

“Best of” What Now?

Amish Trivedi

In this article, Amish Trivedi asks us to consider who’s making all these “best of” lists that overwhelm our media and whether or not we give up too much authority in the process. Further, we are asked if these list makers even know what they are doing with all this authority.

I really used to love “best of” lists. They’re a lot of fun—getting to see what others think are the best episodes of your favorite shows, the best punk albums of all time, or even the worst-dressed people at a particular award show (so you don’t end up wearing the same thing to class or wherever it is you go, obviously). Beyond just the lists themselves, the discussions around them are a lot of fun as well: whether you agree with the items on a list or not, whether the people making the list left off something that was super important, or whether or not there should even be a list when it seems like everything on it is equally good or bad.

Unfortunately, I had a falling out with lists. I take that back: I’m still completely addicted to them, but like any good addict, I’ve come to understand just how problematic lists can be. I suppose it doesn’t help that I learned about CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory), probably in the same way you are now learning about CHAT. However, when thinking about lists, I started considering how all those items listed under CHAT (be careful: your instructor might quiz you) function. All those lists out in the world are produced by people, have various forms of representation (usually in the form of a numbered list but sometimes you’re just thrown information in a video),

and have different means of distribution, like where they are posted, where you end up finding out that they exist, etc. The reception of these lists is a really interesting one, which I'll touch more on later, but for now, consider what people do with these lists when they read or watch them. How do these lists that exist around us impact the person who has come upon them?

Lists can be a great way of getting conversations started, but who is it that is making these lists? We are inundated with "best of" lists in a variety of genres, covering just about everything that has been released, eaten, read, watched, heard, dropped, come out, or was otherwise consumed. Come to think of it, back in June of 2015, the website A.V. Club posted an article about what the best album was up until that point in the year,¹ further categorizing albums into specific sections in order to talk about them more directly. In some ways, the article was a joke (Best Godspeed You! Black Emperor album in fifteen years?), but it speaks to larger issues with the genre of "best of's": Who are the people deciding what is "best"? How do they (whoever they are) decide what is the "best of" any given category? Beyond those things, I'm curious as to why we give anyone else the task of deciding for us what the "best" of anything is.

How are these lists put together, or, to put it in terms of CHAT, what does the process of production for these lists look like? Do people sit and watch all 180 episodes of *Seinfeld* to decide which the best ten are? How do we know, as readers of lists, whether or not the people who are making the "best/worst-of" lists really have any idea how to decide how to choose among their options? I wonder, by what authority did Joan Rivers get to decide who was well-dressed and who wasn't? It makes me wonder, am I qualified to decide such a thing? I'm bald: Should I be allowed to make a list of best hairstyles? Or alternatively: Would it be OK to disqualify me because of my follicle limitation—even though I still have eyes and opinions?

In this way, "best of" lists can be very problematic. Sometimes we are provided with a brief introduction which talks about a method, but often we are left wondering how anyone decided anything at all. These lists also don't provide us with much detail about how they were developed and decided on. "Best of" lists, when posted/published/etc. by themselves, do not help us understand how that list functions, even when having that information might help us understand the things on the list better or, better yet, help us understand the things that were left off of that list. Having some kind of explanation can be useful in helping us think more critically about how these lists are developed, what we're supposed to get out of that particular list, and whether or not the people who have made the list have developed the proper amount of credibility for us to even believe them.

The “best of” list, as a genre, does not provide the means to explain itself, which sometimes means that a list is incomplete or, at the very least, leaves us with questions about the making of that list. Sometimes it seems this is deliberate, with someone or some group making a list they believe to include everything they think should be included, even if it doesn’t truly belong. By whose authority are the people making more culturally significant lists getting together to decide what should be on that list? Consider, for example, *Time Magazine*’s annual list of most influential people.² Who are the people making that list? As far as we know, the editors of *Time Magazine* make the list together every year, but you have to wonder how they decide what “influential” means. Naturally, what might be influential to them might mean nothing to you as a reader, but I guess they feel that anyone picking up *Time Magazine* might feel the list they’ve come up with is close enough to good.

