

Compelled to Count

Sadie Plant

Listing, counting, measuring: we live in a culture of compulsive counting, a society so obsessed with figures that if it were an individual, it would be seeing a psychiatrist. The news is full of metrics, indices, assessments: unemployment figures, inflation rates, currency levels, share prices, profit margins. These are all abstractions, but they are potent too. They are not simply passive indicators, ways of representing and perceiving the messy details of the concrete world: a downturn or an upswing in the figures might trigger a crash, start a war, or make a famine inevitable; even subtle shifts provide the basis on which deals are concluded, houses built, jobs created, art produced. We watch these figures closely, as people once sought clues about the future in the entrails of sacrificed animals, or desert dwellers scan the skies for signs of

rain. And all this data needs to be constantly collated and compared, assessed and analysed, represented and visualised, some as images intended for human eyes, such as bar charts, histograms, scatter plots, streamgraphs, pie charts, flow maps, box and whisker plots, stem and leaf plots, scatter plot matrices, stacked graphs, cartograms, tree maps, and heat maps; others, like barcodes and matrices, to be read by machine.

Percentages, proportions, tables, ranks: on an individual level at least, this compulsion to count and record is regarded as pathological, an obsessive compulsive disorder which is widely understood as a kind of coping strategy, a way of quietening and quelling other unwelcome and obsessive thoughts. It even has a clinical name: arithmomania. People with this disorder become fixated with numbers and calculations, and may even begin to assign spurious or inappropriate numerical value to people and objects and events. They may develop routines in which they have to do certain things a particular number of times; they may be simply unable to ignore the mathematical information around them – so that they can't resist counting the number of letters in a word, or the number of full stops in a text, and become like vampires who, in (relatively recent) legend, can be escaped by throwing down a trail of rice or seeds: this will slow them down, because they have to stop to count the grains. Count Dracula: a name, or an instruction?

Capitalism makes such advanced arithmomaniacs of us all: **we too, like vampires,** try to run but are held

back by the need to count and account for everything. Life in a capitalist economy is a matter of constant calculation: we spend our time weighing up pros and cons, memorising pin codes and passwords, budgeting and assessing, figuring out. Calories, cholesterol, blood sugar levels, heart rates, cell counts, pollen counts, pollutants, rainfall, temperatures, "likes", friends, followers. There is no limit to what can be counted and made to count.

In clinical terms, compulsions are ways of dealing with obsessions which might be completely unrelated to the behaviour, and often have to do with dirt and contamination, violence and disorder, sex and religion: the wilds of experience. It is to keep all this at bay, that counting is deployed: count your steps between the kitchen and the desk and all those fears and longings will be quietened and repelled. But this can use a lot of time and energy: "In mild cases...there may be little encroachment on the patient's work and family life. In severe cases, however, little time is left for other activities". We are so busy assessing the statistics, counting our bank balances, comparing prices, hedging bets, making deals, hunting bargains, and seeking out special offers, that we have **little time to do the living** all this counting is supposed to facilitate, and even less to criticise this tendency.

In DSM-5, the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a system of classification which itself displays a disturbing attention to detail in its attempts to organise thousands of

supposed disorders as though they were books in a library, obsessive counting is classified under 300.3. This is the latest edition of a manual which has often been criticised by professionals as well as those diagnosed and treated on the bases of its classifications, which can seem to verge on... well, to be frank: the obsessive. Children no longer have tantrums, but suffer from "Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder". When someone dies, people don't grieve: they have Major Depressive Disorder. Generalised Anxiety Disorder is the new name for common everyday worries, a Behavioural Addiction is anything one likes to do a lot, and extreme hostility towards authority figures is now known as Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Since the DSM is largely only used in the United States, which is no longer the world's policeman nor its psychiatrist, DSM classifications are now widely converted to the codes used in the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, a system more widely accepted, not limited to questions of mental health, but no less bureaucratic in its approach. In this classification, our arithmomaniac DSM-5 300.3 becomes ICD-10-CM F42, a condition flanked by ICD-10-CM F41.9 Anxiety Disorder, unspecified, to one side, and ICD-10-CM F43.0 Acute Stress Reaction, to the other.

This is compulsive counting and ordering on a massive scale, driven by two main industries: insurance and pharmaceuticals. Doctors, lawyers, and adjudicators rely on ICD codes to assess the claims made by clients and patients who then become customers too: the pharmaceutical industry seeks to multiply its markets by

encouraging doctors to find pharmacological solutions for what are often social ills. These ways of classifying and categorising do not simply represent or passively reflect pre-existing states: there's plenty of data, but none of it is raw. Sorting things out is also a process of changing and multiplying them and, in the case of the psychiatric lists, which represent a particularly ironic level of meta-arithmomania, generating new kinds of craziness.

