Chapter 15: The Printed Book in the Digital Age

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In 2014, Scottish artist Katie Patterson started the Future Library Project. It consists of a hundred books, placed in a time capsule that will remain unopened until 2114. Once a year, a writer is invited to contribute a new text that none of their contemporaries are allowed to read. The organizers first planted 1,000 trees in a town outside of Oslo, in order to supply the paper for the books over a century. A printing press has been installed to ensure that these texts can still be printed in paper form, in case the technology is phased out in the meantime. Margaret Atwood, one of the first writers selected, has commented on the Future Library Project that

> It's very optimistic to believe, … that there will be people in 100 years, that those people
> will still be reading, … and that we'll be able to communicate across time, which is what
> any book is in any case — it's always a communication across space and time. This one is
> just a little bit longer. (in Novak 2014)

Atwood voices an ambivalent take on the longevity of the book, literature, and its readers. The logic underlying the time capsule of the Future Library Project is a logic of monumentality. It suggests that certain literary works are memorable enough to be consigned to posterity, yet expresses a sense of insecurity with regard to the novel's afterlife. The book-bound novel becomes

a locus for speculation about the future of literature: a bulwark against *its own death*, a monument to the genre itself. In this chapter, I will argue that this urge to monumentalize the book and the novel inspires a range of strategies to make literature anew in the face of digitization.

As we know, the form and function of the book as the central carrier of cultural information have changed dramatically with the advent of digital technology. Analog literary texts are now just one node in a network of converging media that compete for our time and attention. How are reading and writing affected by these medial changes? Such questions force scholars of literature to attend to its material aspect, which for a long time has been insufficiently addressed. In the light of the alternative materialities of the digital, the book has been defamiliarized, and as a result, its affordances as a tangible carrier of information can be explored. How has the shift to the digital become an impetus for scholars in comparative literature to reexamine the printed book as an object and medium — or better, a multimedia object? How is digitalization affecting our engagement with, as well as our experiences and valuation of, the printed book and the book-bound novel? And how have book artists and authors exploited the codex, print materiality, and paper in innovative ways as a response to these shifts?

Starting from contested notions of the "end of the book" and the "death of the novel," and then examining several "Renaissances," this chapter explores the resilience of paper-based literature and its academic scrutiny in the era of its foretold death. First, I examine how the academic discipline of comparative literary studies has responded to the shift from analog to digital materialities by developing new frameworks and critical tools to analyze this shift and the literary and artistic products that are created in response to it. Then, I zoom in on recent innovations in, and reinventions of, analog literary practices, in book art and book design as well as literary fiction. I end with a reflection on a specific form of bookishness that emphasizes the novel's size and scale,

and thus reinvents it as monumental. On all these levels, we will see, the digital has brought the book, and the novel as the literary art form bound by the book, into sharper focus.

End of the Book, Death of the Novel?

In the last ten years, the death of the novel has been announced time and again, by authors such as David Shields (2010) and Will Self (2014). Self blames digital media, the "perpetual now" that the internet offers, and constant connectivity, for the demise of the "serious novel":

> There is one question alone that you must ask yourself in order to establish whether the serious novel will still retain cultural primacy and centrality in another 20 years. This is the question: if you accept that by then the vast majority of text will be read in digital form on devices linked to the web, do you also believe that those readers will voluntarily choose to disable that connectivity? If your answer to this is no, then the death of the novel is sealed out of your own mouth. (2014)

Philip Roth has likewise predicted that the "screen" technologies of computer and television condition our brains to the point where the old "single-focus requirement," the devout mode of concentration needed for slowly reading a book, will become an "elegiac exercise" (in Colman 2011). The novel, he predicts, will soon become an elite form for a small cult of readers.

