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The Cruft of Fiction

David Letzler

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The Craft of Fiction

*Mega-Novels and the Science
of Paying Attention*

DAVID LETZLER

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London

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The Craft of Fiction



Introduction

Information and Attention in the Mega-Novel

The Agony and Ecstasy of Big Books

Why do we respond so strangely to big books?

I mean a certain type of big book: the extremely literate, erudite tomes around which one must plan one's life for a month; the books one hesitates to approach without the assistance of a university course, a reading circle, or at least a reader's guide; the books whose spines stare down from bookshelves, holding dominion over entire rooms; the books that inspire fanatical devotion and revulsion in equal parts, even though both seem exaggerated well beyond even the books' own elephantine materiality. I mean the books Frederick R. Karl calls "mega-novels," most notably including ambitious work by postwar American writers like William Gaddis, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace, but also, if we take a more catholic view, earlier behemoths like Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, as well as contemporary global novels ranging from Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* to Roberto Bolaño's *2666*.¹

I ask this question because it seems that mega-novels' most distinctive quality, outpacing even their inimitable heft and learnedness, is the way they prompt otherwise sensible readers into hyperbolic responses. In some readers mega-novels inspire love and reverence, exemplified by Tom LeClair's declaration that "our big books are our big books," because they "gather, represent, and reform the time's excesses into fictions that exceed the time's literary conventions and thereby master the time, the methods of fiction, and the reader."² For other readers, though, the words most often used to describe mega-novels (and their devotees) include "disgust," "illegitimate," and "frauds"—though such readers will also admit to feeling "deeply ashamed" at their own inability to appre-

ciate these books.³ It is not uncommon, in fact, for these contradictory responses to be produced in the same readers: Jonathan Franzen, for instance, credited the inspiration for his bestseller *The Corrections* to his devotional reading of Gaddis's *The Recognitions* but subsequently railed that most mega-novels, including Gaddis's, merely "punis[h] the reader," with their excess and difficulty just a "smoke screen for an author who has nothing interesting, wise, or entertaining to say."⁴ We might understand, then, why Mark O'Connell's widely read essay about mega-novels claims that the experience of reading them resembles Stockholm Syndrome and that the discourse surrounding them "has at least as much to do with our own sense of achievement in having read the thing as it does with a sense of the author's achievement in having written it."⁵ Similarly Raymond Federman seems on point in observing that, whereas once upon a time one needed to have read the latest ambitious novel to appear cultured, a reader now need merely declare on which page of a mega-novel he decided to give up.⁶

What causes this array of responses? Their length goes only so far in explaining it. Most long novels do not provoke the kind of reactions described above—consider V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* or Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, to say nothing of *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*. The books' difficulty and its relationship to pleasure seem important, too, but explaining exactly what we mean by these terms is not easy, especially since many mega-novel admirers deny that mega-novels are either particularly difficult or unpleasurable.⁷ Our inability to clearly lay out exactly why mega-novels provoke these reactions, I suspect, is why existing conversations around them get so wound up in circular logic and polemic regarding the conflicts between realistic and experimental fiction, the competition of commercial and artistic interests, the place of entertainment in the reading process and contemporary capitalism, the indisputability of taste, and so on.

Something else is going on. Consider, for instance, this excerpt from Gaddis's dialogue-loaded *JR*, about a sixth-grader who wheels and deals his way into a Wall Street empire from a cafeteria phone booth:

—Tell them he's been wait give it to me can't tell what he's been, hel-lo . . . ? Not here right now no he's been . . . Davidoff yes Davi . . . Cohen oh calling on Nepenthe yes ran it up to sixteen today think

the Boss is sitting tight on about nineteen percent of the issue just wants control so he can . . . wait no wants to work the nursing homes into this Health Package made to order outlets for Nobili got Hopper here now with his cemetery Brisboy bringing in his funer . . . what? General who? One thing we need right now anoth . . . Oh why didn't you say so without the h yes why didn't you say so, thought you were on your way up brought in one of our own legal boys waiting here now to go over your figures had Piscator run down your Dun and Bradstreet told the Boss you looked a little overextended mentioned controlling interest in another company sounds dead on its . . .⁸

How, exactly, can we characterize this whirling array of verbal static and interchangeable financial jargon, which begins one of the book's typical page-long stretches of one-sided telephone dialogue? I will offer a counterintuitive thesis, one that I believe identifies the characteristic feature of all mega-novels: this passage stands out because it contains a lot of text that is, basically, pointless.

