Introduction

In a chapter entitled "On Not Reading DFW" in her book *Making Literature Now* (2016), English Professor Amy Hungerford states that she refuses to read David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, the notorious thousand-page monster novel from 1999. Hungerford has her reasons. Among others, including misogyny and the undeserved hype created by the commercial publishing industry, she mentions the constraints on her reading time in defense of her choice of not allotting a month of her life to reading this doorstopper. She refers to Gabriel Zaid, author of *So Many Books: Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance* (2003), who "argues that excessively long books are a form of undemocratic dominance that impoverishes the public discourse by reducing the airtime shared among others" (Hungerford 2016).

In Wallace's case, she argues, writer, publisher, advertisers, and literary critics work together to produce and perpetuate a very specific notion of literary genius: a notion that hinges on *size*: "[t]he marketers knew their marks, projecting the aura of literary seriousness out toward reviewers … and daring them to man up, read a thousand pages, and prove they had something intelligent to say about it" (158). Hungerford argues that this type of authorial genius, where authors "make it big" by simply writing big books, is distinctly incongruent with our present day abundance of media. In her defense of not reading, she evokes the need for pragmatic resource allocation.

This makes sense. In our present-day information age, we are bombarded with unprecedented volumes of input from different channels. In today's attention economy (Fairchild 2007), the enormous amounts of texts available, vying for our eyes and brains with other forms of information and entertainment, make the modulation and allocation of attention a pressing matter. The attention economy is a notion that originated in marketing, describing the principle where we assign value to something according to its capacity to attract views, clicks, likes, and shares—these are currency in a world saturated with media. Information is not scarce by any means: cognitive effort, energy, time and, most importantly, attentional resources are. By this logic, no reader in her right mind should spend a month immersed in one novel.

It is therefore not surprising to see a considerable body of publications since the year 2000 that diagnose the literary novel as having a terminal illness, eulogize it, and lament it. The author Philip Roth has 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). V.S. Naipaul has expressed his loss of faith in the novel when it comes to answering to the scale and complexities of

our larger global political situation, and argues that "the world cannot be contained in the novel" (2003, 180). Roth and Naipaul certainly do not stand alone in their gloomy outlooks. In the last decades, many critics and authors have announced the death of the novel, most often blaming new media for the genre's alleged demise. Some have argued novels cannot compete with the more exciting technologies of "screen media." Others believe that shorter textual forms, such as Tweets and the internet's flashy, distracting overload of textual and visual fragments, are conditioning readers to a point where our shortened attention spans will soon make it impossible to read extended prose narratives. The novel, Roth predicts, will soon become an elite form for a small cult of readers.

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. We know this simply because many readers still *do* commit to *Infinite Jest*. And not just *Infinite Jest*: the 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).

In addition, under the influence of sophisticated forms like narratively complex TV series such as *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* and the newfound prestige of graphic novels (e.g. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*) and computer games, we are presently witnessing a revival of the serialized novel as an innovative form, shorn of its long-standing association with "low-brow" culture. Authors like William T. Vollmann and Mark Z. Danielewski have applied themselves to extended series of literary novels that take decades to write and that demand exceptional stamina from writers and readers alike. 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 such 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.

How should we interpret this dedication to big books and long narratives, and indeed the ambition to transform an "old" medium into unprecedented scopes and volumes, just when cultural pessimists announced the medium's imminent obsolescence? The sustained existence and even prevalence of an aesthetic of monumentality in literature seems anachronistic. After the advent of postmodernism with its insistence on partiality and historicity, and Jean-François Lyotard's announcement of the end of the "grand narratives" (1984), after the slice-of-life narratives of the 1950s, the trend of the "local" and neorealism in the 1970s, and the popularity of short fiction in the 1980s, who would have expected the 1000-page novel to prosper in the third millennium?

