Un–Black Boxing the List: Knowledge, Materiality, and Form

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ABSTRACT This article examines “the list” as a material form, attempting to foreground its integral yet often overlooked role in human communication, administration, and thought. Taking a media materialist approach, the article first presents a brief history of the list that examines certain contexts in which it has been operative. Secondly, it presents a case study from the field of popular music (Bob Mersereau’s Top 100 Canadian Singles) to demonstrate how a contemporary cultural list functions epistemologically. Because the list is a form so resistant to definition, the author focuses on functions—not what a list is, but what it does. Ultimately the article argues that quotidian forms like lists can tell us much about the dynamics at play between human beings and the material circumstances in which they enact thought and action.

KEYWORDS Documents and documentation; Media theory; Administration; Media materialism; Popular music

RÉSUMÉ Cet article examine « la liste » en tant que forme matérielle en essayant de mettre l’accent sur son rôle essentiel, mais souvent négligé, dans la communication, l’administration, et la pensée humaine. L’article adopte une perspective matérialiste sur les médias et est organisé en deux sections : la première est une brève historique des listes qui examine certains contextes dans lesquels elles ont servi. La seconde section est une étude de cas portant sur la musique populaire (plus précisément The Top 100 Canadian Singles de Bob Mersereau) qui démontre avec plus de spécificité comment une liste culturelle contemporaine fonctionne épistémologiquement. Parce que la liste est si difficile à définir, l'article porte sur ses fonctions—non ce qu'est une liste, mais à quoi elle sert. En fin de compte, cet essai soutient que des formats quotidiens comme les listes peuvent nous en dire beaucoup sur la dynamique qui existe entre les humains et les circonstances matérielles de leurs pensées et actions.

MOTS CLÉS Documents et documentation; Théorie des médias; Administration; Matérialisme des médias; Musique populaire

Introduction

Lists and rankings proliferate at every turn: to-do lists, shopping lists, bucket lists, class lists; as Werbin (2008) writes, “in lists we are” (p. 1). Particularly in the cultural arena, recent years have seen an expansion of countdowns, rankings, and “best

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of the all-time” collections as the list has (re)emerged as a communicative device par excellence. Top-ten lists, listverse.com, amazon.com’s “listmania,” the Listography book series, and on and on.

But the list is not a form easy to pin down. It is of course a communicative device, but can also be conceived as a cultural formation, an operational form of writing, a storage or archival device, and a mediator. It can be past, present, or future oriented; that is, retroactive, administrative, or prescriptive. Lists are sometimes registers that index, and other times metrics that rank or compare. To try to make sense of all this, we might turn to Robert Belknap’s (2004) preliminary definition: “At their most simple, lists are frameworks that hold separate and disparate items together. Lists are plastic, flexible structures in which an array of constituent units coheres through specific relations generated by specific forces of attraction” (p. 2). But even this definition, if we are trying to pin down what exactly a list is, seems hopelessly open-ended, inclusive of formats as diverse as taxonomies, recipes, rankings, inventories, catalogues, lexicons, et cetera … Belknap addresses this problem by making a helpful distinction between pragmatic and literary lists. The former are quotidian lists of the everyday, enumerative containers that are concerned with the storage and retrieval of information and so do not mean anything, at least in literary terms. Literary lists, on the other hand, he writes, “appeal for different reasons. [In them] we do not hunt for a specific piece of information but rather receive the information the writer wishes to communicate to us” (p. 7).

Streamlining definitional criteria in this way allows Belknap to offer a convincing case for what literary lists are and what they mean. But by limiting his focus to the literary, Belknap turns away from the majority of lists we encounter every day. The question thus remains—a question that is the animating imperative of this article—as to how an approach might be fashioned to similarly zero in on the list as an object of study in administrative contexts. We can adopt another of Belknap’s strategies to do so. Just as he looks first at what lists do in literature before speculating about what they “are” or “mean,” so too must any project wishing to study pragmatic lists look toward function. In my view, starting with an essentialized definition of what a list is or means—or even using these as animating questions—shuts down the generative potential of analysis. It locks the researcher into a trajectory that, in its quest for “scientific” accuracy, leads only toward negation—the list is not that, the list is only this and never that. Consequently, I propose a more generative approach that starts not with the question of what a list is or means, but rather looks at what it does—how it functions in communication, administration, information processing/storage, and knowledge formation.1

So what does the list do? It streamlines. Vast amounts of information, data, and/or knowledge are organized, communicated, and processed through lists. Listing is an inscription technique aimed at reducing entropy, allowing us to combat or “become superior to that which is greater than us” (Latour, 1999, p. 65). But the list also preserves. As a material form, the contents of a list exist in relation to one another until the list is destroyed. That is, a list preserves an account of not just the relations between its contents (how they are drawn together), but also its criteria of inclusion/exclusion, as well as the social action it facilitates. This implicit capacity for storage in both the list’s written and other visual/material forms (see Eco, 2009) may be a lens through
which to examine its ability to survive multiple epistemological shifts—from early writing through literacy and print and into the digital age. Indeed, exploring such factors from a historical perspective may go some way toward accounting for the ubiquity of lists in the contemporary cultural moment.

This article seeks to enact such an analysis by approaching the pragmatic list as a visual form through the lens of media materialism, situating it in relation to concepts such as information, documentation, and archive. Particularly important to this study is Bruno Latour’s (1987, 1990, 1999, 2005) work on material forms and techniques of inscription, what he calls “immutable and combinable mobiles,” which draw together the stuff of the world so that it may be mobilized for various ends. Much more is said about Latour below, but suffice it here to say that it is precisely the list’s malleability as such a form that affords it a privileged (yet often overlooked) position in the history of human communication and thought. No matter which epistemological order determines the conditions of truth and knowledge of an epoch—be it conceptualized as an episteme, “mode of thought,” monopoly of knowledge, or otherwise—the list persists. It is therefore my contention that looking at a quotidian form such as a list, which occupies a liminal or interstitial space between orality and literacy; ‘savage’ and ‘domestic’; ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’; and between past, present, and future, might more broadly tell us something about the dynamics at play between human beings and the material circumstances in which they enact thought and action.

