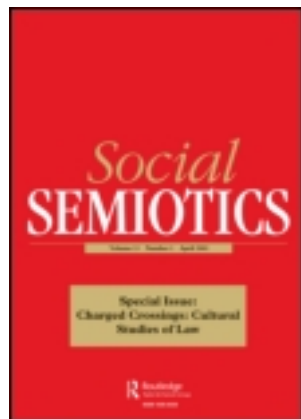


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Publisher: Routledge

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Social Semiotics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csos20>

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Published online: 25 Aug 2010.

To cite this article: Ernest A. Hakanen (2002) Lists as Social Grid: Ratings and Rankings in Everyday Life, *Social Semiotics*, 12:3, 245-254, DOI: [10.1080/10350330216372](https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330216372)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330216372>

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Lists as Social Grid: Ratings and Rankings in Everyday Life

ERNEST A. HAKANEN

It is argued that the inundation of lists in our everyday lives has become part of the social grid, which tells us who and what we are and how we relate to the world. Using Baudrillard's three mutations of the sign, this paper examines the relationship between lists (rankings and ratings) and social life. This updated grid, which is increasingly defined by market capitalism, makes for not only a greater commodified self but a simulated self based on the external statistical world.

Introduction

Top 10 lists pollute my local music outlets and video shops. Some of the lists are by genre, some are national in scope, others are local, all the way down to the employees' favorites. My favorite classical music store has a top 10 section. Even more disturbing is that it is undifferentiated by genre—this week, Cecilia Bartoli is leading one or another group of chanting monks, which is squeaking ahead of favorite classical music themes, which is barely ahead of something rather serious that I can't recall ...

My college is number 129 of 300 elite research universities in *U.S. News and World Report's* 'Best Colleges' edition. I am not sure where the school ranks in *Money's* most affordable colleges, but I know it's there. My local telephone service recently sent me a top 10 list of special services. One of my friends is shopping for a used car, so we've been scouring the many rankings of reliability and resale. The lists mix Ferraris with Fords. I'm happy to have such information. Now I know why I wouldn't want that Ferrari. It's reliability for me.

I shouldn't be so facetious about rankings (or about Fords and Ferraris for that matter). I love the *New York Times* 'Best Sellers List', Nielsen ratings, and *Entertainment Tonight's* movie rankings. I get excited knowing about a good book's rise to and through the top 20. The Nielsen ratings tell me that my favorite show is good enough to be out of danger of being cancelled but not too popular to be recognized by those indiscriminate masses. I prefer James's wine picks at my local wine shop.

David Letterman's tongue-in-cheek top 10 lists have become one of the most recognizable symbols of American popular culture.¹ Part of Letterman's humor lies in the pithy ranked statements about current events and people in the news. However, most of the humor is in Letterman's mockery of our obsession with

rankings—rankings of everything from automobiles to college football teams to human attractiveness. The humor is sustained night after night, week after week, year after year because of our uneasiness with rankings as a very powerful and enduring value-organizing tool. We are either so enthralled with Letterman's charming top 10 or just deluged with top 10 lists that we now have an equal number of top 10 parodies.² Many advertisers have used the same types of lists mocking Letterman and the rankings that he mocks.

At one level, the function of lists is simple. Lists serve businesses as a marketing tool. Businesses either pray to be listed in the top 10 or create their own list. In turn, businesses use lists to make marketing decisions. For example, radio stations use them to develop playlists and fine tune their appeal. Retailers use them to order stock, suggest consumer purchases, and organize their stores. To a degree, the lists also serve the audiences as an information tool.

However, the purpose of this essay is not to discuss these lists as a marketing tool. The purpose of this paper is to examine lists as signifiers of the social grid and then to theorize the rising importance and complexity of lists as a social code by using Baudrillard's mutation of the sign as a model. Lists are complex social signifiers of the relationship among business, products, and consumer. In one way, a list directly represents the stature of a business for most consumers (e.g. Fortune 500). Moreover, lists define not only what is popular but the boundaries of popular culture. In other words, lists graphically imply success. At the same time, lists reduce all products, no matter how diverse, to a level that the average person can handle easily (e.g. it is no longer a question of Ford versus Ferrari, but one of reliability), as represented in consumer survey listings. Further, a list can be used by consumers as a symbol of their own perceived popularity. By knowing a list, the consumer not only builds a sense of belonging to the consumer culture, he knows his instrumentality in building the list.