In literary aesthetics, there is a long-standing tradition of unease with overly long or excessive textual forms. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously argued against the overly drawn-out plot for the tragedy, as the spectator would not be able to synthesize and remember the story. Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), proposed that beauty resides in proportion, harmony, and demarcation—in the viewer's ability to perceive the *contours* of an object. Art critic Bertram Jessup (1950) argued that "over-crowding" or "over-loading" in art leads to perceptual discomfort and disinterest. And Pierre Bourdieu (1987) insisted on the primacy of manner over matter, of quality over quantity, when it comes to literature's symbolic (as opposed to economic) capital. These traditional biases against the excessive form linger in literary criticism. In addition, if we take "magnitude" less in its literal meaning in terms of scale, and more in its related, metonymic way: had World War II not taught us to be skeptical of the sweeping, grand monumental gestures of the nineteenth century, which became suspect aesthetically because of their association with totalitarianism?

Then how can we understand the present insistence, by many prominent novelists and book artists, on scale? What social and technological factors contribute to this new emphasis on magnitude—in scope, length, weight, and bulk? If we want to find answers to these questions, we should venture in the direction of the novel's continuous death and rebirth. For in the meantime, Roth and Naipaul have by no means stopped writing novels in the wake of their apocalyptic pronouncements. The death of the novel, this suggests, is not to be taken at face value. On the contrary, such pronouncements are as old as the novel itself. During the past two centuries, almost every notable technological and social shift has led to anxieties about the future of the novel. The novel was believed to in "competition" for an audience with the rise of photography, the phonograph, and cinema. 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. 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.

The present moment, marked by digitalization, datafication, and the rise of "big data," is no exception to this rule. This book analyzes recent trends of size and scale in the novel in terms of the shift from the bound book to the newer materialities of the digital. Contemporary novels have a lot to say about our experiences of the shift from paper materiality to the omnipresence of digital media. One of the strategies by which the novel "survives" in the hyper-connected and globalized present is by stressing its own volumetric affordances in a dialog with changes in media and technology. Under the influence of digital media and quantitative trends in representation, for instance on social networking websites, literary forms and their bookish carriers are expanding.

Yet in doing so, they inscribe themselves in a long tradition of the monumental book, and underline what is special about the novel. By building the novel to scale, in other words, authors ensure its sustained relevance.

In the chapters that follow, I make an inventory of the current trend of monumentality in book materiality as a way of reinventing the novel in an age of big data. Through an analysis of characteristics like hybridity, slowness, mediacy, and materiality, I will examine 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. In order to construe this argument, I use the construct of monumentality which I outline in the first chapter and then apply to case studies of works by Jonathan Franzen, Roberto Bolaño, Karl Ove Knausgård, William T. Vollmann, and Mark Z. Danielewski, Elena Ferrante, and George RR Martin, among others. As the reader will note, my sample is overwhelmingly masculine. A briefer look at the construct of monumentality will help us understand why.

Monumentality

What do we mean when we call contemporary books and novels "monumental"? This attribute seems never to be in need of definition, let alone critical examination.

> the sheer complexity, monumental ambition, and over-totalizing novelistic drive of 2666 … *Wolf Hall* is a monumental achievement on every level. … *Brothers* is a monumental spectacle and a fascinating vision of an extraordinary place and time. … *Vollmann legt mit diesem Monumentalroman eine ausufernde und dennoch wohldurchdachte Reflexion über das europäische Jahrhundert vor. … In his most monumental novel, Thomas Pynchon casts a savage, postmodern eye over contemporary life. … his last monumental and bewildering work Zwerm …* David Mitchell's Monumental novel comes to the big screen with a huge cast of well known faces playing multiple roles in different time periods. … *Das Werk Lewinskys ist monumental, wie es sich für Familienchroniken gehört, denn nichts anderes wird hier erzählt. …* Murakami's Monumental New Masterpiece … *Les Bienveillantes est un livre si monumental, et si étrange, qu'il donne l'impression d'être l'œuvre d'une vie. …* De Vlaamse auteur Paul Verhaeghen is voor zijn monumentale roman *Omega Minor* bekroond met de prestigieuze *Independent Foreign Fiction Prize*. … Adam Levin has [written] a novel that is muscular and exuberant, troubling and empathetic, monumental, breakneck, romantic, and unforgettable. … *Lehane es autor de Cualquier otro día, una monumental novela ambientada en el Boston de la Huelga de la Policía de 1919 …* Zadie Smith wrote