A media materialist approach to the list can furthermore allow analysis to escape the trap of having to inscribe a value judgment on the list as either good or bad, and thus can move beyond a kind of stock ideological critique. Such an approach, and the binary categories it relies upon, is not very helpful in thinking about a form that has been in constant use for 5,000 years. Of course, there are ideological dimensions to the list—such an adaptable form of organizing and communicating information can be and has been very easily mobilized for various ends. That is to say, the list is very deeply implicated in issues of power; as Werbin (2008) pithily notes, the list serves. However, an ideology-based critique might place too much emphasis on the content of lists at the expense of their functionality. Looking at the latter, at the material structures and operations of lists, can tell us both what they actually do and how they do it. Only then might a broader analysis regarding the uses and abuses of lists for ideological or political ends be pursued.

I therefore seek to follow Latour’s (1987) first rule of method: instead of black boxing the technical or material aspects of the list and then looking for social influences and biases, as researchers our challenge is to “be there before the box closes and becomes black” (p. 21). Put another way, the goal here is to clear space for examining the “infinitesimal mechanisms” from which Foucault’s by now familiar “ascending” analysis of power can be elaborated. By starting with these mechanisms, “which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics,” we can then “see how [they] have been—and continue to be—invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination…” (Foucault, 1980, p. 99). This methodological imperative has been taken up in various ways by much recent scholarship in Media
and Cultural Studies. But whereas many such analyses take as their object a concept or category—such as gender, knowledge, criminality, or ‘the other’—the analysis elaborated here follows a slightly different trajectory, as mapped by thinkers like Latour, Vismann (2008), Goody (1977), and Krämer (2003), who look toward processes and forms that stand even prior to concepts. Likewise, this analysis looks to the techniques and processes by which the distinctions that delineate the conditions of possibility for concepts are themselves inscribed in visual forms such as the list.

This article has two major sections: first, I will sketch out a brief history of the list and some of the ways it has been theorized. This section tests a basic proposition of much scholarship on lists—that it is a strictly administrative form—ultimately judging this view to be too limited. The second section develops a more nuanced account by drawing on Latour’s conceptual apparatus to examine a specific list from the field of popular music, Bob Mersereau’s Top 100 Canadian Singles (2010), in functional terms as a document and a visual form of information. The approach taken herein is intentionally generative and productive. It seeks to stimulate thinking about lists as a means by which to develop different theoretical approaches to material forms of information in general. Doing so can tell us not only about what a list is, but what a list can be.

A brief history of the list

Let the story commence at the beginning: with the onset of writing came the list. Administrative lists of the Ancient Sumerians are some of the earliest surviving forms of writing, c. 3000 BCE, scrawled on the walls of caves and on pieces of birchbark (Goody, 1977). These lists are functional—they document economic transactions, inventories, and other minutiae of day-to-day life in Mesopotamia in this period. They arise, according to Gelb, as a result of the needs of public economy and administration (quoted in Goody, 1977). The list is a form of writing, therefore, that has facilitated human social interaction for at least 5,000 years. Goody distinguishes three kinds of early lists: first, retrospective lists are a kind of inventory of outside persons, objects, or events, such as a king list. This kind of list can both sort and store data in the long or short term. Second, prescriptive lists, specifically shopping lists, serve as a plan for future action. Such lists deal with information that is not meant to be stored long term. Third, lexical lists of the Sumerians together form “a kind of inventory of concepts, a proto-dictionary or embryonic encyclopedia” (Goody, 1977, p. 80).

For Goody (1997), such forms of writing have direct implications not just on speech, but also on the available “mode(s) of thought” in any society:

[These written forms were not simply by-products of the interaction between writing and say, the economy, filling some hitherto hidden ‘need,’ but ... they represented a significant change not only in the nature of transactions, but also in the ‘modes of thought’ that accompanied them ... in terms of the formal, cognitive and linguistic operations which this new technology of the intellect opened up. (p. 81)

Goody sees lists as an intellectual technology that affects both the organization of social life and human cognitive systems. LeGoff (1992) concurs but extends this thought, pointing to lists in such societies as not simply intellectual technologies, but inaugura-
tors of new technologies of power. “We must go further and resituate this expansion of lists within the establishment of monarchical power. Memorization by inventory, the hierarchized list, is not only an activity of organizing knowledge in a new way, but also an aspect of the organization of new power” (LeGoff, 1992, p. 62). Vismann (2008) offers a more expansive analysis of lists as a technology of power, pointing toward the imperial registries of thirteenth-century Europe as “more than nifty administrative techniques designed to economize on reading and writing; they were nothing less than the media technology for a state as a permanent entity” (pp. 81–82).

These thinkers each suggest that the crucial role of the list in arrangements of power/knowledge is related to the fact that while a list is most definitely \textit{not oral}, it is not a simple example of \textit{writing} as conventionally understood, either. Lists are not simply a representation of speech, but are rather an entirely different manner of collecting, storing, presenting, and thinking about information; as Goody and Watt (1963) note, the materialization of the speech act in writing enables it to be inspected and re-arranged in a variety of ways not possible in orality. This quality of writing is what Sybille Krämer (following Wolfgang Raible) calls “ideography,” which “visualize[s] aspects of the content that have no equivalents in the sphere of sound” (Raible quoted in Krämer, 2003, p. 521). Krämer conceives of such modes of writing as possessing a “notational iconicity,” a “fundamentally visual-iconographic dimension” that enables writing that is \textit{operative} rather than semiotic, narrative, et cetera (pp. 518–519). As ideographic forms, lists decontextualize words from speech, visualize words and things, and allow them to be contemplated, re-ordered, and manipulated. When placed in a list, entities become data. Further, the putting of words and things in relation to one another in a list allows for connections to be made that did not exist prior to the act of listing. The upshot is that lists simultaneously challenge extant knowledge formations but also create new ones by inscribing new modes of organization and classification (which amount to new ways of seeing and doing).  