It is argued herein that as lists have become an everyday part of our lives, they have evolved into a very powerful, independent code. The code now channels more to the public than just the notions of popular as opposed to elite culture or popularity of the product. The newer code also defines the 'popularity' of the user which embodies himself in a list. The hyperconsumer must know the list to know where he stands in the audience.

The idea of knowing where 'one stands' or 'belongs' is conceptualized as the social grid. The following is a discussion of the concept of the social grid. It is followed by the analysis of lists as an important tool in the social grid.

The Social Grid

Lévi-Strauss (1966) explained social unity in terms of communication. Members of a society are not, in his mind, drawn toward a single belief (cf. Durkheim). He believed that members are 'bonded together by a perpetual weave and shuttle of transactions' (Harland 1987: 25). Exchanges, whether they be exchanges of marriage or kinship, etc., explained the nature of community. This shift in locus of influence changed social thought in two ways. First, it emphasized the value of

communication as core to social structure. Second, it argued and illustrated that the more important factor in defining community was the relationship between families and not within them.

In other words, communication patterns and rules put down by family-to-family interactions form a social system. These rules then formulate existing actions. This overlay of rules forms a grid. The grid not only classifies what is important in a community, but it also, and more importantly, makes communication possible. The grid is used to decipher information. The grid also helps one contrast and compare and, therefore, make decisions. In this way identity is not that one perceives oneself as a member of a community, but one interprets one's membership in a community. This is a subtle way of saying that communication is membership.

Foucault (1970) adopted the idea of grids as a means to describe the power of industrial modern grids to both individuate and totalize. For example, he saw census enumerations as an individualization technique within a totalization procedure. First, he believed that 'grids' of statistical social analysis created not just a new individual, but the very idea of an individual. There was no individual until the self thought about how it fit into the larger picture or grid. Conversely, once one begins to think about oneself as an individual, one must think more about the notion of the social. Foucault believed that the grid created by social analysis transforms the individual into a marketable product. And, as we individuate, our society becomes much more complex. The need for additional grids becomes an invaluable aid.

Further, Foucault believed that as the types of grids increase, we are increasingly pressured to distinguish ourselves with more and more grids. The result is an increasingly fragmented person, owing all allegiances to many and none to a few. Foucault argued that the individual now spends most of his time fitting himself into the market. This action commodifies the self and, to a degree, makes for a fragmented (Foucault 1970), schizophrenic (Baudrillard 1983a), or saturated (Gergen 1992) self.

Hacking (1981), in his historiographies of statistics, argues that the quantification of the individual through statistical analysis changed the way we think about ourselves in society. He believes that statistical studies of populations generated a discourse about a whole. Conversely, the studies caused the individuals to categorize themselves. However, these categories are really exterior to the society or individual. This process serves to reinforce class structure, the supposedly objective nature of capitalism or markets, and, finally, the illusion of individual as consumer. Postman calls this the 'calculable person' (1992: 138), one who knows his or her value as calculated by an external, refereed source.

The Nature of Lists

Beyond having a fetish for lists, why are lists so important to society and what do they facilitate? If the grid is the dominant code upon which we operate daily, then lists may be looked at as a sign of the code and may signal changes in the code. And

if the dominant code is market capitalism, then the function of lists can give us greater insight into the culture of market capitalism.

Baudrillard's (1983b) method, in particular, addresses the evolution of signs from a cultural point of view. In particular, he believes that signs 'mutate' through three phases: (1) counterfeit, (2) production, and (3) simulation. All signs begin as direct signifiers (counterfeit) and remain so to some degree throughout their life. However, they mutate to include and simulate more powerful social codes (production and simulation). One stage of mutation does not replace another. The stages represent greater co-optation of the sign into the market and grid of capitalism. In capitalism, that which evolves is a greater commodification of the individual. So, by examining a set of signs using this method, one can judge its maturity within the social system. It is not meant to imply maturation or history of that sign. For example, a sign could be introduced with all three stages contained in its code, which is one of the markers of postmodernism, or it could develop the stages over time. The following sections explain the mutations and how lists, in particular, operate within each as signs of the dominant code.

