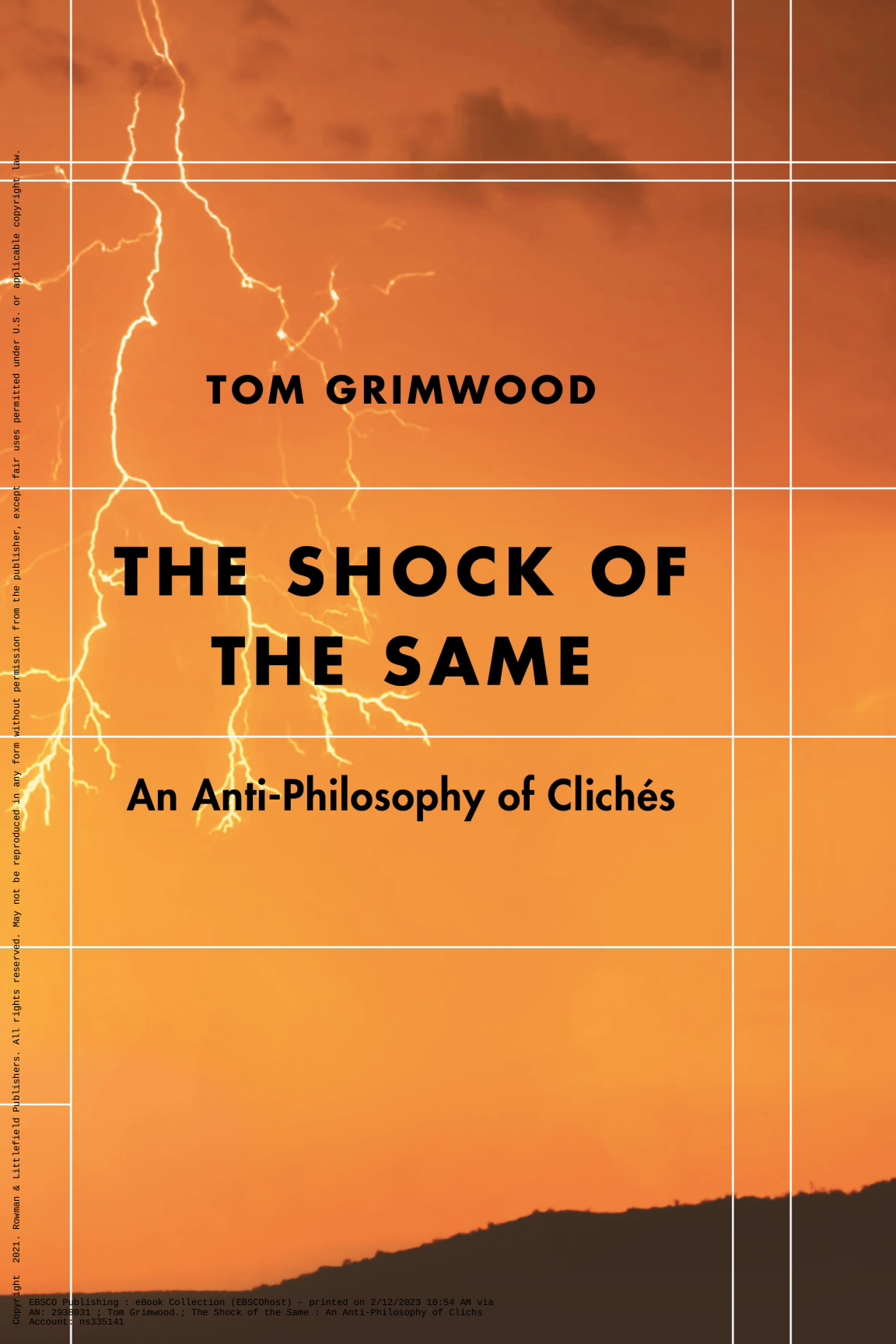

TOM GRIMWOOD

THE SHOCK OF THE SAME

An Anti-Philosophy of Clichés

The Shock of the Same

Futures of the Archive: Theory, Criticism, Crisis

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An Anti-Philosophy of Clichés

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Various elements appear across the book, most notably the Prologue and chapter 7, from my 'Cliché'. In *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Literary Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2015-). DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1052

Prologue

Facing Clichés

This is to be a book about the concept of the cliché. Perhaps this is an impossible task.

For sure, writers have often commented on the cliché, have warned us (at times vociferously) against their use, and condemned those who employ them. But actual theoretical engagement with clichés – what they *are*, what they *do* and what specific relation they hold with notions such as originality and creativity – is rarely given serious or focused attention. If we simply view clichés as signs of bad writing, 'frequently used by people too lazy or unimaginative to perceive a situation and describe it freshly',[1] then they are unlikely to be of interest to the serious theorist; much in the way that printing errors in cheap editions of literary works, or accidental smudges on a draft page may not immediately call for deep conceptual exploration. Given that clichés are associated with the *absence* of thought within language use – and hence their status as lazy, benign and stupid – it seems difficult to theorize clichés without assuming their absence from, or hostility to, theory itself. Perhaps reflecting the usage of the idiom itself, observations on clichés remain largely arbitrary, limited to asides and comments, rather than fully formed theoretical positions. Somewhat consequentially, longer studies such as Jean Paulhan's *The Flowers of Tarbes*, Nicholas Bagnall's *A Defence of Clichés* or Walter Redfern's *Clichés and Coinages*, are often collections and collages of thoughts and half-thoughts that people have had about clichés.[2] The very obviousness of why clichés are something to avoid reflects the obviousness with which they first appear: unexamined, immediate thoughts that are often impervious to scrutiny; the opposite to the activity of theorizing. Perhaps this is why Christopher Ricks suggested that 'the only way to speak of a cliché is with a cliché'.[3]

From a certain perspective, everything about clichés has already been said. Which, given what a cliché is, should not be surprising.

A result of this can be that, when studied on its own, or even celebrated, the cliché can very quickly cease to be effective *as* a cliché, and becomes something else. A cliché placed under the lens of theoretical inquiry may perhaps become a form of critique, or a tool of reinvention, or a mode for negotiating a culture saturated with repetition;[4] and in becoming any of these things, its mutation removes the very banality that rendered it problematic in the first place. We are no longer dealing with cliché, but a more legitimate object of study: critique, reinvention, negotiation; and in doing so, we not only risk losing sight of the cliché as a philosophical problem but also conducting some kind of 'purifying the dialect of the tribe' *à la* Ezra Pound.[5] If such a mutation appears at first to stifle the task of this book, suffice it to say this legitimacy also poses something of a *Cliché-22*: on the one hand, forms of critique are designed to problematize, excite and rejuvenate the discourses they enter (this book no less than any other). No surprise, then, when Lawrence Lerner's 1956 essay claims that academic discussion of cliché tends to be invoked only 'in connection with teaching composition to high school children, and the graces of style to foreigners' rather than higher level criticism and critique.[6] On the other hand, this is precisely what is expected and anticipated in the practices, cultures and rituals of inquiry. *What is your point?* The irritated peer reviewer is always poised to write. *Where is the original contribution?* A long list of mechanical recitations resonate throughout this higher level of critique, sometimes ironically, sometimes with utter conviction.[7]

For, unlike the aforementioned printing error or accidental smudge, clichés *also* project a certain urgency which leads many theorists to comment on them, even if there remain few detailed works devoted to their analysis. This urgency implies a demand to *deal* with clichés: they are things to be attacked, constituting 'a disease that must be stamped out'.[8] Jean Paulhan remarks that 'more than being pointless or stupid, it seems that it is also *wrong*'.[9] This sense of wrong-ness characterizes the cliché when it is named in theoretical discourse. Particularly since the onset of modernity (while variants existed before, it is with the advent of modernity that the nomenclature of the cliché is born), clichés have been viewed as at odds with philosophical, cultural and literary invention: whether this is framed by the romanticist search for spontaneity, the modernist association of integrity with originality, the rise of copyright and author's intellectual property, the 'shock of the new' of the artistic avant-garde, or even more traditional defences of good language use found in rhetorical instruction books. Ryan Stark notes that 'as an overly common expression, the cliché interferes with conceptions of the writer's originality, the writer's propriety in discourse, and the writer's ownership of meaning'.[10] And indeed, for all of the changing dynamics of literary, aesthetic

and cultural theory, the normative context of 'serious' writing and thinking remains hostile to the commonplace. Defenders of culture continue to insist that clarity needs to replace jargon, neologism and malapropism. Critics of culture argue for the paramount importance of keeping open the horizon of 'the new' in order to resist intellectual stagnation, and intellectual managerialism. Whether defending the propriety of language, or criticizing its foreclosure, on all sides there is no shortage of literature condemning the generic, the formulaic and the banal as not simply bad writing, but as a broader symptom of cultural stagnation.

For all of this, while students are warned against them, the media is derided for using them, and politicians are hated for relying on them, the war on clichés has yielded surprisingly few successes. Despite perpetual expulsion, the cliché is still with us: and not just in the various forms it manifests itself, such as the much-touted return of populism in politics, and the sloganeering which accompanies it ('take back control' 'leave means leave' 'make America great again'), or in the meme and hashtag of new media ecologies that are able to move localized communal in-joke to international language and back again. The cliché is *also* still with us in terms of the blind spots which shape our theoretical responses to the challenges all of these things pose; and with them, the ever-present risk of, as Deleuze put it, 'even the reactions against clichés […] creating clichés'.[11] Criticisms of the commonplace *themselves* fall into ready-made platitude, modes of resistance themselves become stagnant motifs and calls for enhanced criticality themselves rest on what David Bordwell once termed a body of procedural conventions.[12] Indeed, it would be strange to suggest that clichés do *not* operate in a much larger sphere than simply bad essay writing and are not visible in a whole range of cultural artefacts and interactions. Clearly, there is more at stake.

THE BOY WITH THE CLICHÉ ON HIS FACE

But this returns us to the problem at hand. If the cliché stands at odds with the academic requirements of invention and originality, how can we conduct a study which doesn't absorb the cliché into those requirements, and in doing so lose its awkwardness? How do we think about the lack of thought without subjecting it to a predisposed hierarchy of thinking and not-thinking? What is the method? Why do we not, at this point, just skip to the last chapter of the book, where we would reasonably expect to find a version of the standard refrain that people need to be a bit more careful with clichés, think a bit deeper, argue a bit better? In other words, how should we 'face' clichés – to consider them conceptually within modern thought – without ending up with cliché all over our faces?

In the middle of Marshall McLuhan's work *From Cliché to Archetype*, there is a short anecdote:

> A teacher asked her class to use a familiar word in a new way. One boy read: 'The boy returned home with a *cliché* on his face.' Asked to explain his phrase, he said, 'The dictionary defines *cliché* as a "worn-out expression".'[13]

By using the literal definition of cliché, there is nothing wrong with the boy's answer to the task he was set. But, of course, there *is* something wrong: in following a literal definition, he produces an image which is absurd. Because he has equivocated expressions of language with expressions of the face, he has failed to learn the lesson he was being taught – that language is inventive – and instead presented a nonsensical image predicated on the regurgitation of dictionary definitions.

At the same time, he has performed admirably. After all, we are all tired of clichés. The equivocation is justified: consider the uninspired language available to describe clichés, often far more depressing than the commonplaces themselves. In many senses, this fatigue with clichés is what first and foremost shapes our familiarity with the very idea of what they are: our weariness is a form of academic practice which the boy's example enacts. How better to identify a cliché than with a sigh? Perhaps this act of resignation captures the essence of the cliché better than the original dictionary definition.

But this raises a question: aside from an instinctive, practical fatigue with clichés, how else can they be defined? The common descriptors that clichés are 'dead', 'worn' or 'sleeping' introduce more metaphors that can cloud definitions as much as illuminate. What constitutes this wearing out? After all, words don't tire in and of themselves, in the way that people, machines, materials, assemblies and relationships do. If the cliché is defined bluntly as a predictable or unoriginal turn of phrase or action, this would conversely seem to demand, at least in principle, a level of innovation in our everyday language which is simply not possible to maintain.[14] As Ruth Amossy notes: 'It would never be enough to define them in purely formal terms, since clichés are based not only on a spatial arrangement (figures of speech, structures), but on a temporal dimension as well: clichés are clichés by virtue of a phenomenon of repetition.'[15]At the same time, Lerner points out that the cliché clearly cannot simply be a synonym of 'frequent use'.[16] If a cliché is truly, as one literary dictionary has it, a phrase or expression that 'has lost its originality and impact through constant and prolonged use', this overlooks the particular *kinds* of use and certain *forms* of constancy which also play a role in an expression becoming clichéd.[17] When Betty Kirkpatrick comments ruefully in her introduction to the *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Clichés* that, in any more detail, 'we seem doomed to disagree about what is a cliché and what is not',[18]

this is not to be wholly unexpected. Clichés are not born from the exactitude of dictionary definitions but from usage, and usage implies not only context, circulation, carrying a morphological form and shape, but also tensions and borders over the same-ness and difference of the cliché in question. With this usage comes other aspects which the dictionary is poorly equipped to handle, such as humour and pleasure; the very idea for the dictionary of clichés which Kirkpatrick edits first emerged from Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, an ironic pastiche of *both* the dictionary and the cliché. Flaubert identified something core to the notion of encyclopaedic knowledge which created a lack of creation; a collection of linguistic usages designed to discourage use. The boy's invocation of a dictionary definition illustrates this well.

If this is the case, then the equivocation in the boy's response is not such an issue. If the stock definitions he uses are in themselves fairly unstable, the grounds for equivocation are likewise infirm, as it could never be clear which agreed definition was being referred to. Instead, the scene suggests less stupidity and rather something more complicated. The teacher proposes that what is familiar can be reinvented; the knowledge acquisition of the class is embedded in the pursuit of finding 'new ways' (what the boy would find termed 'original contribution' were he to move into higher education). Instead, the boy situates the cliché *within* the act of generating the new, rather than expelling it. He does this by repeating himself: one boy in class and one boy returning home. The first boy acts in accordance with the logic of the lesson, and in doing so undermines it; the second boy is fed up of the constant demand to innovate, and in doing so affirms it. As such, the boy's act points not only to the polyphony and resonances which necessarily emerge when we try to define what a cliché is but also to the modes of repetition and circulation at work in the very idea of the new, which are, after all, not just verbal or mechanical, but also an ambient aspect of pedagogy. The cliché is no longer a stylistic error, or a lazy misuse of language (after all, neither boy just sits at the back of the class pretending to participate), but something that reaches into the production, circulation and institutionalization of knowledge itself.

THE BIG IDEA

The boy is not alone in this. After all, Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, and its accompanying *Dictionary*, attempted to demonstrate the ineffectual parody which the modern writer is afforded when 'everything we could say would appear as already said, not in the honorific sense of having been anticipated by the Classics but in the demotic and daemonic sense of words sinking, necessarily, into mere copy, or […] defiled jargonic use'.[19] For Flaubert, language itself produces this repetition, and repetition reduces the writer to

inanity or foolishness. The boy with the cliché on his face echoes this parody, but also suggests a point beyond language in and of itself, which concerns the production of ideas. To this end, a number of writers have suggested critical inquiry is itself more aligned with cliché than may first appear. Murray Davis, for example, has argued that orthodoxy within academic practice is premised on the continuous introduction and cessation of the excitement of the new.[20] The history of ideas thus becomes a perpetual cycle of 'conceptual charisma', whereby new thinkers initially exciting bored audiences; their works circulating until they become accepted, and eventually boring again; at which point a new thinker emerges. Susanne Langer, meanwhile, suggested that this is less a case of succession and usurpation of intellectual orthodoxy, and more of a process whereby new ideas *saturate* the intellectual scene, being applied to everything and anything before settling into unspectacular stock by virtue of their overuse.[21] Or we may think of Jacques Derrida's comment – preluding his discussion of Flaubert – that the European philosophical tradition, with its desire for critical and free thought, ironically lends itself 'more readily to stereotyping than anywhere else'. Premising thought on the critique of dogma leads Western thought to paradoxically become, 'in the very life of its tradition, a vast circulation par excellence, an unending procession of received ideas, the encyclopaedia of commonplaces'.[22] More recently, Rita Felski has suggested that critical inquiry's aversion to commonplaces leads to a no-less common and aggressively ritualistic 'against-ness'. 'Critique is obligated to take up arms against ideas as soon as they are grist for the academic mill of Routledge primers and Norton anthologies'; although, Felski notes, 'the goalposts can shift with disconcerting speed, and it is often a matter of dispute which positions are "hegemonic" and which others "marginal"'.[23]

We should pause here, and be wary of moving from a three-sentence incidental passage in McLuhan's work to a summary of the entire history of Western thought. No doubt some would see this as indulging in a cliché of deconstruction, of postmodernism or pretentious theorists in general, whereby a small anecdote is drained of its brevity and, therefore, its charm. As much as this is something of an occupational hazard, it also raises a further problem for our task of thinking through the absence of thought. Grander accounts of the inevitability of clichés seem to miss something around the dynamic at work in the boy's act of repetition, a repetition which constitutes his 'use' of cliché, according to the teacher's request. Linear accounts of a cliché's emergence, decline and banishment such as Davis' may well provide a perfectly balanced economy for the cliché's relationship to 'proper' thought and writing. But isolating the cliché as what 'happens' to thought would already place thought *prior* to cliché: and in this way, all of those rituals, practices and habits which accompany the creation of thought itself can be missed. To put it another way, such an economy of

the cliché depends upon the notion that the cliché is something we can pick up and *use* (or misuse). Of course, the origin of the cliché is as a part of the printing press, a functional object for the cheap reproduction of art and knowledge. But in focusing on this functional, economized aspect, we risk bracketing a number of other things that are going on when clichés come into play within critical thinking. Inside these brackets we might include what Samuel Weber described as the ambivalent 'processes of institutionalization',[24] whereby the economy of one form of knowledge practice necessarily reaches outside of itself, thus retaining the cliché as an internalized example of what genuine thought is 'not'. We might also include Sloterdijk's observation that ideas and critical discourses 'would dissolve like writing on water if they were not embedded in the ongoing processes of repetitive life that guarantee […] discursive routines'.[25] We would certainly include the 'mundane particulars' of critique, the 'hotchpotch of figures of speech, turns of phrase, moral drams, affective nuances, stylistic tics and tricks' that underlie intellectual assaults on orthodoxy.[26] And above all, we would include the fortuitous, the accidental, or the mistaken elements of practice and which end up leaving a boy with a cliché on his face. The cliché always goes beyond the economy of function; this is why we notice it is a cliché.