These apocalyptic predictions are by no means new. During the past two centuries, almost every notable technological and social shift has led to anxieties about the future of the novel. In *The Novel/Film Debate* (2013), Kamilla Elliot outlines the rivalry between literature and film throughout the latter's history. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* (2006) examines the tenuous position of literary fiction in relation to US television culture. With the installation of the printing press, the volume and intensity of new sensory and cognitive input was

at first experienced as shocking, overwhelming and distracting (Rosenberg 2003). Already in 1758, Samuel Richardson suspected that the novel had run its course. Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1830s, worried that the rise of American democracy would cause authors to write ever shorter text, eradicating 'big novels' (2004, 542). In 1902, Jules Verne predicted newspapers would replace novels within years. In the relatively short history of the print novel, its impending end has been apprehended with the rise of the telegraph, telephone, radio, photography, television, and film. Of course, following all these landmarks, the production, publication, and consumption of novels continued unabated. The alleged "threat" that these then-emerging technologies exerted, even when it never truly jeopardized the novel, did make its impression on the status of literary texts, as well as their form and content. Time and again, the novel survives its own "death" by adapting to these changes.

Besides the novel as a genre of writing, the obsolescence of the book as its medium and material carrier has been predicted as well. Since the late 1980s, scholars and authors have claimed that the future of Western literature would be in electronic media and that hypertext would replace paper and books as bearers of literary texts and locus of literary innovation. Thus, hypertext author Robert Coover announced the death of the book in the early 1990s, and in his defense of hyperfiction as the literary genre of the future, stated that "the print medium is a doomed and outdated technology, a mere curiosity of bygone days destined soon to be consigned forever to those dusty unattended museums we now call libraries" (1992).

Both the celebratory and pessimistic accounts of the book's obsolescence are informed by a logic of media superseding each other. As Marshall McLuhan and his son Eric write in *Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988), it is a consistent factor in the reception of media (and other technological "extensions") that, with the emergence of a new medium, an old medium is expected

to become obsolete. The telephone, as an extension of the human voice, lessens the need for the art of penmanship. The "death of the novel" and end of the book have been (and continue to be) a prevalent instance of this logic of obsolescence.

Such claims regarding the end of the book have been part of a growing tendency in media studies to consider the digital as the point of integration of all media. In line with this tendency, Henry Jenkins (2006) has identified media convergence as the key dynamic of the present. Users are participating in different media that meet and merge with, and remediate each other so that a new integral media platform has come into effect. However, the expectation that books would be fully absorbed by the digital, rightfully criticized by Jenkins, is informed by a binary either/or logic which places digital screens in opposition to the book and paper page. This presumed animosity or competition between page and screen has been reinforced with the introduction of e-readers. Such pronouncements give the false impression that either electronic or paper books can survive, rather than serving diverging functions alongside each other.

Yet, in the years following the hype around e-books and e-readers around 2010 — a period in which the end of the book was again widely prophesied — the sales of printed books have increased while those of e-books have stagnated (Sax 2016; Bläsi 2019). In this case, rather than rendering their predecessors obsolete, newer media technologies have produced the older media anew, to the extent that the latter has been reframed in the light of the new. In the last decades, literature has undergone transformations on paper and in book-form at least as much as in electronic environments. This chapter offers an overview of scholarship that investigates such reinventions from the perspective of a more complex dynamic of media-interaction typified by *divergence* rather than convergence alone. Rather than digital convergence, it hinges on a

dynamic of contrastive, material differences between analog and digital media in the present. (Brillenburg Wurth, Espi and Van de Ven 2013).

Renaissance of the Book in Scholarship: the Turn to Materiality

I now turn to a threefold 'Renaissance' of the medium of print, a term which I borrow from Dutch book designer Irma Boom, who has asserted,

> A book does something the Internet cannot do. It is about choices, about assembling text and image and making it unchangeable. I call it 'frozen information'. Designing a book is about rendering complex structures legible. The order is fixed. Unlike the internet, where everything is jumbled and you lack focus. ... I predict the renaissance of the book! (Pleij 2014; my translation)

The first Renaissance can be discerned in scholarly work on book materiality; the second in book art and design; and the third in 'bookish' novels.

As material carriers and technologies, books and paper had until the 1990s been so habitualized, so overly familiar, that they constituted a blind spot for most scholars of literature. As famously phrased by Viktor Shklovksy, "[h]abitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (1965, 12). And so it was with books, for a long time. In its heyday as the dominant mode for the circulation of information, the book was barely seen as a technology of communication. With the notable exception of specialists in the field of artists' books—Johanna Drucker, Charles Alexander, Ulises Carrión—scholars in comparative literature rarely considered book materiality. Academic disciplines like book history and the sociology of literature did inquire

into the production, transmission, circulation as material practices, as well as the dissemination of texts. Yet traditionally, these remained at a disciplinary remove from literary studies.