Lists as Counterfeit

The first order of the sign, the counterfeit, mirrors that which it represents. The counterfeit is clearly understood as a fake. Users are not duped. However, counterfeits are 'anything but arbitrary' (Baudrillard 1983b: 84). The primary function of the counterfeit is to pass value from one class to another. To know or own a sign represents an upward transcendence of class. At the same time, counterfeits enforce class structures in their unequivocal reference to status and their production by the bourgeoisie. For example, an advertisement or facsimile copy of a status symbol, such as a Rolex watch, transmits its class referent. It reminds the user that they are not of the class that has the Rolex and of their own class which prizes fakes.

A list is directly produced and, later, controlled for distribution by the producer. The code shares the wealth of the producers but at the same time controls what and how much the consumer can consume. The list acts as a powerful self-promotional tool for its producers. The irony is that producers are now seen as self-promoting because the list is produced by an objective third party and, therefore, free from influence. Such an 'illusion' helps to 'double' the size of the business, making it seem as if the industry is larger than it really is. One is reminded of Oprah's book club lists in bookstores. Certainly her business is large, but the lists make it seem larger as they increase her ubiquity and reach.

The consumer, under the illusion of the wealth of the list, gains a social definition of their broad, common tastes—low culture. Being part of low-taste culture not only positions one *vis-à-vis* those who appreciate high culture but also makes one aware of what is unachievable, thereby marginalizing one's tastes, despite the fact that they are in the majority. Therefore, lists as counterfeits remind us where we fit in and where we do not fit in the class/culture grid.

Lists as Production

The second order of signs refers to the boundless possibilities of mass production. The 'energetic-economic myth proper to modernity' (Baudrillard 1983b: 97) is the sign's industrial-age purpose. Most signs come to convey the modern myth of production. The value of the industrial sign is no longer only in its referential value but in its commercial value *vis-à-vis* other signs and is 'conceived from the point-of-view of [its] very reproducibility' (1983b: 100). To buy into the competition of signs and choosing a sign gives a stronger sense of belonging to industrial progress than holding a single counterfeit. For example, the multiplicity of ads or copies of the Rolex reminds us of the gifts of industrialization.

Under this mutation, lists are valued as counterfeits but also in an additional way. It is no longer just the primary item that is popular, bought or sold. Lists negotiate not just the marketplace; they have become more important in the value of the product. What is popular is good; what is good is on the lists; what is on the list is popular. This tautology makes value inherent in the individual product benign.

Music is a good example. Exchange-value of the object has become the relationship of a song to other songs. The song no longer just signifies itself and/or its artist as unique. A song on the list signifies other songs in the grouping. This exchange is one of repetition. The music economy is no longer based on the use-value market economy. Pricing is not based on performance. Strangely, supposedly diverse objects (recorded music) are now sold at relatively the same price (Attali 1989). The artist and art are reduced to technician and technique. The value of the object is confused with emotional inclusion. 'Popular' comes to describe the audience's package promotion, and delivery. Lists create believers in a universal value of the product. Universal value exists before the marketplace, external and intrinsic to representation. But what is more, rank industrializes products and their audiences.

To belong to the mass industrial society is increasingly important. Lists not only remind the individual of their inclusion, but also of their own frail existence. Lists, such as the *New York Times* 'Best Sellers List', usually include the number of weeks something has been on a list. Life expectancy of the very human, frail form is symbolically emphasized. Frailty of items on the list reminds the consumer of his own struggle to belong. Lists help searchers find and channel themselves into increasingly marginalized, and lonelier, crowds. For example, the consumers more than ever before identify themselves with genres of music (Ennis 1992).

Lists emphasize the science that creates and maintains the statistical form. The greater the use of statistics, the greater the association between the individual and the culture of science. A strong relationship to the culture includes the benefits of adhering to the norm and being close to the secrets of long life. Today's college football rankings are less dependent on team records than they have been in the past. A team's performance in the rankings is tied closely to the weighting of the competition.

All of the 'history' in a list illustrates the transformation of the lists as sign to a reproduction of the industry. The 'map' becomes seemingly indistinguishable from

the business. The function of this reproductive sign is to define the benefits of mass production and marginalization to willing consumers. By reinforcing the myths of capitalism, especially its inclusiveness, the lists sell the industry; the product becomes immaterial. The purpose of the second-order signs is to promote the very *idea* of the industrial, scientific marketplace or capitalism. The grid becomes increasingly defined by the market and capitulation of the market.