The same point stands if we follow through on Derrida's jab at Western Philosophy (which is, it should be added, more of an opening provocation rather than an historical claim). On this account, it seems that *everything* is, ultimately, a cliché. Even if this is potentially true, it is difficult to see how this takes us anywhere beyond cynically puncturing philosophy's self-esteem. After all, if everything is a cliché, then nothing is a cliché. In this way, it is noticeable that the move that turns a discussion of clichés into a discussion of something imperative and significant can also obscure the black hole they form at the centre of philosophical enterprise. This is not just because of their vertical position in relation to 'proper' thought (i.e. they are lazy, bad writing, etc.) but also because the cliché is simply not an 'exciting' topic *until* it becomes monumentalized into something bigger: 'this is not just a cliché, it is the entirety of language/ literature/ philosophy/ knowledge!'

'All clichés, by the way, are mere,' remarks Bagnall,[27] and there is something key about the role of the 'mere' which is particularly relevant here. Not only is the term 'mere', itself, a cliché for describing clichés, it also involves a repetition illustrated well by the Cambridge Dictionary:

> used to emphasize that something is not large or important;
>
> used to emphasize how strongly someone feels about something or how extreme a situation is.[28]

The mere-ness of the cliché describes not only the disposable nature of platitudes but also the larger set of relations that its effectiveness – both intended and unintended – rests upon. In this way, the mere cliché is both peripheral *and* fundamental. This is why we need to hesitate at following Flaubert's judgement on 'language' as a whole, Murray's judgement on 'knowledge' as a whole, Derrida's judgement on 'philosophy' as a whole, and even any kind of 'theory' of clichés.

MERE TYPOLOGIES

This double mere-ness shows itself in the ways clichés have been 'faced' by theoretical discourses, and in particular when they are typecast as a single, clear 'thing' to face. For example, a common view is that shorthand communication lacks merit because of the effort it implies for the author. As Redfern summarizes:

> The cliché is a labour-saving device. Everybody loves bargains, getting things on the cheap, with minimal expense and effort. Clichés are the lazy option, the line of least resistance […] even the word itself is often a convenient shorthand for 'an idea I do not like', so that, although past cultures lacked the term 'cliché' or cognates, the hostile attitude towards them must stretch across time and at least some societies.[29]

Pressing this notion further, Olsen argues that clichés are the result of language reduced to a pure function: a 'convincing' but not semantically meaningful place within cultural discourse.[30] Clichés are heuristic, in this sense, in the same way as their aligned and sometimes converging ally, the stereotype. We cannot – or need not – face clichés, on this reading, as they are too cheap and flimsy to withstand a critical gaze.

But why is laziness, *in itself*, bad? The answer, of course, depends on what form of activity the laziness is avoiding. Understanding the cliché outside of the demand for its removal is difficult, because the demand is typically what shapes the definition. The result is that the command to expel the cliché can often be an assertion of a particular mode of writing, rather than an analysis of the cliché itself. For example, Stark argues that the cliché is inherently related to the Romantic notion of authorship.[31] For Stark, the 'Romantic critic devalues the cliché in order to communicate a particular philosophy of writing. Sections on clichés in college writing handbooks wittingly or unwittingly continue to re-inscribe Romantic notions of the writer and of discourse in general.'[32] Such a notion might be summarized by one of the forefathers of Romantic criticism, Edward Young, who wrote in 1759: 'An Original

rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it *grows*, it is not made: Imitations are often a *sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics*, art and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own.'[33] This is a view that still resonates within what Felski suggests is a common view of critical thinking as an 'adventure of serious or proper "thinking", in contrast to the ossified categories of the already thought. It is at odds with the easy answer, the pat conclusion, the phrasing that lies ready to hand'.[34]

The advent of print media, and in particular the invention of printing processes which enabled mass production of literary works, *both* gave rise to *and* problematized this distinction between organic authorship and mechanical manufacture. Etymologically, the cliché is rooted in the French *clicher*, to stereotype. In this original sense, the stereotype was a plate of type metal within the workings of the printing press. The cliché – a term coined from the clicking noise of the stereotype at work – was an imprint of original type. These imprints allowed for the quicker, cheaper and far more numerous production of prints and illustrations for public consumption. The term is thus rooted in the process of creating literature available for cheap purchase by the masses. Hence, the laziness of the cliché is tied to the ease by which literature can be produced, and the corresponding damage these industrialized processes may have on the literary creativity. Stark comments:

> The term's origin is tied to notions of industrialization, mass production, and by implication, mass literacy. The 'run-of-the-mill' cliché itself speaks to the relationship between recognizable activities in industry and recognizable expressions in a culture's discourse. From various Romantic perspectives, the idea of recognizable images stands in direct contrast to the notion of genius and the expression of that genius through ingenious images.[35]

Consequently, for Stark there is a natural 'anxiety' for authors faced with, on the one hand, the Romantic urge to create and produce works of literature to be read and appreciated, and on the other hand, the mass production and repetition of these works, their becoming widespread, well-read and in doing so losing their force; becoming worn or trite. This anxiety was also felt acutely by modernist critics regarding the ready availability of certain kinds of writing, which incited passivity in the reader, cultivated by the consistent use of 'stock phrases to evoke stock responses',[36] and resulting in an inauthentic, vulgar 'fantasying' in the place of reading itself. Whereas the Romantic denigration of cliché takes place for the sake of a fragile literary genius and its capacity to rise above industrialized culture, the modernist critique chides the overuse of clichés for indulging in cheap fantasies which prevent readers from engaging with the complexity of the world in a suitably challenging and severe manner (which could, of course, be seen as a charge against

Romanticism itself). For both, the problem of banality infesting literary creation depends upon a distinction between popular and intellectual readership, although one might say that the modernist holds hope for the redemption of the former.

But there is a further danger with laziness that arises from the *machinations* of production; machinations which, after all, provide the cliché its name. In this case, it is not the spontaneity or originality of the author that is put at risk by cliché, but the legal reaches of copyright which accompanied the rise of mass literary production.[37] The emergence of copyright is inherently linked to the legal classification of plagiarism in the eighteenth century: a classification which, as Niall Lucy argues, 'was essential to the formation of literary works as the property of individual authors, while also helping to produce the very category of literary "works" as such'.[38] The requirement to legally separate creation from imitation means that clichés mark a 'failure to honor the legally and economically significant imperative of originality'.[39] Just as the appearance of quotation marks in texts is linked to the invention of printing,[40] so Jakob Norberg suggests the criticism of the cliché within literary works shows a marked increase in intensity 'under the copyright regime of the modern cultural market'. As such, the laziness of the cliché is not simply a sign of lack of creativity, but something with economic ramifications:

> The cliché is attacked as a near-scandalous dependence on the efforts of others, as literary freeriding, in texts for which the authors are nonetheless compensated in some way. In this way, the attack on the cliché is often most vehemently directed at authors who are deemed stylistically uncreative but nonetheless achieve commercial success.[41]

This complicates the dichotomy between lazy writing and creative industry, as the repetition inherent to the cliché is *also* inherent to the production of print media. As such, the distinction between authentic literary production and cliché is not manifested in the words or expressions themselves but is embedded in broader oppositions that create the conditions for originality and repetition to be identified as such.[42]

It is significant, in this respect, that the marking of the cliché as something lazy, unoriginal or stupid (or, more commonly, a combination of these: the user of the cliché is stupid because they are unaware of their unoriginality) does not only designate it as poor practice in the realm of a particular academic discourse. It also determines it to belong to another discipline altogether. If a cliché is a lazy heuristic, then it is consigned to the concerns of psychology, not philosophy or literature. If using clichés is an expression of cultural stereotypes, then it is better served by sociology or cultural criticism than psychology. And if the cliché is an effect of mass print production, then

it is a matter for engineering or economics, not sociology. But if the effect of the cliché is a question of legal ownership, then this needs to be dealt with by law, not engineering. However, if the evidence of the cliché at work is a figure of speech, it is better served by philosophy and literature than law and so on. Norberg correctly notes that 'the concept of the cliché does not belong to any recognized discipline',[43] in the sense that the study of clichés does not fit any single ready-made area, be it philosophy, literature, rhetoric or whatever. But we can add that, simultaneously, it belongs to each of these disciplines as a transient figure, a memory of what another discipline may or may not look like beyond the borders. This transience hides in plain sight some blunter acknowledgements: after all, each discipline has its fair share of repetition, stupidity, unoriginality and laziness.

FACING THE FRONT

It should now be clear why the cliché is so difficult to 'face', given how its repetition and senselessness is not limited to individual tropes, but to the very circulation of the cliché and the academic and social practices which seek to reject it. This provides some foundations for what this book will try and avoid in its approach.

McLuhan's anecdote demonstrates that when we face clichés, this is not simply a literary or linguistic task. As such, we should not be content with, for example, Michael Riffaterre's account of cliché as a particular 'lexical unit', a stylistic or rhetorical expression of broader cultural stereotypes.[44] It is instead an assembly of relations, which includes intrinsic relations to the mechanisms of critique. Remy de Gourmont once wrote, warning against the potential proliferation of the commonplace: 'To explain clichés all we need is a theory of association: one proverb beings another along with it; a cliché drags all of its consequences and all of its rags behind it.'[45] This supplemental appearance of the cliché within philosophical literature – the kind of obscuring of the obscure – is of interest, but necessarily resists a systematic overview. The cliché bears a number of relationships to the performance, practice, media and memory; D. H. Lawrence was not wrong to call the cliché 'hydra-headed', a beast whose last head could never be quite lopped off.[46]

For this reason, there remains no 'history' of the cliché, philosophically speaking. With few exceptions, there is no rich seam to mine from the history of philosophy, no abundance of texts specifically naming the cliché which can, in turn, be deconstructed, just as Derrida and de Man have done on the subject of metaphor. That is, *unless* we approach the cliché in supplemental terms: if we read 'habit', 'heteronomy', 'tradition' and, indeed, 'commonplace' all as bearing some kind of relation to the modern problem of clichés.

The basis of such a supplement would be the more general privileging, within modern philosophy, of modalities of thought which allow clichés to be identified: from Hobbes' demand for political invention, Descartes' suspicion of all the opinions and false beliefs he had previously accepted (the received ideas whose 'general upheaval' forms the starting point of the *Meditations*), Locke's energetic rejection of rhetorical ornament from the business of knowledge, and so on.

This supplemental aspect reminds us that there is no cliché without judgement, and no judgement without some form of *curation* between old and new, innovative and banal, sacred and profane. As such, an investigation of clichés cannot simply be an exercise in typologies, a differentiation between what a cliché is and what it is not, or some kind of guide book for the 'correct' usage of language. Likewise, it cannot be a primer on the psychology of critique, as some recent work on bias and stereotype within philosophy has indulged in. When I suggest that clichés form a blind spot in critical thinking, this is not to expose some ideological conspiracy against banality, or to unmask hidden forces at work, or fetishize particular psychological processes. These all suggest a position above cliché, outside of the very practices being documented – a position which is both non-existent and unneeded. Much about the cliché as a concept, or anti-concept, is very much obvious, and very much exists on the surface of the text. At the same time, this provides a potential and paradoxically creative role for the cliché in the act of criticism; just as Amossy suggests when she claims 'clichés in literary texts makes the addressee reconfirm, question, or modify his view of the world', or when Serpell argues that 'hidden in plain sight, [cliché] can force us to take another look at the business as usual we call critique'.[47]

In turn, this highlights the danger of attempting some kind of top-down 'theory of' clichés, which would seem fated to reproduce preexisting organizations of knowledge that mark out the cliché precisely by de-facing it; insisting on its exteriority, its place-lessness, its unnecessariness, its laziness. Critique, we will remember, derives from the Greek *krisis*, which was once a term for 'the art of making distinctions', 'distinguishing the true from the false, the genuine from the spurious, the beautiful from the ugly, and the right from the wrong'.[48] But such distinctions are typically enforced through the accusation of cliché, rather than the cliché *itself*. After all, distinguishing the true from the false is notoriously difficult with banal platitude ('it's a cliché, but it's true…'). Charging it with not belonging is rendered problematic by the dual purpose of the commonplace, which is to be a *transient* yet *localized* trope: its rhetorical strength lying precisely in its appearance of belonging. If the cliché is decried for its stock ugliness and its inability to express complex emotion, this does not remove a certain aesthetic to it that has an appeal of some kind (else why would such stock literature be in stock in the

first place?). In this way, taking clichés seriously (or as seriously as we can, without transforming them from cliché to critique) exposes the manoeuvres of critique to insist on boundaries and borders; for the cliché constantly traverses the very boundaries used to frame them.

Indeed, this is the preoccupation of Jean Paulhan's *The Flowers of Tarbes*. Here, Paulhan identifies two such borders created by opposing forces regarding the clichés of literature, and language in general. He terms these the forces of 'rhetoric' and of 'terror'. Both sides declare war on cliché, lining up their forces to face the enemy on opposing fronts. On the side of rhetoric, Paulhan situates the modern European revival of classificatory systems for ornamental speech, which were popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and reflected a more general desire to treat language within a fixed set of parameters. On the side of terror, meanwhile, he places the writers and thinkers who assert the precedence of thought over language, and their attempts to invent new language and forms of expression While the two sides seem at odds, Paulhan argues that they in fact both share a desire for the unmediated communication of ideas through language. The rhetorician argues against the cliché as a perversion of good writing, seeing the language of the terrorist as unnecessarily flamboyant and misleading; while the terrorist *also* claims that clichés are unnecessary since everybody already uses them, such that their function overrides their meaning. While both fronts seem opposed to each other, Paulhan notes that more work is done to maintain the front itself than progress it. This is because, he argues, both fronts employ numerous tricks to make the cliché appear as a fixed target, despite the different charges being levelled against it. The problem is not that either side has misrepresented cliché, but rather that the very strength of the commonplace is *not* its strangulation of discourse through mindless repetition of fixed and decaying phrases. In fact, Paulhan suggests, the strength of the commonplace is its diversity:

> I have no idea whether commonplace expressions are intelligent or stupid, and I cannot see any way of ever finding out in a rigorous manner. But one thing we can say for sure is that *they are not common*, despite their name, and despite their appearance. On the contrary, if they have one character trait – and which is the source of the faults we have seen, from inertia to confusion – it is that they are an *exceptionally vacillating* and *diverse form* of expression, one that lends itself to being understood in two, even four, different ways, and a kind of monster of language and reflection.[49]

It is possible, then, to face clichés without committing to either a defence of clichés, or a condemnation. Instead, I want to understand more about what 'kind of monster of language and reflection' the cliché is, by exploring the

constellation of relations between language, medial technology, archival practices, and creativity at work in the rejection of the banal commonplace from 'serious' thought.

It therefore makes no sense to attempt to find a rigid definition of what a cliché is, and proceed from this; resonance and memories seem to make a far better point of reference. This may be frustrating to those who, following the likes of Pound or Riffaterre, insist on a constitutive difference between the cliché, the aphorism, the commonplace, jargon and so on. Of course, *generally speaking*, something that is a commonplace is not necessarily a cliché. But as the chapters of this book hopefully show, in the context of the production and circulation of ideas, the two are more effectively linked than when we are 'general speaking' (whenever that may be). One can say, I think, that the two are different *without* at the same time committing to a hard and fast border between the two. Indeed, to identify such a border would be to approach the concept of the cliché from the wrong end, which I've been attempting to steer away from. Neither does it seem appropriate to make a claim that this book will cover *every* aspect of the cliché, or every theorist or artist who has tapped its resources. This may inevitably lead to criticism: why didn't you include X? How could you ignore Y? But it almost goes without saying that the approach of this book will be partial, doubtless leaving out many thinkers, topics and ideas that, in a different draft, might have been included. The boy with the cliché on his face has already shown us that, for all its unimportant brevity, it is possible to think through the often-obscured complexity of the commonplace, residing in the banalities at the centre of our thinking and doing. These banalities emerge from situations; and like all situations, this book will be contextualized, in this case by particular thinkers and particular ways of reading them.

How, then, do we face clichés, without ending up with cliché all over our faces? We will need to unpack the richness of the topic by re-reading the rejection of the cliché through the lens of what Boris Groys identifies as 'readymade (anti)philosophy':[50] that is, revisiting those thinkers who have addressed fundamental philosophical concerns through the material practices and social memory of ordinary life, not only in its vitality but also its boredom, banality, circulation and commonality. In short, we need to examine life from the perspective of the cliché; or at least from the contextualized assemblages through which they appear. What follows is therefore not a totalizing view, or something constituting the 'final word' on the cliché. Rather, it is a series of reflections on the different sites through which clichés might be understood.

