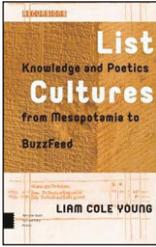


Review



List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to BuzzFeed. By Liam Cole Young. Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 196 pp. ISBN: 9789462981102.

A study of lists is a battle against entropy. So begins Liam Cole Young's *List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to BuzzFeed*, with a nod to numerous list makers across history: Homer, the ancient Sumerians, medieval scholars, *Billboard*, the Nazis, as well as a wide range of philosophers, computer scientists, writers, and artists. The first and most noticeable thing about Young's erudite study of list cultures is just how comprehensive and far-reaching his object of study truly is. Lists are at once expansive and open-ended, including everything from inventories, taxonomies, rankings, recipes, instructions, and catalogues—not to mention everyday shopping and to-do lists. Far from occupying a benign or trivial role in human history, lists and the list-making activities that surround them have and continue to perform a powerful role in shaping perceptions and understandings of wide-ranging phenomena. As Susan Sontag once argued in relation to the significance of her own list-making activities, “I perceive value, I confer value, I even create — or guarantee — existence” (p. 9). Following Sontag's provocative orientation towards the power of lists, *List Cultures* is less concerned with the question of what lists are or even mean and more invested in the exercise of what lists do.

For Young, the list represents an ideal object for media theory because it exists as both a ubiquitous technique and a malleable form for making sense of the contours of epistemology, administration, logistics, and poetics. More specifically, in exploring both the work and uses of lists through pop music charts (Chapter two), double-entry bookkeeping (Chapter three), the Nazi Census (Chapter four), the BuzzFeed listicle (Chapter five), and the poetics of the likes of Borges (Chapter six), Young unearths a fascinating history of how these activities have come to shape, constrain, and expand the realm of the possible. In structuring the book in this way, Young ably demonstrates that lists are not deterministic but heuristic: through tracing their operations and by mapping and comparing shifts in ways of knowing made possible through these activities, we are better equipped to produce “fresh insight into how we think, how we do, and how we imagine” (p. 18).

The book's overarching framework for thinking about the work lists do (epistemological, administrative, logistical, and aesthetic) informs the core of Young's larger project. Popular music lists and *Billboard* charts are instructive as cultural techniques of categorization and as “epistemological operators” (p. 48). Much like the *florilegia* of the Middle Ages, the form makes possible the emergence of archives and canons, all the while underpinning taste formation as well as the circulation and mastery of knowl-

edge. Over time, the form becomes so deeply ingrained in the field that chart content (e.g., music rankings) ultimately serves as a distraction from questioning the very logic of the list. The process of blackboxing the (c)overt (economic) imperatives of the list makes it difficult to decipher the kinds of work the music charts enact.

Attention to how formats and techniques shape economic and political interests continues as the core subject of Chapters three and four (on governmentality and administration). Young's inclusion of Nazism may seem oddly out of place in chapters following a discussion of popular music charts, but the double-entry bookkeeping and Nazi Census case studies reveal the degree to which lists can be leveraged in the articulation of extreme projects—i.e., the attempt to create “a totally administered society” (p. 70). The use of facts and statistical data allowed the Nazis to appear neutral and also enabled them to seek cover under the weight and authority of abstraction. Statistics, analytics, and lists were used to cast prejudices as common-sense objective knowledge that, later, were deployed via Nazi rhetoric, writing, and policymaking. These listing and logistical operations had catastrophic consequences, positioning human beings as “a standing-reserve of resources, objects, forces, etc. to be ordered and manipulated according to the desires and objectives of ‘man’” (p. 106).

Similar logics surrounding the calculation, compression, and circulation of people manifest in Nazi Germany have also been replicated via the closed user-based systems created by popular Web media corporations such as BuzzFeed. Indeed, the list's compressive function has been attractive to online media companies because it performs the work of streamlining, that is, of removing redundant data from a medium or channel in the interests of improving efficiency. For BuzzFeed, its data-driven entertainment platform harnesses the listicle format and Big Data analytics to extract greater and greater capital value, to reduce people and things to commodifiable data points, and to produce “more operations in less time to produce perfect, frictionless circulation” (p. 129). As Young insists, the working formula here and elsewhere is the convergence of calculation, compression, and circulation.

The book's final chapter situates lists as expressing generative capacities. Lists can occasion poetic ruptures that express desires running counter to preserving order in the face of entropy. Here, Young invokes figures such as Borges (“The Library of Babel”) to present stories that appear strange and uncanny while simultaneously capable of producing awe and wonder about the world. Lists may be adept in concealing the inner machinations of systems, techniques, or protocols and are also able to “break the fourth wall” (p. 144) of our understanding of these very things. The uncanny poetics of the artist, filmmaker, and philosopher can help to dislodge deeply rooted perceptions of, for example, epistemological structures. Lists cannot be reduced to mere logistical or administrative ends; rather, they can also clear space wherein “alternate logics, systems, and futures might be conceived and explored” (p. 151).

Young's approach to lists and list cultures is highly original and the text is lucidly written. Despite this clarity in writing and structure, the book presents a challenge to the reader: one must engage in close and engaged reading. The drawing together of various theoretical and epistemological projects (media materialism, the Toronto

School, German media studies, media archaeology) is at once inviting and challenging. As such, the book is appropriate for senior-level undergraduate and graduate-level courses in media and communication studies. The larger argument in *List Cultures* is that lists are neither neutral nor benign; in producing systems that unevenly conceal and reveal their inner and outer workings, list making and list makers warrant much closer scholarly scrutiny in both historical and contemporary contexts. Future research in this area will likely prove equally rich and thought provoking.

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