Lists as Simulation

The third mutation or post-industrial sign is a simulation in spite of the reality. It no longer has to signify class or social reality or even the market. The sign alone must only be known. Finally, the sign has broken free of its referent and its market and is in the hands of the consumer. The reality in the sign is concocted by the individual[istic] consumer.

Baudrillard (1981) calls this societal shift 'hyperreality'. The hyperreal world emphasizes a cybernetic relationship between the consumer and the product. The consumer believes that he/she is the sender of a message ('I get what I want') and the sign represents not a message but feedback (Sarup 1993). Consumers come to believe that the sign is their own creation. The sign must tactfully allow the consumer to believe that he/she is in complete control of the sign. 'The receiver/consumer is the god who guarantees that the [media content] "works" or has "meaning". Only the recipient of the message can guarantee that the language ... is spoken well' (Poster 1990: 67).

The value of the sign lies, therefore, in its emotional interaction with the consumer (I will continue to use the term 'consumer' for the sake of convention and organization, although it implies a sense of receiver of messages instead of sender). Poster describes Baudrillard's position on media effects in terms of advertising:

Baudrillard's argument is not that people 'believe' the ad; that itself would assume a representational logic, one subject to cause-effect analysis (how many people bought the product because they saw the ad). Nor is his argument based on irrational manipulation; the ad works on the unconscious of the viewer, subliminally hypnotizing the viewer to buy the product ... Instead Baudrillard sets his argument in linguistic terms: the ad shapes a new language, a new set of meanings (floor wax/romance) which everyone speaks or better which speaks everyone. (1990: 58)

What is even more seductive is that collecting (knowing) signs gives the consumer more emotional feedback or feeling of belonging to a world of free choices. The new consumer fetishism is the stockpiling of repetitious signs. The consumer 'freely' collects signs that signify the self. As they are caught up in a play of repetitive images, the consumer world becomes relative and external to 'reality'. As in any evolutionary system, sameness and lack of reference points creates a greater level of comfort with day-to-day existence (Baudrillard 1983a).

This behavior is reinforced by the market economy. Since information has become the key to moving product, information has been given precedence over the

product. To limit the probable confusion in the market, distinction is given to information, while products are made to fit simple, broad and arbitrary categories. Once classified, products become more and more alike. The consumer is not concerned with product limitation, since he or she equates the proliferation of information with the real product choice.

Contemporary lists of music or books include the name of the artist and rank determined by either occurrence or sales.³ Most lists have additional columns for number of weeks on the list and previous position. Various statistics imply popularity, but it is implications of a 'history' that are important here.

First, the statistics might imply 'history' in the sense of a symbolic warehouse in which to stockpile the product. With the wealth of information, lists seemingly allow for *knowing about the product, rather than knowing its value*. Here, then, is the creation of a simulacrum of the product. It makes for much easier participation when one does not have to know the original. For example, fantasy sports competitions are based upon statistical information from the real competition. A player does not have to understand the actual game to compile the best statistics and make good predictions from them.

Second, stockpiling contributes to a culture in which overwhelming repetition is accepted as action, especially when there is a sense that nothing else is happening. The longer a favorite item remains on a list, the more the listener feels a sense of belonging and contribution to mass society. In this sense, the listener's contribution to popular art is his/her ability to put up with more of the same over and over again. The obvious notion, or not so obvious to the consumer, is that as part of the mass culture, the consumer will always have a favorite on the list and never lose contact with his own popularity. I bought *Tuesdays With Morrie* because it was on the *New York Times* 'Best Sellers List' for such a long time. How many people bought Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* for the same reason?

At the social level, stockpiling lends itself to illusions of socio-temporal control. Attali refers to this as the 'stockpiling of sociality'. Listeners no longer stockpile what they want to hear but 'stockpile what they want to find time to hear' (Attali 1989: 101) read, view, and write. Having reserves of 'knowledge' gives a sense of future action, which is as important, if not more, than knowing the moment in our fast-paced information society. By the same token, the stockpiler can pretend to know about the items in the list. Understanding other tastes no longer requires knowing the actual cultural product, only its ranking system.

In the end, product value is measured by its exposure and recognizability, not by its use- or exchange-value. The actual products themselves can become increasingly similar as long as an illusion of choice is constructed by and for the consumer through the media. This brings us full circle back to a gluttonous consumer who emotionally envisions him/herself as the prime mover in the explosion of information. In such an environment, the consumer wants to express him/herself in the increasingly visible explosion of brand information.