Thus, because lists are neither oral nor purely literate, they (along with other forms of operative writing) illuminate the extent to which the conventional orality-literacy polarity, theorized by Ong (1982) and others (see also Goody & Watt, 1963; Havelock, 1962; Parry, 1971), does not hold. Primarily at issue is that the polarity rests on an idea of meaning behind or within language in both its spoken and written forms. But pragmatic or operative lists do not “mean” in this way. They possess neither an inherent narrative function nor semiological units to be decoded; they do not tell stories, nor are they open to interpretation. Further, meaning in lists does not arise from grammatical structures of language because the latter do not factor in the construction of a list, which instead adheres to a different, non-grammatical structure. That is, certain visual and graphic qualities govern the creation of lists—columns, rows, and techniques of ordering determine its form and the manner by which a list is written; or better, the way it is \textit{filled in}. But these structures do not produce meaning, at least not in a phenomenological or hermeneutic sense.

Indeed, because such early lists are primarily administrative, the only “meaning” we may be able to attribute to them is in their operativity and indexicality. Lists \textit{function} to facilitate various forms of interaction between human beings (economic, social, po-
litical, etc.), as Goody (1977) comprehensively demonstrates, while also standing as a record or an index of the occurrence of this interaction. Lists make things happen while also registering items and transactions. Each administrative list of the Ancient Sumerians stands as a record of an event (the economic transaction), while its contents are indexical to a corresponding material item involved in the transaction (whether a chicken, a tool, a person, etc.). But there is no narrative here, nor are there any syntactical rules inherited from speech governing the list as a written formation. As a result, for a long time these lists remained unread, or more precisely they remained unreadable: because of a tacit assumption in early twentieth century archaeology that the Babylonian lists of the third millennium BCE were bits and pieces of narrative text, the significance of their administrative functionality was overlooked. Once such assumptions were dropped, a window onto an entire world of non-narratological writing was opened (Vismann, 2008). It seems, in this case, the format was the message.

To reinforce the crucial point: the conventional orality-literacy polarity cannot properly account for operational forms of writing such as lists (but also tables, charts, memos, diagrams, etc.; see Guillory, 2004; Krämer, 2003; Latour, 1987; Rotman, 2008), because it does not account for any form of writing that is not simply a duplication or representation of speech. All of this is to say that the list stands outside or between orality and literacy. Such a claim echoes Vismann (2008), who locates lists within a broader categorization of such forms of writing that are purely pragmatic, of which for her the most notable are files. Her grammatological approach to files is useful to a project that thinks about lists because it writes a new history of a concept, the law, which has as a point of origin not orality or literacy, but administrative records. She is “concerned not with the reasons that may have persuaded other legal cultures to adopt written records, but with how these administrative forms of writing function precisely insofar as they are not subject to the logic of speech” (2008, p. 4).

As a similar kind of form, the list administers. It is deployed in order to order: lists make sense of the world, they facilitate the development of knowledges and discourses, they organize experience. But such functions can be deeply contradictory. Illuminating the wider political and historical implications of the list addresses the extent to which it can and has served power interests—both in the acquisition of power and its retention. Ben Kafka (2012) shows, for instance, that lists were a privileged form mobilized in the name of the French Revolution—witness Condorcet’s assurance to provincial administrators that “[e]ach hour that you consecrate to this work, each line that you inscribe in the register, is a step forward for the Revolution…” (p. 56)—but also in the name of its subsequent terror—witness chief of the General Police Bureau Augustin Lejeune, who when asked by Robespierre to draw up a list of accusations against those notables deemed “good for the guillotine” by the local sans-culotte militants, wrote, “I shuddered reading this list, I brought it home with me, I lifted up a paving stone, and buried it, determined to perish rather than allow it to reach its destination” (quoted in Kafka, 2012, p. 67). While Lejeune’s act of destruction may in this instance have saved lives, Kafka shows that more often than not such lists—which categorized citizens of the Republic as “moderate,” “aristocrat,” or “counterrevolutionary”—had bloody consequences (p. 65).
Such examples show that the list is a form particularly amenable to the control of populations—it establishes (or at least reaffirms) social categories and relations by placing human subjects next to one another, thereby inscribing or creating relations between diverse subjects. Although historically many forms of rule have made use of census taking and other population administration tactics, clearly the most hyperbolic and macabre extension of such processes occurred with the proliferation of census techniques in Nazi Germany. By reducing human beings to an entry in a registry and abstracting away bare life into numbers and figures, such tactics served ultimately not only to dehumanize subjects, but also to “transport them to a new reality—namely, death” (Aly & Roth, 2004, p. 1). Werbin (2008) argues that the integral role of the list in the Nazi installation of what he calls “massively organized information” cannot be understated; that with the onset of Nazi governmentality, lists were redeployed as “critical support technologies of juridical-disciplinary mechanisms,” which came to constitute a unique new way of seeing and doing in their own right: involving fracturing ‘threatening populations’ from ‘healthy populations.’ The list was at the heart of these schisms that marked modern Nazi governmentality—healthy || diseased; Aryan || Jew; us || them—serving the delimitation and policing of abnormal cases in populations; installing caesuric social fractures. (p. 44)

The crucial point is that because the list is so flexible, so innocuously woven into the fabric of the world that we hardly pay it any notice, it is a form that is very easy to mobilize for political ends. Its caesuras surreptitiously delineate populations so they may be administered and policed. In this way lists are Hannah Arendt’s (2006) “banality of evil” materialized: crucial components of a system of administrative protocol that prevents any “conscientious functionary” from being able to act, even if they wanted to. At least, so they are wont to claim whilst on trial: “You might ask why ... we signed in this way documents with which we were not familiar. I respond: By absolute necessity, by the physical impossibility of doing otherwise[,]” claimed Carnot, deputy of the Terror’s infamous Committee of Public Safety, a full 165 years before Eichmann in Jerusalem (quoted in Kafka, 2012, p. 63).