In her introduction to a special issue of *Comparative Literature* on the 'material turn' (2018), Brillenburg Wurth argues that textual interpretation in Western culture has for the larger part of its history entailed a range of strategies aimed at looking *beyond* the material aspects of the text, for intangible, invisible and non-literal meanings. In hermeneutics, the texture of stories has been conceived foremost as a stepping stone, an entry point into the often hidden, derived text hovering beyond the materiality of their words and letters. This immaterial, figural meaning is what the interpreter was after. Matter, if considered at all, was thought of as a vehicle for something else waiting to be disclosed.

Leah Price (2006) has chalked up this split between the material and the ideal to a Cartesian heritage of Western culture, which has taught us to filter out the sensuous aspects of the printed page. This disembodied concept of the literary work further stemmed from eighteenth-century debates over copyright. As Mark Rose writes in *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (1993), literary property was not thought to reside in ideas but in the ways they were expressed. Style could be held as literary property, hence copyrighted. In "Print is Flat, Code is Deep" (2004), N. Katherine Hayles explained how this led to the prevalence a concept of print literature as immaterial verbal construction.

Since the late twentieth century, with the advent of electronic text, online platforms, and print on demand, scholars began to see—and smell, and feel, and hear—the print book anew. In light of the multiplication of textual media, they were faced with the challenge to rethink the physical, material codex as a cultural agent, and to critically interrogate its affordances. Drucker

has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the interconnection of textual materiality and cultural significance in this light:

> Durability, scale, reflectiveness, richness and density of saturation and color, tactile and visual pleasure—all of these factor in—not as transcendent and historically independent universals, but as aspects whose historical and cultural specificity cannot be divorced from their substantial properties. (Drucker 1994, 45).

This ushered in an extension of hermeneutics to include not only the text, the inside, but also the outward materiality of its carrier, as Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre argue in their introduction to *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture* (2019).

The last decades have witnessed a renewed attention to books and paper as bodies of literature in a digital age. A body of academic work attempts to grapple with the physical properties and the changing communicative and cultural functions of the printed book. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay in *A Book of the Book* (2000) assembled a wide array of creative and critical texts on the artistic potential of the book. Peter Stoicheff and Andrew Taylor's *The Future of the Page* (2004) focuses on the materiality of the paper page and the electronic 'pages' that literature has come to interact with in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Simon Garfield's *Just My Type: A Book of Fonts* (2011) explores the history and contemporary significance of typography. Nicholas Basbanes' *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History* (2013) examines paper as the most important material constituent of bookmaking. And Keith Houston's *The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time* (2016) covers the breadth and scope of bibliographic communication.

The new interest in book matter should be understood as part of the material turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences at large. In literary studies, this turn came about in close

conjunction with the New Materialism growing out of feminist theory, philosophy, sociology, archaeology, and science and technology studies. As Liedeke Plate notes (2019), this is informed by a dissatisfaction with the linguistic turn and social constructionism's focus on language and representation. Bruno Latour critiqued this focus, in *We Have Never Been Modern* (*Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, 1991), for its complicity with a conception of materiality as inert, passive, and separate from the human subject. New materialists intend to re-establish materialist ontologies (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012).

This new awareness in turn led critics like Drucker, Alan Liu, and Jay David Bolter to develop new vocabularies, analytical tools, and critical approaches for the analysis of literary works. Already in 1991, Jerome J. McGann urged textual scholars to attend to typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and other 'paratextual' phenomena often regarded as extraneous to poetry or the text as such. Leah Price's *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian* Britain (2012) has broadened the scope of literary history as a discipline by considering the social and material histories of books and print. Hayles (2004) proposes the method of media-specific analysis. This entails a mode of attention to the fact that all texts are materially instantiated, and that the medium matters. She aims to re-conceptualize textual materiality as an emergent, rather than pre-given property, described as "the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies" (72).