The Significance of Insignificance: The Cruft of Fiction

There will be immediate objections. What do I mean by “pointless”? According to what standards? Why need literature have a “point” at all? To begin answering these questions, let's examine two foundational essays in narrative theory by Roland Barthes. In 1966 Barthes's “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” argued that literary text could never be without purpose, writing, “Art does not acknowledge the existence of noise (in the informational sense of the word). It is a pure system [. . .]. Though a particular notation may seem expendable, it retains a discursive function: it precipitates, delays, or quickens the pace of discourse, sums up, anticipates, and sometimes even confuses the reader.”⁹ Even in its blandest moments, in other words, literary text cannot help but have *some* purpose. However, several years later, Barthes substantially revised this position in his famous essay about “reality effects,” those “concrete details” in realist fiction (e.g., the wall barometer in Flaubert's “A Simple Heart”) that seem to have no purpose at all.¹⁰ Asking, “if there exist insignificant stretches, what is, so to speak, the ultimate significance of this insignificance?,” Barthes eventually concluded that

such *effets de réel* negotiated the aporia in bourgeois realism's conflicting drives toward narrative meaning and realistic mimesis, suggesting "it is the category of the 'real,' and not its various contents, which is being signified."¹¹

Yet such text exists in abundance beyond the realm of the well-made realist narrative, too. Decades earlier Henry James had perceived stretches of such writing not within his own quintessentially realist novels, but in more fanciful, longer novels:

A picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty, and is, moreover, not composed at all unless the painter knows *how* that principle of health and safety, working as an absolutely premeditated art, has prevailed. There may in its absence be life, incontestably, as "The Newcomes" has life, as "Les Trois Mousquetaires," as Tolstoi's "Peace and War," have it; but what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically *mean*? We have heard it maintained, we will remember, that such things are "superior to art"; but we understand least of all what *that* may mean, and we look in vain for the artist, the divine explanatory genius, who will come to our aid and tell us. There is life and life, and as waste is only life sacrificed and thereby prevented from "counting," I delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form.¹²

Tolstoy's philosophical fantasies, Dumas's pseudoromances, Thackeray's metafiction: these cannot be construed as attempting to convey unmediated reality in the manner Barthes describes. Their volume and variety might be interpreted as mimicking the richness of life's connectedness, but as James points out elsewhere, "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so."¹³ In other words one can always, arbitrarily, add more interconnections to a novel, and at a certain point, that additional material generates not a greater sense of life, but gratuitousness.

James would surely ask similar questions of contemporary meganovels, all looser and baggier in construction than any Tolstoy or Dumas envisioned. As Karl writes, the mega-novel "*is* long, but lacks any sense of completion; while it has no boundaries for an ending, of course

it does end; it seems to defy clear organization—it seems decentered, unbalanced—yet has an intense order; it is located outside traditional forms of narrative, but still employs some conventional modes.”¹⁴ This unwieldy balance is why, as Mark Greif puts it, mega-novels “feel stuffed, overfull, or total; they feel longer than their straightforward story would require, and bigger than other books of similar length or complexity of plot.”¹⁵ But to say that a mega-novel is “overfull” implies not vitality, but decadence. Certainly that is the argument James Wood makes when suggesting that while “all the many thousands of pages of the big, ambitious, contemporary books” do not “lack for powers of invention [. . .] there is too much of it,” which “almost succeeds in hiding the fact that they are without life.”¹⁶ Even Franco Moretti’s generally positive analysis of mega-novel prehistory in *Modern Epic* acknowledges that large swaths of them “do not really work all that well.”¹⁷ It would be one thing were this charge of excessiveness purely pejorative, but, oddly, it is assented to by mega-novel supporters. LeClair’s book in praise of mega-novels (which he calls “systems novels”) is, after all, named *The Art of Excess*. Ironically the mega-novel’s gratuitous text appears essential to its nature.

To my knowledge no one has identified and explored this specific case of the mega-novel’s excessive text. That is what I propose, in this book, to do. To undertake such a study, we should start by naming the phenomenon. I will suggest “cruft,” a half-slang / half-technical term from programming circles that has expanded into general Internet culture. Defined by *The New Hacker’s Dictionary* as “Excess; superfluous junk; used esp. of redundant or superseded code,” cruft is generally characterized as code that is “[p]oorly built, possibly over-complex.”¹⁸ Cruft is not technically wrong, but it is unnecessary, inelegant, or too complicated for its own good. The term has widened to cover several digital phenomena, especially within wikiculture, where it is often applied to encyclopedic text that editors find trivial, overwritten, redundant, or unreadable.¹⁹ Although the term is almost always intended negatively, it is also associated with a certain obsessive attraction, most obviously in the case of “fancruft,” those excessively detailed wiki entries about extremely minor elements of some niche subculture.²⁰