Can't get to sleep? Maybe this will help:

DSM-5 307.45 ICD G47.20

Circadian Rhythm Sleep-wake Disorders, unspecified type

DSM-5 307.45 ICD G47.21

Circadian Rhythm Sleep-wake Disorders, delayed sleep phase type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD G47.22

Circadian Rhythm Sleep-wake Disorders, advanced sleep phase type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD G47.23

Circadian Rhythm Sleep-wake Disorders, irregular sleep-wake type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD G47.24

Circadian Rhythm Sleep-wake Disorders, free running type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD G47.25

Circadian Rhythm Sleep-wake Disorder, jet lag type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD G47.26

Circadian Rhythm Sleep-wake Disorders, shift work type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD G47.27

Circadian Rhythm Sleep Disorder in conditions classified elsewhere

DMS-5 307.45 ICD F51.3

Non-rapid Eye Movement Sleep Arousal Disorders, sleepwalking type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD F51.4

Non-rapid Eye Movement Sleep Arousal Disorders, sleep terror type

DMS-5 307.45 ICD F51.5

Nightmare Disorder

Still awake?

There are many kinds of lists of many kinds of things, and lists of lists, and lists of lists of lists; no end to the kinds of things which can be listed, counted, and analysed, drawn up, spun round, written down. The Internet is fertile ground for lists of indices which pretend to statistical significance but in fact yield only blurry images.

10: the number of hours a night people slept before the light bulb was invented

7.9 million (up to): number of people in the UK using alcohol to sleep-wake

3: number of people out of 10 who have had their mattress for more than 7 years

6.8 million: number of people using prescribed medicines to sleep-wake

82: percentage of those surveyed who felt going over their day and worrying what tomorrow would bring were the thoughts that kept them awake.

There are 84 verbs in Richard Serra's famous list of "actions to relate to oneself, material, place and process". Others include to tie, to bend, to weave, to match, as well as 24 settings, or instances: of mapping, of location, of context, of time. The result is an image, a poem, a series of instructions, a finite list of infinitives. It's lengthy, but it's also very short, when one thinks

of all the things there are to do. Lists are delimiting and limited, but the rich abundance of the world, what Michel Foucault refers to as “the wild profusion of existing things”, is not.

10.000: the things of the Tao

1.000: the names of Shiva

1.001: the number of nights

100: the times I've told you

99: the names of Allah

50: ways to leave your lover

Countless: things to do

The alchemists' pre-modern experiments led them to make countless lists of elements, attributes, and qualities of the natural world; distinctions which are rarely compatible with those made by the later scientific mind, and barely comprehensible today. As the art historian James Elkins points out, they too can also be seen to display “a neurotic tendency to count and name”. But their efforts, which were rather to embrace than to ward off the chaos of undifferentiated stuff, resulted in lists and categories so different from our own that they now tend to induce a kind of vertigo: the list of synonyms for *materia prima* compiled by the 17th century alchemist Martin Ruland includes Eagle Stone, Leafy Water, Flower of Copper, Shade of the Sun, and many other **gloriously inconsistent** and bewildering names. Such nomenclature is as peculiar to the modern scientific mind as the list of animals which Jorge Luis Borges claimed to have found in, “a certain Chinese encyclopaedia in which is written that

'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies". This was the list which inspired Michel Foucault to write *The Order of Things*: "In the wonderment of this taxonomy", he wrote, "the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*."

Sei Shōnagan's lists are more familiar, but no less effective: take number 44, for example: *Things That Cannot Be Compared*. "Summer and winter. Night and day. Rain and sunshine. Youth and age. A person's laughter and his anger. Black and white. Love and hatred. The little indigo plant and the great philodendron. Rain and mist', as well as two scenarios: "When one has stopped loving somebody, one feels that he has become someone, one feels that he has become someone else, even though he is still the same person," and: "In a garden full of evergreens the crows are all asleep. Then, towards the middle of the night, the crows in one of the trees suddenly wake up in a great flurry and start flapping about. Their unrest spreads to the other trees, and soon all the birds have been startled from their sleep and are cawing in alarm. How different from the same crows in daytime!"