Werbin’s (2008) analysis of the Nazi apparatus of massive organized information helps to demonstrate that not only were lists integral to the actual administration of populations “on the ground”—in the day-to-day material administration of bodies in spaces—but also that lists served in the installation of the more abstract arm of the Nazi apparatus of security, the racialized mythology and “eternal” truths of the Aryan Third Reich. These truths were established as always already self-evident via the rhetorical style of affirmative accumulation so favoured by Hitler and other Nazi thinkers like Rosenberg, in whose words and works there is “neither knowledge to establish, nor thought to overcome. There is only an already acquired, already available truth to declare” (emphasis in original; Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe, 1990, p. 304). This logic of affirmative accumulation is mirrored in Nazi administrative lists, which do not argue a case for their contents but simply contain, organize, and communicate whatever data is placed within their boundaries. The list has no author, no trace—it can be exceedingly difficult to question the authoritative ground on which it stands because no
justification for inclusion/exclusion is given other than the fact of the list itself. The list can be mobilized as if it were simply enacting or declaring a categorization of subjects that has always been: it is all simply there. As such, the list enacts visually and justifies the already available truths declared by a rhetoric of affirmative accumulation. The material form of the list allows the human being to be abstracted into a number or type and placed in a column that will dictate its inclusion or exclusion from the Reich according to criteria based on the latter’s own “self-evident” truths. The list thereby contains and enacts, as Werbin (2008) shows, a caesura of “threatening” populations from the master race on paper, but also prescribes such a caesura in reality. Thus, the role of the list in facilitating the Final Solution brings into view an important ethical dimension of the list.

This ethical dimension raises a whole host of questions that have been given careful treatment by others (Agamben, 1998; Aly & Roth, 2004; Black, 2001; Werbin, 2008) and necessarily lie outside the scope of this essay. Suffice it here to say that highlighting the ethics of the list demonstrates the extent to which it is a form that is deeply implicated in rationalism. Lists can quite clearly be a friend to the kind of bureaucratic apparatus critiqued by Weber (1958), the instrumental reason so vehemently attacked by Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), or the mechanization of knowledge feared by Innis (1995). This connection is also made clear by Vismann (2008), whose genealogy of the law through files we return to now because it tells us more important things about the historic administrative capacities of the list.

For Vismann (2008), “[l]ists do not communicate, they control transfer operations … individual items are not put down in writing for the sake of memorizing spoken words, but in order to regulate goods, things, or people. Lists sort and engender circulation” (2008, p. 6). In this view, the list is strictly a medium of transfer; its storage capacity is only ever temporary because there is no need, nor any desire, to preserve a list once the act or event that it facilitates has occurred. Therefore its orientation is always toward the present. At the same time, Vismann notes that “files are governed by lists. … Lists with tasks to be performed govern the inside of the file world, from their initial compilation to their final storage” (p. 7). Which is to say, lists prefigure files: the latter are process-generated algorithmic entities, and the process generators are “list-shaped control signs” (p. 7). Lists prescribe any file’s movement through space and time: file notes issue commands for the next movement or event of a file’s existence—to where or to whom the file should travel, at what time, by which means, et cetera. Each executed command triggers the next. Over time these notes accumulate, one after the other, to form a list that preserves a record of a file’s “life.” There is a triple function here: lists do not simply administer but also archive and prescribe. They are not simply present based, but can record the past and program the future.

While Vismann’s emphasis remains trained on the extent to which lists and files take on a machine-like character, her explicit rejection of the list’s capacity for storage is problematic. Though in facilitating the movement of files through the spaces of administration, lists express an obvious space-bias (to borrow Innis’ language), we must also be mindful that the list’s archival capacities express a time-bias in recording these events. Ensuring this capacity for storage and archive remains in focus will ensure an analysis of
the list does not stray into a mode of critique too fixated on its tendency to be co-opted by forces of rationalization, and thus on whether lists are good or lists are bad.

Focusing on functionality rather than an implicit essential character—i.e., saying that the list functions administratively, but that it is not essentially or only administrative—also maintains focus on the extent to which interstitial forms of writing, such as the list, can aid our understanding of historical shifts in ways of knowing and acting in human societies. Such forms of writing are parts of media-technological networks and thereby affect action in, by, and through those networks. They enter into relations with other agents (whether human or non-human) that have implications for knowledge production and dissemination. The goal of analysis should be to trace these relations. As an example, we can point to Goody’s (1977) account of the prescription, a form that emerged via the writing down of medical “recipes” in the third millennium BCE. Prescriptions arise as a simple storage problem—a wish to preserve and share information. Once put down on paper, however, a process of trial-and-error is enacted on the information over space and time, as subsequent users of the prescription can add or subtract to it as deemed necessary. Such a process enhances knowledge about the human body and its treatment, Goody suggests, and he points to it as a kind of proto-scientific method (1977, pp. 136-138; also pp. 90-93). The key point is that administrative forms of writing, which arise out of very practical, everyday problems of storing and sharing information, inaugurate processes that affect the very trajectory of human thought and action. As such, they are not simply administrative, but have a kind of agency—they do not merely facilitate, but actively contribute to such processes. This example foregrounds, as do each of the above thinkers, that such epistemological factors only come into view when we broaden our understanding of writing beyond the grammatical, semiological, or conventionally historical to encompass operational and interstitial entities such as lists.

From Goody to Latour

Goody’s (1997) analysis of the prescription shows that his understanding of human knowledge, society, and history is not about inventions, inventors, nations, or spirits of ages determining the unfolding of history; rather, he foregrounds the unintended consequences or implications of the material documents and documentation of everyday life. An important point emerges from this idea: since the repetition of such acts of administrative writing (in lists, prescriptions, recipes, experiments, transactions, etc.) comes to influence the way written statements are conceived and documented—that is, such acts of writing come to be future oriented in their preservation of data/information to be used later—we can also suggest that this form of writing allows societies to break free from the perpetual-presentness of homeostasis (see Goody & Watt, 1963). This is achieved via the capacity not only to preserve the past (as might be conventionally thought) but also to affect the future. In this last point, the connection between the thought of Goody and Bruno Latour becomes clear.