Perhaps at the end of it, this will still have been an impossible task. We can only proceed and find out.

NOTES

1. Nierenberg and Calero, *Meta-Talk*, 15.
2. Jean Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*; Walter Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*; Nicholas Bagnall, *A Defence of Clichés*.
3. Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*, 356.
4. See Spence, *Figuratively Speaking*.
5. Pound, *Selected Prose*.
6. Lerner, 'Cliché and Commonplace', 249.
7. I am thinking here along the lines of what Andrew Whelan points to:

> The professional academic lifeworld of the humanities and social sciences is permeated in many of the routine social rituals which mark it (conferences, seminars, PhD supervision meetings, undergraduate lectures and tutorials, abstracts, peer reviews and other 'backstage' academic documents and correspondence, informal conversations and so on), by arguments of a particular 'intellectual' hue. Especially favoured in this context are critical lines that purport to describe and declaim the world 'as it really is' – often through engaging with established critical positions. These intellectual or academic arguments are a currency; they are intellectual capital, and they are a real, poignant and human medium of social exchange. People care about these arguments. They are that which is honoured as special, meaningful, worthwhile, distinct from the sometimes tedious tasks that otherwise make up the course of the work. Where manually entering grades into an online database or rewording a subject outline to incorporate new learning outcomes is profane, these arguments are sacred. ('Academic Critique of Neoliberal Academia', 4)

Like Whelan, my aim here is not to point a finger and scoff, or incur the wrath of academics about the value of intellectual currency. Rather, my interest is how these lines between the sacred and the profane are established and perpetuated, and how moveable they might be.

8. Kermode, 'Nutmegged: The War on Cliché', 27–28.
9. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 19.
10. Stark, 'Clichés and Composition Theory', 453.
11. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 89.
12. Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, xi. Cited in Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 118.
13. McLuhan with Watson. *From Cliché to Archetype*, 43 (emphasis in original).
14. Grimwood and Miller, 'The Boy Done Good? Football Clichés', 380.
15. Amossy, 'The Cliché in the Reading Process', 34.
16. Lerner, 'Cliché and Commonplace', 250.
17. Shaw, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 79.
18. Kirkpatrick, *The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Clichés*, x.
19. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 178.
20. Davis, 'Aphorisms and Clichés', 245–269.
21. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*.
22. Derrida, *Psyche*, 301.
23. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 124.

24. See Weber, *Institution and Interpretation*. Weber argues that disciplines of knowledge, in order to assert themselves as disciplines, must necessarily exclude or differentiate other claimants on their terrain. To perform this exclusion, critical thought always contains an image of non-thought. Expulsion is thus never complete, but rather a form of demarcation which 'does not merely demarcate one thing by setting it off from another; it also de-marks, that is, defaces the mark is simultaneously inscribes, by placing it in relation to an indeterminable series of other marks, of which we can never be fully conscious of cognizant' (145).
25. Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy*, 12.
26. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 117.
27. Bagnall, *A Defence of Clichés*, 113.
28. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mere.
29. Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*, 17.
30. Olson, 'The Generational Cliché', 114.
31. This view is also shared by Walter Ong: 'strong disapproval of the cliché is a regular concomitant of the romantic state of mind'. *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*, 21.
32. Stark, 'Clichés and Composition Theory', 453.
33. Cited in Williams, *Keywords*, 230, my emphasis.
34. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 7.
35. Stark, 'Clichés and Composition Theory', 454.
36. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 250.
37. Woodmansee, *The Author, Art and the Market*.
38. Lucy, 'The Source of Plagiarism', 3.
39. Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 16.
40. See Sartiliot, *Citation and Modernity*, 20–21.
41. Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 20. While Norberg sees this as a prospective point of resistance to the capitalist ownership of language, it also calls to mind Jean-Paul Sartre's disdain for precisely the common-ness of the cliché: thoughts which 'have become the meeting place of the community' and thus constitute a form of 'hell'. *Situations*, 137.
42. This is particularly pertinent to the rise of what we once called 'new media', with its mass circulation of memes, vines and new terms taking place seemingly overnight. In such a context, the word cliché can itself seem a little 'old hat' now; but I am inclined to agree with Heinrich Plett when he notes:

> Whereas in the Gutenberg Galaxy the commonness of commonplaces was restricted by the spatial and temporal limits of postal service and book trade, the Electronic Age effects it within an instant of time. […] Thus the shift of place from individual memory to the written notebook, from there to the printed commonplace-book and again from there to the electronic data-bank safeguards the commonplace an ever widening circle of distribution. This does not mean that each older mnemonic 'store-house' is entirely superseded by a newer one; all types rather coexist together. ('Rhetoric and Intertextuality', 318)

The pace of change, built upon the media platforms and our interconnection with medial technologies, is not the issue. The philosophy of these

communications—the conceptual, underlying principles of how they work, and, more importantly, why they are problematic—remain similarly obscured. Partly, this is due to the relationship between media and form; as well as those specific moments where the obviousness of media is suppressed in some way, or when form is dismissed as being merely medial. New media platforms provide a distinctive shift in the ways in which these boundaries are constructed. It is a shift, rather than a 'development' or 'progression', because any discussion of new media is instantly prey to its own platitudes, whether negative or positive. What is particularly significant, though, is precisely how the 'storehouse' of the commonplace relates to the ways in which new media relocates the prominence of the archive within our cultural thought. The machinations of this archival aspect of contemporary cultural production are embedded within what Plett identifies in the history of rhetoric as the move from private ownership to common intellectual property. *Contra* Lyotard, in today's world the archives are no longer anonymous, but at the forefront of our interactions. True, the archive can remain ostensibly hidden—such as when our computers automatically 'archive' a hundred unanswered emails—but it is possible to detect a renewed energy in processes for accessing, retrieving and collecting in the public domain: Wikipedia, Spotify, Youtube and so on.

43. Norberg, 'The Political Theory of the Cliché', 77.
44. Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*.
45. Cited in Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 19.
46. D.H. Lawrence, 'Introduction to These Paintings'.
47. Amossy, 'The Cliché in the Reading Process', 43; Serpell, 'A Heap of Cliché', 177.
48. Brown, *Edgework*, 5.
49. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 78, my emphasis.
50. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xi.

Chapter 1

The Meaning of Clichés

> If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point, it's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle, etc.
>
> – Jacques Rancière, 'Art of the Possible'.

The question of what clichés *mean* is almost inevitably asked from a particular, ready-to-hand disposition. When Jacques Rancière provides a pithy endorsement of the 'anti-critique' sentiment that has taken hold across much of the contemporary humanities, his words nevertheless retain a very familiar urgency: regardless of what we do with critique itself, we must rid ourselves of the ever-presence of clichés. This is perhaps why Christopher Ricks's comment in 1980 that 'the feeling lately is that we live in an unprecedented inescapability from clichés' still resonates strongly today, when emerging media appear to shape actively political and public debate and the sound bite, cultural cipher and social media meme actively influence electoral decisions.[1] But in fact, the sense that we live in an age of clichés echoes throughout the modern era. There is no shortage of nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature condemning the generic, the formulaic and the banal as not simply bad writing, but as a broader symptom of cultural stagnation. Furthermore, the recurrent motifs of such expressions – dying metaphors, stagnation, stupidity, mechanization and, above all, *loss* – present an overly familiar struggle of the intellectual (whether modern, postmodern, anti-modern or something else). This is a struggle that has been reasserted by as wide a range of authors as John Rentoul in the 2010s, Francis Wheen in the 2000s, Hans Magnus Enzenberger in the 1970s, Guy Debord in the 1960s, Theodore

Adorno in the 1950s and George Orwell in the 1940s.[2] Across all of these varied positions, the surface expression of discontent tends to be similar. If the arguments of anti-critique, such as Rancière's, quite rightly expose the inadequacy of conventional criticism in the face of such stagnation, they also maintain a critical distance from the cliché itself: whether as the object of criticism or as criticism itself, it remains something to be *removed*.

However, the very familiarity of these expressions – not to mention the perpetual urgency of their tone – serves to cloud the question of when such a loss (or the threat of this loss) actually *occurs*, both in the historical sense (at what point culture becomes wary of, or resistant to, a thing labelled a *cliché*) and in the hermeneutic sense (the conditions under which cliché 'means' something, even if this meaning is only ever a kind of 'anti-meaning', or sense of loss or inescapability). Indeed, the actual theoretical engagement with clichés – what they *are*, what they *do*, and what specific role they play in the formation of 'proper' thought – is rarely given serious or focused attention, other than to assert their difference from originality, creativity, criticality and so on. And perhaps this is necessary; after all, if the cliché marks the absence of thought, then how else might it be thought *about*, other than in terms of its expulsion? If the cliché poses a specific threat to modern thought in particular, would raising it to an object of academic interest not risk valorizing the cliché or elevating it to something beyond the banal? The cliché is not an object of discussion; it is the very antithesis of discussion itself. Far from unlocking its meaning, then, theorizing cliché may simply be an exercise in sanitizing its peculiar threat, which is – as Jean Paulhan's masterful treatise *The Flowers of Tarbes* rightly noted – both irritatingly stupid and possibly tyrannical. But at the same time, it strikes me that there is something significant about this difficulty in handling clichés *conceptually*, and the subsequent and persistent failure of the intellectual to escape their inevitability: a difficulty that suggests a deceptive complexity in the cliché. How, then, do we situate clichés in relation to the production of meaning, without privileging 'meaning' in a way that effectively displaces and rejects cliché before it can be situated?

Etymologically, the answer to this question is relatively simple: the cliché is first situated by the French *clicher*, to stereotype. Before any psychological concept of prejudice became associated with it, the stereotype was simply an object: a mechanical part, a plate of type metal, within the workings of the printing press. The cliché – a term coined from the clicking noise of the stereotype at work – was an imprint of original type. By replicating the page of type, a quicker, cheaper and far more numerous production of prints and illustrations became possible. 'As such,' Anton Zijderveld argues, 'the cliché stood, together with the invention of typography, at the cradle of modern technology'. Historically speaking, somewhere between William Ged's experiments of 1725 and Charles Stanhope's successes of the 1790s, the

cliché provided a foundational contribution to modernity itself as a 'rational procedure to quickly and massively reproduce cultural material'.[3]

But if this explains the technical origin of the cliché, the values that underlie the subsequent 'cultural material' of modernity – the emphasis on rationality, autonomy, invention, innovation and so on, which the printing press allows to flourish and expand – problematize the situation of reproduction. The cliché marks a disconnection where speech ceases to speak, thought ceases to think and writing simply becomes marks on a plate of type metal; it follows that to identify clichés as anything beyond mere marks – to give meaning to this loss of meaning – requires a critical distance between intellectual discourse and the operation of cliché itself: a distance supplied in the chain of supplements, metaphors and expressions, effectively re-marking the mark of the cliché as a cultural artefact. In this way, just as the metal dab of the printing cliché supplemented the original type, the cultural reception of the cliché is built upon numerous additions, ornaments and assumptions that interweave clichés, commonplaces, platitudes, banality, inanity, gossip, jargon, the 'everyday' and so on.[4] In this way, any such expression of this reception is never simply technical or technological but also grammatical, political, aesthetic and moral. If invention is the arch-motif of modernity, then its underside is the permanent risk of thought becoming stagnant, and thus unthinkable. This is not just because, as Nancy Struever has argued, the political philosophy of modernity from Thomas Hobbes onward is 'invented' precisely on the principle of invention, that a politics capable of surviving the instabilities of several Copernican revolutions *demands* novelty (thus forcefully superseding the classical conception of *inventio*); yet, any discourse based on immanent and self-renewing voices will inevitably be, in Struever's words, 'fraught with fashion, and, at the same time, more susceptible to the quick exchange of deadening theoretical conformities – sound bites, so to speak'.[5] Nor is it solely that, as Jacques Derrida remarks, within the operation of modern philosophy, 'the delivery, transmissions, and reception of ideas, coded arguments, classifiable responses or solutions lend themselves more readily to stereotyping than anywhere else'.[6] More than this: to merely *repeat* accepted ideas, already dispersed and circulated through technological media, is tantamount to elevating mechanical reproduction over and above philosophy itself. Boris Groys argues that this characteristic privileging of invention within modernity takes place at the expense of that which records, circulates and archives.[7] In the cultural practices of philosophy, art and literature alike – not to mention their dissemination and dissolution into further fields – the desire for 'the new' corresponds to an active distancing from those conditions that would render the next big thing a mere artefact for circulation. In short, it is not only that the new is constantly under threat of becoming old; it is that the vehicles of such a transformation are also rendered suspect. It is not just

the reproduction of ideas but their *storage*, Groys notes, that form common targets in the founding works of modernity: from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's celebration of the destruction of the Library of Alexandria, to Goethe's Faust, who escapes from the depressing number of books he must read to seek a more immediate and exciting existence with the devil as his guide. Culturally, the cliché as a historical–technological object is always already replaced with something resembling a dissipated archive of anti-thought.

SITES OF DISPLACEMENT

Within these general themes, the expressions that would shape a philosophical understanding of clichés all have particular sites where they emerge as specific and contextualized problems for, or conflicts with, 'thinking'. We could, for example, say that Walter Benjamin gives a particular title to the problem of the cliché: the loss of aura in the age of its technological reproducibility. Aura, for Benjamin, characterizes the 'work of art': works of art exhibit uniqueness (they cannot be reproduced), distance (they are always above or beyond us) and permanence (they transcend the immanent world), which in combination produce an aura. Each dimension of aura, however, is dismantled by the mass mechanical production of the artwork. It is no longer unique, it is easily available and it can be destroyed as and when we please.[8] Likewise, whatever *remains* in the age of mechanical reproduction is always transient and incomplete, a series of points that speak only to the present, reproduced in fragmentary and indistinct ways.[9] For Zijderveld, this provides an 'elective affinity' between 'the decline of aura' and the rise of clichés.[10]

We could also say that Gustave Flaubert provided an entire typology of such expressions: *The Dictionary of Received Ideas*, an appendix to his unfinished novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (though largely written well before the novel itself). The dictionary is meant to arise from the work of the book's two eponymous characters, who retire from their jobs as copyists in Paris and move to the countryside. There, they undertake a number of activities in the belief that, by following the conventions of written wisdom, they can become experts in any field. They find themselves, however, victims of hopeless fancy and undermining clichés. This is not due to any laziness on their part: they both critically engage with their source material, only to find that such a criticality is not reflected back from the world they expect to find. Frustrated at every turn by the sheer amount of information the modern world creates, and without any overriding interpretative system, Bouvard and Pécuchet are left only able to repeat, and thus enlarge, the documentation of the world around them in the form of their dictionary. *The Dictionary of Received Ideas*, then, reduces the actors of the modern world to copyists reproducing

haphazard and unusable nonsense, caught up as they are in a value-free circulation and repetition of catalogued knowledge.

A few decades later, Marcel Duchamp gave a specific form to the expression: by placing a urinal in an art gallery, he juxtaposed the high-culture sanctity of the art gallery with the banality of the everyday object. In doing so, Duchamp did not simply claim that anything could be art; by extension, his *Fountain* also starkly demonstrated that even the fortressed walls of the gallery, and all of the high culture that built them, cannot prevent art from becoming common, empty and pointless. In this sense, in Walter Redfern's words, 'ready-mades are meta-clichés, clichés conscious of themselves and mocking people for taking them as gospel'.[11]

These three examples are arbitrary, to some extent, far from unified in their sentiments, and presented in an overly general way. This is because the cliché is, to a similar extent, an arbitrary concept. But it is also because, as iterations of resistance to the cliché, these particular examples map out its general contours, in terms of the particular displacements of meaning they focus on: technical ('the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition'[12]); archival ('The page must be filled. . . . All things are equal: good and evil, beautiful and ugly, insignificant and characteristic'[13]); or demographic ('the Duchampian readymade strategy seems to undermine the rights of intellectual private property',[14] ushering the masses into the previously sacred space of the elite). In this sense, any of these three examples, with their arbitrariness and disunity, could serve as a starting point for interrogating the apparent 'inescapability' of clichés that Ricks laments.

For now, I will focus on one more. In *On Clichés*, Zijderveld builds on Benjamin's concept of aura (alongside a sociological canon of Max Weber and George Herbert Mead) to forge these expressions into a specifically historical theory. Zijderveld argues that the progression of modernity leads to a decline in the traditions and practices that previously grounded shared social identities. Clichés come to supplement the loss of these stable and fixed cultural truths. The cliché, indeed, is nothing less than Zijderveld's subtitle: 'the supersedure of meaning by function in modernity'. Just as foundational myths provided ancient communities with fictional points of social cohesion – an aura, so to speak – modern clichés operate as fixed points of reference that are otherwise absent in the secular modern world of 'free-floating' norms and meanings. 'They provide clarity, stability and certainty as fixed points of recognition, as things to get a hold on, as stable points to relate to',[15] but, unlike the myth (the stability and certainty of the premodern), the cliché holds no proper meaning and is, ultimately, entirely arbitrary. Clichés therefore operate as purely functional (and changeable) signs within social interaction.

Zijderveld thus provides a historical answer to the question of how clichés relate to the production of meaning. And this historicity marks his

list of the defining features of clichés: they are embedded within particular social traditions, entering them through repetition and eventually gaining the 'coercive power of institutions'.[16] Containers of 'stale wisdom of past generations', clichés are primarily, but not exclusively, linguistic.[17] Because of their expressive nature, they are prominent in the arts; through overuse they become contagious and immediate, implemented without the need for prolonged thought or reflection; indeed their meaning is irrelevant, emotionally neutral 'stock knowledge'[18] akin to gestures rather than actions. They have a reified nature that endures over several generations; as such, they can gain autonomy that allows them to carry meanings in a functional, unintended and anonymous way.