“Best of” lists are designed to make it so we don’t have to have a lot of genre knowledge before reading the list, but also so that we can determine for ourselves afterwards where we would like to begin and what more we would like to know (which has its fingers in the pie of CHAT, specifically the reception part). Life is busy, of course, and it is impossible to know everything about any given topic, so we turn to “best of” lists to tell us what we should know in a very quick amount of time. We unwittingly (that is to say, inadvertently or maybe even mistakenly) give over authority for making these lists to an editor or someone who has proven through a variety of ways that they have the credibility to decide what might be included on lists within their discipline. Even in the case where a popular vote (along with complex math) determines the makeup of the “best of” list, we are meant to believe that the system is set up so as not to give a false advantage to any individual item on that list. In other words, reception is kind of interesting here because there is a gap between production and reception, and we fill it by giving the producer authority, one that maybe they haven’t earned at all. This gap is, of course, that we don’t really understand how these lists are produced or who has allowed for this perceived authority to be given to the list maker. We implicitly give them authority because we want to assume they know more than we do. Again, not always the case.

As an example, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) allows users to give movies a rating from one to ten on their website. They use an algorithm (if you don’t know what that is, it’s a fancy math thing that I’m not really too sure about either) that uses a set of factors to calculate which movies are the best, using a system of weighted parameters. Some of these criteria include how long the movie has been out, the number of votes cast overall for that movie, etc., which they use to determine their list of the top 250 movies. At present, *The Shawshank Redemption* is the top movie on the list. Of course, you may

not personally think that Stephen King's prison movie is the best thing ever put on film, but the users of the website have been given the task of voting based on whatever criteria they individually come up with. Sometimes you come to agree with the list of movies at IMDb and sometimes you don't. The credibility here doesn't come from the individuals rating things but rather the group as a whole, the sheer number of people who think something is good or bad. That said, we have absolutely no idea who these raters are and the only real credibility for that list is developed if you happen to agree with it already, which is also entirely subjective.

There is an advantage in the Internet age in responding to these lists: How easy is it to criticize or question such a list via a website's comments section, Twitter, or Facebook, etc.? Social media has made it a lot easier to debate and discuss these lists that come out with such frequency. The uptake and reception for these lists is very different than it used to be, with the Internet providing a space for people to voice their concerns about the decision process of the list or what they feel should have been included or excluded from it. While not always correct, in the sense of being fact-based, modern social media has made it so that the authority of the list-maker can be called into question without much delay and with a reasonable amount of support from others in these forums. Online articles and forums allow more easily for citations as well, not only because of the available technology to link things but also because online forums are not limited to the one hundred word "Letter to the Editor," the previous gold standard in terms of uptake in print media, when that was a thing.

Think about this: What's stopping you, dear reader, from starting a blog, making a list of some sort (could be a list of anything!), and people reading it and sharing it and commenting upon it? I mean, you could just make a list with no criteria or basis for your logic, but it would still be a list in an accessible place. The Internet giveth and the Internet taketh away: we have easy access to materials, but the quality of those materials is hard to gauge without spending some time to consider who made them, how they were made, and what process those materials went through to be presented to you.

Thinking back to reception, however, these forums are infamous for being all over the place, the anonymity of the Internet allowing people to say whatever they want, even if they are just doing so for the spectacle of saying awful things. In this way, we can't gauge how an audience will respond to an artifact of production, but the wild responses you get on a forum seem like they could be just as much a part of the production as the original list. Maybe the comments at the bottom of a website's content even affect how we view the original post and its efficacy. In some ways, because we only feel an authority

but are not presented with one directly, comments on an online forum take advantage of this lack of anyone showing how they produce their list. Of course, as Alfred says about The Joker in *The Dark Knight*, “Some [people] just want to watch the world burn,” and the anonymity of the Internet allows people to say things just for shock value, but perhaps we ought to consider how those shocking comments affect our reception of the original piece we were there to view.