Since then, the impact of the avalanche of studies reconsidering the inter/medial aspects of literature has even led scholars like Brillenburg Wurth (2012), Hayles and Pressman (2013, Pressman 2017) to suggest that Comparative Literature as an academic subject should no longer be understood solely as comparing across languages, but also as comparing across material textures and media technologies, which requires acts of medial translation. 'The literary' is then

considered as a mode emerging in-between these textures and technologies. Such an approach gives rise to the new discipline of Comparative Textual Media, as part of an increasing recognition of literature's place in a media ecology, and literary studies as part of media studies.

The material turn has not just increased attention to the text's visual and aural aspects, but also to the sensory and affective dimensions of *reading*: the touch, shape, weight, and smell of the paper page, and how they affect the reader (Hamilton 2018). The counterpoint of this rediscovery of the physicality of the book, its having a body, is the rediscovery of the obvious fact that the *reader* has a body as well. Scholars like Liedeke Plate have reconsidered reading as a physical act, reminding us that "books do things to us" in return (2015, 105). Books, being material objects that affect us, have agency and foster sociality.

Renaissance of the book in artists' books: the disintegrating codex

Concurrent with the renaissance of the book in scholarship, a similar awareness of the potentialities of the codex can be discerned in artistic and novelistic experiments. As Johanna Drucker has shown in *The Century of Artists' Books* (1995), the book itself has changed shape as a material artefact in the twentieth century. Undeniably, the variety of post-WWII artists' books is indicative of a new-found freedom for the medium that could transcend its function as a tool for disseminating information. The codex became an object for reflection by artists and graphic designers, who started to "treat" or creatively transform found book objects into multimedia objects, through a range of practices like overwriting, decoupage, book-altering, and text-treating. Book art as an analog art for digital times takes part in a range of artistic revivals of analog media like vinyl, polaroids, and floppy disks, that exemplify how old and new media evolve concurrently.

Garrett Stewart (2011) has examined a practice he calls "bookwork," a form of book altering that uses books as the material substance for sculpture, demonstrating that "the idea of the

codex survives its use" (xiii). Such bookworks are expressions of what he calls *demediation*, a process by which media are neutralized in their function: in this case, as bodies of literature or information. As such, demediation pays tribute to an increasing cultural disuse of books, reducing them to works of display, from the library to the museum. Artists as Doug Beube, Brian Dettmer, Cara Barer, and Simon Morris engage in the cutting up of an older, found or discarded book to make new art objects. These effectively demediate the codex by rendering books illegible and thus impeding their former medial functionality. Thus, the books in Detmmer's *Dictionary* series are maimed, with pieces of the page cut away and shellacked, and no longer meant to be read.

Such ravaged book sculptures become an apt vehicle to interrogate the future of the book and reading in times of distraction and fragmentation. This ephemerality comes especially to the fore in Tom Philips's *A Humument*, a project he started in 1970 and completed in 2016. Inspired by the cut-up techniques of postmodernist writer William Burroughs, Philips decided to alter the first book he could buy for threepence, which turned out to be the 1892 Victorian novel *A Human Document* by W.H. Mallock. Philips started to overwrite, overdraw, overpaint, and thus erase its text as a visual palimpsest, until only a small number of words remained on the page. In 2010, a digital version of *A Humument* was released as *A Humument App* for iPhone. The 367 full-color pages have been scanned, so now the user can zoom in on details at enhanced resolution. Meanwhile, a 'find wheel' spins through the book and presents visual thumbnails, which make it easy to navigate.

Other disintegrating monuments to the book underline its fragility and transitory nature in the digital age even more forcefully. Consider *Agrippa (a book of the dead)*, a collaborative project by cyberpunk novelist William Gibson, graphic artist Dennis Ashbaugh, and publisher Kevin Begos. *Agrippa*, too, is made as a palimpsest, and performs the process of the book's decay. From

the outside, it looks like a blackened log that has been exhausted and will no longer burn. The title is singed into the cover, the pages are ragged and charred. The book includes etchings and pages of DNA sequences. It features a poem by Gibson, which can only be played from a 3½-inch floppy on a 1992 Apple Macintosh. When the disk runs, the text of the poem starts scrolling up the screen while an encryption program on the floppy disk encodes each line and makes the poem 'disappear' after its first and only reading.[2] In addition, the pages of the artists' book were treated with photosensitive chemicals, causing the gradual fading of the words and images from the book's first exposure to light. On all these levels, the meaning of the text is founded on *absence*: it emerges in the space between the ephemeral referent and the reader's memory – the imperfect trace left on her mind. We see that these experimentations all point to disintegration, loss, and mourning, and can be considered monuments or memorials to the book which inscribe its transitoriness.[3]