Latour (1987) discusses the ability of those who possess knowledge or information about the world to affect the future in relation to his concept centres of calculation. Historic centres of calculation such as the eighteenth-century empires of the European continent emerge, Latour argues, after cycles of accumulation bring information about
the world back to a certain point. The latter becomes a centre of calculation when this information allows those who occupy it to act on the world from a distance (in space and in time). Cartography, for instance, as a technology of knowledge primarily concerned with the collection of information, enabled empires of conquest to first know the world and then to act on it from a distance in future expeditions. Latour uses as an example the French explorer Laperouse, who collected information about the East Pacific and transported it back—first to his ship, then to Versailles—which allowed future expeditions to know what to expect of this area, thus freeing them up to collect different kinds of knowledge beneficial to the king. Latour’s (1987) point is that we do not often examine the means invented to transport such data from field to centre, which take the form of what he calls “immutable mobiles” (pp. 215–224). Goody’s prescription-list is just such an inscription technique: information from the outside world is collected, listed, and stored within it. The prescription then allows the person who possesses it to act on the world and affect the future—it preserves this knowledge and carries it forward through time.

The purpose of this brief example is to show that the conceptual apparatus developed by Latour (1987, 1990, 1999, 2005) engenders thinking about lists in ways beyond simply their present-based operativity. Lists draw things together and put them in relation to one another—as visual forms of information, they tell us things that were previously unavailable. Connections are forged and relations become traceable. Lists help to accelerate and make more efficient the collection of information in cycles of accumulation, thereby facilitating the ability of any point to become a centre of calculation. Lists are part of the stuff from which the social, the cultural, the political, the economic, and so on are assembled and preserved. By turning our analytic eye toward them, we begin to see that they are not so simple after all. Lists may contain black boxes—information that is taken for granted, but which shapes the list’s ability to organize and communicate information in particular ways. Latour also allows us to understand a list’s context of citation—that is, the mobilization of many voices within the text in order to strengthen its case. But above all, Latour helps us to understand the list as a material form of information that mobilizes, stabilizes, and combines data, crystallizing it as information. The list therefore does not simply contain, organize, and communicate immutable mobiles, but is itself one. A close analysis of a particular list, Bob Mersereau’s Top 100 Canadian Singles (2010), will reinforce such claims and allow us to more clearly understand the contemporary functionality of a cultural list.

Un–black boxing a popular music list

To begin, a brief rationale for choosing the popular music field as the lens through which to examine the internal logic and operativity of the list. First, there is a long-standing special relationship between popular music and lists. In the twentieth century, sales charts and year-end top 10s came to structure the field in a variety of ways: as a summary of industrial and market tendencies; a snapshot of musical preferences and taste; a marketing device; a shared communicative format between producers, critics, and consumers; and an active archive of social musical experience. Such list functions constitute an important yet often overlooked component in the documentation of popular music history. Second, iTunes playlists—both user and algorithmically gener-
ated—have emerged over the past decade as perhaps the dominant mediator of the contemporary musical experience. Third, an abundance of lists with a more overtly historical tenor has emerged in recent critical and populist musical discourse, more experientially ambitious than traditional sales charts or top 10s. Such critical or pseudocritical lists seek to archive, compare, and rank according to “importance” or “influence” not only various historical and/or contemporary songs, artists, or albums, but also urban scenes, genres, fashions, even actual historical moments. And fourth, emergent forms of collaborative information/knowledge projects, most notably Wikipedia, increasingly enable and encourage the unquestioned use of lists to prop up aesthetic claims—thereby legitimating a musical object or artist’s relevancy, value, or importance. Lists in the popular music field both validate taste and are an easy target for the contestation of the popular music canon—they interpolate us, always, to question the authority of their claims, and to respond with lists of our own.

In fact, the ubiquity and importance of lists in contemporary popular music and culture—readily observable with every Web-browsing session—seems to be a particularly acute example of a broader shift toward (or back toward) the list as a dominant mediator of cultural information. Further, popular music lists are not simply administrative—they are bound up in a much broader economy of subjective and collective memory work. Popular music lists demonstrate explicitly the archival capacity of lists that resonates with the historicizing gaze of a contemporary cultural moment fixated on history, memory, and archive—a condition variously theorized as experiencing an “acceleration of history” (Nora, 1989), a “memory boom” (Huyssen, 2003), or an “archival impulse” (Foster, 2004). In the words of Huyssen, “the [culture’s] turn toward memory is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space” (p. 18). Bob Mersereau’s Top 100 Canadian Singles6 is but one manifestation of this tendency.

Context of citation

Mersereau’s (2010) methodology in compiling the list consisted in first polling a committee of over 800 Canadians that he describes as follows:

Many are directly involved in the daily creation, sales, promotion and broadcasting of Canadian music. There are famous musicians, well-known media people, managers, record company employees, reviewers, writers, deejays, retailers, roadies and club owners. And there are also lots of just plain fans who love Canadian music and make it a part of their daily life. (pp. 8–9)

From each committee member he solicited a ranked top-10 list of singles, the latter defined as “songs that had been released as singles, whether to the public for sale or to broadcasters in some sort of medium for airplay” (2010, p. 10). Mersereau has not divulged exactly how the results were tallied—what formula or point system was used to amalgamate the individual lists, other than to suggest the results were run through a statistical formula (Dunphy, 2010). But importantly, this committee format allows the list to offer what Mersereau describes as a “consensus,” rather than simply a subjective ranking of his own picks, or a critics’ poll (Quill, 2010). In this way, the critical
environment by which a list is authored is reconfigured—away from the single author or publication, and toward an ostensibly more democratic “Canadian consensus.”