This schematic ultimately produces a dark vision of the 'clichégenic society', fuelled by what Zijderveld refers to as 'cliché power':[19] a society open to manipulation by those who would turn the functionality of clichés to their own ends. While clichés remain 'indispensable to social life', there are 'historically specific, socio-cultural circumstances in which this functionality of clichés turns into a tyranny'.[20] Zijderveld's claim is supported by the historical structure at work throughout the definition of cliché, which includes not just the temporal unfolding of the use of an expression (in many respects, this echoes Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's account of the descent from 'actual' to 'inactive' metaphors, 'reduced by usage'[21]) but also the recurrent juxtapositions of modernity and premodernity, whether this is contrasting magic with science, or the Greek polis with faceless bureaucracy. It turns out that the historically specific circumstances in which functionality becomes tyranny are nothing less than modern society. In circumscribing the history of clichés as such, Zijderveld's analysis ultimately renders modernity and clichés signs for each other: both mark the supersedure of meaning by function, which underlies the ominous warning that 'societies which follow the path of modernisation will unavoidably become clichégenic'.[22]

THE ANTI-PHILOSOPHY OF THE CLICHÉ

Zijderveld's argument is not, of course, the only history of clichés, nor is it the best. The almost caricatured extremes it reaches make it, in some senses, the archetypal clichéd critique of the cliché. However, unlike Redfern, who dismisses the work as an implausible conspiracy theory, or Ricks, who belittles Zijderveld's argument for its deterministic generality, I think that there is something intriguing about its (ultimately doomed) efforts to provide a determinate historical trajectory to the cliché;[23] an intrigue that reflects, in turn, the three previous approaches (Benjamin, Flaubert and Duchamp), and in doing so helps to situate the cliché in relation to the production of meaning.

This intrigue centres on three points.

1. Zijderveld's case relies upon a distinction between meaning and function, which is developed from a particular reading of Benjamin's account of aura. Grounding such a large-scale account of the cliché's universal form, this meaning–function distinction seeks to avoid any ambiguities: that is, any variations or developments across medial technology (the likes of which Marshall McLuhan highlights, for example, in *From Cliché to Archetype*). Instead, as previously noted, Zijderveld sustains the distinction through a series of juxtapositions of premodernity and modernity. In short, *difference* determines Zijderveld's history. Following Émile Durkheim and Mead, Zijderveld asserts that meaning occurs by embedding moments within wider systems of thought, whereas function is an instrumental route from one moment to another, such as switching on a light or greeting a shopkeeper. Function is therefore always described in terms of how it is *not* meaning. Any challenge to this stable definition is simply reabsorbed into the distinction. For example, Dadaism may 'subject […] clichés to their creative and often inventive power', but 'eventually, this victory too was again overtaken by routinization and the tyranny of clichés'.[24] The moment when function appears to become meaningful, and the distinction between meaning and function is threatened, marks the point at which the tyranny of clichés is upon us. The question here is not so much whether these juxtapositions are historically sound (even if they are almost all questionable) but how they are managed, given the problematic role of the cliché as an object of study. That is, however much it sits within an opposition to thought or meaning, the operation of the cliché is not one of difference, but of *sameness* (repetition, circulation, reproduction);[25] and it is, in fact, such a sameness that seems to require boundaries and parameters of meaning to be constructed, on an almost ad hoc basis.
2. What constitutes this difference, which allows cliché to be identified *as* an object of study, is an overriding *suspicion* of the operations of the cliché. Whereas for Benjamin the age of mechanical reproduction signals the possibilities of 'revolutionary demands in the politics of art',[26] there is no such redemptive silver lining for Zijderveld. Modern society cannot escape this clichégenic epoch, nor its 'form of brainwashing'.[27] But – and here is where Redfern, among others, is unfair to Zijderveld's case – he is certainly not alone in voicing such a conspiratorial conclusion: this suspicion inhabits expressions of the cliché and its workings throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Perhaps, as McLuhan suggests, this is only driven by the territorialism of 'literary specialists' who cast doubt on anything that lies beyond the confines of particular

expert practices;[28] the kind of specialism that, it might be argued, Duchamp's ready-mades directly challenged. But if this is the case, then such a suspicion would also have a history; and such a history would emerge in particular sites of meaning that shape the speculative idea of the cliché as a concept. In other words, it would not just be the end result of a study of cliché, but inextricable from the hermeneutic conditions of 'study' itself.

3. Both of these points of intrigue shape an overarching concern with the ability to document a contemporary epoch (in this case, modernity) that is structured by and absorbed in circulatory practices. That is, the whole exercise of providing a determinate history of clichés is problematized by the question of *from where* we write it, if the displacement inherent to the cliché infects *every* act of representation, that is, if the production process of modern meaning or truth is *also* the production process of modern clichés. If all of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* more or less reflect this problem in some sense (from where to learn about the world – the city or the country? the museum or the open air? through specialist knowledge or traditional wisdom? etc.), it misleadingly figures as a conclusion to Zijderveld's interrogation of the clichégenic society. As with the first two points, the historical claim that clichés are a symptom of modernity depends upon a further substructure of assumptions that allow certain words, terms, acts, gestures and so on to be termed 'clichéd', and others not. In this way, the historicizing of cliché within particular times takes place within broader conditions that dominate the practice of thinking as something distinct, serious, progressive and proper rather than indistinct, nonserious, stagnating and parasitic. To return to my previous point: the marking of critical distance, necessary for any traditional objective study of the term, itself obscures the mark of the cliché. And in this sense, a history of the cliché is impossible, as all such a history would ever be is a reassertion that clichés lack propriety.

At the same time, the cases of Benjamin, Flaubert and Duchamp show that the resistance to cliché can be far more specific than their expressions initially suggest: clichés arise within a particular constellation of interests, techniques, institutions and mechanics of language that are specific to certain times and places and not others. Each of these expressions centres on a tension between the determination of meaning as an intellectual pursuit on the one hand (which, as Groys argues, privileges innovation and invention) and the material conditions and substructures of this pursuit on the other. In turn, such a tension resists attempts to simply reassert the difference between the two, as Zijderveld's meaning/function distinction does. Whether one claims that Duchamp's *Fountain*, for example, is a work of art in the classical sense, or, conversely, that it is not art at all, both stances maintain a particular and

exclusive production of what we know as 'art history'. But the intrigue of the ready-made is precisely that this difference is called into question; that within a particular localization, and a particular contextualization – in other words, a particular time and space – the banality of the ready-made object becomes something more profound and wider reaching in terms of what we think of as art.

This is also why the philosophical significance of the cliché emerges when we consider it, not as an *object* of study, but as a form of what Groys terms 'anti-philosophy'; not as a form of atemporal non-thought, but rather a kind of philosophical equivalent to the anti-art of Duchamp's ready-mades. By interrogating those sites where intellectual pursuit and its material conditions are placed in tension with one another the possibility arises of dissociating, in Groys's words, 'the production of evidence from the production of philosophical discourses'.[29] That is, it is possible to find strategies for understanding the philosophical problem of the cliché without succumbing to stock 'philosophical' responses, which demand qualities seemingly antithetical to the operation of the cliché itself. Rather, as Groys continues, 'the production of evidence can use any experience, practice, object or attitude. . . . The experience of self-evidence (of truth) is here produced in the same way in which the "aesthetic experience" is produced in the case of artistic readymades: it can be attached to any possible object'.[30] The result is not to leave all sense of meaning, significance and truth to one side, which would simply affirm Zijderveld's 'tyranny' of functional clichés. Rather, it is a case of calling into question the boundaries of the very difference between meaning and function and exploring how the conditions for shaping such a *suspicion* of cliché, and the conditions for documenting its tyranny (or stupidity, or stagnation), emerge in terms of 'thoroughly ordinary practice', which, in turn, 'substitutes for traditional "exclusive" philosophical practices . . . [and] "thinking" in general'.[31]

THE CASE OF THE COMMONPLACE

In short, then, if we are serious about situating clichés, and their inescapability, without falling back into the contradictory clichés of critique, then some practices are particularly worth exploring. In this context, a surprising omission from Zijderveld's insistent juxtapositions of modernity and premodernity, and the corresponding distinction between function and meaning, is the case of the 'commonplace' as a form of argument itself. This is all the more surprising, given that at first sight the case of the commonplace seems to confirm Zijderveld's schematic history. The commonplace – from the Latin *locus communis*, in turn from the Greek *koinos topos* – was, of course, a tool

of the Sophists, whose persuasive strategies were built upon the circulated knowledge of local communities; the 'topics' that filled their arguments were employed on the grounds of their likeliness to mirror the beliefs of an audience. In this way, the Sophist commonplace embedded the life of rhetoric within community practices and social memory, which, in turn, invoked a temporality of *kairos* rather than *chronos*; a bulwark of everyday common sense over and against the universalist pretensions of dialectic; and communication through a 'plurality of instances, not a generalized system'.[32]

Juxtaposing this with the modern cliché allows a familiar linking narrative to emerge regarding the shift in Western culture from premodernity to modernity. For Richard Lanham, the decline of the commonplace in modern rhetoric can be explained simply by the fact that 'we no longer *trust* traditional wisdom, and are far more interested in investigating the world anew'.[33] The commonplace undergoes a significant mutation, no less than the shape of sophistry itself, with the European Enlightenment's assault on 'tradition' – the structures of social memory and relationships inherent to rhetoric's successes – before re-emerging under the auspices of the mass print media. George Kennedy employs the Italian term *letteraturizzazione* for this more general slippage from the primary idea of rhetorical interaction (the oral art of persuasion in civil contexts) to a secondary apparatus of techniques (lists, formulas, catalogues) concerned with the 'surface of a communication', where immediate speech is replaced by archived text. The most frequent manifestations of this slippage are 'commonplaces, figures of speech and thought, and tropes in elaborate writing'.[34] From the rise of the early modern commonplace book to the contemporary urban dictionary, the dynamic art of social interaction is reduced to something less contextually specific, less 'meaningful', becoming more of a technical artefact than an integral mode of persuasion.

Such is the brief metanarrative, and, of course, scholars of rhetoric have provided far more in-depth chronological accounts of how such a mutation appears and in turn affects the very idea of what rhetoric is and how it should be studied in the contemporary academy.[35] Nevertheless, there is still something of a jump made between ancient commonplace and modern cliché; a jump that makes this a juxtaposition, and not a detailed chronological history. Kennedy makes such a jump in a discussion of the commonplace in Aristotle, noting in passing that 'there is absolutely no relation between the Greek commonplace and the modern cliché'.[36] He does not expand on why this is the case. And this is characteristic of many invocations of cliché: it is just *obvious* why clichés should not appear alongside the Greek idea.

Now, the claim may well be true, but that is not the issue. The issue is rather the *jump*, which is not so much chronological – that is, from ancient to modern – but focal: from the *object* of study to the *conditions* of its study. The obviousness of such a brief dismissal arises less from within the specific

study of rhetoric and more from the wider cultural assumptions regarding 'study' itself; assumptions that exclude the supplemental and arbitrary movement of the cliché from their frame of reference.

And here lies the problem with all of Zijderveld's juxtapositions. If the *circulation* of a word, not its *classification*, renders it cliché – in other words, its function rather than its meaning – then the techniques for interpreting the history of the commonplace are already part of a particular practice of circulating certain ways of knowing at the expense of others. This leads to a curious double movement within treatments of the cliché that Zijderveld exemplifies: the cliché is both externalized and removed from 'serious' study, but only under the conditions of another, accepted, system of circulation, functionality and orthodoxy. In Kennedy's case, this is the underlying ritual of preserving the dignity of rhetoric as a discipline over and against the caricatures that other disciplines (mainly philosophy, of course, and in particular early modern philosophy) apply to it.[37] Zijderveld's appeal to the Weberian metanarrative of modernity, meanwhile, is integral to the idea that clichés provide a stabilizing system of purely functional signs – the inevitable dispersion of religious institutions, the irreversible fragmentation of communal knowledge, and the cultural decline of aura – but is by now far more effective as a ready-to-hand cliché than a demonstrable, or even determinable, 'fact'. In the same way, inquiries into the role of clichés within philosophy almost inevitably end up reproducing the idea of philosophy as an exclusive set of practices, and of clichés as a corrupting influence from outside.

The question this raises, then, is on what basis is the distinction between meaning and function, or, indeed, ancient commonplace and modern cliché, *produced*? Not in terms of its *effects* – the metanarrative above gives a clear definition of those differences – but in terms of the *conditions of this difference*. I have suggested that these conditions are embedded both within suspicion of what the cliché does and within the acts of representation and documentation involved in its rejection. The juxtaposition of classical commonplace and modern cliché provides a site for exploring this suggestion further.

INTO THE ARCHIVE

If many modern scholars of rhetoric remain as hostile to the cliché as their counterparts in philosophy, it could still be said that much of the modern suspicion of cliché is inherited from the ancient dispute between sophistry and dialectic. After all, it was a specific use of the commonplace as a commoditized form of 'truth', with lofty service charges attached, that pitched the Sophists against the dialectical pedagogy of Plato and Socrates and their

idea of truth as something well beyond the uncritical assumptions of the everyday Athenian. Socrates compares the work of a pedagogue to that of a common salesman: 'Those who take the various subjects of knowledge from city to city and offer them for sale retail to whoever wants them, *commend everything* they have for sale'.[38] This derisive analogy is grounded both in the commonness of the salesman and his wares – that everything is commended means all value is debased – and the commodification of truths that Socrates routinely discredits. Both suggest what Groys identifies as the disparate positions of the Sophist and the philosopher, the former a salesman pitching his commodities of truth, the latter a critical consumer wary of such a pitch.[39]

Indeed, recasting rhetoric as a method of discernment between the real and the apparent means of persuasion was precisely how Aristotle reclaimed commonplaces as integral to argumentation, that is, as proofs, rather than truths. His *Rhetoric* thus begins with the declaration that 'rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic';[40] the former discerns the 'real and the apparent means of persuasion', whereas the latter does much the same with deduction.[41] It is not the ability to persuade that makes a man a Sophist, Aristotle argues, but rather the choice to use this ability indiscriminately.[42] Aristotle reinvented the common topics by addressing this problem of the commonness of expressions as arbitrary similarity. Aristotelian commonplaces provided a sense of probability that a given audience would accept not only on the basis of custom but also on the suggestion of a wider universal truth. As Quintilian later argued, such terms 'would not have acquired immortality had they not carried conviction of their truth to all mankind'.[43] The shift is, at least in part, one of timeliness. If the Sophist commonplace is shaped by the specific place and time in which such a term might be effective (in Groys's terms, how well it might sell), then Aristotle's common topics are abstract, universal and therefore everlastingly common to every kind of argument, no matter what the specifics. The sales pitch becomes an art form (*tekhnē*). The *Rhetoric* thus redefines what is already well known.[44] Aristotle's elevation of the commonplace to a refined technique, though, is enabled by the restatement of difference between the common, non-discerning and profane usage of the Sophist, and the skilled, exclusive art of the orator. What is already in circulation – repeated, shared, *common* – is given legitimacy by a newly constructed hierarchical catalogue of the workings of public life. To this end, the *Rhetoric* provides endless lists for such catalogues: 'the constituents of wealth', 'things that must be good', 'the objects of praise and blame' and so on. It is precisely the detail of this archival structure – what allows the commonplace to exist beyond the fleeting moment of its everyday usage – that permits rhetoric to sit in counterpart to the metaphysics of dialectic. By virtue of this, the commonplace would 'not increase our understanding of any particular class of things'.[45]

While its success is often attributed to the oral culture of ancient Athens, the Sophist commonplace was *also* an archival act, both in terms of origin – topics were so named originally because their Sophist authors inscribed them on papyrus rolls, which students would then unroll to the relevant place (*topos*), a literal locating of the most appropriate argument to use – and in terms of purpose. Walter Ong remarks that 'what one finds in the doctrine and use of the commonplaces are thus the essential tendencies which an oral culture . . . develops because of its information storage problem';[46] it is in this sense that common topics were 'accordingly defined as storehouses for arguments'.[47] Both philosopher and rhetorician, then, are invested in placing what is common, in the face of a surplus of language, gestures and actions. Such placing, for both, distinguishes the commonplace as a proof, over and against the banality of distributed common discourses. Likewise for both, such placing is organized in terms of a particular time of the commonplace that captures the contemporaneity of a discursive moment in such a way that it can be *replicated* to some purpose, in such a way that it becomes a thing that moves beyond a singular moment, thus acquiring value.[48] For the Sophist, this value is the immanent life of oral discourse (what will be persuasive within the present context); for the philosopher, it is evidence of a universal condition.