> her monumental *White Teeth* when she was just twenty five. … Jonathan
> Franzen's monumental tragicomedy of depressive love.[1]

Judged by its use in these reviews and articles, the expression "monumental novel" is somewhat of a buzzword. Commonplace in reference to the nineteenth-century works of canonical authors like Tolstoy, Zola, and Stendhal, the adjective is currently over-used in reviews of the latest literary sensations.[2] However, because of its seemingly self-evident nature, the term has rarely been given substance. As Alexander Rehding suggests in reference to monumental music of the nineteenth century, it is hard to move beyond stating "the obvious, bare observation that monumentality is somehow about big gestures and grand effects" (2009, 4). At the least, it is clear that a working definition should combine a notion of bigness and lasting greatness with an emphasis on commemorative value. How do big books' material dimensions and expansive scope relate to their workings as vehicles of cultural and personal memory? How does the monumental bigness of these works relate to a commemorative dimension of preserving the novel, literature, or the book for future generations?

Effects of the monumental are, first, the direct result of material and quantitative characteristics like weight, length, bulk, size, and number of pages. Yet, size is not all that monumentality entails. The material dimensions of these texts and their carriers are expected to metonymically point to what is "inside" them. We often assume that big novels are large-scale both literally and materially, *as an effect* of their narrative scope and because they tackle "big" themes. The books' outer perimeters raise expectations with respect to their quantitative range of subjects, the "amount" of geography and history amassed in the narration, the ground they cover, or their conceptual magnitude.

Monumentality as a metonym for grandness in scope in turn gives rise to monumentality as a value judgement and an instrument of distinction.[3] The author's ambition of "conquering" time and space renders his or her novels weighty in the figural sense of being important enough to preserve. We implicitly assume a correlation between quantity and quality, which Bertram E. Jessup has called "aesthetic size," and which explains why we "speak with evaluative intent of a large canvas, a big building, a long poem, a major composition and a sustained performance" (1950, 31). In everyday parlance we make this correlation habitually, as terms like "great," "grand(iose)" and "magnificent" illustrate.

In the marketing of books and in literary criticism, therefore, monumentality is appropriated as one of the latest marketing strategies of the "literary-value industry" (English and Frow 2006) that produces the reputations and status positions of authors and their works and situates them on various scales of merit. That this strategy seems to work, and that the monumental sells, is underwritten 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" (see figure I).

Fig. I: Tote bag. Courtesy of Emma Reynaert. Instagram: @emmareynaert.

While big books are of all times and places, in this book I will show how monumentality is currently foregrounded as a literary trend, in contrast to a culture of participatory media and remix. As Alexander Starre notes in "The Small American Novel" (2019), 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). The marketing strategy of commodifying big books' bulk as a selling point goes against this current. In doing so, it plays into a nostalgic longing for canonicity and for posterity, yet at the same time it questions the staying power of literature. Aimed at *stability*, a monument inadvertently suggests a certain *vulnerability*. We can therefore arrive at an understanding of monumentality in the contemporary novel only when we take into account its other dimension besides volume, which I do in the first chapter of this book: the dimension of preservation and commemoration.

Between old and new media

Is this twenty-first-century trend towards magnitude a gesture of resistance on the part of the print novel in the face of the book's expected demise due to datafication? Or, rather, is it precisely the expected outcome of this development? This book argues that it is, in fact, both. On the one hand, digitalization and big data exert a profound influence on "analog" literature. On the other, novels stress their difference with respect to the engulfing flow of data. Big books defy predictions of shortening

attention spans, emphasize their monumental qualities like weight and bulk and, through digression and regression, promote a new kind of "slow" reading. Yet even (or, as we shall see, especially) when obviously opposition to these transformations in media, big books and monumental novels are marked by their profound influence.