Bookish novels

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010) aptly illustrates the often porous boundaries between artists' books and experimental novels. Foer used a digitally enhanced method of die-cutting to carve into the text of *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) by Polish-Jewish author Bruno Schulz. After Schulz was killed by the Nazis, his writing was largely lost, as were his paintings and drawings. Foer has cut Schulz's text to ribbons (beginning with the title: *Tree of Codes* is what's left over after shredding 7 letters of *Street of Crocodiles*) and created a different book out of it. Visual

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[2] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41kZovcyHrU for a video of the poem running.

[3] The same themes are foregrounded in *Nox* (2010), an experimental, multimodal work that is a replica of the scrapbook the Canadian poet Anne Carson made in memory of her recently deceased brother, Michael. In *Nox*, she has translated and parsed Catullus's elegiac poem 101 into lexicographical entries. The book is folded in concertina style, and contains photographs, paintings, drawings, collages, a letter by her brother, and pieces of text composed, photocopied, and stapled (see Brillenburg Wurth 2014, Plate 2015). In its digital replication of fragile analog materiality, *Nox* is not just a memorial for her lost brother but also for the book.

Editions, die-cut specialists in the Netherlands, and a 'hand-finisher' in Belgium have further created this intricate artefact. Its fragile and vulnerable materiality (any reckless turning of a page might destroy it) are all the more fitting considering Schulz's history. A sense of loss literally and materially permeates *Tree of Codes*, notably in the holes in its pages. Pressman argues he thus "memorializes the book by promoting awareness of the allegorical paradoxes that render books always on the verge of loss, erasure, and obsolescence" (2018, 115). In this respect, *Tree of Codes* has much in common with the carved bookwork of book sculptors Brian Dettmer and Doug Beube, with two important differences: it is intended to be read, and produced on a large scale by a mainstream publisher, the London-based Visual Editions.

In those respects, Foer is emblematic of a number of experimental literary works published during the last twenty years. Produced by big publishing houses in relatively large print runs, these novels appropriate the aesthetics of book art without being as exclusive. Today, digital media are involved at every stage of the production and distribution of literature, so even the book-bound, analog novel is digitally produced. Novels increasingly demonstrate an awareness of this fact, and of the interrelations between digital and analog materialities. Alexander Starre (2015) has aptly called such texts *metamedial*: literary works that openly reflect on their own existence as printed and bound codices. In her research, Alison Gibbons (e.g. 2012) analyzes such multimodal texts: literary works that combine multiple semiotic modes—such as the visual, the textual, and the tactile—in their narratives and experiment with the possibilities of the book form. They exploit their material dimensions and paper materiality in a way that is not external to their narratives but part of the meaning, and thus they comment and reflect upon the shift to the digital and the book's changing status and meaning as a node in a network of converging and diverging media.

Perhaps most famously, we see this practice in Mark Z. Danielewski's experiments with typography and page layout in *House of Leaves* (2000), a book that transcends its own bindings by linking up to a website and a CD by the author's sister, the singer-songwriter Poe. Hayles has analyzed how *House of Leaves* performs the computer's tendency to absorb all other media, and then adapts this remediating craze in a graphomaniac, maximalist book. This book seeps out of its bindings, like the titular house which is bigger on the inside than the outside, and thus embodies the transformations of both the reading subject and literature's materialities that digitalization brings about (See Hayles 2002; Hansen 2004, Bray and Gibbons 2015; Pressman 2020).

Other examples of such 'hybrid' novels are Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) which incorporates film through a mixture of typographic design and flipbook techniques. It features a 'conceptual' shark presented visually as text on the page. The shark is like a giant memory bank, an external hard-disk that the protagonist believes has devoured his mind and identity. *The Raw Shark Texts* performs fears of print literature vanishing in the endless, dark recesses of networked digital media, and associated fears for the future of reading and literacy (see Pressman 2020; Brillenburg Wurth 2011). Other hybrid novels include Graham Rawle's *Woman's World* (2005), which weaves its story entirely as a collage of recycled text from women's magazines from the early 1960s (Brillenburg Wurth 2011), and J.J. Abrams's and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013) with its handwritten marginalia. Such books operationalize the power of print matter and foreground the book as a multimedia object that is in important ways shaped by digital technology.

