Outlining data profiles

In a recent essay on big data, “The whole is always smaller than its parts”—a digital test of Gabriel Tarde’s monads,” Bruno Latour et al. describe a data reduction process, a data management method for producing valuable insights by enacting delimitation in a heterogeneous field of data points. To accomplish this, Latour et al. recommend drawing a line.

Or more specifically, they suggest drawing a potato:
The first [method for handling data sets] is the very humble and often unnoticed gesture we all make when we surround a list of features with a circle (a shape often referred to as a ‘potato’!).

Latour et al. are concerned with developing a theory that does not lapse into two levels of analysis for dealing with individuals and aggregates. Tarde’s theory of monads is an elusive, “admittedly exotic notion” borrowed from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In bare terms, Latour et al. define a monad as “not a part of a whole, but a point of view on all other entities taken severally and not as a totality.” Tarde’s monads offer the type of “one level standpoint” Latour et al. seek, and they suggest that the contemporary practice of navigating databases provides a working proof of Tarde’s thought. An in-depth discussion of Tarde and Latour is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is instructive that Latour’s examples are drawn from the problem of searching for the identity of a human individual within a vast data set. Latour et al. search by name—what could be more subject-oriented?—and their strategy for ordering
the undifferentiated sprawl of heterogeneous raw data is to group data points by drawing a figure. Their “humble . . . unnoticed gesture” of inscribing a line traces an edge and lends shape to a contour; they are drawing a profile.

A profile is a contour, a representation in outline that renders significant features. Latour’s potato is precisely the use of a line to inscribe a profile into a plane of aggregated data, to create an outlined representation for the very purpose of “consider[ing] human actions and appetites.” While in this particular instance Latour is, for once, after the human, his drawing operation
applies equally to nonhuman objects, and a similar linear gesture appears in object-oriented ontology, in the “general inscriptive strategy” Ian Bogost, following Graham Harman, calls ontography.¹⁶

According to Bogost, the most basic kind of ontography is a list, which, as you may recall, is what Latour’s potato encloses. “Ontography,” Bogost explains, “is an aesthetic set theory.”¹⁷

While the potato encircles on a principle of affiliation, the list deploys a line to line things up, stressing difference through rhetorical disjunction.¹⁸ Yet, both are a means of enticing a form, while allowing irreducibility.
But if the point of the profile is to render significant features, the identifiable silhouette of an individual, what are we to make of the non-descriptive graphical quality that takes place in the lining up of an ontographic list, which according to Bogost only “reveals” “on the basis of existence” without “necessarily offering clarification or description”? Rhetorical strategies aside, what good is the “profile” of this proffered potato?

Latour might demur, but he and his colleagues state, “The gesture of adding a circle is simply the recognition of the outside limit of a monad.” It seems that at best, this will be a lumpy approximation, too blobby for portraiture and too vague
to aid identification. Surely, there comes a tipping point wherein the more detail one adds to this profile—the more points one encloses in its line—the more bloated and less descriptive it becomes. This overstuffed potato has an odd profile indeed!

Ontography, too, is susceptible to swelling. Writes Bogost, it “is a practice of increasing the number and density. . . . Instead of removing elements to achieve the elegance of simplicity [which would be data reduction] ontography adds (or simply leaves) elements to accomplish the real-ism of multitude.”21 Blogger David Berry makes a suggestive link between object-oriented ontology’s propensity to pack it in and Heidegger’s notion of gigantism.22 Though Berry protests
the intermingling of humans and nonhumans in object-oriented litanies, the very “contamination” he fears signals the nonanthropocentric impurity this essay seeks to promote. The gigantic is a telling figure; it is a pathological figure, a figure in excess of self.

Big data’s pathological overaccumulations symptomize capitalist excess, like plastic, and big data threatens to bloat a naive profile into a totality. Indeed, Latour et al. confirm, “Were the inquiry to continue, the ‘whole world’, as Leibniz said, would be ‘grasped’ or ‘reflected’ through this idiosyncratic point of view.” A thusly inflated profile recalls the David Foster Wallace character Norman Bombardini, who resolves to permanently overcome the loneliness inherent in what Tarde and Latour call a two-level-standpoint universe, divided between Self and Other, individual and aggregate. Bombardini fixates on filling the entire universe with Self, squeezing Otherness out of the (profile) picture by aggressive consumption, an anti–Weight Watchers, reverse-diet plan to grow to infinite size. Like Bombardini, big data bingeing balloons a profile into another sign of big
capitalist excess, another symptomatic silhouette of surplus: obesity.