Their expansion fits into a larger development of increasing interest in the topic of size and scale in the humanities and social sciences, as influenced by digitalization: a preoccupation with size and scale in other media and cultural fields, but also as topics of investigation in the humanities and social sciences at large. Scholars from Derek Woods to Mary Ann Doane, and from Jussi Parikka to Mark McGurl, all occupy themselves with issues of scale and magnitude in relation to representation. One can also think here of Chakrabarty's claim that the era of climate change requires of us to think "the human" across multiple scales. Such issues are particularly timely in an era in which processes of digitalization and globalization converge and intersect, and during which the scale on which we consider aesthetic, ethical, and political relations is expanding. Although the present book mostly focuses on scale as quantity and materiality, these larger considerations of scale—e.g. implied in the idea of ecological crisis and climate change, as well as the ethical and ontological effects of these changes—always work through in the background. I will gradually develop an argument about the changing forms of subjectivity (e.g. of authors, readers, and literary characters) that pertain to such expanding cultural forms.

In this book, my main temporal framework for understanding a panoply of cultural, technological, and social changes that affect big books today is the "information age" (Castells 2000). This is our current historical moment that roughly started in the 1970s, a time when technological developments drastically changed possibilities of accessing, processing, and transferring information. In particular, I will focus on the growing importance of big data as part of this shift. When throughout the book I reference such diverse phenomena as digitalization, surveillance, on-demand media consumption, the age of (late) globalization, and the post-television age, these should all be considered as in their relations to the information age and big data, which form the center of my narrative.

Big data denotes today's possibilities of processing and transmitting unprecedented amounts (petabytes) of data, without the need to sample ("N=all"). Its authority stems from its size and assumed totality. This shift to an all-inclusive scope has consequences for representational strategies in literature. In the computer age, as Lev Manovich announced in *The Language of New Media* (2001), the database replaces narrative as our primary means of meaning-making. Other than the narrative plot, the structure of the database is characterized by non-causality and lack of closure, and by the potentially endless addition of elements. Narrative is the outcome of a process of selection: for every element (character, event), another element could have been chosen. The database, according to Manovich, is less discriminatory and more inclusive. This emphasis on quantification and scale is bound to have bearing on

the ways in which we make sense of the world around us and our own lives, and to transform the role of literature and of narrativity in society.

Based on my analyses of big novels in the present book, I will propose that, rather than being in competition with each other, narrative and database are related in terms of inspiration and cross-fertilization, as scholars like N. Katherine Hayles (2007), Kristin Veel (2009), and Victoria Vesna (2007) have argued before me. Bound between the covers of the material book but influenced by digital media's quantitative strategies of representation, today's big books are hybrids between narrative and database, causality (one thing *because of* another) and seriality (one thing *after* another), inclusivity and selection.

That "analog" literature is currently transforming under the influence of digitalization does not mean, of course, that the quantitative and serial forms in these novels are new or unprecedented. In what follows I stress that the strategies of scale, seriality, and quantification at work in these novels should be placed in their proper media-historical tradition, and understood as *re*inventions of older forms. The contemporary serial novel is a continuation of the nineteenth-century serialized novel or *feuilleton*; and the database narrative expands late medieval annals and chronicles. The renewed attention to book materiality and the spatial features of the codex in works by Vollmann and Danielewski go back to the art of illuminated manuscripts and of the visual-textual innovations by the likes of William Blake and Stéphane Mallarmé. By thus incorporating "the new" (telling-as-counting, database structures, quantification), such works simultaneously remind us of, and revalue, older aesthetic strategies (the mathematical sublime, the chronicle, digressions). I will map these configurations of old and new media trends in the novel from a perspective that N. Katherine Hayles has called "comparative media studies," an umbrella term for critical projects that "explore synergies between print and digital media" and thus bridge the growing divide between digital and traditional humanities pursuits (2012, 7; see also Hayles and Pressman 2013). This will help us to better understand the genealogical links between contemporary media and earlier literary forms, and grasp the extent to which pre-digital literary modes and styles anticipate the cultural dynamics of the digital era. I will show how today's big books and monumental novels enter into a dialog with new media and render older representational practices newly relevant.

