking information that fosters the dreams of these artists.

In the chapters “A Sublime of Data” and “Narratives of the Database,” Van de Ven examines the relation between the experience of the sublime and our present predicament characterized by information overload. The sublime, as conceptualized by Immanuel Kant, is an experience of an object so immense that it surpasses our understanding. According to Van de Ven, writers of monumental novels bring about this experience using narrative regressions that frustrate the reader’s process of sense making. Taking Bolaño’s book *2666* as an example, she notes that monumental novels are impossible to thoroughly close-read or be grasped in their entirety. The amount of data is simply too grand, like the amount of data compiled by Google, to be fully processed. Our subjectivity simply cannot digest all the digressions, all the enumerations, or all the events of *2666*.

To counter this overload and make the data digestible, writers start using the coding of the archive and database. Digitization strips events of their qualities and transforms them into digits that are easy to process. These quantitative techniques generate novels composed of concatenations, endless lists of things, and minor narratives composed of insignificant details. These enumerations and arbitrary categorizations bring structure and order to the overload of information but do so “*without compression*,” and the resulting novels are still interminable (74). Bolaño’s *2666* is a monument that lacks the closure needed for its events to acquire meaning. Instead of a narrative of causal relations, it consists of correlations. Rather than a story with a hierarchy of events, it is horizontal and paratactic. Van de Ven concludes by noting that, “by way of excess and overload, [*2666*] dismantles the illusion of the signature or the proper name, the solitary author as the originary of creation” (88).

Chapter 4, “The Quantified Selves,” discusses the increasingly intimate role that big data techniques play in our self-conception. Focusing on Knausgård’s *My Struggle*, Van de Ven discloses the deeply intertwined nature of technology and self-representation. Like big data fanatics who aspire to an “ $N = \text{all}$ ” approach, Knausgård wants to recall all his memories, retrieve all time lost, and absorb all of reality in his writings.

Once again, the archive proves to be the idol of the writer. However, with every memory retrieved, not only is another present negated, but each time, another memory is also occluded. Consequently, writers must always choose what to include and what to exclude. In his autobiographical writings, Knausgård explicates these choices, the failures of his memory, and the gaps in his archival narrative. As a result, the act of recollection becomes “a dialectic of remembrance and forgetting” that Knausgård uses to “re-imagine archiving the self as a creative act” (120). It is this act of constructing a self through an interminable series of remembrances that mirrors and mimics the open-ended lists of social media posts and the current obsession with quantification.

In her discussion of Knausgård and Ferrante, Van de Ven argues that “the size of [books] is not a neutral, value-free aspect: it is loaded with connotations, among these about gender” (115). By tracing the role gender plays in the reception of their novels and how the narrators relate to themselves, she demonstrates that these authors problematize common conceptions of gender by disclosing the discrepancy between themselves (or their narrators) and gender schemas instituted by literary critics. According to Van de Ven, this act opens a space that is used to overdetermine and overwrite representations of gender. In doing so, Knausgård and Ferrante aim to institute “an escape act, allowing the author to recuperate (self-)representation” (135).

The next chapter examines the novel in the post-television age. Van de Ven investigates the myriad relations between Mark Z. Danielewski and George R. R. Martin’s books and “quality TV” serials, including *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*. Van de Ven notes that both media share an affinity with serialization—a playful variegation of “the familiar and the unknown, . . . pattern and noise, stability and change” (138). While serialization was previously conceived to be cheap, commercial, and superficial, now it is associated with artistic prestige, profundity, and cultural value. By showing how the book *The Familiar* by Danielewski adopts elements from TV series and how Martin’s *Songs of Ice and Fire* became increasingly tangled up with *Game of Thrones*, Van de Ven lays bare the intertwined nature of these two media in the information age.

The chapter titled “The Book-as-World-as-Book” expounds the paradoxical attempts of monuments to “represent” the “unrepresentable” world by examining William T. Vollmann’s novel *The Atlas* and Danielewski’s book *Only Revolutions* in the context of the software Google Earth. Van de Ven argues that Google Earth attempts to represent the “unrepresentable” and to instantiate a “disembodied master subject” detached from the process of world making (168). In *The Atlas*, this perspective is compromised.

Here, a narrator travels the world and finds that there is no escape, there is no outside from which one can control or view the world. One is always already entangled with(in) one. According to Van de Ven, Danielewski's novel goes even further by encompassing history and cultural specificity in this escape act. Whereas Knausgård and Ferrante were able to escape the grids of gender by overdetermining them, Vollmann and Danielewski remain stuck in an in-between space-time that is always changing but where one is never free.

The last chapter, "Slow Reading, Materiality, and Mediacy," discusses the ideology of datafication. A central antagonistic figure in this chapter is the positivist obsessed with quantifying. The dream of this new positivist is a time where everything can be recuperated and present at hand. By using all data available ($N = \text{all}$), the positivist believes that we can create a crystal-clear world: a world without past and future and where no negativity can hide. This *fata morgana* inspires novelists to build monuments of all that they remember and all that they desire—a gesture that revives the Romantic obsession with totality. But by yearning for totality, these positivists and novelists simultaneously disclose their dependence, paucity, and frailty. This tension constitutes an idiosyncratic dialectic. The style of Van de Ven's book resembles this dialectic. She continuously shifts between a linear narrative and innumerable digressions on everything from Don Quixote to Donald Trump's nuclear button. Throughout the book, she refrains from conceptualizing this style and her own role as a writer. Yet despite this minor shortcoming, Van de Ven's book offers an engaging analysis of the relation between contemporary literature and digitalization that does not shy away from considering the limitations of traditional literature.

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