While there is often discussion about whether a list is good, what seems rarely called into question is whether or not the people making the list have enough knowledge to make the list. When we consider a list of best albums in a given year, we generally assume the people who are making that list listened to enough albums from that year to decide what the best really is. However, how do we have any idea how many albums that is, or, in most cases, how many albums would make a significant sample size? How many albums might even be released within a given year? Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? It is a difficult question because we are not always aware of all the mediums of production anymore. Maybe something uploaded to an obscure website is really good but if you can’t find it on Spotify, the album might as well not exist. There are so many people who have so much more access to recording software and instruments these days, isn’t it possible that the best thing that exists in the world right now might not even be accessible to the majority of us?

At the same time, what on earth makes an album “good,” or a person “influential”? How these things are determined, let alone defined, is rarely stated and, at best, we are provided a brief essay outside of the list which tells us the process for determining how the list came into being. At other times, there might be a small paragraph or even mini-essay with the list that talks about its significance in a broader sense. However, it is hard to know from the standpoint of the general public whether or not these things provided for us really capture everything we need to know within the list and its extra text.

Part of that, again, is because lists are easy. Who has time to devote to listening to twenty thousand albums to determine what the “best” album of the year/decade/etc. is? I know I don’t, but I do imagine that the people making the list get paid to listen to albums all day long, determining whether or not they sound good to them. But herein lies another problem: subjectivity. As I asked before, how do we as individuals decide what is good or bad for everyone else? Obviously, part of the answer has to be credibility. The music editor, whose job it is to listen to all the music that comes across their desk, must have some way of understanding what they think is good and what is bad. The editors at *Time Magazine*, through their position in the magazine industry and the magazine’s general place in our culture and our politics,

must have some idea of how to construct a list of influential people, even if we as individuals might disagree. Interestingly, you can even say to yourself, “I don’t find that person influential, *but* I do understand how they are influential to other people.” (Taylor Swift comes to mind immediately.)

And, the thing about acknowledging the subjectivity of “best of” lists (in terms of both the way they are produced and how they are received) is that it forces us to recognize that the things under CHAT (the “factors,” the “terms,” the “categories”: production, reception, distribution, etc.) aren’t just things we can make neat little lists out of (who made it, who reads it, etc.) either. CHAT, as a theory, is something that hinges on human interaction, which is, in a lot of ways, unpredictable. Representation, distribution, and reception are based on how individuals understand something that is produced, so it’s difficult to consider exactly the kind of impact something like a list might have. I think, though, that because of the process of production, representation, and distribution, the reception of the audience is based on kind of a blind authority being given to the producers of these lists. CHAT, it seems, has room for these kinds of questions, but we have to be willing to ask them.

But if we’re unwilling to ask these questions, we accept the list-maker’s credentials, we accept their authority over the list that they are making. What I mean is that we accept that they are smart enough and have enough desire to make the most accurate list that they can in order to maintain that credibility. We as readers or listeners or viewers ultimately have to accept the authority of those making these lists because that is the position we have put them in based on their jobs, their educations, and their overall experience within that field. It’s almost the opposite of a three-year-old who won’t try broccoli when they have never had broccoli in their lives: they have developed zero credibility on the subject and, therefore, cannot be trusted to make an informed decision. Besides, broccoli is really pretty good.

Sometimes, however, this authority and credibility is undermined when something slips through the cracks, as happened with the 2015 *Best American Poetry* (BAP) anthology, which is published every year by series editor David Lehman and a guest editor, in this case Sherman Alexie. Now, don’t let your eyes glaze over: I know poetry isn’t the thing you were hoping to read about, but I promise there’s plenty of juicy gossip in here that will make this interesting to you, the reader. In fact, it seems that the group of people who write poetry in this country (mostly professors and people in frilly shirts) seem to have nothing but drama to keep us busy. Probably a good thing too: if there were no drama, no one would care about poetry.