Jessica Pressman has analyzed this phenomenon in terms of what she calls "the aesthetics of bookishness": a renewed appreciation, or even fetishization, of the book object. Bookishness is precisely inspired by, and created in response to, the threat of obsolescence:

[b]ookishness proliferates in twenty-first-century culture, presenting numerous and varied

sites through which to calibrate and consider medial change as well as to critique digital

culture, especially end-time narratives about the death of the book. (2018, 97)

Authors like Danielewski, Hall and Safran Foer have responded to this threat by claiming to create

books that cannot exist online: thus Foer writes, "On the brink of the end of paper, I was attracted

to the idea of a book that can't forget it has a body" (Heller 2010). Earlier, Danielewski said about

his *Only Revolutions* (2006): "I'm ultimately creating a book that can't exist online…I think that's

the bar that the Internet is driving towards: how to further emphasize what is different and

exceptional about books" (Cottrell 2000).

A subclass of bookish works distinguish themselves by incorporating augmented reality

and taking place literally between book and computer. Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse's digital

pop-up book *Between Page and Screen* (2012) is such a text. It is an augmented-reality book of

poetry consisting of a print book with geometric shapes ('Quick Response' graphics), read by a

webcam that projects a series of poems in the space between screen and page (see Pressman 2015).

The Ice-Bound Concordance (2014) by Aaron Reid and Jacob Garbe is a text-based game where

the reader is asked to co-author a book by the AI simulacrum of a diseased writer. To help finish

the story, you explore hundreds of permutations offered through a logic-driven combinatorial

narrative system. It is accompanied by *The Ice-Bound Compendium*, a printed book that propels

the game forward by unlocking new levels and fragments of the author's past. The reader has to

hold it up to a webcam that reads each page for relevant themes; when you find a match, an

augmented reality layer appears over the page, revealing hidden notes, images, and short clips (see

Van de Ven 2019a).

At the same time as reflecting on the meaning and status of bookishness, such works reflect on the changing meaning of human embodiment and subjectivities, as Brillenburg Wurth has argued. More than just the dominant medium for transferring information, "the book has been a mediator of human identity and consciousness, the construction of an individual, humanistic subjectivity in Western culture has often been associated with the reading of books" (2011, 120). Rather than announcing the end of the book, or constituting a swan's song to its former prowess, these works reflect on the changing status and potentialities of the codex in relation to shift to newer media: on what the book is, has been, and what it could be now that it is freed from its function as a vehicle of information.

Big books and monumental novels

This brings us back to the monumentality of the *Future Library* Project addressed at the outset of this chapter. Aimed at *stability*, a monument inadvertently suggests a certain *vulnerability;* it thus becomes a vehicle for addressing the shift to the digital and the future of the book and novel. Digital media do not erase the "analog" novel, but produce it anew as a monumental form. A last development that I wish to mention here, is that of building the novel to scale: the recent emphasis on big, heavy tomes that I address in *Big Books in Times of Big Data* (2019).

Of course, when we look at the actual production, dissemination, and consumption of current-day novels and books, we see that there is no reason to expect its impending end. In the face of predictions that people would no longer be able to concentrate on extended prose narratives because our attention spans would be shortened by digital media use, it is particularly striking that the last decades, many big books have been published. These last decades since have witnessed the publication of other exceedingly large works, from Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) to Garth Risk Hallberg's *City on Fire* (2015), Péter Nádas's *Parallel Stories* (2005), Haruki Murakami's

1Q84 (2009), and Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013). At the same time, artistic projects of "big books" and "endless texts" stretch and enlarge the spatial-material form of the codex to the point of illegibility. Richard Grossman's ongoing project *Breeze Avenue* is a "novel" that the artist plans to expand to a three-million-page length; Yahaya Baruwa's projected *Struggles of a Dreamer*, the "world's largest published novel," measures 8 ft. 5 x 5 ft. 5 x 11 ft. Irma Boom creates lavishly designed monumental books like the *SHV Think Book 1996-1896* (1996), currently exhibited in the MOMA. Boom introduced to book design the "fat book," a book that is remarkably thick (Design Observer, 2012). The fact that monumentality sells is underlined by a popular line of merchandise ranging from tote bags to mugs and from notebooks to t-shirts with the text "I like big books and I cannot lie." Size is currently appropriated as one of the latest marketing strategies of the literary-value industry. This ties in with an overuse of the word 'monumental' in reviews and critical essays on contemporary novels.

