



**Umberto Eco**

**R.I.P.**

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## ‘WE LIKE LISTS BECAUSE WE DON’T WANT TO DIE’

[SPIEGEL Interviews Umberto Eco](#)

**Susanne Beyer and Lothar Gorris**

Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco, who is curating a new exhibition at the Louvre in Paris, talks to SPIEGEL about the place lists hold in the history of culture, the ways we try to avoid thinking about death and why Google is dangerous for young people.

**SPIEGEL:** Mr. Eco, you are considered one of the world’s great scholars, and now you are opening an exhibition at the Louvre, one of the world’s most important museums. The subjects of your exhibition sound a little commonplace, though: the essential nature of lists, poets who list things in their works and painters who accumulate things in their paintings. Why did you choose these subjects?

**Umberto Eco:** The list is the origin of culture. It’s part of the his-

tory of art and literature. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It also wants to create order—not always, but often. And how, as a human being, does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, through catalogs, through collections in museums and through encyclopedias and dictionaries. There is an allure to enumerating how many women Don Giovanni slept with: It was 2,063, at least according to Mozart’s librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte. We also have completely practical lists—the shopping list, the will, the menu—that are also cultural achievements in their own right.

**SPIEGEL:** Should the cultured person be understood as a custodian looking to impose order on places where chaos prevails?

**Eco:** The list doesn’t destroy culture; it creates it. Wherever you look in cultural history, you will find lists. In fact, there is a dizzying array: lists of saints, armies and medicinal plants, or of treasures and book titles. Think of the nature collections of the 16th century. My novels, by the way, are full of lists.

**SPIEGEL:** Accountants make lists, but you also find them in the works of Homer, James Joyce and Thomas Mann.

**Eco:** Yes. But they, of course, aren’t accountants. In “Ulysses,” James Joyce describes how his protagonist, Leopold Bloom, opens his drawers and all the things he finds in them. I see this as a literary list, and it says a lot about Bloom. Or take Homer, for example. In the “Iliad,” he tries to convey an impression of the size of the Greek army. At first he uses similes: “As when some great forest fire is raging upon a mountain top and its light is seen afar, even so, as they marched, the gleam of their armour flashed up into the firmament of heaven.” But he isn’t satisfied. He cannot find the right metaphor, and so he begs the muses to help him. Then he hits upon the idea of naming many, many generals and their ships.

**SPIEGEL:** But, in doing so, doesn’t he stray from poetry?

**Eco:** At first, we think that a list is primitive and typical of very early cultures, which had no exact concept of the universe and were therefore limited to listing the characteristics they could name. But, in cultural history, the list has prevailed over and over again. It is by no means merely an expression of primitive cultures. A very clear image of the universe existed in the Middle Ages, and there were lists. A new worldview based on astronomy predominated in the Renaissance and the Baroque era. And there were lists. And the list is certainly prevalent in the postmodern age. It has an

irresistible magic.

**SPIEGEL:** But why does Homer list all of those warriors and their ships if he knows that he can never name them all?

**Eco:** Homer's work hits again and again on the topos of the inexpressible. People will always do that. We have always been fascinated by infinite space, by the endless stars and by galaxies upon galaxies. How does a person feel when looking at the sky? He thinks that he doesn't have enough tongues to describe what he sees. Nevertheless, people have never stopping describing the sky, simply listing what they see. Lovers are in the same position. They experience a deficiency of language, a lack of words to express their feelings. But do lovers ever stop trying to do so? They create lists: Your eyes are so beautiful, and so is your mouth, and your collarbone ... One could go into great detail.

**SPIEGEL:** Why do we waste so much time trying to complete things that can't be realistically completed?

**Eco:** We have a limit, a very discouraging, humiliating limit: death. That's why we like all the things that we assume have no limits and, therefore, no end. It's a way of escaping thoughts about death. We like lists because we don't want to die.

### 'People Have Their Preferences'

**SPIEGEL:** In your exhibition at the Louvre, you will also be showing works drawn from the visual arts, such as still lifes. But these paintings have frames, or limits, and they can't depict more than they happen to depict.

**Eco:** On the contrary, the reason we love them so much is that we believe that we are able to see more in them. A person contemplating a painting feels a need to open the frame and see what things look like to the left and to the right of the painting. This sort of painting is truly like a list, a cutout of infinity.

**SPIEGEL:** Why are these lists and accumulations so particularly important to you?

**Eco:** The people from the Louvre approached me and asked whether I'd like to curate an exhibition there, and they asked me to come up with a program of events. Just the idea of working in a museum was appealing to me. I was there alone recently, and I felt like a character in a Dan Brown novel. It was both eerie and won-

derful at the same time. I realized immediately that the exhibition would focus on lists. Why am I so interested in the subject? I can't really say. I like lists for the same reason other people like football or pedophilia. People have their preferences.