This archival practice plays a decisive role in the distinction between the premodern commonplace and the modern cliché. Not the only role, of course; it almost goes without saying that the Enlightenment assaulted the evidential basis of received ideas, and by the nineteenth century the allies of the commonplace – the maxim and the proverb – had also passed out of the domain of rhetoric and firmly into the hands of those Paulhan describes as terrorists (Friedrich Nietzsche and Lautréamont, or Blaise Pascal and Søren Kierkegaard).[49] In doing so, they of course became something quite different from the former safe repositories of social memory. But if these shifts are highly visible and pronounced, what also shifts the contours of the commonplace is the development of archival technology, and, along with it, the medium through which the distinction between meaning and non-meaning is stored and retrieved. Of course, the development of the printing press is the most significant advance, along with, among others, the lowered costs of paper, the improvements in telegraphic and other communication networks, and Dewey's Decimal Classification system. All of these things increasingly intensify the archival technique at work in the philosophical treatment of the commonplace and constitute a progressive *letteraturizzazione* from immanent life to formulaic list. And, importantly, not just *one* formulaic list: Sven Spieker has argued that the nineteenth century constitutes a distinct turning point in the use and meaning of the archive. Faced with the increase in techniques of recording and reproducing the present moment, Ong's 'information storage problem' is inversed: it is not that there is a limited space to store

documentation of the past and present, but rather an increasingly unlimited space, constantly pushed to expansion by the awareness that such documents – however trivial, however everyday – hold evidence crucial to the understanding of the truth or meaning of the present age. In Spieker's words, 'the nineteenth-century archive is founded on the *suspicion* that, to the extent that they could be treated as the material traces of an obscure beyond – time, history, life itself – whose limitations were profoundly unknown or unknowable, literally *anything* could be or become a clue'.[50]

This suspicion that everything might be a trace or document of something meaningful mirrors, in many ways, Plato's earlier suspicion of the Sophists' selling of everything *as if* it were meaningful. What changes, then, between the commonplace and the cliché is not the meaning of tradition so much as the archival possibilities for *holding* and *sharing* such a meaning. If the commonplace depended upon a clear, cohesive sense of shared social memory, then modernity witnesses the material practices that duplicate, enlarge and represent social memory through seemingly endless medial forms that disrupt that cohesion. Social memory is now everywhere, captured in a perpetually enlarging cultural archive. By the same token, it is also nowhere. Both Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche raised the problem of modern thought becoming little more than the production of page after page; a production Schopenhauer rooted in the primacy of passive reflection over insightful intuition – 'that books do not take the place of experience, and that learning is no substitute for genius, are two kindred phenomena'[51] – that leaves the philosopher to only 'coordinate' rather than 'subordinate' concepts.[52] Nietzsche, too, referred to the 'oversaturation of an age with history' as both 'hostile and dangerous' to life. 'The war is not even over', Nietzsche wrote, 'before it is transformed into a hundred thousand printed pages. . . . It seems that the instrument is almost incapable of producing a strong and full note, no matter how vigorously it is played; its tones at once die away and in a moment have faded to a tender historical echo'.[53]

Little surprise, then, that the commonplace ceases to be the commodity the Sophists once sold. At the same time, this is not due to the commonplace falling *outside* of any linguistic economy. Far from it: because everything in the present age can be recorded, documented and reproduced, there is nothing that does not at least have the potential to become meaningful. 'Nothing – literally nothing – can be dismissed because literally everything has to be collected and inventoried'.[54] The quest for a meaning beyond function is itself absorbed in the functional act of archiving. In this sense, Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* prefigures the work of major modernist projects such as the Mass Observation Archive (begun in 1937 and revived in 1981), aiming to capture every detail of ordinary life in Britain. This project still operates under a certain condition of 'meaning', determined by the directives used to

gather particular observations of anonymous, everyday activities – questionnaires, topics to discuss, calls for participation. By contrast, Flaubert highlights the problems that the modern archive has with any such conditions. If words are printed and documents archived because of what they record, this suggests that their value resides in the meaningful contemporary world beyond. The Sisyphean task of Bouvard and Pécuchet is to document the life of the contemporary world around them; but their search for meaning, as Spieker shows, always returns them to the stereotype and cliché that any such documentation inevitably produces:

> The maddening conundrum faced by Bouvard and Pécuchet is that everything that can be known is already archival. As a storehouse of knowledge, the modern archive refers us to a place outside of itself, the very place Bouvard and Pécuchet are seeking. But this beyond-the-archive is not a transcendent outside or an empty space waiting to be filled; it is in fact another archive.[55]

Each 'meaningful' position is embedded within an archive, and that archive within another archive: 'another discipline or field of knowledge that has to be studied, inventoried, and mastered'.[56] Nietzsche's strong and full note is reduced to the echo of its representation, recording and documentation. In other words, meaning itself is carried by the functionality of the archive, to the extent that the two can only be separated arbitrarily at the point where one stops reading and stops documenting. This is why Zijderveld, just like Kennedy, rests his claims on what are, by and large, clichés; their metanarratives are embedded within certain received ideas and canonical formulations that produce a discipline or tradition of knowledge, which take the form of clichés when placed in relation to further documents within further contexts.

UNDEAD SPACES

In this sense, it could well be said that the classical commonplace and the modern cliché are not so different in kind, so much as the cliché amplifies the techniques of retrieving what is common and re-placing it within contemporary language. This reflects Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's argument over the modern topics (in their terms, *loci*) of argument:

> The triteness characteristic of what we today call commonplace does not in any way exclude specificity. Our commonplaces are really merely applications of 'commonplaces' in the Aristotelian sense of the term to particular subjects. But because the application is made to a frequently treated subject, developed in a certain order, with expected connections between the *loci*, we notice only its

> banality and fail to appreciate its argumentative value. The result is a tendency to forget that *loci* form an indispensable arsenal on which a person wishing to persuade another will have to draw, whether he likes it or not.[57]

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca thus locate the particularity and effect of the modern commonplace obscured by its commonality. This informs the earlier claim by Groys that shifting focus to the 'production of evidence' from the 'production of discourse' revealed a range of significance in the everyday and the banal: a 'tendency to forget' that each ordinary activity, and each everyday occurrence, contains within it the potential for a specific significance and value contrary to the more exclusive domain of 'philosophical argument'. However, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also insist on the stability of the archival structure underlying the commonplace, instead of focusing (characteristically) on its reception by an audience. What we need to add to their claim, then, is that once these techniques of retrieval and re-placing in the modern commonplace *are* amplified, the commonplace effectively ceases to *hold* a place in the very archival scheme that produced it. Instead, it retains only its commonality: a range of similarities to what *might* be meaningful, and what *might* be functional. It is, in effect, stored, but not catalogued; everywhere, but nowhere. Perhaps for this reason, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's seminal work *Modern Rhetoric* describes the cliché as a kind of toxic half-life of a parasitic organism, at work in the otherwise healthy domain of language usage:

> Language . . . changes, develops, and grows, and, by the same token, language wears out. We are not thinking of words . . . that have died natural deaths. . . . We are thinking rather of words that have been thoughtlessly used in certain contexts so often that they have lost nearly all their force.[58]

If the expressions of fatigue and wear are familiar, the *letteraturizzazione* between meaning and non-meaning is not as simple as use giving way to documentation of use, and from there to the formulaic typology such an archive affords. However tired the clichés, Brooks and Warren cannot determine whether they are living or dead. Clichés are, in fact, neither: they are a kind of undead word that leads, through use, to the death of meaningful language. Paradoxically, the loss of force entails a further power to stagnate wider discourse. The ambiguity of this undead state can be seen in Brooks and Warren's hesitancy: certain, but unnamed, contexts; nearly, but not all, of their force. Clichés are expelled from good rhetoric on the grounds of typological and etymological classification (the textbook goes on to ask the reader whether 'knowledge of the origin of these terms help[s] you to understand why the qualities they name are to be avoided'[59]), but any specific

classification of the moment of their expulsion is missing. Indeed, the very conditions that establish Brooks and Warren's work as 'modern' – its classificatory techniques, its insistence on inventive language use over and above jargon and sound bite – give rise to a more specific 'age' of the cliché: a kind of lifespan of language that is both worn out and unending, by virtue of its resistance to the 'placing' that would identify its value. It is not surprising, then, that the initial confidence expressed in marking the cliché out as different to meaningful language inevitably returns only an uncanny sameness; and in turn not surprising that writing guides often echo Wolcott Gibbs's lighthearted rules for the 'Theory and Practice of Editing *New Yorker* Articles', which include this strategy for avoiding clichés: 'There is obviously no rule about this, except that anything that you suspect of being a cliché undoubtedly is one and had better be removed'.[60] Here, clichés are not identified by the simple reduction of meaning to function, but by the suspicion that their function might itself go beyond its original, localized use.

Indeed, if the commonplace loses its place, and remains as a kind of lingering commonality, this re-introduces the very timeliness that Aristotle banished from the philosophical description of the common topic: a moment too humdrum to warrant a prolonged or serious discussion. Yet, such a moment – the specific, operational time of clichés that is too quick for cognition,[61] too stagnant for use, and too common for classification – is problematic to simply dismiss, *precisely* because expressions of any such dismissal are embedded within a complex relationship between the documenting of the contemporary world, and the medial technology and archival practices that support this documentation. For Gibbs, this function is simply left undefined, and – even though the jovial tone of his writing obscures this – in its place is introduced a permanent state of suspicion. But even when a clear definition of such functions is given, as in Zijderveld's work, this suspicion still forms the basis of his fear regarding the 'tyranny of clichés': that the very system for identifying the cliché on account of its difference – its function, in opposition to meaning – ceases to be able to *recognize* any such difference. And while Zijderveld's particular case may be caricatured and overstated, such a suspicion underpins all of the material constituents at work in the marking of the cliché as something outside of proper thought: whether technical (the aura-suppressing mechanical reproduction of the printing press), archival (the potentially infinite documentation of knowledge), or demographic (the uncontrolled similitude of the 'common' and its everyday, valueless language).

In many ways, this problem is already raised within Benjamin's concept of aura, when he attempts to demarcate the aura of a work of art from the functional copy of the mechanical reproduction; this demarcation underlies Zijderveld's attempt to mark out the cliché as an object of study. Benjamin offers a clear distinction between the 'here and now of the original' work of

art, which 'underlies the concept of its authenticity' and 'eludes technological . . . reproducibility', and the functional processes of its mechanical reproduction, whereby the 'unique existence' of a work of art is replaced with a 'mass existence'.[62] This is precisely what Zijderveld sees as the affinity between the decline of aura and the rise of cliché: the supersedure of meaningful, iconic, stable signs by movable, arbitrary, functional inanities, when 'semantic power and heuristic pith' yield to 'social functionality' without the need for cognition or deliberation.[63] Clichés become quick, reproducible shortcuts to a simulated auratic effect: an effect that immediately declines in significance and value. Indeed, for Benjamin the new mechanical media (specifically, film) reveal 'things which had previously floated unnoticed on the broad stream of perception';[64] but the mass detail captured in film produces a critical but *inattentive* audience (much like nineteenth-century archival practices, though by different means). 'The audience is an examiner', he concludes, 'but a distracted one'.[65] At first glance, Struever's claim that sound bites remained the permanent risk of any politics of invention – the 'quick exchange of deadening theoretical conformities' – appears to provide a firm conclusion to the historical context of the commonplace I sketched out above. In this vein, the time of modernity is one of an unending archive of documents of immanent reality, while the time of clichés is one that all too quickly passes from one document to the next, such that the life of the new becomes only the dead weight of the object that carries it.

But the problem with this conclusion is that it would maintain the cliché as a traditional object of study: that is, an object marked by difference. Once marked by such a difference, the timeliness of clichés not only leads to their depiction as throwaway terms – just as Struever's sound bites are depicted as transient and 'fashionable' – but also as immediately separable from any system of production or circulation. It is not surprising, then, that writing on clichés is so often characterized by quick, aloof and light-hearted remarks, which skip from one instance to the next, or by the tendency to identify them *only* in terms of their inevitable decline or separation from sense, just as dictionaries of clichés isolate specific phrases and meticulously track their origins, their uses and their eventual misuses. Each entry in a dictionary of clichés is an expression of the decline from meaningful use to arbitrary loss, which follows directly from the strategy, unashamedly rooted within the nineteenth-century urge to classify and contain all aspects of life, of seeking a masterful, totalizing view from everywhere; no inanity unseen, no platitude unexpected. Furthermore, such a fetishizing of the cliché presents a simple choice for its study: a somewhat jovial encyclopaedic pursuit (found in, e.g., Nigel Rees, John Rentoul and Walter Redfern[66]), or the pessimism of a future clichégenic tyranny (found in writers as diverse as Rémy de Gourmont in the nineteenth century, Zijderveld in the twentieth and Jonah Goldberg in

the twenty-first[67]), for which the time of clichés is too quick, concealing any number of sleights of hand, or unspoken, unthought movements.

If the auratic 'original' appears as a clear reference point that allows us to distinguish 'proper' discourse from the exchange of banal platitudes, then such an objectification of the cliché as different or separate seems entirely possible. But the reference point is far from clear. First, any attempt to locate any kind of original meaning is increasingly subverted with the development of particular modern printing and archival practices that give rise to redrawn boundaries between meaning, value and significance. Indeed, there remains a temporal ambiguity within Benjamin's writing over whether aura itself would be recognizable *without* the very mechanical reproduction that signals its loss. In many senses, aura is created as it is lost: despite its accompanying historical narrative, aura is always a *response to* the problem of the machine's sameness that Benjamin describes. Both platitude and profundity are carried by the technical, archival and demographic conditions that the study of the cliché expresses.

Second, as Groys notes, Benjamin's particular distinction between original and copy is formed largely by a presupposition that the space in which mechanical copies circulate is 'universal, neutral and homogenous'; as a result, Groys continues, Benjamin 'insists upon the visual recognisability, on the self-identity of a copy as it circulates in our contemporary culture'.[68] But as we have seen, such a space is in fact an amplified and intensified scene for the production of categories, 'topics' and meanings. Within such a scene, commonplaces routinely engage and disengage with sites of significance (as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argued) as well as with sites of repetition and banality and of suspicion and tyranny, as well as sites of harmless fun and intellectual laziness. The complex dislocating and relocating of such boundaries in modernity, increasing with the machinations of circulation itself – from paper documents to plate photography, from wider print media to digital networks, and so on – produces what Groys terms a 'topologically underdetermined, diasporic, profane' place;[69] a place that, unlike the clear repository of Aristotle's commonplaces, does nothing to *guarantee* any continuity between reproduction and original. Instead, it continues to produce forms of commonplace that are both old and new, commoditized and original, meaningful and functional.

As a consequence, when we sense (with some justification) that we still live in an age of inescapability from clichés – and that these clichés may well be taking aggressive, active and affective forms in the configurations of our social and personal lives – we need to resist the urge to simply impose the notions of progress and decay as our only barometers. Such barometers maintain an insistence on the nature of criticism, or novelty, or aura that can become reified in opposition to the cliché. However, as Groys notes:

> The readymade demonstrates right from the beginning that the question of 'meaning' is irrelevant. What matters instead is the question of placement, localization, displacement, and contextualization – that is, the operations beyond all signification that deal with signs as if they were 'meaningless' things.[70]

The meaning of the cliché involves a complex configuration of dislocating and relocating critical discourse in late modernity, a configuration that reflects the machinations of circulation itself: print media, digital networks and cultural archives. Such configurations emerge within particular sites of anti-philosophy, where the boundaries between philosophical meaning and non-meaning – and, in turn, between technological and human, archival and visible, intellectual and everyday – are contested, underdetermined and profaned within modernity. At these sites, the marking of cliché brings into view the everyday practices and conditions that resist the exclusivity of philosophical discourse. Nevertheless, such sites contribute significantly to that same discourse's unending struggle with the remarkable persistence of clichés.

NOTES

1. Ricks, 'Clichés', 54.
2. Rentoul, *The Banned List: A Manifesto against Jargon and Cliché*; Wheen, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions*; Enzenberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*; Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, esp. 131–136; Orwell, *Essays* – see chapter 2 of this book for a more detailed discussion of Orwell's arguments.
3. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 7–8.
4. Nicholas Bagnall makes an effort to distinguish cliché from these other forms, such as Flaubert's sense of a 'received idea', platitude and so on. However, while these ad hoc typologies serve to support Bagnall's rhetorical defence of the cliché, he is ultimately frustrated: 157 pages into his book, he admits that 'in the end we are not much nearer a satisfactory definition of the cliché than we were at the beginning', and that 'an agreed definition can never be possible, or even, dare I add, desirable'. *A Defense of Clichés*, 157.
5. Struever, *The History of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of History*, 80.
6. Derrida, *Psyche*, 301.
7. Boris Groys, *Art Power*, 24.
8. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version', 254.
9. Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 26.
10. Zijderveld, *On Clichés,* 36.
11. Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*, 149.

12. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', 254.
13. Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, 281.
14. Groys, *Going Public*, 124.
15. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 53.
16. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 10.
17. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 11.
18. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 58.
19. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 97.
20. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 104.
21. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 225.
22. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 5.
23. See Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*, 19; and Ricks, 'Clichés', 58.
24. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 100.
25. The peculiarity of this sameness is the really fascinating (and least discernible) aspect of cliché. It is the reflective undercurrent to the critiques of difference and identity that Gilles Deleuze puts forward in *Difference and Repetition*: but whereas for Deleuze difference was always subsumed by the Same in Western philosophy, this sameness does not constitute an identity (it is, in other words, not the same Same; it is the same, but different). In one sense, Zijderveld's notion of the clichégenic society is an almost accidental statement of logocentrism gone awry; but, interestingly, he does not go as far as to claim a metaphysical form of clichés. Despite articulating the cliché as a form of non-present presence, Zijderveld describes the clichégenic society as one where other presences – governing forces, strategic minds, and so on – use cliché as a tool of domination. In other words, a difference is necessarily restated in order to arrive at a meaningful conclusion. In this way, he withdraws from a radical treatment of cliché to a far more traditional one.
26. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', 252.
27. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 15.
28. McLuhan with Watson, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 44.
29. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xi.
30. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xi–xii.
31. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xi.
32. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists*, 33.
33. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 170; my emphasis.
34. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 5.
35. See, for example, Thomas Conley's *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* for an overview of the development of rhetoric from the Sophists to the twentieth century, using the principle that rhetoric becomes important at times of political or intellectual crisis; and Kathleen Welch's *The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric* for an account of the difference in contemporary approaches between those that interpret classical rhetoric as reflecting an objective and ordered reality, and those that engage with classical rhetoric in a more dialectical way.
36. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 71.
37. See Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*, 162–167 for a brief review of how the philosophical ideas of the early modern period effected a rejection of rhetoric.