Ultimately, the consumer identifies him/herself as being as unique as a brand (which underneath is not unique at all).⁴ Sarup refers to this production of consumer as the illusion of 'privatized individuals' (1993: 165). What the market 'does to you

is what you do to yourself and the way it does this is by being about itself' (Wagner 1995: 61). 'People are about *it* in somewhat the same way as the product is about it and it is the contingency of each to the other that the ad performs or replaces' (1995: 60). As for lists, there is no purer form of market representation. Lists are about themselves, which are concurrently about the consumer and the business marketplace.

Lists strengthen the consumer's illusion of control through categorization. For example, the number of lists multiplies to include new music. The discourse of these lists supports an illusion of diversity and choice. The consumer reacts emotionally to this 'new' sense of belonging to a more refined group and 'buys' into it. For example, one of the newer music charts is an 'alternative' list. Obviously there is a category of music called 'alternative', which has historically been marked by its instability. The critical mass of music produced and number of radio stations that may use this list is not great enough to support the chart alone.

So why have this specific chart or any other 'alternative' list? To create an artificially higher rank among the competing songs *vis-à-vis* one another and not with songs outside their genre. This then promotes a sense of seemingly more powerful choices across which the consumer feels a more powerful and refined identity with the market. This follows an economics of supply, not demand. However, what is supplied is a consumer profile (which the consumer believes is self-determined), not diverse music.

Conclusion

Attali is right when he says that 'lists give value, channel, and select things that would otherwise have none, that would float undifferentiated' (1989: 108). The lists provide greater public information and do carry out an important marketing function. On the other hand, lists too easily define everything as quantity, common, accessible, technological, digital, etc. rather than as quality, unique, obscure, artistry, and analogy. This is part of the fascination with the signs of order and rating. Our society and personal identities are subtly defined more and more by rating systems, imaginary or real. The lists, like all simulations, 'do not so much adapt to a common taste as they adapt that taste, and it is a taste wherein wanting is more important than liking' (Wagner 1995: 62).

Lists support a negative late-capitalist value system, and are desired for their order-giving value. This contemporary contradiction is embodied in the postmodern lists and part of the larger dominant contradiction that defines our era: that we have come to accept the negative attributes of capitalism because we believe that it comes with the territory of the best (no longer just better) system—the taken-for-grantedness of which we must beware (Althusser 1969).

Now, for the list of my sources. Scholars and academics usually read them first to see where you stand. If you have not perused them, now is your chance to see where you and I fit.

Notes

- [1] For example:
 Top Ten Ways to Get Americans Excited about Soccer
10. Rename the sport 'Deathball 3000'
 9. From now on, you can't use your feet either.
 8. Constitutional amendment stating if US wins the World Cup, every American gets a brand new car.
 7. More players who look like Mia Hamm—fewer players who look like Davor Vugrinec.
 6. Instead of 'Gooooooal' have the announcer guy yell, 'Yahtzee!'
 5. Printed on every red card, collectible 'Star Wars' photo.
 4. Drunken monkey goalies.
 3. Find a way to involve the hilarious San Diego Chicken.
 2. You mean millions of Americans aren't getting up in the middle of the night to watch?
 1. Give Tiger Woods a soccer ball, America will never lose again.
- [2] For example, a list by K. Micken, distributed on the internet:
 Top 14 suggested names for Wal-Mart wine:
14. Pino Greasio
 13. Merloaded
 12. Chateau Traileur Parc
 11. White Trashfindel
 10. Big Red Gulp
 9. Grape Expectations
 8. Domaine Wal-Mart 'Merde du Pays'
 7. NASCARbernet
 6. Chef Bordeaux
 5. Peanut Noir
 4. Chateau des Moines
 3. I Can't Believe It's Not Vinegar
 2. World Champion Riesling
 1. Nasti Spumante
- [3] Note that sales are not usually reported. They are still maintained as proprietary information by companies.
- [4] In other words: what color is a chameleon on a mirror? In the past the chameleon would have responded to the medium itself and become silver. Today, the chameleon is so familiar with the medium that it looks to the medium for a model of itself. The chameleon becomes colorless, less truthful to itself, but at the same time believes it has greater choice in the matter.

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