Anyways: the 2015 BAP published a poem by a person named Yi-Fen Chou. The poem is called “The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers,

Poseidon, Adam and Eve” and it was originally published in *Prairie Schooner*, a literary journal published by some people affiliated with the University of Nebraska. I won’t bore you with the details of the poem, but it is, to be perfectly honest, not too good, but that’s not terribly important yet. What is important is that Yi-Fen Chou isn’t real. Actually, Yi-Fen Chou is real, but the person who published a poem with that name is actually Michael Derrick Hudson, a white guy that works at a library in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Frustrated with all the rejection letters he was getting (which I can tell you feel like they are sold in bulk packages at Costco), Hudson decided to put an Asian woman’s name on his poems in the hopes of getting them published by making people think he was something other than a middle-aged white dude with a receding hairline.

While *Prairie Schooner*, which is generally considered a respectable publication with quality editors and a history of publishing quality work, has not publically commented on publishing the poem, which as I mentioned is pretty terrible (though hopefully you’re wondering at this point why I should get to decide for you and maybe you want to read the poem yourself³), Sherman Alexie wrote a post online and an e-mail to the other people published in the anthology. Alexie’s writings are interesting in that they give us some insight into the process of putting together the BAP anthology this past year:

I had no idea that I would spend the next six or eight or ten months reading hundreds and hundreds of poems. Hell, it’s quite probable that I read over 1,000 poems last year. I might have read over 2,000 poems. It could have been 3,000. Well, let me be honest: I carefully read hundreds of poems that immediately caught my eye while I skimmed hundreds of other poems that didn’t quickly call out to me. It’s possible that I read more poems last year than any other person on the planet. It was an intensive education in twenty-first century American poetry.⁴

Now, how many poets do you suspect are published in a given year? Actually, that’s a silly question because perhaps you aren’t terribly interested in poetry and weren’t aware that *any* poems were published last year. That’s completely reasonable, and I don’t blame you for not knowing because, after all, it’s poetry. However, I can tell you from some experience as an editor on a few literary journals (you see? That’s just me trying to throw a little poetry cred your way) that in all likelihood 3,000 poems barely even skims the surface of all the poems published. That’s not to say it’s really possible to read all the journals which publish poems each year, but in this case, Alexie had the task of doing just the thing we mere readers are incapable of doing on our own, namely reading a ton and then deciding what was good or what was bad. In a way, we always trust the people making “best/worst-of” lists to do just this: the work we’re much too busy to do while also adding their own experience,

which we're far off from earning ourselves. However, that does not mean we cannot question exactly how things are determined for our consumption.

Alexie was trusted with an authority to decide based on his credibility, something he has developed and ultimately earned through years of working within the industry as both a published writer and editor. As he mentions in the blog post, he himself has been in BAP five times (even if he now dislikes some of the poems they have chosen to publish), has won numerous awards, published a bunch of books (some poetry, some fiction, some nonfiction, and a book of recipes⁹) and in general has quite a lot of prestige within the literary community. What does it say to you that someone like him (a) skimmed a bunch of poems rather than reading them all closely and (b) in that process, chose a fairly terrible poem that wasn't even written by the person it was supposed to be written by (based on the author's race, which was actually fake)? Doesn't sound too good, does it? Even though he provides a list of rules he says he followed in deciding what belonged in the anthology, obviously somewhere along the path, that system broke down. OK, how could he know that Michael Derrick Hudson was publishing poems under an assumed name? He couldn't, but even he admits he published the poem because of the name on it:

I'd been drawn to the poem because of its long list title (check my bibliography and you'll see how much I love long titles) and, yes, because of the poet's Chinese name. Of course, I am no expert on Chinese names so I'd only assumed the name was Chinese. As part of my mission to pay more attention to underrepresented poets and to writers I'd never read, I gave this particular poem a close reading.

So now we have a poem published for the exact reason Hudson was hoping it would get published: the Chinese name of its fake author. However, the poetry-reading audience (there are a few left, mostly people in frilly shirts as well) assumed that Alexie had chosen the poem because he thought it was good. While he and the editors at *Prairie Schooner* might be the only ones, people who read the *Best American Poetry* anthology had no reason to doubt that Alexie had included it because it belonged. Even if he, as an author of color, decided to give a work a closer read because he wanted to be more representative, isn't that within his right as the guest editor? Of course it is, but he has earned that for himself by creating good work over the years and trying to promote people he thinks should be promoted.