38. Plato, *Protagoras* 313d; my emphasis.
39. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xvi.
40. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1354a1.
41. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b15–17.
42. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b18–22.
43. Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 5.11.41.
44. Ellen Quandhal notes that, for Aristotle, 'taking terms that contemporaries were discussing and using them newly . . . is typical' ('Aristotle's Rhetoric: Reinterpreting Invention', 129). For this reason, Kennedy points out that 'it is desirable not to use "commonplace" as a translation for Aristotle's common topic, since that will create confusion with the kind of commonplace found in sophistry or secondary rhetoric throughout classical literature' (*Classical Rhetoric*, 71). In other words, the common translation of Aristotle's 'common topic' is misleading because it is, ironically, too common.
45. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1358a21.
46. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 85.
47. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric*, 83.
48. The need for this purpose to be shaped and articulated is amplified in late antiquity by what Ernst Robert Curtius describes as 'the most influential development in the history of antique rhetoric', that is, the removal of judicial and political genres of oratory from the 'political reality' of statecraft, following the end of the Roman Republic. Once rhetoric was freed to apply to any subject, and 'penetrated into all literary genres', the topoi take on a different function, which is now far more dispersed than their original purpose. As a result, Curtius suggests, contradicting Kennedy, 'they become clichés, which can be used in any form of literature, . . . [and] spread to all spheres of life with which literature deals and gives form'. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 70.
49. See Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes.* For a fuller discussion of Paulhan's account of terror, see chapter 4 of this book.
50. Spieker, *The Big Archive,* 30–31; my emphasis.
51. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation Vol. 2*, 74.
52. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation Vol. 2*, 439–440.
53. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 83; see chapter 3 of this book for a fuller discussion of Nietzsche's essay.
54. Spieker, *The Big Archive,* 32.
55. Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 33.
56. Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 33.
57. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 84.
58. Brooks and Warren. *Modern Rhetoric*, 420.
59. Brooks and Warren, *Modern Rhetoric*, 421.
60. Gibbs, *Backward Ran Sentences*, 649.
61. Derrida notes that the comedic qualities of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* lie not with their ignorance (they are, after all, well-read; this is the central juxtaposition of Flaubert's humour), but 'rather in a certain acceleration, in a certain rhythm to their

philosophical assimilation, in the speed with which they examine, manipulate, and substitute ideas, systems, proofs, and so on' (*Psyche*, 304–305).

62. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', 253, 254.
63. Zijderveld, *On Clichés,* 24.
64. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', 265.
65. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', 269.
66. Rees, *The Joy of Clichés*; Rentoul, *The Banned List*; Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*.
67. Gourmont describes clichés as words that bypass a person's conscience (*Le Probléme du Style*, 48). As Paulhan summarizes, for Gourmont 'the author of commonplace expressions gives in to the power of words [and] … to the influence of language' (*The Flowers of Tarbes*, 20). Goldberg critiques American liberals and progressives for imposing a form of tyranny on political discourse, whereby the possibility of disagreement is closed down by the repeated usage of some clichéd terms, and the condemnation of others (*The Tyranny of Clichés,* 21–24).
68. Groys, *Going Public,* 65.
69. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy,* 102.
70. Groys, *Under Suspicion*, 139.

Chapter 2

Dead Spaces

Arendt, Orwell and the Morbidity of Political Clichés

> 'A cliché is not a half-dead metaphor; it is rather one that refuses to die.'
>
> – Lawrence Lerner, 'Clichés and Commonplaces'.

If, traditionally, clichés have not been taken seriously as an object of in-depth analysis, this has not stopped them from being associated with very serious responses. Throughout modernity and beyond, clichés have been derided not only for being stupid or lazy but also for being *dangerous*. Accounts of clichés are often preoccupied with their heralding of the decay or death of language or the looming threat of something terrifying being concealed among the banal. This is the sense in which cliché becomes a political issue: the threat of clichés seem to operate from a space somewhere between *elocutio* and *inventio*, somewhere between metaphor and commonplace, and somewhere between democracy (the cliché as 'a reminder of the radically social character of language'[1]) and tyranny (the cliché as a 'form of brainwashing'[2]). Regardless of whether clichés are dim or despotic, it makes sense to try to understand what kind of morbid space this is and its operation within the limits of political discourse.

Helpfully, for our purposes, there are two common reference points for just such a concern. Despite their differences in length, purpose and context, Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and George Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English Language' have long been the touchstones for defences of politics against the danger of clichés. This derives from their shared focus on three issues, which we can formulate as questions for this chapter: first, what is at stake when clichés enter the sphere of the political?

Second, what kind of space does cliché occupy in political discourse once it has entered? Third, what is the association between this space and death?

Orwell and Arendt's texts offer a level of detail, and a number of significant complications, beyond many of the more instinctive responses these three questions may prompt. For example, take political commentator John Rentoul's book *The Banned List*; a collection of 'linguistic atrocities', which is 'reserved for those [words] that grate, or that are wrong; […] for jargon so foolish that it impedes communication; and for stock phrases that betray an insulting lack of thought'.[3] Words and phrases appear on Rentoul's banned list for at least three reasons: 'not being sure about what one is saying; wanting to be part of the in-crowd; and a lack of time'.[4] We could add an implicit fourth: the increasing transmission of political doctrines through bludgeoning mantras.[5] These four reasons suggest that when clichés abound, genuine political convictions may turn out to be only ciphers that create illusions of agreement and conformity. What is at stake, then, is the *character of political* as an authentic and meaningful sphere. If clichés introduce into politics the perpetuation of certain discourses through uncritical recitation only, with the true meaning lost or non-apparent, then this also suggests what the space clichés occupy is. It would either be, first, a noticeable vacuity within the broader space of political debate, rather than a space of its own; that is, simply empty words, which carry no inherent political meaning (as Goldberg argues in his critique of liberal rhetoric).[6] Or, second, it would be a representative space, distinguished from other representative spaces within the political sphere by virtue of its signifying some kind of generalized unit (a viewpoint, a policy, etc.) that loses its persuasiveness once its generalization is broken down into detail (as Rentoul and others attempt to). Such a generalized representative space has an appeal, of course: it rubs shoulders and intermingles with the space of slogans and soundbites.[7]

This answer to our first two questions – that political clichés introduce, and enable, laziness, ignorance and propaganda – is fine, *so long as* we think of clichés purely in terms of their utterance by a particular speaker. This allows us to locate the apparent effectiveness of the cliché at its source of production and confers on the soundbite and the slogan an unchanging repetitive power. In effect, it reduces the cliché to something small – an uttered phrase – and in doing so, the sheer triviality of highlighting the endless soundbites of the ruling elite with scathing satire becomes manifest (hence Rentoul's recurrent apologies for pedantry in his anti-jargon crusade).

But overall, this response falls short of what we are looking for. The general fact that political figures repeat certain mantras to the point of saturation is irritating, but not that interesting. Nor does its existence as a fact help us to understand the *affective* space the cliché occupies in political discourse, which our third question alludes to in terms of its morbidity. As Lerner

argued, clichés are more than simple repetition.[8] It seems better, following the discussion in chapter 1, to suggest that what makes clichés 'political' is, rather, their *tactical* employment within particular events, which is to say, their appearance within relationships, atmospheres and configurations of practice. In this sense, neither the uttering of clichés nor their critique is what makes clichés political, per se. Rather, articulating the place of clichés in political discourse means examining the sites of practice where clichés take political effect. In effect, this is to ask what constitutes the commonplace of the political cliché; a concern that in many senses provides Arendt and Orwell's texts their depth and longevity, not to mention their controversy.

ARENDT: BANALITY, EVIL AND AESTHETICS

What, then, is at stake in Arendt's well-known collection of *New Yorker* articles on the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann? The answer is found early on. 'Justice insists on the importance of Adolf Eichmann', Arendt writes. But as the trial progresses, Adolf Eichmann seems only to insist on his unimportance.[9] He does this, not by way of pleading innocence within justice (that he was just following orders, e.g., as was the plea heard in the Nuremberg trials) or placing himself outside of justice (by refusing the authority of the court, or of the state), or, indeed, by any wilful or assertive act. Rather, Eichmann is immersed completely in the machinery of totalitarian bureaucracy. He thus embodies middle-management par excellence: 'Officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché.'[10] His soundbites render language meaningless: even when he employs words that aren't actual clichés, he repeats them so much that they become one. This is exacerbated by his attempts to *sound* meaningful: he uses the term *geflügelte worte* – a term for famous quotes from the classics – to refer to stock phrases or slogans. 'The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.'[11]

Eichmann's jargon steps away from justice at the very moment it insists on his importance: a symptom of a nightmarishly bureaucratic de-socializing political structure that replaces the authentic demands of responsibility and justice. He is not insane and claims to have no intrinsic or pathological hatred of the Jewish people.[12] In fact, he appeals to his own 'normality' in order to evoke sympathy. But it is precisely this normality – this banality – which renders his participation in the holocaust so difficult to conceptualize.[13] As Bernstein suggests, when 'we tend to think of good and evil in absolute terms – as a stark dichotomy', we assume that if 'one commits "monstrous

deeds" as Eichmann did, then one *must* be a monster or demonic', whereas Eichmann presents evil, not as radical or unintelligible but rather by assimilating and absorbing the very discourse of responsibility, returning it to his audience in vacuous and generic responses. Evil can be, in certain situations, entirely normal.[14]

The traditional view, then, is that what is at stake in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a question of whether evil can, in fact, be banal and whether efficient bureaucratic activity alone can produce mass genocide.[15] This raises some obvious headline topics for further discussion: evil, justice, responsibility and the role of repetitive and mechanical practices within all three. Beyond this, though, there remains no strong agreement across in the secondary literature on what *specifically* is at stake when the cliché enters politics. Literature has instead tended to focus on Eichmann's culpability, and the extent to which Arendt denies or affirms this.[16] Was he seduced by the clichés of Nazism, embracing completely the stupidity of the regime's doctrines? Did he use clichés to his own ends, by hiding his culpability? None of this is answerable from Arendt's text itself, meaning that the book remains controversial on a number of different strata.[17] While this is not the place to recount all of these controversies, it is useful to note some points on the continuum of responses to the book in order to address our specific question of what is at stake when the cliché enters the political: from outright rejection of Arendt's attention to clichés, to clichés as a signpost to deeper considerations, and finally the suggestion that some kind of theoretical position towards cliché is discernible.

At one end of the continuum, there is the accusation that Arendt's focus on clichés trivializes a deeply serious moral debate. Certainly, the immediate critical response to Arendt's book positioned the cliché as merely an aesthetic concern, distinct from the political space in which the trial of a Nazi war criminal occurs.[18] In some cases, this position accuses Arendt of speculative and inconclusive pop-political science. Presenting Eichmann as one who simple regurgitates Nazi platitudes and was 'unable to think' for himself appears to excuse the man of his actions. Arguing that evil has to be neither radical or intentional seemed at odds with her a-theoretical reportage. Her brief treatment of the legitimacy of the trial early on in the book sits awkwardly with her criticisms of the Jewish judges at its end. What if she was duped by Eichmann's performance? What if the everyday banality of Eichmann's jargonized chatter was simply a cover to be removed – as Bettina Stangneth's detailed investigation into Eichmann's documented life in Argentina argues, showing that his anti-Semitism was far deeper-rooted and aggressive than Arendt ever considered?[19] In such cases, clichés are no more than mirages that Arendt gave too much weight to, and in doing so ignored the more serious points the trial raised. At the same time, if we reject aesthetics altogether,

then what is at stake in the trial will have always been at stake regardless of Eichmann's clichés; so our question remains unanswered.

That said, Arendt's position *vis a vis* the trial remains ambiguous, which has a corresponding effect in judging the stakes of the book. In an interview with Günther Gaus, she revealed that while studying thousands of pages of transcript of the trial, she repeatedly 'broke out into loud laughter about the peculiar stupidity that had exercised control over innumerable lives'.[20] She once wrote to her friend Mary McCarthy: 'You were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted – namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria'.[21] Whatever constituted this euphoria has struggled to translate into the more 'serious' interpretations of the book. Thus, further along the continuum of responses, much of the literature filters the aesthetic elements for the sake of identifying just such a serious theoretical analysis.[22]

A net effect of this filtering is to produce a noticeable emphasis on what is *not* written, or what is given insufficient attention, in the book itself. Indeed, when literature claims to show what Arendt's writing is *really* about (for the sake of positing a serious theoretical position), we often find the book left to one side. Similarly, the more recent celebration of Arendt as an icon of best critical practice in the face of rising populism has seen her become a representative of a particular form of liberal intellectualist democracy, regardless of whether this is manifest in her Jerusalem report or not.[23] Perhaps this always remained a risk for a writer so taken with the aesthetics of the trial, hence Gershom Scholem's criticisms of Arendt for sloganizing 'the banality of evil', and thus rendering it meaningless.[24] Yet, when bypassing the charge of aestheticism by presenting Arendt as a champion of anti-clichéd thought, a further aestheticism can take hold: a certain trite aesthetic of *criticality* itself. Take the following summary of Arendt's critique of clichés, for example:

> Arendt relentlessly questions common language, and without having a clear analytical approach (at least, without announcing one) she critiques, and criticizes, almost every moral and political concept that plays part in the trial – law, state, citizenship, order, collaboration, evil, resistance, justice, legitimacy. These concepts are destabilized by her up to the point where none of them could be easily defined and agreed upon unreflectively. The artificial safety Eichmann surrounds himself with by using clichés, and the certainty that the court promised to deliver through appropriate legal procedure, are destroyed by Arendt, who keeps on asking difficult questions.[25]

The heroism ascribed to Arendt here – relentlessly questioning! Destroying the artificial! destabilizing concepts! – is in stark contrast to the models of heroism Arendt herself describes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. These are

limited to the figures of Jewish heroism put forward by the prosecution (which Arendt treats with suspicion) and Eichmann's 'heroic fight'[26] with the German language. Instead, this rather-too-familiar line drawn between the critical thinker (Arendt) and the harbinger of clichés (Eichmann) constitutes far more of an 'artificial safety' than what surrounds Eichmann. Indeed, assuming that Eichmann *himself* constructs this space – as, for example, Rei Terada does by arguing that Eichmann resorts to commonplaces to 'protect against reality, that is, against the claim on [the] thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence'[27] – is already to grant clichés the status of *tools*, and to Eichmann a certain poetic capability with respect to them. This has the effect of affirming them as simply linguistic units; but does so *at the very point* they are asked to go much, much further into the realm of political morality and legal certainty. The cliché is reduced to a manageable utility (a defence mechanism), while at the same time the significance and reach of its effects is increased well beyond this kind of single use (a symptom of genocide). This seems to be more of a symptom of the question of what is at stake when clichés enter politics, rather than an answer.

Such artificiality stems from a need to position Eichmann's clichés in relation to critical thought, without attending to the topology of the spaces they occupy. Jakob Norberg points out that 'the cliché becomes recognizable as a problem in the passage of time, through repetitions that indicate and embody socially prevailing notions'.[28] As such, Eichmann's space within the trial, not to mention the spatiality of the trial itself, become crucial to the way in which both the trial's clichés, and its uncertain of political concepts, emerge during the course of events. In this way, Norberg's work sits at the far end of this continuum of responses, arguing that Arendt's book does, in fact, proffer an implicit theory of the cliché. But in order to find such a reading, it is necessary, as Norberg suggests, to look at the clichés *as they appear*; which includes the aesthetics of the cliché as well as the broader relationship to politics:

> Arendt may have been accused of aestheticism and superficiality when she remarked on the sheer banality of Eichmann's speech, but in a sense, she had in her book already charged psychology for not being sufficiently superficial. Those who try to interpret Eichmann's speech in some way are not shallow enough to linger only on what is being said, without seeking to push beyond it to identify hidden or unconscious motivations and desires.[29]

In this sense, answering our first question hinges on the answer to our second: if we really want to know what is at stake when clichés enter politics, and not simply the stakes that might be alluded to by their presence, then

we must first understand the space they occupy in all their immediacy and banality.