Neo-Romantic giants

At first sight, some of the works on which this study focuses might seem conventional in their appearance and book-bound materiality. The artists seem to have little or nothing in common, apart from media stardom or notoriety. Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003) was a Chilean writer who in recent years has achieved posthumous fame in the English-speaking world. William T. Vollmann (1959–) is an American author and

journalist whose dangerous lifestyle has brought him to the attention of the FBI. Mark Z. Danielewski (1966–) achieved a cult status with his debut *House of Leaves* (2000) and boasts a committed group of fans who discuss his work in online forums. The Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård (1968–) wrote a fictional autobiography in six volumes that recently caused great scandal by exposing in shocking detail the private lives of his friends and family, and by choosing a title which in German translates to *Mein Kampf*, the title of Hitler's autobiographical manifesto. Elena Ferrante (?) is famous for her refusal of media stardom and her wish to remain anonymous. George RR Martin (1948–) is stalked by disgruntled fans who worry about his health, fearing he will die before finishing his epic *Song of Ice and Fire* series.

Indeed, in many respects, they could not be further apart. Bolaño's novels are hybrid in their combination of different genres and styles, from detective fiction to the *Bildungsroman* and from the surrealist to the satirical. Vollmann's books are hybrids between journalistic writing and literary prose, exploring the limits between fact and fiction, with a conscientious eye for historical detail. Knausgård focuses on the intimate and intensely personal details of his own private life, and Danielewski incorporates the materiality of the book and the page in innovative ways to stress what is special about books. Ferrante writes about female friendship and the covers of her books misleadingly link her work to the "chick lit" genre; and Franzen reinvents the panoramic social novel for the age of globalization.

A parallel emerges, however, when we consider the quantitative aspect, the way these authors produce "monumental effects" in size, scope, and commemorative focus. From the bare material fact of their total output, in volume, weight, or stacks of pages, it becomes immediately clear that these writers have put great effort into creating an *oeuvre*. Thus Bolaño, on the brink of his death from liver disease, strove to leave posterity "the fattest novel in the world" (Valdes 2009). The result is his magnum opus *2666*, posthumously published in 2004. Fattest novel or not, Bolaño is quantitatively surpassed in his production rate by Vollmann. After a traumatic experience in his youth (his sister drowned because young William, immersed in a book, was not paying attention), the author has been under a self-imposed imperative to register "everything," and has published 24 books since 1987. Knausgård displays a similar unstoppable compulsion to write. After having written two award-winning novels, he published the first volume of *Min Kamp* (*My Struggle*), a total of six autobiographical novels that were published between 2009 and 2011. His writing stands out for its excessive detail, and many have called him a Norwegian Proust. Jonathan Franzen keeps reinventing the "Big, American novel," with heavy tomes like *The Corrections*, *Freedom*, and *Purity*. George RR Martin has been working on his epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* since 1991. And Danielewski, in response to information overload, incorporates a graphomaniac whirlpool of text in works like *House of Leaves*. In 2015, he started writing *The Familiar*, a 27-part series of fat novels.

As I will maintain, the extraordinary volume of the collected works of these authors is a direct consequence of their totalizing rather than synecdochal use of narrative strategies. In most cases, their works stand out for an unwillingness to compress, to *sample* their stories' materials—be these memories of former girlfriends as in Knausgård's case, Vollmann's women around the globe, characters in Martin's *Game of Thrones*, beautiful descriptions from destroyed texts in Ferrante, or murder victims in Bolaño's *2666*. Because of this inherent hostility to summary, only their oeuvres in their entirety are representative of their monumentality. It is impossible to give one short rendition of a passage from the works of these writers to elucidate at once what their monumental strategies amount to, precisely because monumentality entails most importantly accumulation, quantity, and scale—*numbers*. Bolaño's *2666* has 1128 pages (893 in the English translation). Since 1976, he has published a total of 24 volumes, counting his poetry, story collections, novellas, and novels, 15 of which have been translated into English, five posthumously. Knausgård's *Min Kamp* series amounts to over 3500 pages and has sold 450,000 copies in his homeland. An impressive feat, as only five million people live in Norway. Half of Vollmann's books are 600 pages or longer. Publishing rights to the first volume were sold to over 15 different countries and the grand total of his output tops 10,000 pages. His novel *Europe Central* is accompanied by 748 endnotes. The first five volumes of Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* contain a total of 1.322.322 words and would take the average reader 424 days to finish. And Danielewski's projected 27-part series *The Familiar*, if ever completed, would have a grand total of 21.000 pages. Monumentally big, monumentally popular, monumentally prolific.