We can see in this claim of consensus for *The Top 100 Canadian Singles* something Latour observes in scientific discourse: the process by which many voices are deployed to strengthen an argument or truth claim. Mobilizing an army of jurists allows Mersereau to avoid being critiqued for his own critical judgments (since his method does not incorporate them). No single person can be blamed or celebrated upon the reader’s dis/agreement, since blame or praise must be diffused over 800 jurists. Mersereau’s method also makes the list appear not to be offering an argument or judgment—“It is just what the people think,” he might say. However, an argument does exist and a truth claim is being put forth, whatever Mersereau’s opinion or intentions. That is, the list appeals to an authority of 800 voices to make an argument that it represents or tells us something worth knowing—a snapshot of Canadians’ opinions about their musical past. It is notable that Mersereau is explicit in his rejection of both his own status as authority and that of music critics; he sees strength in numbers, rather than prestige. The list is thereby shielded, since as Latour (1987) shows, a paper with few sources is easily attacked, while a paper that draws on numerous voices is much more difficult to refute. Mersereau can claim his list’s truth is in the numbers and statistics, and in order to challenge this claim the contrarian would need to examine each individual list to determine its meeting of proper criteria, the accuracy of the statistical methods of amalgamation, et cetera. These data are anyway not available, but even if they were, the task would be monumentally time-consuming.

One might argue that the connection between such a list and the discursive process Latour describes in the scientific field is tenuous, since the individual lists Mersereau solicited are based strictly on opinion, and opinion is not forced to abide by any objective standard of truth. True enough. However, the key point is that Mersereau’s description of the 800 jurists as a consensus obfuscates what the list actually does, how it acts on the field of which it is a part: it streamlines Canadian music; it incorporates certain artists, genres, and eras at the expense of others; it defines Canadian music as something; it inscribes the list itself as a viable or legitimate form through which to organize and communicate information about the field of Canadian music; and finally it both establishes and enacts a mode of engagement with music that is neither empirical (based on units sold, etc.) nor aesthetic (based on formal attributes or affect, etc.), but is based purely on comparison. Further, it is comparison according to a specific logic and a set of criteria that are dictated by Mersereau as the compiler of this list.

For instance, the definition of Canadian music used—“the only real entry qualifications were that the performer had to be technically Canadian, no matter where he/she lives now or came from” (quoted in Quill, 2010)—runs contrary to that of Canadian content (CanCon) laws and therefore allows for the inclusion of works that might not meet the criteria of the latter (for example, much of Bryan Adams’ work, a Canadian artist notoriously excluded by CanCon). These implicit criteria therefore affect the way we think about music, and specifically about Canadian music, because they reconfigure the epistemological terrain. That is to say, the list constitutes a particular archive of Canadian music that is delineated by specific criteria of inclusion.
Additionally, while the list may initially spark debate about its methodology, legitimacy, or relevance, these factors may over time become black boxed. If this were to happen, the list could be easily used in the future as a historical document, something that Mersereau has been upfront about hoping for. As he says, “The history of a lot of these songs just wasn’t available in bookstores…. I was looking for a reference book and I guess, in the end, I just went ‘Well, I guess I’m going to have to write it’” (quoted in Meany & Barber, 2010). The list’s context of citation (its assembled consensus) affords it a legitimacy based on the number of contributors, which may allow it to be used in the future as a historical document or at least as a signpost that frames the conversation around Canadian music. It might be used to establish a canon of Canadian music or provide the data drawn on by future conversers in debates about the field. Therefore, a list that is ostensibly present oriented—in Mersereau’s claim that this is but a “snapshot” of how Canadians think about our music at this particular moment (quoted in Quill, 2010)—is also past oriented in its implicit historicizing ambition, yet also future oriented in that it seeks for itself legitimacy as a historical document to be used at some point in the future. The incorporation of many voices makes this list’s ability to act in this way much stronger than if Mersereau had authored the list himself, or even with a small number of music critics.

Mersereau’s attempt to construct a consensus with his list also functions to popularize the Canadian popular music field. Latour (1987) suggests, “If one wishes to increase the numbers of readers … one has to decrease the intensity of the controversy, and reduce the resources” (p. 57). This is exactly the strategy deployed by Mersereau in wresting away the authority to construct lists from music critics and aficionados. Although he deploys many voices in the text, their input is limited, consisting only of a list of 10 songs and nothing further. The intensity of the controversy is thereby defused. This contrasts with much popular music criticism—a discourse community constantly derided for being obscurantist and impenetrable for non-experts—which abides by the same discursive trajectory as that of science, in which “the intensity of the debates … slowly led from non-technical sentences, from large numbers of ill-equipped verbal contestants to small numbers of well-equipped contestants who write articles” (Latour, 1987, p. 52). Mersereau’s is a list “for the people, by the people,” he might say.

Further, as noted above, Mersereau takes pains not just in the introduction of his book, but also in virtually every interview conducted while promoting it, to note, “[N]one of you will completely agree with the final one hundred chosen. Art is arbitrary—we knew that going into the project” (Mersereau, 2010, p. 7), or “No list can be definitive. … This is a snapshot of tastes and preferences in 2009. The 2010 list would be substantially different” (quoted in Quill, 2010). Such statements anticipate readers’ objections to the list’s contents in advance, a tactic that is common to all rhetoric, scientific or not: “[T]hanks to this procedure, the text is carefully aimed; it exhausts all potential objections in advance and may very well leave the reader speechless since it can do nothing else but take the statement up as a matter of fact” (Latour, 1987, p. 53). While Mersereau encourages disagreement with the list, his series of statements and method of presentation effectively ensure that there is little dissent regarding the decision to organize, frame, and communicate this information in such a form. His read-
ers are distracted by content and do not question the logic of the list—how it frames their thinking about Canadian singles and prescribes a specific, hierarchized path through the archive of all available Canadian music. That is to say, Mersereau’s list elicits the 
\textit{captation} of the reader by exerting “subtle control of the objectors’ moves” (Latour, 1987, p. 57).