ORWELL: MAKING LANGUAGE MATTER

Fifteen years before *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, George Orwell had also attempted to place the cliché in relation to political discourse in his essay *Politics and the English Language*. This has proved a far less controversial text, although its brevity and format have also led to less critical interpretation (certainly compared to the discussions around the relationship between language and politics in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). It should also be noted that, as ardent as Orwell was on the importance of clear writing, it has not stopped the legacy of Orwell's name referencing *both* a defiant seeker of the truth present reality *and* a speculative prophet of a contemporary culture he would never know;[30] or the neologism 'Orwellian' coming to mean *both* totalitarian politics *and* the intellectual honesty that promises to prevent it.[31] Nevertheless, what is at stake in Orwell's essay is ostensibly familiar. The political implications of clichés are rooted in both the writer's lack of thought, and the danger of words being separated from their original meaning, leaving them open to appeal to other meanings that are less sense-worthy. He concludes that language is 'an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought', and thus 'one ought to recognise that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring some improvement by starting at the verbal end'.[32]

At first, this may resemble the account of political cliché we encountered at the start of the chapter: that is, that clichés are stupid and meaningless. But there is something more specific at work in Orwell's essay. Fundamentally, it argues that language *matters*. However, the lack of interest in the materiality of the words – the world they are reflecting, and the original reference they arise from – erodes this mattering, and the result is an obscured creation of perverted and meaningless terms. While in other essays Orwell would attribute this to an apathetic audience – 'any writer or journalist who wants to retain his integrity finds himself thwarted by the general drift of society rather than by active persecution'[33] – here, writers themselves are charged with refusing to take an interest in the work they produce:

> Many [metaphors] are used without knowledge of their meaning […], and incompatible metaphors are frequently mixed, a sure sign that the writer is not interested in what he is saying. Some metaphors now current have been twisted out of their original meaning without those who use them even being aware of the fact. […] [A] writer who stopped to think what he was saying would avoid perverting the original phrase.[34]

Orwell's examples of the decay of language are noticeable for being utterly mundane, at least in comparison to the more grandiose title of the essay. He gives an example of people writing 'tow the line' rather than 'toe the line', and 'the hammer breaks the anvil' rather than the other way around. These are tedious enough that they will slip by the disinterested writer. This, in turn, re-enforces an apathy towards language and further enforces their apathy. Just as clichés become problematic in the space in between being completely new (and thus evoking an image) and dead (thus becoming an unused phrase), so too does the careless writer create problems when their readership encounters thoughts that merely pretend to think. Orwell thus laments:

> modern writing at its worst does not consist of picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug.[35]

According to C. Namwali Serpell, Arendt takes Orwell's concern that ready-made phrases will speak and think for their user without them even realizing to its 'logical conclusion'.[36] Indeed, Arendt's suggestion that Eichmann was not stupid, but instead *thoughtless*,[37] would seem to echo Orwell's polemic directly. However, this should not overlook the tactical difference between the two. If *Eichmann in Jerusalem* inserts an erstwhile aesthetic concern into the seriousness of a political trial, the task of Orwell's essay is effectively to insert politics into the everyday circulation of language and to demonstrate the potentially serious outcomes of banal aesthetics. The problem is not just the tedium of everyday platitudes, so much as the slow disintegration of these stock phrases into something unrelated to their original. At this point, the everyday ceases to be a *genuine* banality and becomes instead a performance or enactment of a meaning that is determined by someone other than the writer (by a political group, for example), without the writer caring to notice. Because of this, Orwell's essay is always poised on the notion that 'if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought'.[38] On the one hand, while not reducible to language, Orwell's 'political reality cannot exist apart from the language by which this reality is described'.[39] On the other hand, 'political and economic' aspects influence the decay of language.[40]

As such, what is at stake in his essay is the formation of a politics via the re-establishment of a boundary between proper meaning (which is meaningful and 'alive') and nonsensical meaning (which is between life and death). Orwell's concern, he argues, 'has nothing to do with archaism, with the salvaging of obsolete words […] or with the setting-up of a 'standard English' which must never be departed from. On the contrary, it is especially concerned with the scrapping of every word or idiom which has outworn

its usefulness'.[41] In doing so, he both creates the conditions for an authentic politics and issues a normative command to his audience to act (and speak) on one side of the boundary rather than the other. Once again, the question of what is at stake when clichés enter politics is determined by what space they occupy: the point Orwell stresses is that the boundary has a proper *place*, which is established by, first, the original sense of phrases and, second, a list of six rules that will reverse the decline in language use by erecting the boundary between useful sense and meaninglessness.

EICHMANN'S LAST CLICHÉ

What kind of space does cliché occupy in political discourse, then? Arendt's book presents not one but two such spaces, which are seen when comparing the opening of the trial with the closing scenes of Eichmann's execution.

First space. At the beginning of the trial, Eichmann himself occupies a space marked out by physical boundaries. As Mirjam Wenzel describes, this setting adopts the central paradigms of theatre.[42] The court holds a 750-seat auditorium and has been modified to allow foreign journalists to watch from outside.[43] Television cameras are set up to record the proceedings for the world. The walls of the courtroom mark out the space for Eichmann to exist in as a political actor: framed, representative, set apart by bulletproof glass. If Arendt finds objections to the trial itself relatively insignificant,[44] she nevertheless stresses the importance of the trial being a *performance*. His part in the proceedings is fully determined before the trial has begun:

> This audience […] was filled with 'survivors', with middle-aged and elderly people, immigrants from Europe, like myself, who knew by heart all there was to know, and who were in no mood to learn any lessons and certainly did not need this trial to draw their own conclusions. As witness followed witness and horror was piled upon horror […] and the more grandiose [the prosecutor] Mr. Hausern's rhetoric became, the paler and more ghostlike became the figure in the glass booth, and no finger-wagging: 'And there sits the monster responsible for all this', could shout him back to life.[45]

This is a dead space: the corpse-like Eichmann is there to *represent*: not only legally, but visually and historically for the unfolding theatrics. As Susan Sontag noted, 'The truth is that the Eichmann trial did not, and could not have conformed to legal standards only [...] The function of the trial was rather that of the tragic drama: above and beyond judgment, catharsis'. For Sontag, this was theatre in the 'profoundest sense'.[46] The trial provides, in Shoshana Felman's borrowing of Nietzsche's term, a 'monumental' dimension to the

history of the Nazi regime, whereby the human realities of the holocaust were laid bare before television cameras.[47]

This first space is constituted by the materiality of the courtroom, which in turn distinguishes the clichés which are on trial – those uttered by Eichmann – and the other commonplaces which otherwise flow throughout the trial. And there are many of these. Arendt notes how the prosecutor asks questions of Israeli heroism, ignoring the role of complicity on all sides, and this commonplace sense of heroism – autonomous, driven by noble ideologies and with a preordained success – mixes with the curious ready-to-hand version of the holocaust the audience already knows and expects.[48] Her attempts to summarize the trial's events while resisting those automatic terms – 'horrors of the gas chamber', 'Nazi death machine' and so on – are problematized by the trial's audience, who expect these to be repeated, and repeated again. Yet the material separation of Eichmann from the rest of the court allows the performance of his clichés a different status to those of the surrounding courtroom. The prosecution commonplaces are a necessary part of the trial's proceedings, whereas Eichmann's clichés are the awkward obstacle to the resolution the performance of the trial wants.[49]

Second space. As he prepares to die, Eichmann is removed from the courtroom boundaries. Now, the location is unremarked on, and the space he occupies is framed only by his final words, which, predictably, are nothing more than regurgitated clichés. This, however, provides him with a kind of protection against the horror of his impending execution. The man who has been all but lifeless while occupying the first space of the defence box now shows a vitality linked to the sense of elation using clichés gives him.[50] 'In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was "elated" and he forgot that this was his own funeral'.[51]

He has also evaded judgement: not through clever tricks of legal rhetoric, but from the abandonment of his personal autonomy to the last letter of his orders. Not only was it the case that 'Eichmann had undergone such a radical loss of his identity […] that it had become impossible to find him guilty as charged';[52] for Arendt, the court itself used 'inadequate juristic concepts'[53] to account for the new kind of banal evil Eichmann personified. In just about every sense, Eichmann's end is disappointing in relation to the performance of the trial. Some members of the public called the death sentence 'unimaginative'. Others said it was 'pointless' for a single death sentence for the magnitude of the crimes committed.[54]

In her postscript, Arendt comments:

> And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far

> from calling it commonplace. It surely cannot be so common that a man facing death, and, moreover, standing beneath the gallows, should be able to think of nothing but what he has heard at funerals all his life, and that these 'lofty words' should completely becloud the reality of his own death. That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreck more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.[55]

As Arendt makes clear here, this second space is also a 'dead space', but unlike the first space, it is not constituted by the court or by the processes of politics. Instead, its boundaries are demarcated by clichés themselves and result in a bizarre scene that, as Arendt notes, *cannot* be called commonplace despite its saturation with repeated phrases. Clearly, her description of the 'remoteness from reality' connects to the crimes for which Eichmann was guilty. But this is not simply a denial of reality. Instead, the cliché space created by Eichmann's actions at his execution constitute an event in and of itself and hence, refuses to admit the type of closure that an explanation or theory might provide.

'THE PROCESS IS REVERSIBLE'

At first sight, Orwell's essay may not lend itself to the kind of theatrical scenes that allow the two dead spaces of political clichés to emerge in Arendt's text. However, just such a division of space occurs, and is, indeed, key to its argument. While ostensibly they follow Arendt's topology, they appear in the reverse order. The second half of Orwell's essay reflects Arendt's first space, where a political order is described based on the space of the English language, and the cliché is confined to merely representing what must be removed from meaningful discourse. The first half, conversely, presents a space where ordering fails and clichés run amok.

This becomes clearer by briefly recounting the overarching structure of the essay. The essay begins with an acknowledgement that 'English language is in a bad way' and criticizes the 'half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth', and likewise the belief that it cannot be shaped for our own purposes, whether harnessing this decline or reversing it.[56] This is not the case, Orwell suggests: the process *is* reversible. He then provides five examples of different writing vices, a 'mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence' which allows him to diagnose four 'tricks', or 'swindles and perversions' for 'habitually' dodging the heavy work of writing prose.[57]

Having established the main errors through empirical and anecdotal examples, Orwell then moves on to examples of his own creation. He first

translates a Biblical passage (as an example of good literature) into 'modern' jargon-infused language in order to point out their differences. From here, he moves on to examples of political writing. Whereas previous examples were identified as cases of writers trying to save time but losing clarity in the process, Orwell asserts that political writing itself has become 'largely the defence of the indefensible';[58] 'designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable'.[59] Vague and euphemistic meaning benefits the perpetrators of tyranny (bombing villages is described as pacification, and so on). Orwell thus returns to his initial premise – that the process is reversible – by pointing out that the 'conscious action of a minority' has already rid the English language of several silly phrases and 'fly-blown metaphors'.[60] However, targeting individual phrases – and driving out foreign phrases completely – is only a small aspect of what amounts to the 'defence of the English language'. The bigger point is to 'let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about'.[61] To lay the foundations for this, Orwell presents six rules: not using stale metaphors; not using long words where short ones will do; cutting out any words where possible; never using a passive where an active can be used; not using foreign, scientific or jargon words if there is an 'everyday English equivalent'; and finally 'break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous'.[62]

This produces a distinctive space of an English language that maintains the truth and legitimacy of the political. The need to use 'everyday English equivalents', for example, is a simple plea for simplicity of expression; but at the same time cannot escape the spatial metaphor that brings together a geography, culture and language (particularly when all of Orwell's rules are underwritten by the caveat that they can be broken to avoid anything *barbarous* – thus associating Englishness with civilization itself).[63] From this, it is clearer how Orwell's essay mirrors the path that Arendt takes. In the Eichmann trial, the cliché is contained by the processes and procedures of the court; when it breaks out of these, the court's effectiveness is undermined. Orwell begins by noting how the decay of language undermines politics, before rebuilding the processes and procedures to keep clichés contained. While Arendt describes the courtroom and the enclosed space it allows for Eichmann's clichés, Orwell lays out his borders for proper language use in this latter half of his essay, which appears at the point he begins to discuss the politics of language. In doing so, he is drawing on the same Aristotelian distinction that Arendt does (most notably in *The Human Condition*, but throughout her work), whereby the 'proper' political order is directed towards living the good life, in contrast to the more basic order of life within social interaction: the distinction between *eu zēn* and *zēn*.[64] Therefore, when Orwell notes that 'all issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia',[65] it is clear that what he refers to

as 'politics' is a use of language that turns us away from the political and the good it might achieve. As such, the political nature of all issues must be saved from politics-as-it-exists by a stronger foundation of genealogy and reference (the material archives of linguistic sense), attentive writing (retaining the sense of writing as a practice that cannot be circumvented by laziness), and, of course, a sense of English-ness that defines the English language (including the exclusion of any 'foreign' words). Clichés are, in this space, nothing less than a profane invasion; but an invasion that can be easily identified and cornered through the application of 'elementary' rules.

But just as with Arendt's second space of clichés, Orwell's initial account of the decay of language is problematic and puzzling. Consider two of the 'tricks' he identifies in contemporary writing:

> *Dying metaphors*. A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image, while on the other hand a metaphor which is technically 'dead' (e.g. *iron resolution*) has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness. But in between these two classes there is a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves.[66]
>
> *Meaningless words.* In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning. […] [T]hey not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly even expected to do so by the reader. When one critic writes, 'The outstanding feature of Mr X's work is its living quality', while another writes, 'The immediately striking thing about Mr X's work is its peculiar deadness', the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like black and white were involved, instead of the jargon words dead and living, he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way.[67]

The choice of dead and living to illustrate 'jargon words' is noticeable, given that Orwell has appeared to use just these same words himself to describe worn-out metaphors. In fact, this juxtaposition helps to illustrate the kind of space from which clichés appear in this part of his essay. One may, of course, have sympathy with Orwell's point that certain terms are used to impress meaning where there is none (all the more so if one is accustomed to sitting through whole conferences of papers regurgitating the standard promises to innovate, subvert, expose and so on). Yet, there are reasons for certain jargon words circulating, and these are not always due to laziness or apathy. Walter Nash once commented that 'there is a social origin of jargon which has less to do with pursuing a profession [i.e. adopting specialist language] than with the masquerade of assuming a role'; or asserting membership of

a particular group by 'showing, through your language, that you have paid your dues, of sense, of sympathy, of sycophancy'.[68] Indeed, Clifford Geertz has argued that anthropologically, clichés hold a 'common sense wisdom' which he describes as 'shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc. It comes in epigrams, proverbs, obiter dicta, jokes, anecdotes, contes morals – a clatter of gnomic utterances – not in formal doctrines, axiomised theories, or architectonic dogmas'.[69] As such, there is a quality of catachresis at work: something irreducible about the cliché that cannot be limited to verbal or written 'expressions', or to a knowing explanation of what such an expression really means, because they are themselves caught up within other expressions, performances, rituals and habits that are obscured by focusing on the word alone.

This is precisely why Orwell can use 'dying metaphor' in one passage in the context of bad writing (i.e. a context where 'worn' and 'dying' have been tropes for describing clichés long before Orwell wrote his essay), and chide the use of 'life and death' in the context of the faux-seriousness of critical jargon. As Serpell notes, *contra* Orwell, 'a cliché never gets fully 'worn out'; the moment it does, it loses its recognisability'.[70] In doing so, clichés remind us of the 'incessant materiality' of all language, and their benefit to localized communication. This is why it is notable that Orwell only uses actual, existing examples in this half of the essay (while in the second half he creates his own), and that the examples he does use are so banal. What Orwell describes is effectively an everyday space where propriety is determined by the flow and pace of social groups, but flows and paces which are inextricable from the clichés and commonplaces being targeted in the essay. No surprise, then, that the essay requires two distinct 'spaces': one for empirical banalities and one for the exemplary lies of politics.

THE UNDEAD CLICHÉ

The answer to our second question is now in sight. For both writers, there is a construction of a political space, ordered and boundaried, where the cliché appears as an obstacle to the political. This is placed next to a second space, where we see the cliché usurping such an order and potentially following another of its own making. Serpell's earlier claim that Arendt takes Orwell's argument to its logical conclusion perhaps turns out to be a good description: in many senses, Arendt's articulation of the clichés at work in Eichmann's trial allow an extreme version of the tensions present in Orwell's polemic. This is clearer if we turn to our final question about the association between the cliché and death, and unpack this 'dead space' further.

This association is seen in both texts first and foremost as the dissolution of 'life' within the political sphere. The first space of clichés in Arendt's text

constitutes a museological framing of Eichmann. He occupies the contained space of an artefact of guilt. While the court initially wants a monstrous villain to emerge, as Arendt details, this space represents the bureaucratic commonplace, which Groys summarizes:

> The archivists and bureaucrats in charge of documentation are widely regarded as the enemies of true life, favoring the compilation and administration of dead documents over the direct experience of life. In particular, the bureaucrat is viewed as an agent of death who wields the chilling power of documentation to render life grey, monotonous, uneventful, and bloodless – in a word, deathlike.[71]

This commonplace finds its clearest expression in Zygmant Bauman's reading of the holocaust, where individuals working in the Nazi Party are complicit in mass murder while 'sitting at their desks',[72] and the bureaucratic procedures of classifying, labelling and separating leads to a failure to 'perceive and remember' the human beings behind the technical jargon.[73] It is Eichmann's readiness to adopt stock phrases that make him ideal to engage with bodies outside of the Third Reich (such as the Swiss Red Cross), where the language of murder is replaced with 'official-ese', to avoid what was happening in the camps becoming known.[74] The processing of perpetual clichés immunizes Eichmann from other views. Norberg suggests that this marks

> the moments in which Eichmann's blindness to the plurality of views becomes aesthetically manifest through the sheer dullness and repetitiousness of his speech. Arendt's preoccupation with his blindness to contention also illuminates her view of the political rather than simply moral nature of his crime: the source of Eichmann's guilt is his impenetrable ignorance of the plurality constitutive of politics.[75]

Bauman argues that such bureaucratic processes create specific territories that the 'everyday' has no access to; purpose-built commonplaces which facilitate a double organization: first, the division between the vitality of the everyday and the restriction of the bureaucratic; second, the triumph of administration over activity which instigates and perpetuates this division. When this territory is represented from the defence box, the clichéd bureaucrat is the singular enemy of the political. Embedded in the stock language of clichés, Eichmann is unable to identify any tension or contestation to the actions taking place around him. There are no different viewpoints to consider, and no dissent to reproach. Because the cliché is effectively accepted speech within a given group, it does not allow for alternative positions; Eichmann has never been 'outside' of a limited bureaucratic frame of the world, producing a mind 'so thickly coated as to repel completely the intrusion of alternative views on

any given matter, the actual grasp of which might have complicated the strict adherence to rules channelled from above'.[76]

It might be tempting to summarize this as a somewhat familiar conclusion: clichés drain politics of life by removing meaningful reference to reality; political life is thus sustained while clichés are killed off. But based on the understanding that clichés operate in more than one 'space' within the political sphere, there are some further considerations to make before we settle on this. While the presence of clichés in political discourse may remove the plurality of possible viewpoints, this removal is only the conclusion of a prior mechanism: on a more practical level; in both Arendt and Orwell's texts, the dissolution of political life is premised on the loss, or contestation, of *memory*. As Norberg noted, it is the repetition of words through the passage of time that makes the cliché irritating; not only because it reveals a certain acceptance of unchallengeable truths about reality (which does not correspond to the reality Eichmann is face with) but also because it shows a lack of awareness that the same words are being used in succession. As such, within the first space, it is the loss of memory which renders the cliché a danger to the political. For Orwell, this is as simple as a writer forgetting that meaning should choose the word, and not the other way around; which then leads to the misappropriation of language which is unaware of the roots of its correct usage. For Arendt, Eichmann's inability to remember forms a key part of his guilt.[77] The clichés Eichmann utters are summoned by the court to represent the mechanisms of murder at work in the Nazi regime.