Unfortunately, in this case, it failed. Michael Derrick Hudson isn't someone who is unrepresented in our society, or rather he as a poet was, but he as a white man isn't. He seemed to go through the process of stealing the

name of someone he went to high school with (told you it was juicy) in order to publish something he claimed was rejected nearly fifty times. For whatever reason, it never occurred to Hudson that maybe his work was just bad and that maybe it deserved to be rejected. However, that’s the kind of authority we give editors as readers, to determine for us what should be read and what shouldn’t. In Hudson’s case, he must have thought that was lame and decided he knew better than all the other editors. Turns out he did, of course, but that’s a subject for a whole other essay.

By this point, you may be wondering why we give over our authority to other people, even when those people seem way smarter or better credentialed than we are, when it comes to the “best” or “worst of” anything. Perhaps this is the kind of question you should be asking whenever you read *anything*, taking into account that every genre has experts but that we have to decide for ourselves if what we’re reading is reliable and whether the source of the material presented is credible. There are some things we read that we are perfectly fine questioning, but sometimes, when something is meant to be more fun than informative, we take for granted what is being presented to us. Reading and watching things critically is a crucial skill and doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy those things, just that you should consider a few things when consuming anything.

We as readers have to consider our responsibility when offered a chunk of text or other consumable media by anyone—we have to consider how we are receiving a text and what we are doing with the authority we have over our own thoughts and ideas produced by something we observe. Yes, that teacher/professor/parent or other person might be an authority figure, but it is perfectly reasonable to question whether or not the information they have provided for you is acceptable, whether you as the reader can trust the information within that source, and how it is presented to you. Any text can utilize language or other visuals as a means of production (in a CHAT sense) to manipulate you into believing what it is saying—that’s part of the author’s or authors’ objective through distribution, after all—but that doesn’t mean you have to turn a blind eye and not question what is provided for you. What we as critical readers can do is always question those motives, question that authority, and think critically about the information we are provided at all times. “Best” or “worst” of something? Maybe it is, but maybe it isn’t. Either way, lists are all over the place, and, just like with anything else you read, it’s important to consider what that text is trying to do and how much trust you place in the author or publisher before buying into the argument they are making. It’s not a bad habit to form, certainly.

Endnotes

¹ Anselmi, J. J., et al. "The Best Albums of 2015 So Far." *The A.V. Club*. Onion, Inc., 29 June 2015, www.avclub.com/article/best-albums-2015-so-far-221390. Accessed 24 Sept. 2015.

² "The 100 Most Influential People." *Time*, www.time.com/collection/2015-time-100/. Accessed 7 Sept. 2015.

³ Hudson, Michael Derrick. "The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve." *The Best American Poetry 2015*. 1st ed. Scribner, Sept. 2015, www.books.google.com/books/about/The_Best_American_Poetry_2015.html?id=NUEjBQAAQBAJ, Accessed 7 Sept. 2015.

⁴ Alexie, Sherman. "Sherman Alexie Speaks Out on The Best American Poetry 2015." *Best American Blog*, 7 Sept. 2015, blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2015/09/like-most-every-poet-i-have-viewed-the-publication-of-each-years-best-american-poetry-with-happiness-i-love-that-poem-je-1.html. Accessed 8 Sept. 2015.

⁵ Actually, I don't think he has published a book of recipes, but until you read this endnote, did you have any idea? You just trusted me not to lie to you.



Amish Trivedi mostly writes poems but also reviews music and books of poetry, which is as much fun as it sounds. He has a book of poems called *Sound/Chest*, an MFA in poetry from Brown University, and is a PhD student at Illinois State University trying to figure out how poetry fits into the modern world. He'd rather spend time collecting guitars and pens.