What does cruft look like in a mega-novel? Let’s glance back at the passage from *J R*. Chapter 1 will examine this book in more depth, but

Hagia Sophia, Ravenna's interior of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Rome's S. Stefano Rotondo or S. Maria Maggiore or S. Clemente, or Milan's S. Lorenzo, or even the plan of Old St Peter's, nor the slightest trace of classical foundations whether Greek, Hellenistic, or Roman, as might be exemplified by the Temple of Jupiter, Diocletian's palace at Spalato, the gateway to the market at Miletus, Algeria's Tingad with its Arch of Trajan, apartment housing in Ostia, Trajan's Market in Rome, also in Rome, the Baths of Diocletian, the Basilica of Maxentius, Baths of Caracalla, the Temple of Venus, near the Golden House of Nero, Hadrian's Mausoleum, the Mausoleum of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia, the Canopus of Hadrian's villa, the interior of the Pantheon, Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, or the Piazza d'Oro with peristyle court and pavilions, or the Flavian Palace, the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, plan of the Villa Jovis at Capri, Arch of Tiberius at Orange, France, Trajan's column in Rome, the Imperial Forum, Temple of

Perhaps¹⁶⁵

perhaps what's split back or red printed to wall stands in restorations or places not evidence of floor joists and joists of bogged printed girders double double bogged printed girders ceiling joists rafters king post struts side posts ridge beams collar ties brusses turning stairs or bed mounding (at least the stairs offer some detail: treads treads two large newel posts one at the top and one at the bottom, capped and connected by a single curved baluster supported by countless balusters) through round open tines or wallbracket mounted baluster lockers and sign of brass

here

Mars Ultor, Forum Augustum, Forum of Nerva, the Forum Romanum with the arch of Septimius Severus, the Arch of Titus and the Temple of Castor and Pollux, or in Spain the aqueduct at Segovia, or back in Rome the theatre of Marcellus, the Colosseum, the sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia, Praeneste with its axonometric reconstruction, the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, the Forum Boarium in Rome, the Maison Carrée at Nîmes, or the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, the walls of Herculaneum, the terrace of Naxian Lions on Delos, the Tower of the Winds in Athens, the Stoa of Attalus in the agora of Athens, the plan for the city of Pergamum or city center of Miletus or the Bouleuterion in Miletus, or the Temple of Apollo at Didyma, Temple of Athena Polias at Priene, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the theatre at Epidaurus, the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens as well as the Temple of Olympian Zeus, or the tholos at Delphi, or the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, or the Erechtheion on the Acropolis, the Porphyra on the Acropolis, the Parthenon with its Panathenaic frieze, Athen's acropolis, the temple of Aphaia at Aegina, the Temple of Olympian Zeus at Agragias, the Temple of Hera or Poseidon or Neptune at Paestum, the Temple of Apollo at Corinth, the shrine of Anubis at the Temple of Hatshepsut, Deir al Bahari, or the Lion Gate at Mycenae, or the palace at Mycenae, the palace of Tiryns, the Palace of Minos, Knossos, Crete—which seems like a good place to end though it cannot end there, especially when there is still the Great Zimbabwe Enclosure, the Giza pyramids of Mykerinos, Cheops and Chephren, to say nothing of Ireland's New Grange passage grave, France's Essé gallery grave, Malta's Ggantija temple complex, Scotland's Skara Brae settlement, the Lascaux cave, the Laussel pre-historic rock-cut Venus, or the notion of the Terra Armata hut which is also a good place to end though of course it cannot end there either.¹⁴⁷

In his essay "Critical Condition" published in *Simple Themes* (Univ. of Washington Press, 1995) Brendan Beinhorn declared that Navidson's house, when the explorers were within it, was in a state of severe shock. "How ever *without* them, it is completely dead. Humanity serves as its life blood. Humanity's end would mark the house's end." A statement which provoked sociologist Sondra Staff to claim "Critical Condition" was "just another sheaf of Beinhorn bullshit." (A lecture delivered at Our Lady of the Lake University of San Antonio on June 26, 1996.)

