



On the List

DOI:

https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_13

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dolbear, S., Nichols, B., & Peppel, C. (2022). On the List. In C. F. E. Holzhey, & J. Schillinger (Eds.), *The Case for Reduction* (pp. 253-61). (Cultural Inquiry; Vol. 25). ICI Berlin Press. https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_13

Published in:

The Case for Reduction

Citing this paper

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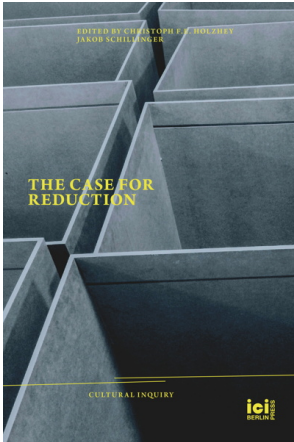
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The Case for Reduction, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, Cultural Inquiry, 25 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 253–61

SAM DOLBEAR
BEN NICHOLS
CLAUDIA PEPPERL 

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CITE AS:

Sam Dolbear, Ben Nichols, and Claudia Peppel, 'On the List', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, Cultural Inquiry, 25 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 253–61 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_13>

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ABSTRACT: This essay presents some thoughts about lists and draws on a range of material, from Lauren Berlant to George Perec. It acts as an introduction to a series of short meditations on individual instances of listing. Usually presented in a sequence and assembled according to some practical or conceptual necessity, lists offer the promise, perhaps the illusion, of keeping track, of bringing control to the flux of things and thoughts, of putting confusion to a halt. They relate to reduction in two ways: first, as a quantitative reduction — as a form of making smaller or less; and second, as a qualitative reduction — as a form of condensation to the most salient data.

KEYWORDS: Lists; Categories; Accumulation; Enumeration; Form (Aesthetics), Continuity; Berlant, Lauren; Eco, Umberto; Contzen, Eva von; Tankard, Paul; Belknap, Robert; Boyer, Anne; Didion, Joan; Perec, Georges; Sontag, Susan

On the List

SAM DOLBEAR, BEN NICHOLS, AND CLAUDIA PEPPEL

The list is not as innocent as it looks.

Paul Tankard

In her essay ‘First Things’, Lauren Berlant describes a number of undertakings, routines, insights, and tasks that form first thing in the morning. Among breakfast habits, taking medicine, suicidal thoughts, and the walking of dogs, Berlant inconspicuously mentions that ‘Lists get made’, which raises the question not only of the form lists can take in order to be recognized as such, but of the circumstances in which they emerge.¹ Lists get made at difficult moments in life, when anxiety creeps in, when the day begins unstructured or ends unproductively. They get made when an overview is lost, when decisions have to be made, structure is needed, or instructions must be followed. Lists get made when we can’t motivate ourselves, when we feel tired, when things get undone or don’t happen the way we want them to. Lists get made when we fail to remember or lose our orientation, when we need to make plans for the future and expectations in real life, when wishful thinking does not eventuate.

1 Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), ‘First Things’, p. 3.

Lists get made and proliferate. They compile, group, or rank ideas, ingredients, pieces, plans, procedures, details, desires, feelings, records, lovers, victims, or rather any kind of content in a reduced form. They can be written, spoken, or take a non-linguistic, even visual form. They hold various temporalities: Lists of things *to do* in the future, reminders from the past. Usually presented in a sequence and assembled according to some practical or conceptual necessity, they offer the promise, perhaps the illusion, of keeping track, of bringing control to the flux of things and thoughts, of putting confusion to a halt. They can be tentative, playful, and assertive, confident but provisional, imposing but suggestive, and ultimately futile. They might accumulate along a certain line or theme, but they also might fracture that accumulation, to work between levels and levities, tones and styles. Lists provide structure, they offer overview, the pleasure of erasing things one has accomplished. They promise effectivity, a certain productivity in the here and now, the hope to master one's life, to overcome procrastination. They offer the pleasure of continuity, of keeping track, of winning over inertia. According to Umberto Eco, lists are the struggle against and for the sheer superiority of infinity, a form of representation that 'suggests infinity almost *physically*, because in fact *it does not end*, nor does it conclude in form.'² He distinguishes between 'a poetics of everything included' and 'a poetics of the etcetera', between verbal and visual lists.³

'The list is not simply a means of collecting, but of sorting things out', writes Paul Tankard.⁴ Lists are 'managerial devices',⁵ but also, or even for that reason, aesthetic, pleasurable, and have a 'strong affective momentum.'⁶ Lists can elicit 'frustration, feelings of control and security (the world in order), or, on the contrary, insecurity and fear (of that

2 Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: From Homer to Joyce*, trans. by Alistair McEwen (London: MacLehose Press, 2009), p. 17.