Interestingly, this emphasis on scale and monumentality comes about at a time in publishing history when size really shouldn't matter anymore. As Starre notes in "The Small American Novel" (2020), the shift to electronic text formats has largely eliminated concerns about a text's length: "From a publication angle, a short digital text is not much different from a long one … Strictly speaking, digital texts can only be long and short, whereas printed texts can also be big or small" (6). Increasingly, writers emphasize big books' bulk, affective powers, and ability to inhabit spaces, as ways to make sense of our experiences in and of a changing media landscape.

On the one hand, novels seem to expand. The fourth book of *2666*, "The Part about the Crimes," is situated in the Mexican border town Santa Teresa in the desert of Sonora, and based on the mass killings of women in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s. Each of the 110 murder cases in this part is told separately, creating a massive textual memorial. Karl Ove Knausgård, with *My*

Struggle, his six-volume series of monumental autofictional novels, can be considered Proust for the Facebook generation, who does not need to choose between hundreds of "friends." His compulsion to retrieve and preserve "everything" makes his writing the equivalent of sharing "Too Much Information" on social media, "instagramming" pictures of every meal, "twittering" personal details, or posting overly revealing selfies. Even though these works do not specifically address the shift to the digital as a theme, we can see their representational strategies in light of a larger shift in culture to present the full picture (N=all) rather than a sample or selection.

On the other hand, creators of big books and novels stress their difference with respect to the engulfing flow of data, seeking to defy the predictions of shortening attention spans, to emphasize their monumental qualities like weight and bulk, and, through digression and regression, to promote a new kind of "slow" reading. In his projected 27-volume series *The Familiar*, which was put on hold after five volumes in 2015, Danielewski uses the formal and material aspects of the book to literally slow the reader down, and insists on difficulty over accessibility:

> You need a lot of imagination. You need a lot of skill. One of the things I've been toying with recently as I'm finishing volume five of *The Familiar* is to actually create a kind of reader rating system that somehow alerts readers, like skiers, that you are on a difficult trail. Because I feel the way that books are currently presented, everyone assumes, or in some degree feels entitled to be able to read everything that's put out there. And I feel it's a disservice to people who are good readers, who spend a great deal of time reading difficult books and can make their way through hard texts. ... It's a lot to ask that of readers. (Driscoll and Van de Ven 2018, 149)

He uses page layout to make the reader reflect on the temporal unfolding of the narrative, for instance through the excessive use of white spaces to visually perform the characters' emotions, and tracks single sentences across multiple pages. Delay becomes meaningful as a provocative strategy to counter the renewed valuation of positivism and objectivity of datafication. It offers an alternative to the ideals of instantaneity and immediacy underlying trends of the quantified self and big data. The delay thus effected stems from a resistance embedded in the linear, finite form of prose writing and the novel, which is made visible and palpable as we make our way through the books. This stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned emphasis in contemporary media on real-time, 'binging,' and the instantly 'on demand'.

Sanctioned by the circular logic of the monument, these authors build the novel to scale to preserve it as an art form, while aspiring to their own brand of virtuosity that will carry them into the future. Bringing together the colossal and the memorial, big books today confront the challenges of an era in which the spheres of political, ethical, and aesthetic relations are expanding. The form of the novel flourished in the eighteenth century and achieved maturity in the nineteenth, and despite its predicted obsolescence in the digital age, it continues to affect the present. Book-bound literature reinvents itself as monumental in deep interaction with the digital and with changing perspectives of the world in terms of scale — without, however, being absorbed by it. Thus, books and novels *survive* in the information age, as always living on past its own predicted expiration date, by adapting to social and technological changes and reinscribing their own unique affordances.

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