¹⁶⁵Mr. Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampanò's or his own. — Ed.

is as good a place as any to consider some of the ghosts haunting *The Navidson Record*. And since more than a handful of people have pointed out similarities between Navidson's film and various commercial productions, seems worthwhile to least briefly examine what distinguishes documentaries from Hollywood releases.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶In his essay "It Makes Navidson's house are none other than *The Shining* Vertigo, 2001, Brazil. Lawrence of Arabia, Polvere, *Amityville Horror*, *Night of the Living Dead*. suggestion that the names wrote: "In response to the *Quarterly* v.8, July, 1995, p. 68. Daniel Rosenthal No Difference" *Film*

Fig. 1. Excerpt from *House of Leaves: The Remastered, Full-Color Edition* by Mark Z. Danielewski, copyright © 2000 by Mark Z. Danielewski. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday

¹⁶⁸Aside from cinematic, literary, architectural, or even philosophical ghosts, history also offers a few of its own. Consider two famous expeditions where those involved confronted the unknown under circumstances of deprivation and fear only to soon find themselves caught in a squall of terrible violence.

I.

On September 20th, 1519 Ferdinand Magellan embarked from Sanlúcar de Barrameda to sail around the globe. The voyage would once and for all prove the world was round and revolutionize people's thoughts on navigation and trade, but the journey would also be dangerous, replete with enough horror and hardship that in the end it would cost Magellan his life.

In March of 1520 when Magellan's five vessels reached Patagonia and sailed into the Bay of St. Julian, things were far from harmonious. Fierce winter weather, a shortage of stores, not to mention the anxiety brought on by the uncertainty of the future, had caused tensions among the sailors to increase, until on or around April Fools Day, which also happened to be Easter Day, Captain Gaspar Quesada of the *Concepcion* and his servant Luiz de Molino planned and executed a mutiny, resulting in the death of at least one officer and the wounding of many more.¹⁶⁹ Unfortunately for Quesada, he never stopped to consider that a man who could marshal an expedition to circle the globe could probably marshal men to retaliate with great ferocity. This gross underestimation of his opponent cost Quesada his life.

Like a general, Magellan rallied those men still loyal to him to retake the commandeered ships. The combination of his will and his tactical acumen made his success, especially in retrospect, seem inevitable. The mutineer Mendoza of the *Victoria* was stabbed in the throat. The *Santo Antonia* was stormed, and by morning the *Concepcion* had surrendered. Forty-eight hours after the mutiny had begun, Magellan was again in control. He sentenced all the mutineers to death and then in an act of calculated good-will suspended the sentence, choosing instead to concentrate maritime law and his own ire on the three directly responsible for the uprising: Mendoza's corpse was drawn and quartered,

Juan de Cartagena was marooned on a barren shore and Quesada was executed.

Quesada, however, was not hung, shot or even forced to walk the plank. Magellan had a better idea. Molino, Quesada's trusty servant, was granted clemency if he agreed to execute his master. Molino accepted the duty and

whether clear, reflective, insulated, heat-resistant, switchable, tinted, bad-guy, antique; or even tin-plated steel, factory-painted steel, brass; or even a single nail or screw, whether sheet-metal, particleboard, drywall, concrete, drive, aluminum, silicon bronze, solid brass, mechanically galvanized, yellow-zinc plated, stainless steel, epoxy coated, black finish, Durocoat; to say nothing of the sheer absence of anything that might suggest a roof, whether pitched, gable, hip, lean-to, flat, sawtooth, monitor, ogee, bell, dome, helm, sloped, hip-and-valley, conical, pavilion, rotunda,

147Of course, it is impossible to consider any sort of construction, whether of homes, factories, shops, stores, department stores, market halls, conservatories, exhibition buildings, railway stations, warehouses, and office buildings, exchanges, and banks, hotels, prisons, hospitals, museums, libraries, theatres, churches, bridges, airports, town halls, law courts, ministers, and public offices, Houses of Parliament, monuments, parks, even towns and cities, without paying heed to such names as Thomas Hall Beeby, Ricardo Boglil, John Simpson, Steven Holl, Leon Krier, Richard Neutra, Andres Duany, and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Ramon Fortet, Daniel Libeskind, Quintan Terry, Allan Greenberg, Jane B. Drew, Robin Seifert, Frank Gehry, Jean Willerval, Avi Isozaki, Kisho Kurokawa, Gise and Mojgan Hariri, John Ourvan, Zaha Hadid, Peter Eisenmann, Richard Meier, John Hejduk, Aldo Rossi, Herman Herzberger, Louis E. Fry Sr., Louis E. Fry Jr., Louis E. Fry III, Santiago Calatrava, I. M. Pei, Ricardo Scofidio, Harry G. Robinson III, Terry Farrell, Bernard Tschumi, Charles F. McAfee, Ewa Vescel, the Coop Himmelblau, Cheryl L. McAfee, Charles James Simon, Roy James Small, M. David Lee, Michael Graves, Elizabeth Diller, Charles Moore, Bruno Taut, Robert Trynham Coles, Miles van