Already from this brief overview one realizes how "monumental" effects are, in the first instance, a direct correlate of the material characteristics of the oeuvre: the size, bulk, length, and weight of these novels make them "weighty" in a figural sense, which immediately and sensorially underwrites their status as "instant classics." As the direct cause of these material and quantitative aspects, monumentality entails the ambition to be comprehensive in time and place: to be all-encompassing in geographical space and in thematic range, as well as never-ending in narration.

In addition, it will become clear that some of the works I examine here have certain (problematic) neoromantic characteristics in common. Drawn into their works' monumental rhetoric, authors like Bolaño and Vollmann are presented, and present themselves, as prototypically nineteenth-century Romantic heroes who suffer for their art, do not steer clear of risk, and manifestly oppose the commercial industry surrounding literature.[4] Vollmann distrusts modern technology. He does not own a cell phone or a computer, and avoids television, the Internet, and most other contemporary media. In his FBI file, which he revealed in a 2013 essay in *Harper's Magazine* entitled "Life as a Terrorist," it says his "anti-progress, anti-industrialist" tendencies led the FBI to put him under surveillance as "suspect S-2047" in the Unabomber investigation of the 1990s.[5] Franzen is notoriously critical of the Internet

and media technology at large, from cell phones to e-books and Amazon. He once rejected an invitation to Oprah's Book Club TV show and did not want its "logo of corporate ownership" on his book's cover (Rooney 2005, 45–5). Ferrante takes this a step further and lives in complete anonymity, which paradoxically leads to speculation about her (or his) true identity. Knausgård resents the modern predicament of being constantly "exported elsewhere," and presents his project of writing "literature of the highest quality" (2013, 459) as a turning away from a world marked by mediated experiences and commercialism. In his last novel, he compares himself to Adolf Hitler on grounds of his solitary constitution and artistic aspirations. Danielewski, though less of a Romantic and most attuned to the present moment, wants to investigate in his work what is special about the book in relation to the Internet, what books do that digital media cannot do. Last, Bolaño is rumored to have literally died for his art by delaying a liver transplant in order to finish his novel.

At the same time, these authors express an awareness of the belatedness of their Romantic ideals and their clash with the world they live in. Knausgård expresses this duality in *My Struggle*.

> The ideas I had nurtured, and which had been such a natural part of me that I didn't even realise they were ideas, and accordingly had never articulated, only felt, but which nonetheless had had a controlling influence over me, were Romanticism in its purest form, in other words antiquated. My notion that art was the place where the flames of truth and beauty burned, the last remaining place where life could show its true face, was crazy. But now and then this notion broke through, not as a thought, for it could be argued out of existence, but as a feeling. I knew with my whole being that the notion was a lie, that I was deceiving myself. (2013, 127–8)[6]

These neoromantic tendencies prove resilient and hard to shake off. They foster "archival" representations of women as a quest to preserve otherness, which continue in the tradition of what Goethe (1808) called *das Ewig-Weibliche*. They express a longing for unity and transcendence, their *Sehnsucht* and an anachronistic sense of faith in the power of literature to produce "everlasting" greatness.

In negotiating an awareness of belatedness and a drive to take the novel to monumental heights, these authors balance naiveté and cynicism. Vollmann cannot write the new *War and Peace* and is aware of that, but it does not stop him from trying. Knausgård, his critical reception notwithstanding, is no Proust, and Bolaño's *2666*, as I will show, is a far cry from *Moby-Dick*, as it should be. I have chosen "monumentality" as a central concept for this, as it captures this retro-artistic dimension: besides referring to bigness and preservation, it resonates with belatedness and militarism. A part of this latter strand of connotations, it is important to note that bigness in literature is

coded along gender lines. The totalizing ambition of "conquering time and space" in the novel has for ages been connoted with masculinity and patriarchy, as terms like "masterpiece" and "masterwork" underscore. The association in Western thought of masculinity with big, ambitious works on the one hand, and the feminine with small, personal, ephemeral forms of writing on the other, is still felt in literary criticism and production today. In chapter five, I review this masculine coding of monumentality in more detail by comparing Knausgård's autobiographical series as well as his authorial image to the case of Elena Ferrante as a female counterpart.