\textbf{Immutable mobiles}

While readers are captive, objects—in this case musical objects—are dominated. Latour (1987) shows how objects and/as data come to be “dominated by sight,” in that “at one point or another, [objects] all take the shape of a flat surface of paper that can be archived, pinned on a wall and combined with others” (p. 227). Which is to say, collected objects come to be \textit{stabilized}, \textit{mobilized}, and \textit{combined} in material, visual forms such as lists, tables, charts, or diagrams in order that they can better be controlled from a distance: “[W]hen someone is said to ‘master’ a question or to ‘dominate’ a subject, you should normally look for the flat surface that enables mastery (a map, a list, a file, a census, the wall of a gallery, a card-index, a repertory) and you will find it” (Latour, 1990, p. 45). \textit{The Top 100 Canadian Singles} is such a material form of information, which mobilizes, stabilizes, and combines data about Canadian music, crystallizing it as information and as history all in one place. In order to be placed in the list, musical objects must be translated into units or data that are not related to the formal, technical, or affective dimensions of music, allowing us to say that Mersereau’s list is constituted by 100 immutable mobiles that are definitively not musical. Musical objects—more specifically, songs—are transformed so that they may be imported into a new medium. The singles are thus stabilized and mobilized by their collection and importation into the list, and combined together to become a new document. This document itself can also be seen as an immutable mobile. The book is a stable, unalterable medium; it is mobile and can be transported with great ease, or the actual list can be condensed down to simply 100 entries on 100 lines, reducing the noise in the channel; it is also combinable and comparable with other music lists—it may be placed in relation to Mersereau’s (2007) \textit{Top 100 Canadian Albums}, for example, or \textit{Rolling Stone} magazine’s (2003) “500 Greatest Songs of All-Time.”

Few other formats allow for such a seamless drawing together in a single material form many discrete units dispersed over time and space—the earliest entry (Hank Snow’s “I’m Movin’ On”) is from 1950, the latest from 2007 (Feist’s “1234” and Wintersleep’s “Weighty Ghost”). Mersereau’s list therefore can be seen as a visual form of information, its pages a series of two-dimensional inscriptions stacked on top of one another, which creates what Latour (1990) describes as an “optical consistency” between divergent units (p. 34). Such a visual form slices across traditional modes of classification (whether genre based, time based, etc.) and can tell us things about its objects or data that were previously not apparent—new connections can be forged between songs or artists that might not have previously been evident. One example is that the list tells us that the 1970s is the decade with the highest number of songs (43) resonating in the cultural register of Mersereau’s jury. We might then think about what this information tells us, i.e., try to ascertain how or why this is the case, perhaps drawing on historical events such as the enactment of CanCon rules in 1971. Such a process
of visualization allows us to do certain things we could not do with this information previously—whether this is to debate the merits of the list or think about the hows and whys of certain patterns it contains.

So, on the one hand, Canadian music—the vast archive of music written, produced, and/or recorded in this country—is streamlined and made more manageable for the reader, i.e., the archive is made navigable. But on the other hand, by streamlining Canadian music in this way, Mersereau's list itself emerges as a potentially new kind of canon, out of which may emerge new connections or even narratives. Put another way: because the list cuts across traditional classification systems, the dominant narratives of Canadian popular music history (whether chronological, regional, genre based, etc.) become altered. A prescriptive path through a popular music archive is enacted by the list's material form, and the way a reader navigates the list determines their processing of its information. Each of the constitutive elements of the list is transformed so all are of the same “optical consistency”: time is condensed, regional differences are flattened, genre categorizations do not hold, and so on. Only the internal logic of the list obtains.

To sum up this section, a list such as The Top 100 Canadian Singles is not purely administrative. There is a constitutive dimension of the list that acts on the popular music field. Popular music lists such as this one serve to delimit the terms in which the field can be thought about, communicated, historicized, and canonized, and by extension its relation to the wider musical discourse and society. All popular music lists draw things together to act on the field from a distance. In our example, Bob Mersereau’s Top 100 Canadian Singles constructs an archive of Canadian music that makes a series of historical claims, most notably that the objects it contains should be privileged in the historical record of Canadian music, and that since this historical record is constantly being constructed and contested, this list is itself a viable historical document. Latour’s conceptual tools have aided in clearing the ground for understanding the functionality of a list: how it comes to be, how it is made to circulate, what kinds of activity it enables or negates; in short, what it actually does and how it does so.

Conclusion

The digital list is the future of the list. Mersereau’s collection is something of a dying breed in the cultural realm, where new lists such as those found on Pitchfork (2009) online magazine rapidly proliferate. A problem arises when attempting to give an account for such digital lists, since, as Goody (1977) shows, much of the written list’s organizational, administrative, and even affective potential is derived from its visible edges—its borders, which we might describe in Virilian (2005) terms as its horizon. That is, because a list in writing can be grasped all at once, it literally displays its organizational capacity via its form, wearing its principle(s) of organization as a kind of exoskeleton: always observable, but often unnoticed. Therefore, depending on the size or scope of a list, it can be either intimidating or comforting for the reader, since as Virilio (2005) argues, horizons ground phenomenological experience. In contrast, an online list such as that found on Pitchfork does not abide by the same visible logic. The structural limitations of computer monitors ensure that the horizon of online lists is continuously deferred and elusive. Items are either scrolled through, with those at the
The list is navigated item by item via Next or Previous buttons. One can never examine, let alone comprehend, such a list all at once. Thus, certain information is lost to the reader (i.e., the size or length of the list, one’s navigational progress, the ability to compare entries that are further apart than a computer screen will allow, etc.). The loss of a visible horizon produces an unsettling effect in the reader.

Such a comparison can tell us things about both written and digital lists themselves, and about the relations between them. The written list is increasingly replaced by its digital successor—shopping lists are being constructed on mobile devices, to-do lists on digital sticky pads, lexical lists are stored and accessed online, and so on. This is to say nothing of the dynamic lists created by algorithms to structure and guide our consumption and/or taste habits online, or of the fact that such algorithms are themselves a kind of list. Much productive future research might be pursued into the list as a form that has a crucial role to play in the operational infrastructure of computation. Additionally, much more might be done to further trace the types of relations a list such as Mersereau’s enters into upon its reception: who uses it, what other medial forms it takes, how it has been critiqued (such as in this article), as well as what its life is in both the Canadian music scene and in relation to broader processes of cultural history or memory.

