On the face of it, there is something uniquely contemporary about the practices and procedures of listing. The present era might be variously characterized according to the ‘kill lists’ of drone warfare, the instructional lists of computational algorithms, the cultural rankings of the ‘best of’ list, or the ubiquitous clickbait ‘listicle’ that vies for our attention. Indeed it would seem that the politics and aesthetics of digital culture can be traced in the ever more visible proliferation of lists. Yet in List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to Buzzfeed, the first book by Canadian scholar Liam Cole Young, listing is shown to have been ‘a part of every new media ecology and its corresponding “flood” of information’ (14). Young, currently a lecturer in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, Ottawa, argues that the cultural technique of listing is ancient, and provides the foundation of administrative and organizational power from which both state and corporate institutions have emerged. Moreover, quite apart from any apparent visibility, he explains how lists are fundamentally recessive, and why they should be understood as operational forms that provide the infrastructural background to human society, mediating our knowledge of the world. For Young, ‘quotidian forms like the list are heuristics for understanding such “civilizational” questions of order, knowledge, and being’ (49).

This is a book that compels us to subject the superficially banal operations of the list to closer scrutiny. There is much at stake here: it is precisely because the list is ‘so innocuously woven into the fabric of the world’ (33) that it can be so effectively activated and deployed for political purposes. Young demonstrates how techniques of listing administer the present, archive the past, and organize the future. This is, then, a work of media theory, but one that emphatically rejects the Anglo-American field’s tendency to privilege narrative and spectacle at the expense of the operational. The book makes a valuable contribution to an emergent logistical or infrastructural media studies, where scholars of quite different methodological investments agree on the urgent need to interrogate the procedural form of media. For Young, it is only by examining the longer history of the list that we can begin to apprehend the material circumstances of the digital, and the extent to which human agency is mediated by such forms. His own persuasive blend of media materialism combines an archaeological approach, established in German media theory, with methods drawn from the work of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Bruno Latour.
This question of method is central to the book, and is a subject to which Young frequently returns throughout the various chapters. However its broader contribution to the field of cultural politics lies in its analysis of an important tension immanent to the list form. On the one hand, lists circumscribe, define borders or boundaries (as per its etymology), based on inclusion and exclusion, and according to certain criteria. This is a power that can be ‘harnessed by forces of rationality and governmentality that categorize and administer people, words, and things’ (18). Yet on the other hand, the list has the power to destabilize such rationality and overturn such borders on the basis of its ‘aesthetic gesture towards the infinite, the unknowable, or the not-yet-known’ (85). In the explicit exhibition of its organizational function, the list is rendered strange and invokes alternative encounters, which is to say that lists function as a component of a perceptual and epistemological orthodoxy, but the contours of this technical mediation can be ‘revealed’ by poetic practices of list making. Young argues that the list is a form that is ‘embedded within the epistemological undergrowth of modernity’ but that it is also ‘the site by which a space is cleared for thinking other’ (138).

The book explores this tension, albeit rather unevenly, in five chapters organized around an assorted collection of case studies, many of which aim to ‘add a degree of granularity’ (68) to the existing studies on which they lean. This begins with a discussion of the popular music industry, its reliance on the apparent statistical objectivity and neutrality of sales charts, and its inscription of taste communities. Most interesting here is Young’s critical take on superficially subversive lists compiled by participatory fan cultures, which, he argues, in fact overlook the role played by the material form of the list in preemptively structuring cultural practices. After establishing that lists are materially bound up in the cultural production and circulation of commodities, he then examines the administrative power of lists as a technique of governmentality. The epistemological authority of statistics, for example, relies on a certain ficticity which Young argues was established by the bookkeeping practices of 15th century Italian merchants. Double-entry bookkeeping paved the way for ‘logistical modernity’, in which the abstraction of techniques of listing and categorization could be used to legitimize Nazi race policy and to produce the human being as ‘a calculable object’ (92). In a powerful analysis of the Nazi census, which highlights the significance of IBM’s tabulating punch card machines, Young emphasizes that the administrative governmentality of Nazism was neither an anomaly nor a historical rupture, but instead a coalescence of historical vectors. We arrive back in the present with an analysis of algorithmic, operational lists: the list is ‘formally operative in computation’ (112). What is ultimately drawn out by this discussion is the claim that lists, in the form of databases, institute a new temporal regime, wherein 21st century society is increasingly ‘recalibrated around nonhuman, machinic time’ (124).
The final chapter, which at last addresses the poetics of lists in detail, is less convincing than what comes before, perhaps because it lacks some of the former granularity. The chapter acts as a way to explore the Heideggerian idea of ‘saving power’, a creative force immanent to existing technocultural conditions that might be turned toward displacing an otherwise dominant orientation to the world constructed and maintained by such conditions. Here Young is interested less in aesthetic or poetic forms that promise a transgressive escape than he is in the power of certain lists to induce a different temporality in which ‘alternate knowledges, affects, and engagements’ (134) might emerge. There is reflection on Jorge Luis Borges’s literary obsession with list-like forms and the extent to which his writing operated against the dominant rhythms of modern narrative. There is also brief discussion of Chris Marker’s essayistic filmmaking, characterized by its associative open-endedness and ambiguous structure, which invokes the ‘non-narrative time of lists’ (149) and, in opposition to the representational drive of documentary, gestures toward a temporality that is open to something beyond such limitations. What remains unclear is how such aesthetic practices, established in opposition to the temporal regime of the 20th century, might be brought to bear on the conditions of the 21st, which Young has sketched out in the previous chapter. There is also little acknowledgement of how such issues are being debated by theorists and practitioners of these forms, as in contemporary work on the essay film for example.

Overall, though, even if this final chapter feels somewhat unresolved, there is much of interest here to scholars working in fields beyond media studies, and particularly in the area of cultural politics. Echoing Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey’s call for ‘suspicious attentiveness’ to a world of increasingly ‘gray media’ (2012: 12), Young’s materialist analysis of the tensions and paradoxes of listing demands a renewed closer inspection of the ostensibly dull background operations of such cultural and political processes. This book also leaves us with important questions about the political efficacy of our artistic responses to such systems and processes.

References

Reviewer bio: Dr Rob Coley is a senior lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Lincoln.

Address: School of Film and Media, College of Arts, University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln, LN6 7TS

Telephone: 01522 886129

Email: rcoley@lincoln.ac.uk