**SPIEGEL:** Still, you are famous for being able to explain your passions ...

**Eco:** ... but not by talking about myself. Look, ever since the days of Aristotle, we have been trying to define things based on their essence. The definition of man? An animal that acts in a deliberate way. Now, it took naturalists 80 years to come up with a definition of a platypus. They found it endlessly difficult to describe the essence of this animal. It lives underwater and on land; it lays eggs, and yet it's a mammal. So what did that definition look like? It was a list, a list of characteristics.

**SPIEGEL:** A definition would certainly be possible with a more conventional animal.

**Eco:** Perhaps, but would that make the animal interesting? Think of a tiger, which science describes as a predator. How would a mother describe a tiger to her child? Probably by using a list of characteristics: The tiger is big, a cat, yellow, striped and strong. Only a chemist would refer to water as H<sub>2</sub>O. But I say that it's liquid and transparent, that we drink it and that we can wash ourselves with it. Now you can finally see what I'm talking about. The list is the mark of a highly advanced, cultivated society because a list allows us to question the essential definitions. The essential definition is primitive compared with the list.

**SPIEGEL:** It would seem that you are saying that we should stop defining things and that progress would, instead, mean only counting and listing things.

**Eco:** It can be liberating. The Baroque era was an age of lists. Suddenly, all the scholastic definitions that had been made in the previous era were no longer valid. People tried to see the world from a different perspective. Galileo described new details about the moon. And, in art, established definitions were literally destroyed, and the range of subjects was tremendously expanded. For instance, I see the paintings of the Dutch Baroque as lists: the still lifes with all those fruits and the images of opulent cabinets of curiosities. Lists can be anarchistic.

**SPIEGEL:** But you also said that lists can establish order. So, do

both order and anarchy apply? That would make the Internet, and the lists that the search engine Google creates, perfect for you.

**Eco:** Yes, in the case of Google, both things do converge. Google makes a list, but the minute I look at my Google-generated list, it has already changed. These lists can be dangerous—not for old people like me, who have acquired their knowledge in another way, but for young people, for whom Google is a tragedy. Schools ought to teach the high art of how to be discriminating.

**SPIEGEL:** Are you saying that teachers should instruct students on the difference between good and bad? If so, how should they do that?


**Eco:** Education should return to the way it was in the workshops of the Renaissance. There, the masters may not necessarily have been able to explain to their students why a painting was good in theoretical terms, but they did so in more practical ways. Look, this is what your finger can look like, and this is what it has to look like. Look, this is a good mixing of colors. The same approach should be used in school when dealing with the Internet. The teacher should say: “Choose any old subject, whether it be German history or the life of ants. Search 25 different Web pages and, by comparing them, try to figure out which one has good information.” If 10 pages describe the same thing, it can be a sign that the information printed there is correct. But it can also be a sign that some sites merely copied the others’ mistakes.

**SPIEGEL:** You yourself are more likely to work with books, and you have a library of 30,000 volumes. It probably doesn’t work without a list or catalogue.

**Eco:** I’m afraid that, by now, it might actually be 50,000 books. When my secretary wanted to catalogue them, I asked her not to. My interests change constantly, and so does my library. By the way, if you constantly change your interests, your library will constantly be saying something different about you. Besides, even without a catalogue, I’m forced to remember my books. I have a hallway for literature that’s 70 meters long. I walk through it several times a day, and I feel good when I do. Culture isn’t knowing when Napoleon died. Culture means knowing how I can find out in two minutes. Of course, nowadays I can find this kind of information on the Internet in no time. But, as I said, you never know with the Internet.

**SPIEGEL:** You include a nice list by the French philosopher Ro-

land Barthes in your new book, “The Vertigo of Lists.” He lists the things he loves and the things he doesn’t love. He loves salad, cinnamon, cheese and spices. He doesn’t love bikers, women in long pants, geraniums, strawberries and the harpsichord. What about you?

**Eco:** I would be a fool to answer that; it would mean pinning myself down. I was fascinated with Stendhal at 13 and with Thomas Mann at 15 and, at 16, I loved Chopin. Then I spent my life getting to know the rest. Right now, Chopin is at the very top once again. If you interact with things in your life, everything is constantly changing. And if nothing changes, you’re an idiot. 

For more about **Umberto Eco**:

<http://www.umbertoeco.com/en/>

<http://www.historytoday.com/alexander-lee/rose-any-other-name-umberto-eco-1932-2016>

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