The contemporary co-existence of written and digital lists shows us, importantly, that the historic malleability of the list persists. This persistence throughout history has been remarkable: the administrative lists of Mesopotamia and Babylonia survived the introduction of the alphabet and later scroll and codex technologies of writing (Blair, 2011; Goody, 1977). The list played an important role in administration of the Greek city-states, and it functioned as a rhetorical device in the early Greek histories (such as Homer’s famous catalogue of ships in the Iliad—see Belknap, 2004; Eco, 2009; LeGoff, 1992). Lists aided in the expansion and strengthening of the Roman Empire and survived into the manuscript period of the Middle Ages (Vismann, 2008). Lists were formative in the explosion of bureaucracy in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe (Kafka, 2012), while also being deployed as a figurative model in the literature and visual art of the Renaissance, Baroque, Modern, and Postmodern periods (Belknap, 2004; Eco, 2009). The list’s administrative capacities aided in the administration of populations and warfare in the twentieth century (Aly & Roth, 2004; Werbin, 2008), and it has been a vital tool in development of the scientific method (itself a kind of list template) from the Enlightenment onward. Now, the machinic functionality of the list secures for it a privileged position in the digital logic of the database (Adam, 2008; Manovich, 2001).

I have sought to trace in a very preliminary way some of these developments in the history of the list, so that we might more fully understand its role in the organization, administration, and archiving of human communication and knowledge. I hope to have shown that the list does not always function innocently, but can serve. That it
does not cease to exist once it has served its purpose, but can archive. That it does not simply administer, but is also constitutive. I hope to have demonstrated, in short, the necessity of un–black boxing this complex form.

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Notes
1. I am here taking up Bernd Frohmann’s (2009) call for generative, experimental approaches toward documents and documentation “which have as their aims not so much the precision and accuracy of a scientific representation of what documents and documentation might be, but forging concepts in a Deleuzian spirit, seeking to enhance their power and force, with more concern for what they do than for what they mean or represent. The benefits of extending the concepts of document and documentation are located here, and with a closely associated aim, that of multiplying these concepts and seeking ways of also extending an encouraging hospitality to many different areas of their application” (p. 301). Adopting this approach necessarily implies that the category of “list” is inclusive of a broad range of formats.

2. The “cultural techniques” stream of so-called German media analysis is concerned with precisely these matters, and so has been formative in the development of this article. Krämer (2003) and Bernhard Siegert (2008, 2011, 2012) are the most-translated thinkers from this tradition, which takes as its object the operative entities that process the distinctions at the core of any society—such as those between inside/outside, subject/object, nature/culture, matter/form, et cetera. Hence the interest of these thinkers in doors, operative writing, maps, formats, and so on. “Cultural techniques—such as writing, reading, painting, counting, making music—are always older than the concepts that are generated from them. People wrote long before they conceptualized writing or alphabets; millennia passed before pictures and statues gave rise to the concept of the image; and still today, people sing or make music without knowing anything about tones or musical notation systems” (Macho quoted in Siegert, 2008, p. 29).

3. This understanding of lists emerges from Goody’s (1977) comprehensive study of the form as operative in ancient societies (pp. 103–111) and has been extended by Werbin (2008, pp. 5–10) to account for how listing practices function in modern and contemporary formations of power. I have further extended Goody’s and Werbin’s insights by exploring the relationships between lists and networks in Young (2013b).

4. This paragraph paraphrases my more expansive discussion of lists in Vismann (Young, 2013a, in press).

5. This tack follows Latour’s call for the tracing of relations made throughout his work but with particular force in Reassembling the Social (2005). This call itself was inspired by Michel Serres’ work (see Serres with Latour, 1995; see also Yonge [2013b]).

6. Some information on the book’s materiality: it is presented in coffee-table book format with dimensions of 23.9 × 23.1 × 2.5 cm. It has 216 glossy pages with colour photographs throughout. There is an introduction by Mersereau of about 2000 words, after which are listed the top 100 singles (starting with #1). Each entry has an accompanying section of text that describes the song and attempts to contextualize it historically. Each of the first 10 entries has 3 to 4 pages devoted to them: 2 to 3 pages of
text (of 800 to 900 words) and one full-page photo of the artist or group. Entries 11 to 50 are two pages each: one full-page picture, one page of text (400 to 500 words). Finally, entries 51 to 100 are one page each: the top half of the page devoted to small photo and song title/rank, the bottom half to text (300 to 400 words). Interviews were conducted for the song write-ups with artists “or someone who was close to them at the time” in order to “present clear and fresh perspectives on the works” (Mersereau, 2010, p. 9). Full-page or sidebar lists of celebrity jurors (such as John Roberts, Paul Quarrington, Denise Donlan, Rich Terfry, et al.) are dispersed throughout the text, breaking up the progression of the list occasionally. All of the jurors are listed in the back of the book, along with their occupation, institutional affiliation, and location. The book also contains an autonomous, unannotated list of the “Top-100 French-Canadian singles” (pp. 78-79). Finally, the book contains a standard alphabetized index.

7. To qualify as Canadian content, a musical selection must meet two of the following criteria: 1) the music is composed entirely by a Canadian; 2) the music is, or the lyrics are, performed principally by a Canadian; 3) the musical selection consists of a performance that is recorded wholly in Canada, or performed wholly in Canada and broadcast live in Canada; 4) the lyrics are written entirely by a Canadian (CRtC website).

8. A select few high-profile jurists’ arguments or justifications are included in the final list, but the vast majority of written material in the book consists of Mersereau’s own write-ups.

9. I pursue this line of inquiry in Young (2013b). For a general introduction to the study of the “operational infrastructure” of computation pursued in much “German” media theory, see Wolfgang Ernst (2013).

References


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