3 Ibid., introduction and p. 17.

4 Paul Tankard, 'Reading Lists', *Prose Studies*, 28.3 (December 2006), pp. 337–60 (p. 341).

5 Ibid., p. 344.

6 Eva von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature: Towards a Listology', in *Lists and Catalogues in Ancient Literature and Beyond: Towards a Poetics of Enumeration*, ed. by Rebecca Laemmle, Cédric Scheidegger Laemmle, and Katharina Wesselmann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), pp. 35–54 (p. 50).

which we cannot grasp, in size and number); pleasure (derived from the appeal of the act of reading, the act of decoding, and the associative powers); disappointment (lack of explanation, narrative embedding); alienation from the text; awe in view of the poet's skills, etc.⁷ Lists 'delight and frustrate': they have an 'enormous appeal'.⁸ They are self-perpetuating: because there is 'no such thing as a list of one'. Once one has started a list, 'a pressure is exerted for it to be continued'.⁹ Though its essence is mainly a formal feature, something ritualized, magical, invocative emanates from the act of making a list. At the same time, lists are ordinary, banal, boring. One might even say that the best thing about them, their biggest promise or appeal, is that they do not have to be interesting (which of course is different to saying that they are not).

Scholars often reach for a certain simplicity when defining lists, though the etymology is varied and refers to a very heterogeneous use, deriving from the Germanic root *liston/lista*, meaning 'border, hem, edge, strip'.¹⁰ 'At their most simple, lists are frameworks that hold separate and disparate items together.'¹¹ Eva von Contzen offers a reduced, or 'minimalist definition: the "list" is a set of items assembled under some principle in a formally distinctive unit'.¹² These units could be the sentences themselves, arranged in such a way as to make them appear separate, or they might utilize other forms: from dashes to numbers, letters, points, and other dividers. Within these units the list constitutes, as Tankard argues, an 'argument or assertion at the most minimal level of articulation possible'.¹³ The reach towards the simple and the minimal reflects these qualities in lists themselves. Lists 'hold'

7 Ibid., p. 50.

8 Ibid.

9 Tankard, 'Reading Lists', p. 342.

10 See 'list', in *Online Etymology Dictionary* (2022), especially 'list (n.2): "a narrow strip," Old English *liste* "border, hem, edge, strip," from Proto-Germanic **liston* (source also of Old High German *lista* "strip, border, list," Old Norse *lista* "border, selvage," German *leiste*) [...]. The Germanic root also is the source of French *liste*, Italian *lista*. The word has had many technical senses in English, including "lobe of an ear" and "a stripe of color." This also is the *list* in archaic *lists* "place of combat" (late 14c.), from an earlier sense "boundary;" the fighting ground being originally at the boundary of fields' <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/list>> [accessed 20 July 2022].

11 Robert Belknap, *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 2.

12 Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', p. 36.

13 Tankard, 'Reading Lists', p. 339.

and ‘assemble’ rather than offer accounts of the relations between what is held or assembled. They are always a kind of montage, a cut-out, a part of a larger whole. They are arguments or assertions *reduced* to the lowest possible level, and merely show rather than explain themselves.

We encounter the same problem when trying to describe definitively how lists relate to reduction: because any attempt at definition tends towards expansion or complexity. But they have many reductive elements. In a basic sense they constitute a quantitative reduction: as the philosopher John Searle writes, ‘any list you care to make about anything automatically creates two categories, those that are on the list and those that are not.’¹⁴ Lists reduce things to what is there and present on the list. Yet, they arguably share this quality with pretty much any form of representation, which is always necessarily selective. Furthermore, in a qualitative sense, lists reduce chaos to order: they are a schematic form of representation. Whether this constitutes a ‘reduction’ seems up in the air. By clarifying ‘states of affairs’, schematics also increase understanding and make future thought and action possible. Then, in a similar way, lists reduce complexity to simplicity. They take a complex set of particularities and reduce it to a set of salient points or key principles without necessarily narrating the full relation of those points or principles to each other. In short: lists relate to reduction in two ways: first, as a quantitative reduction — as a form of making smaller, more concise; and second, as a qualitative reduction — as a form of condensation, in which the thing is grasped in a moment. Yet, they still accumulate, proliferate, *get made*.