And one more example of a list which itself cannot be compared to those we make today: the index to Robert Burton's amazing *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the 17th century book which makes its own compendious attempt to deal with "all the kinds, causes, symptoms, prognostics, and several cures" of the condition that was then known as melancholia and is now broken down into the orders of the DSM. Burton's book considers melancholia "in three partitions, with their several sections, members, and subsections, philosophically, medically, historically opened and cut up": he too wished to order and classify. But even a glance at his index confronts us with a radically different approach to classification: under A, for example, we find not only Air, Aqueducts, and Arteries, but also "All are melancholy" and "All beautiful parts attractive in love"; while "How to resist passions" sits alongside such items as Humours and Hypochondria Under H.

To the modern bureaucrat, such listings are unhelpful, or simply wrong. The categories are mistaken, the **metaphors too mixed**, the levels inappropriate: like is not compared with like. But the illicit combinations and incongruous collisions present in the early lists are the very stuff of the life for which our own compulsive strategies of counting and ordering leave so little time. Borges gave Foucault a glimpse of the contingency and specificity of our own systems of counting and ordering things, and Susan Morris lets us see this too. Not by compiling lists alien to our own: she doesn't seek to abandon, but rather to extend and intensify the ways we count and what we classify. She runs with Serra's list of

verbs, setting out to collect her receipts, to record her activities, to allow her movements to be traced, to keep track of her expenses, to note her emotions, to pore over the newspaper, to trace the rhythms of the body and the day. All this data she then processes, laying it out into a bloodless landscape of metrics and indices, abstractions far removed from their living, lively origins. The result is not a triumph of rational assessment, but a display of its limits, even its impossibility. The driest tables, charts, and lists begin to reveal and generate precisely the disorders they would keep at bay. The patterns and cadences which emerge confront us not with simplicity and order, but rather their opposites, or at least their challengers: the ebbs and flows, the **gaps and knots** of the messy, boundless, blooming world that lies beneath and runs between the listings and the codes; the automatic processes, coincidental trends, the subtexts, lakes, and rivers in our documents; the pulsing, bleeding, seething mass on which the data draws and which it multiplies in turn; the wilds of experience that run through our lives even as we count, compulsively, in an effort to hold them back.

Compelled to count verbs

to abandon, but rather to extend

to allow her movements

to assess the claims

to assign spurious

to be constantly collated

to be frank

to bend, to weave

to be red by machine
to be traced
to collect her receipts
to count and account
to count and name
to count and record
to count. In clinical terms
to count the grains
to criticise this tendency
to deal with "all the kinds"
to display "a neurotic tendency"
to do a lot
to do. Lists are limiting
to do certain things
to do. The alchemists'
to do the living
to embrace than
to facilitate, and even less
to find pharmacological solutions
to have found in "a certain Chinese"
to hold them beck
to ignore the mathematical
to induce a kind of vertigo
to keep all this at bay
to keep track of her expenses
to match, as well as 24
to multiply its markets
to note her emotions
to order and classifying to organise thousands
to pore over the newspapers
to record her activities
to reveal and generate

to resist passions
to run but are held back drop to sleep. 3: number
to stop to counting to tie, to ben
to trace the rhythms of the body
to verge on...well
to ward off the chaos
to weave, to match
to write *The Order of Things*
Compelled to count statistics

27.5: hours spent writing
14: cups of coffee consumed
66: full stops deployed
36: scrapped sheets of paperback
7: sleepless nights
19: cigarettes resisted
1: walks taken with artist
2: meals eaten with artist
15: emails exchanged
9: works consulted
354,702: keystrokes
11: interruptions by telephone
418: tears shed
9: thematic approaches considered
8: thematic approaches rejected
24: mosquitos found in apartment
8: steps from kitchen to desk
2,701: number of words
13,664: number characters
2,655: number of spaces (do the count?)

Notes

1. mayoclinic.org
2. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, 2. 5th edition, dsm5.org
3. Richard Serra, *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself*, 1967-1968
4. James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting Using the Language of Alchemy*, Routledge, 1999
5. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et le choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Bibliothèque des sciences humaines, nfr, Ed. Gallimard, 1966
6. Sei Shōnagan, *The Pillow Book*, Penguin, 2007.
7. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, NYRB Classics, 2001.
8. Ibid
9. Ibid

Sadie Plant is a philosopher, author and cultural theorist teaching at the Zürcher Hochschule der Kunst, Switzerland.

Small Black Reptile (SBR) is a journal published twice a year by the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, formed to platform critical writing around cultural production and exhibition making.