The corpus' aspect of neo-romanticism, and the resultant inseparability of these authors' biographies and their oeuvres, constitutes the most important difference with their 1980s and '90s predecessors. I specifically have in mind a group of postmodern authors that includes Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and Richard Powers, who wrote what Tom LeClair (1989) calls "systems novels," systemic "meganovels" marked by an all-encompassing scope and a thematic emphasis on information and cyber-technology. For me, authors like Bolaño, Danielewski, Vollmann, Franzen, and Knausgård represent a different phase in literature, in which the relation between literary narrative and digitalization and databases is not one of simple mimicry, but a dynamic of simultaneous resistance, "working through," and competition. In other words, these authors cannot be conclusively understood as adapting to "the new," because they actively try to preserve and archive "the old" at the same time. That is why we arrive at a better understanding of them through the prism of nineteenth-century monumentality, marked by a double temporal logic of looking back to literature's origins and forward to the future of the novel.

Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) links the novel's rise to the emergence of modern subjectivity. As a genre, the novel not only reflects, but also co-constitutes modern, Western, bourgeois subjectivity. Watt relates the distinctive qualities of the novel to those of the society in which it began and flourished. In the days of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, important changes occurred in the growing reading public related to the emergence of economic specialization and individualism, the spread of Protestantism, and the gradual rise of capitalism and urban life, which promoted democracy and freedom of choice. In philosophy, secularization of thought produced a predominantly man-centered world in which the individual was responsible for her own scale of moral and social values.

In literary fiction, this went hand in hand with the increasing individualization of characters and detailed descriptions of setting and situation. For Watt, the rise of the novel, with its attention to the uniqueness of the everyday lives of normal people, formed a challenge to traditional class hierarchies and the dominance of the aristocracy, and the central position of the Anglo-Catholic Church. Readers' interest in private lives, the processes that occur in the individual consciousness, and economic motives were factors in creating the eighteenth-century novel, which in turn helped shape modern bourgeois subjectivity. The novel was both a cause and effect of this

"transition from the objective, social and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualist and private orientation" of the modern world (Watt 2015, 177). A question that the following chapters address implicitly, and that I come back to in the conclusion, is what forms of subjectivity—of authors, readers, and characters—are reflected and constituted in and by novels in times of big data.

Overview

The present account of big books begins with a discussion of monumentality in the nineteenth century. My first chapter situates contemporary big books in a literary past, in order to analyze their function in the present and their investment in preserving the novel as a monument for the future. Here, I relate how, through "monumental" strategies and effects, contemporary novelists attempt to create a sense of stability for literature in the face of changes in the media landscape and our habits of reading and interpretation.

In a second chapter entitled "A Sublime of Data: Information Overload between the Covers," I address database aesthetics in the contemporary "analog" novel.[7] Though generally conceived as a recent artistic development, I demonstrate how this database aesthetics is rooted in an eighteenth-century tradition of the mathematical and Romantic sublime that revolves around excess, absence, and expendability. Through a case study of Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, I lay bare how the sublime encodes itself in today's big novels as an aesthetics of overload. Such novels make the reader experience a breakdown of the hermeneutic capacity to process information, and thus help us reflect on and work through the way in which we are enveloped by information on a daily basis.

The third chapter deals with possible ways of restoring order to counter this overload, and more specifically with the relation between narrative and database as competing ways of ordering the world. What representational strategies are at the novel's disposal when, as Wolfgang Ernst has argued, "telling" is increasingly understood as "counting" and when its overarching frame is no longer the hierarchical beginning, middle, end structure of the story? After introducing two devices that combine the two ordering systems, lists, and the anaphoric singulative frequency, this chapter argues that where narrative tries to accommodate the database in big novels today, the balance often shifts, creating the opposite situation: the database engulfing many fragmented narratives. What implications does this shift have for the novel's potential to represent global connectivity and to function as a textual monument? As a case study I go on to consider Bolaño's *2666*, this time zooming in on Book IV: "The Part about the Crimes."