What shape do lists have? When lists form vertically, they might use dots, indents, and space to create delineation and separateness. Lists in literary works are unusual, they not only introduce ‘a sudden verticality into the horizontal flow of text’,¹⁵ but seem ‘to represent an extra-literary discourse.’¹⁶ Entries often stand loose and yet together,

14 John Searle, ‘The Storm over the University’, *The New York Review of Books*, 6 December 1990 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/12/06/the-storm-over-the-university/>> [accessed 21 July 2022].

15 Michel Butor, ‘The Book as Object’ (1964), quoted in Brian Dillon, ‘Why Literature Loves Lists: From Rabelais to Didion, an Incomplete List of Listmakers’, *Literary Hub*, 14 September 2018 <<https://lithub.com/why-literature-loves-lists/>> [accessed 20 April 2022].

16 Tankard, ‘Reading Lists’, p. 337.

and are often employed in 'syntactic and conceptual coherence to both the other elements and the surrounding narrative material'.¹⁷ One famous example is Joan Didion's packing list, taped inside her wardrobe door for years, part of her essay *The White Album*, a gripping though devastating journey through the decade of 1968–78.

TO PACK AND WEAR:

2 skirts
 2 jerseys or leotards
 1 pullover sweater
 2 pair shoes
 stockings
 bra
 nightgown, robe, slippers
 cigarettes
 bourbon
 bag with:
 shampoo
 toothbrush and paste
 Basis soap
 razor, deodorant
 aspirin, prescriptions, Tampax
 face cream, powder, baby oil

TO CARRY:

mohair throw
 typewriter
 2 legal pads and pens
 files
 house key¹⁸

In her restless and sober style, Didion recalls all sorts of events in the outer world as well as in her private life. She writes about racism, hyper-violence, her visits to Eldridge Cleaver and his involvement in the Black Panther movement, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, Jim Morrison and The Doors, trials for murder like the Manson case, and the case of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, 'who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5'.¹⁹ Didion also writes about how she, as a reporter and successful writer, was

17 Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', p. 36.

18 Joan Didion, *The White Album* [1979] (London: HarperCollins, 2017), pp. 34–35.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

frequently on the road and confronted with many odd and terrible things, and about how these selective events tore her life apart. 'I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself.'²⁰ She continues:

I was supposed to have a script, and I had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience.²¹

Didion describes an inability to give incompatible images a narrative contour, one of the many signs of the impending collapse she experienced in the summer of 1968, which is also featured in her essay as well as in the detailed psychiatric report that followed soon after. The packing list reveals how the formal simplicity of the list has a stabilizing function in the face of unremitting disorder: the banality of everyday objects as the remains of what might constitute a normal and repeatable life, reassuring oneself of oneself and of one's preparedness in case of travel or emergency whilst also offering a continuity into a possible future.

Another striking example is Susan Sontag's 'Notes of a Childhood', a twenty-three-page-long list of selective memories as part of her *Early Diaries 1947–1963*, dated from January 1957. Flashbacks to childhood scatter her diaries; written in a paratactic style and accentuating the fragmentary, they are reproduced without any reference to the age at which or circumstances in which they took place, interrupting or rather eliminating any further chronological context. They leave the reader at a loss yet captured by their suggestive nature. David Rieff comments that the style has a 'notational, almost stream-of-consciousness manner' and adds that this is 'the closest she came to straightforward autobiographical writing', even if unintentionally.²² Here, another ability of the list is played out, namely to give cohesion to a plethora of loose details and at the same time to testify to a pause: The notes, from which

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., pp. 12–13.

22 Susan Sontag, 'Notes of a Childhood', in *Reborn: Susan Sontag, Early Diaries 1947–1963*, published posthumously and ed. by her son David Rieff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), pp. 106–29 (p. 106).

we here quote one page only, appear strangely detached but at the same time — as the past's own present — everlasting:

[...]

Daddy telling me to eat the parsley, it's good, in the Fun Club

The big white blister on my finger when some paper caught fire from the Bunsen burner (I had my chemistry equipment in the small roll-top desk).

Thelma de Lara. The picture of Jesus in the basement. 'That's a picture of God.'

(8) Mother telling me she was going to marry Nat.

Sharing a room with Mother the first two years in Tuscon. (Nat recommended it.)