Cabinet of Wonder; Jim Kalins *One Room, Sarrac's House*; Clus, or *Les Moutoux*; Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*; Lant's *Solaris*; Ann Rand's *The Fountainhead*; "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James; Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" or *The House of Seven Gables*; or *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis? To say nothing of *Brookly & Uchin*; Frida Kahlo's "Blue House" in Coyoteac, Diego Rivera's "Nocturnal Landscape: Pissaje Nocturno" (1947); Rachel White-Parris's *House* or Charles Ray's *Ink Box*; Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* or more words by Robert Venturi, Aldo van Eyck, James Joyce, Paolo Portoghesi, Herman Meriville, Otto Friedrich Bollnow (*Mensch und Raum*, 1965), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*The Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962, in which he declares "depth is the most existential" of all dimensions)¹⁷⁰ To all of it, I have only one carefully devised response: Proopy!"¹⁶⁸

for now it should suffice to say that while several of this passage's references have some larger relevance to the book (e.g., those involving General Haight and Nobili), most of its financial schemes are basically meaningless and interchangeable with a dozen others in the larger work. The noisy speech represented in this passage may seem "realistic," but there is a reason such starts and stutters are usually omitted in literary narrative: they take up space without communicating anything meaningful. We could probably elide this entire passage into a sentence of summary (e.g., "Davidoff rattled off the details of J R's plans before turning back to his secretary") with little narrative loss. If we wish an even more obvious example of cruft, consider the passage reproduced in figure 1 from Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, recounting an expedition through the physics-defying labyrinth that has emerged within its protagonist's house. Down the left margin we see a list, containing dozens of entries, of every architectural style that does *not* describe the labyrinth, while down the right is a similar, inverted list of every architect who would *not* have built it, and slightly off center on each page is an equally long catalog of furniture that is *not* to be found. It is hard to imagine any sane reader processing more than the first few entries of any of these lists. In fact it turns out that the labyrinth signified by these elaborate marginalia is nothing but an empty sequence of rooms, rendering the text almost literally insignificant.

What exactly are we supposed to do with such text? Literary studies has traveled a long way from the Jamesian organicism formalized by Percy Lubbock's claim in *The Craft of Fiction* that a novel must be built around "[a] subject, one and whole and irreducible," with anything deviating from that subject being "wasteful," but even allowing that we need not be so rigid, how would we explain why good novels would include text that seems merely to gum up and lengthen their already very long narratives?²¹

There are several possible arguments. One, exemplified by Steven Moore, suggests that this text is not actually excessive, but merely appears that way to insufficiently knowledgeable readers:

I remain convinced that negative reactions to unconventional modern fiction can be blamed partly on ignorance of the novel's long, colorful, and decidedly unconventional history. No one familiar with

Lyly's *Euphues* is likely to accuse a contemporary writer of being showy and pretentious; Lyly makes them all look as modest as nuns. Gaddis' alleged difficulty is a walk in the park compared with Subandhu's *Vasavadatta*. Those who balk at the length of some of today's literary mega-novels (*Gravity's Rainbow*, *Infinite Jest*, 2666) might be chastened to learn that the best novels in China, Arabia, and France during the late medieval period are *thousands* of pages long.²²

Another view, though, which might be aligned broadly with poststructuralism, takes precisely the opposite approach, as exhibited in John Johnston's claim that mega-novels' "value, therefore, would seem to lie in the fullness with which they bring to awareness and propagate the complexity of this cultural moment. They do this, as I try to show, by transforming the novel into various 'writing-down systems' that articulate and render visible a postmodern discourse network defined first by the formations of information theory and cybernetics, and only secondarily by textuality and simulacra. At the same time, inasmuch as they remain novels, they model and reflect new forms of postmodern subjectivity."²³ Johnston claims that mega-novels, rather than unearthing the narrative structures of the past, create an entirely new—and at least partially emancipatory—form of writing for the contemporary moment, in which the entire conventional concept of purpose is "short-circuited or exceeded such that the novel no longer makes sense."²⁴

These two positions will define the dialectic by which the rest of this study proceeds. Individually both have serious weaknesses. Though as Moore suggests, many mega-novels draw on narrative forms predating the modern novel, in doing so they almost always distort or omit narrative elements crucial to those genres' goals. Conversely Johnston's argument fails to distinguish mega-novel excess from garden-variety incoherence: after all, text that "no longer make[s] sense" typically characterizes bad writing rather than good. We need a better way to articulate how cruff can provide value to a narrative, one that acknowledges cruff's insignificance without falling into the fallacious argument that the reproduction of chaos constitutes a meaningful response to a chaotic world. And I believe we can do so via a subject frequently invoked regarding mega-novels: attention.