Chapter four, "The Quantified Self," continues the discussion of big data, this time zooming in on the datafication of everyday experiences and the "Quantified Self." It

reflects on how these developments influence our expressions of personal memory, our self-representations and, ultimately, self-understanding. I analyze Knausgård's *My Struggle* series in a comparative media framework of current trends in self-representation in new media and on social networking sites. How do current grand-scale projects of autobiography position themselves with respect to new possibilities for self-(re)presentation offered by tracking, quantifying strategies, and social media?

Chapter five continues the topic of the big, serial novel, but now brings the category of gender into the discussion. How is big, book-bound materiality gendered in literary tradition? Here, I make a comparative analysis between Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels and her authorial image and Knausgård's. Seemingly antithetical in terms of presence, self-branding, and assumed gender, both authors use scale strategically to subvert, rather than reinscribe, gender expectations. Both destabilize categories of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, and feminine and masculine—Knausgård by using the book as a proxy for the unattainable, masculinized body, and Ferrante through strategies of maximalist writing, most notably diffraction and overwriting, that reconfigure the book as a collective project and object of female (self-)containment.

Chapter six addresses how the serial novel relates to other media within the larger contemporary context of convergence culture, zooming in on television in what has been called the "post-television age." The renewed relevance of the serial has often been viewed in terms of a medial "comeback" of the nineteenth-century serialized novel or *feuilleton*, but it should also be considered as emerging due to the influence of narratively complex TV series such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire*. What processes of remediation are at work here, transferring characteristics and connotations of a newer medium to an older one? I examine the status of case studies of Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar* (2015–), which has a projected length of 27 volumes but was recently put on hold after five instalments, and George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–) that is being adapted to the popular TV series *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2010–'19). I ask how serialization transforms the social function of literature as a locus of (online and offline) communal discussion, and show how these serials tap into new media's potential for participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) by letting the reader co-decide what the next volume will contain and how the story arcs will develop.

Besides digitalization and serialization, globalization is another factor in the novel's material expansion. The seventh chapter investigates recent reiterations of the age-old metaphor of the "book as world" in relation to developments in global information systems such as Google Earth. How can monumental novels renegotiate the local and the planetary, without falling prey to the ideological pitfalls of the "totalizing" representations of certain data visualization? I answer these questions through analyses of William T. Vollmann's *The Atlas* (1996) and Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006): two works that exploit the book's material aspects to spatialize the reading

experience and make us experience the book as a space that, like the world under globalization, both is self-enclosed and simultaneously exceeds all representations. Reading them together will illuminate the novel's potential to engage with global scales and situations while contesting the conflation between representation and reality that characterizes part of today's data-saturated media culture.

After placing recent trends in size and scale in literature in relation to this current media-scape, chapter eight reviews the dissimilarities between big-scale literary novels and book on the one hand, and trends in new media on the other. What does the form of the novel add to the current media-scape marked by size, scale, seriality, and quantity? I show how today's big books can be said to embody a resistance to prevalent tendencies in media towards positivism, simultaneity, and immediacy. Through examples from Knausgård's *My Struggle*, Danielewski's *The Familiar*, Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*, and David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, I will show how contemporary big novels embody this resistance in their form, through a foregrounding of mediacy (as opposed to the often assumed transparency of data) and delay (as opposed to simultaneity of recording online). This offers new insights into the ways in which the monumental writing stresses what is special about the book-bound novel in contrast to the immediacy and perceived transparency of self-recording through new media.

By outlining all these different aspects of the materiality, structural and organizational aspects, and societal components of big books in an age of big data, this book aims to open up new perspectives on literature in relation to our present evolving and expanding life-world. The argument throughout these chapters will be that bigness, or monumentality, is one of the most important strategies by which literature is currently transformed and thought anew in a dynamic interaction with the larger media-scape. By adapting to new forms and scopes of reference, reimagining earlier modes of representation for the present, and stressing its own unique affordances, literature ensures its own proliferation in an age of big data.