Reading Ida Tarbell on the Duponts.

Finding a Kosher restaurant for Grandma.

The Normandy Isle School. Ida + Leo Huberman.

Chemistry sets.

Peter Haidu putting his hand on my thigh under the water (age fourteen).

Getting home to a barbecue dinner.

Crying in the movie *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—with Mother, in a big Manhattan theatre.

Poison ivy. Dr. Stumpf.

The ebony swinging doors (Chinese) that gave on to the living room in the house in Great Neck.

The table Christmas tree in Florida: silver with blue lights.

Wanting a sapphire.

Capturing grasshoppers to put on the keys of a toy piano.

[...] ²³

The inherent reduction of the formal arrangement results as a framework and creates a context and cohesion, even as the memories are wildly disparate. As Belknap writes, 'This is to say that the list is simultaneously the sum of its parts and the individual parts themselves.'²⁴ Because of their dual nature, lists must therefore be looked at from two opposing viewpoints: the individual units that make up a list (what does it hold?) and the function or purpose of the list as a whole (how does it hold together?).²⁵

23 Ibid., p. 107.

24 Belknap, *The List*, p. 15.

25 Ibid.

Another shape that lists can take is horizontal — formed as a block, separated by commas, which present less of a demand to be struck or scribbled out, completed — such as in Georges Perec's 'Notes on the Objects to Be Found on My Desk' (1976). A much longer enumeration seems to be necessary here than when the list is formally marked as such from the outset:

A lamp, a cigarette-case, a bud-vase, a stone for striking matches, a cardboard box containing small filing cards of different colours, a large *papier-mâché* penholder with seashell inlays, a glass pencil-holder, several stones, three turned-wood boxes, an alarm clock, a push-button-calendar, a lump of lead, a big cigar-box full of knick-knacks (no cigars), a steel spiral device in which you can put pending mail, a polished stone dagger handle, ledgers, exercise books, loose leaves, various writing instruments and accessories, a big blotting stamp, several books, a glass full of pencils, a little gilded-wood box.²⁶

The protagonist, who explores the elusive everyday and tries to make sense of his immediate surroundings, is obsessed with observing, compiling, and checking by means of enumerations and provisional lists, as well as with suffering from digression and the maelstrom of arbitrary classifications. Insofar as the list seeks to account for something present, it might also attempt to represent something absent or failed. Such examples can be found in Kafka's list of impossibilities:

The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently. One might add a fourth impossibility: the impossibility of writing.²⁷

To write a list in the negative form, as something that refuses specific things, or even refuses the demand of the form itself, as an account of something absent or impossible, is to take a risk: either to come to terms with an impossibility, to cement it, or to break the link with this

26 Georges Perec, 'Notes on the Objects to Be Found on My Desk, An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris', in Perec, *Thoughts of Sorts*, trans. by David Bellos (Boston, MA: David R. Godine Publisher, 2009), pp. 11–16 (p. 14).

27 From Kafka's letter to Max Brod from June 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. by Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken, 1977), as quoted in Rebecca Comay, 'Testament of the Revolution (Walter Benjamin)', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 50.2 (2017), pp. 1–12 (p. 6).

impossibility, as a kind of exorcism or sublimation. This is echoed in Anne Boyer's 'Not Writing' from 1995:

When I am not writing I am not writing a novel called 1994 about a young woman in an office park in a provincial town who has a job cutting and pasting time. I am not writing a novel called *Nero* about the world's richest art star in space. I am not writing a book called *Kansas City Spleen*. I am not writing a sequel to *Kansas City Spleen* called *Bitch's Maldoror*. I am not writing a book of political philosophy called *Questions for Poets*. I am not writing a scandalous memoir. I am not writing a pathetic memoir. I am not writing a memoir about poetry or love. I am not writing a memoir about poverty, debt collection, or bankruptcy. I am not writing about family court. I am not writing a memoir because memoirs are for property owners and not writing a memoir about prohibitions of memoirs.²⁸

The danger is that lists that act as reminders might become repetitive in their attempt to summon something. You might forget or fail to do the task, to respect the power of the list, and you might have to repeat the demand the next day, the next month, still in the hope of its fulfilment. But lists, in some ways, are the hope of living differently, or perhaps even the proof that we already have. Their potential to reduce and expand holds a promise, often broken, yet repeated nevertheless.

28 Anne Boyer, 'Not Writing', in Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2015), pp. 41–43 (p. 41).

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