Yet, here lies a problem. For all that, it has been invoked as a representative form throughout the trial, *the cliché cannot represent*, at least in the way that the court insists on it. Instead, it can only repeat. This is not to say that Eichmann has no memory: after all, it is precisely the memory of clichéd funeral oratories which allows Eichmann to 'forget' his own death within the second space. Instead, Arendt notes, his memory 'was certainly not controlled by chronological order, but it was not simply erratic. It was like a storehouse, filled with human-interest stories of the worst type'.[78] When pressed on his activities in Vienna around the planning of the Final Solution, Eichmann remembers playing bowls, but not his discussion of the camps.[79] He recollects nothing more in the world beyond the immediacy of the game; just as endlessly repeating his annoyance at being passed over for promotion in the Nazi Party obscures his recollection of anything the party was doing. It seems to be more the case that the cliché fails to 'represent' in the political sphere precisely because it operates at a level of a certain *cultural memory* – not of grand culture, but of the repetitive circulation and banal exchanges that this involves; human interest 'of the worst type' – rather than an individual, agential narrative. And hence, the second space presents a curiously undead

vitality which refuses to be reduced to one order of memory, and rather takes on a form of commonality that refuses to yield to the political.

In this sense, the first space – a space where the cliché is upheld as that which must be removed, in order to save the vitality of the political – cannot, ultimately, 'kill' the cliché. The cliché's lack of distinct memory may suggest the death of political discourse, but this overlooks the life that its alternate form of memory, based on the circulation and practice of words, provides. This is why, when Orwell wants to re-establish a referential standard for language, his rules are destined to fail because this is not how clichés work.[80] Indeed, on his own account, clichés are initially too banal to be noticed as bad writing, or, consequently, as politically effective. In order to rectify this closer attention is needed, and this is done by drawing sharper lines between correct and incorrect usage. These boundaries of meaning establish the cliché as a political issue. But this also *removes* the banality from the cliché that allows it to take effect in the second space. The boundaries of the first space are presented as 'elementary' common sense, so the original space in which the cliché operates is smothered. Consequently, the cliché has to be kept alive within this space, precisely in order to show its potential threat: hence, the examples Orwell provides in this half of the essay become far more tyrannical. Politics forces the cliché to show itself as dead amid the socio-material relations that constitute political life.

But in showing itself, the cliché does not adopt a representative position; at least not in the political sense. The 'politics' Eichmann is offering – his recitation of a shared consensus – is, already, an anti-political gesture, much in the same way as Orwell's clichéd politics is the opposite of the *eu zēn* of the political life. The bureaucrat is not one view amongst the plurality of views within the political sphere but distinct from plurality altogether. Eichmann's guilt is a foregone conclusion. The appearance of the cliché in this first space in both texts is always-already confirmed: they are there to represent nothing less than the denial of the reality established by the organization of a political order. This representation is aesthetic, rather than referential. That is to say: far from distracting politics with aesthetics, the cliché is sustained as an aesthetic object distanced from the very vitality which constitutes a threat to ordered meaning. In this way, it is undead, not in the sense of a harbinger of linguistic decay, but undead in terms of its own capacity to be affective. Conversely, this is precisely why the first space always fails to kill the cliché: its insistence on representation fails to capture the uncanny vitality of clichés within the spaces of everyday practices, a vitality which is, itself, rooted in deadening repetition.

If, then, the political cliché does not operate in a single space, or correspond to a linear chain of reference, this is not to suggest some kind of hierarchy between the two spaces we have identified in Arendt and Orwell's works.

It is not the case that the everyday cliché is somehow more 'authentic' than its aesthetic-political counterpart. It may well be more creative: as Arendt notes, it ironically produces events which are far from commonplace. But this creativity is frustrating. After all, it sees a mass murderer go to the gallows in a spirit of elation. It also frustrates Orwell's basic notion that thought can influence language and *vice versa*, because the repetition inherent to linguistic decay necessarily invokes a notion of *practice* which intervenes in between the two, and challenges the linearity of their influence on one another. Yet, the differences between these two dead spaces articulate the nuances of the political cliché – and the extent to which these spaces may be fatal.

NOTES

1. Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 21.
2. Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 15.
3. Rentoul. *The Banned List*, 32.
4. Rentoul, *The Banned List*, 33.
5. The New Labour spin-doctor Alistair Campbell championed this rhetorical style, who declared: 'One of my rules of political communications is that just as the politicians are getting tired of saying something, and the media are getting bored of hearing them say it, is the point at which you have to keep going with an argument' ('Pressure Needs to be Kept on the Tories over NICs'). Since Campbell's successes, this has become a mainstay of political discourse: British prime minister Theresa May took this to such an extreme that in one speech in her 2017 election campaign, she used the soundbite 'strong and stable' fifteen times in thirteen minutes (see Withey, 'Theresa May said "strong" 28 times and "stable" 15 times in 13 minutes').
6. Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés.* For a brief summary of this argument, see above, chapter 1, n.67.
7. Such a space may also start to resemble, at points, Ernesto Laclau's notion of the 'shared metaphors' which he argues form the basis for collective populist identity, where varied particular interests and demands are gathered together under a single signifier, which allows the different figures of political demand to become one overarching metaphor that then constitutes a collective 'will'. This overarching metaphor then obscures its disparate and contingent origin. See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 63. It should be noted, however, that Laclau is very much opposed to the notion that populist metaphors are mere clichés; his argument is rather that treatments of populism assume stupidity, irrationality and laziness instead of analysing the fundamental rhetorical foundations of political movements.
8. Lerner, 'Cliché and Commonplace', 250.
9. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 5.
10. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 48.
11. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* 49.
12. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* 26.

13. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* 50.
14. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now*, 65.
15. See, e.g., Bergen, *The Banality of Evil.*
16. The literature is vast, but for particularly insightful takes on the debate see Formosa, 'Moral Responsibility for Banal Evil'; Simona Forti, *New Demons*, particularly 185–208; Clarke, 'Beyond "the Banality of Evil"'.
17. For an overview of the controversy, see Kirsch and Galchen, 'Fifty Years Later'. Kirsch's argument that the *tone* of Arendt's work sets up the more theoretical controversies is particularly important.
18. For useful summaries of such responses, see Ezra, 'The Eichmann Polemics', and Rabinbach, 'Eichmann in New York'.
19. Stangneth, *Eichmann before Jerusalem*. This argument was also made in the 1960s by, amongst others, Ezorsky, 'Hannah Arendt Against the Facts'.
20. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 299 n.16.
21. Arendt, *Between Friends*, 168.
22. For example, a typical analysis may read: 'The fact of the matter is that the analytical substance of the book is legal and the real controversy over it should have revolved around the juridicial theory which Arendt presents.' Biale, 'Arendt in Jerusalem', 33.
23. On the news that Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* sold out on Amazon .com the day after Donald Trump's presidential inauguration, Emmett Rensin wryly noted:

> Suddenly, a voice came howling out of the past, highlighted in pull quotes and conveyed in memes. The words are difficult to make out at first. They're half-remembered, if remembered at all – Did I do the reading that week of college? A quick Google provides clarity. Of course: The woman is Hannah Arendt, and she has come back from the wilderness to deliver us a message: Fascists are bad news ('You don't know Hannah Arendt').

24. Arendt and Scholem, *The Correspondence*, 204. Arendt herself argued that she had heard nobody use the term 'banality of evil' as a slogan; although this does not strike me as an effective defence, given that widespread circulation is not a necessary condition for slogans to exist; as any unsuccessful advertiser will acknowledge.
25. Zipory, 'Can Education Be Rid of Clichés?', 402.
26. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 48.
27. Terada, 'Thinking for Oneself', 849.
28. Norberg, 'The Political Theory of the Cliché', 81.
29. Norberg, 'The Political Theory of the Cliché', 90.
30. Rodden. *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, 286. Rodden argues that the enthusiasm with which print media embraced the figure of Orwell as a prophet, particularly in the 1980s, had the effect of overriding much of what the author actually wrote; his status as a prophet superseded the texts themselves.
31. See Garton-Ash. *Orwell and Politics*, xii
32. Orwell, *Essays*, 359.
33. Orwell, *Essays*, 329
34. Orwell, *Essays,* 351.

35. Orwell, *Essays,* 354.
36. Serpell, 'A Heap of Cliché', 156.
37. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287.
38. Orwell, *Essays*, 357.
39. Zolyan, 'Language and Political Reality', 132.
40. Orwell, *Essays*, 348.
41. Orwell, *Essays*, 358.
42. Wenzel, 'Eichmann, Arendt und das Theater in Jerusalem'.
43. Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 254.
44. Others, such as Karl Jaspers and Martin Buber, had argued that Nazi crimes were against humanity, not just Israeli Jews and Eichmann should therefore be put on trial in an international court; Israel had kidnapped Eichmann from Argentina, thus potentially breaching international law. See Swift, *Hannah Arendt*, 72–73.
45. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 8.
46. Sontag, 'Reflections on *The Deputy*', 118.
47. Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious*, 111.
48. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 11–12.
49. This remains the case whether Arendt is documenting the trial, using the transcripts of police interviews or the notes he wrote for an autobiography: whether 'writing in his memoirs in Argentina or in Jerusalem, whether speaking to the police examiner or to the court, what he said was always the same, expressed in the same words' (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 49). Arendt's positioning of Eichmann within this frame of the defence stand supports Wenzel's argument that Arendt's report is as a much a performance as the trial itself. For Wenzel, the book 'stages' the encounter between Eichmann and the court in order to 'involve its viewers, the readers, in a process of forming judgments and that it believes that it is not only objective and impartial, but also particularly committed to justice' ('Eichmann, Arendt und das Theater in Jerusalem', my translation).
50. Arendt notes this several times but discusses in most detail in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 53.
51. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 252.
52. Swift, *Hannah Arendt*, 74.
53. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* 292.
54. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 250. Added to this, here is the more complicated issues of German guilt, its tendency to become 'cheap sentimentality', and the effect of the execution masking these complications, which is a point too large, and dealt with too quick by Arendt, to be discussed here.
55. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288.
56. Orwell, *Essays*, 348–349.
57. Orwell, *Essays*, 350, 353.
58. Orwell, *Essays*, 356.
59. Orwell, *Essays*, 359.
60. Orwell, *Essays*, 358. Orwell's examples of clichés that have been 'killed' are 'explore every avenue' and 'leave no stone unturned'. Given the essay's keen-ness on accuracy and reference, it is unfortunately not clear in what sense these phrases met their fate in 1946; they evidently rose again fairly soon after.

61. Orwell, *Essays*, 358.
62. Orwell, *Essays*, 359.
63. It is perhaps not surprising that Stefan Collini identifies Orwell in *Absent Minds* as a symbolic figure for the 'British mind'.
64. On this, see Ranciere, *Dissensus*, 28. Aristotle discusses the distinction in *Politics* 1252b29. On Aristotle's influence on Orwell, see Berman, *Modernity and Progress*, 85–89.
65. Orwell, *Essays*, 357.
66. Orwell, *Essays*, 350.
67. Orwell, *Essays*, 352–353.
68. Nash, *Jargon*, 5, 100.
69. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 90.
70. Serpell, 'A Heap of Cliché', 177.
71. Groys, *Going Public*, 81.
72. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 24.
73. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 105.
74. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 82.
75. Norberg, 'The Political Theory of the Cliché', 87.
76. Norberg, 'The Political Theory of the Cliché', 87.
77. 'In a rare moment of exasperation, Judge Landau asked the accused: 'What exactly *can* you remember?' (if you don't remember the discussions at the so-called Wannsee Conference, which dealt with various methods of killing)'. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 53.
78. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 81.
79. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 86.
80. This was, indeed, pointed out by H. G. Wells when he suggested that meaning can be grown from out of cliché use. Certain phrases which appear empty and meaningless on first appearance due to their apparent impracticality – the abolition of war, the abolition of social inequality and so on – can still hold a counterintuitive effectiveness: 'After people have repeated a phrase a great number of times, they begin to realise it has meaning and may even be true. And then it becomes true.' *The Last Books of H.G. Wells*, 22.

Chapter 3

Cynical Modernity from Nietzsche to Sloterdijk

> Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is only a form of what is dead, and a very rare form. Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things.
>
> – Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

In his discussion on the meaning of modernity, Fredric Jameson suggests that we might see the term as a 'unique kind of rhetorical effect'.[1] As a powerful trope which instigates a break from previous forms of figure, 'modernity' itself becomes a sign for modernity. Jameson argues that such a trope

> is always in one way or another a rewriting, a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms. Indeed, when one comes to recent thought and writing, the affirmation of the 'modernity' of this or that generally involves a rewriting of the narratives of modernity itself which are already in place and have become conventional wisdom. In my opinion, then, all of the themes generally appealed to as ways of identifying the modern – self-consciousness or reflexivity, greater attention to language or representation, a materiality of the painted surface, and so on and so forth – all these features are themselves mere pretexts for the rewriting operation and for securing the effect of astonishment and conviction appropriate to the registering of a paradigm shift.[2]

Is it possible to consider the *critical concept* of the cliché in a similar way – as a trope of modernity, perhaps supplementing Jameson's own 'modernity' trope? One which likewise involves, as we discussed in chapter 1, a remarking operation that identifies and condemns unwanted paradigm shifts or unwarranted astonishments? This 'cliché'[3] would not be a trope of 'powerful

displacement', but rather a reconfiguration of memory in relation to critique: marking out, via the designation of something as clichéd, what should be preserved and what can be lost amid the assaults on convention; separating banal repetition from the perpetuation of certain orders of thinking. We would then see different critiques of the use of clichés – Riffaterre's lexical unit, Zijderveld's sociological unit or the unit of linguistic decay in Orwell's definition of dying metaphors – all as 'pretexts' to such a reconfiguration because all essentially point to *remembering well* as the main way to both identify clichés and guard against them. Lazy writing is clichéd because it repeats what it remembers as creative; stock images are clichés because they call to mind commonplaces too general to hold any specific effect; function supersedes meaning when habit overtakes original reference and so on. In each case, invoking the cliché as a rhetorical operation presents an example of *bad* remembering; the effect of the cliché depends upon recalling precisely the non-significant and overly familiar aspect of its reference.[4] Conversely, to identify something as a cliché is to understand the distinction between what is preserved as meaningful, historical and salient and what is profane, banal and forgettable. Jameson's 'modernity' and our 'cliché' would then constitute two sides of the same tropic operation.

This extra side may seem superfluous (or at least implicit in the first rendition of the trope), but I am not so sure. In keeping with his general argument that the trope of 'modernity' is itself not necessarily modern, Jameson appeals to classical rhetoric to in order to highlight a procedural operation that chronological modalities may miss. But this appeal only reaches as far as the *delivery* of the trope. It seems to me that, in order to be successful, the rewriting operation must necessarily go beyond the deliverer of rhetoric (the re-writer). It also involves drawing upon the collective memory of a given audience in order to constitute a 'conventional wisdom' in the first place, and furthermore must harness in some way the channels through which that memory informs enthusiasm for astonishment. In other words, for 'modernity' to be persuasive, it must speak to and thus depends upon the very 'everyday' that it aims to displace. Otherwise, we would have no need of a trope in the first place: using standard definitions, at least, there is no rhetoric without an audience (implied, imagined, future, real), and no trope without the need to express a common understanding of that which resists direct conceptualizing.

This aspect of reception and circulation is significant to Jameson's claim, but more so for what we are trying to outline as a general re-marking operation that identifies and condemns cliché. If our outline focused solely on the delivery of the 'cliché' trope, its operation would seem to assume a separate, cliché-free space from which the trope is deployed. This is, of course, a space of critical judgement, constituted by a more accurate or informed

relationship to the past, or a certain critical distance within the present. For the purposes of maintaining its separation, such deployment works best with single, etic units – lexical, sociological and so on – which effectively become sub-tropes pretexting the arch-trope that identifies and condemns the cliché in one move. However, the task of the re-marking operation is not to establish conditions of astonishment (as with 'modernity') but to regulate the circulation of discourse. In this sense, 'cliché' cannot extricate itself from the common practices of memory, precisely because of its need to *reconfigure* rather than *displace*. At the same time, the nature of these common practices of memory are targeted precisely because they do not operate in single units: instead, a kind of unit-ordering forms part of the critical exercise. Indeed, the modern cliché emerged first and foremost not as a 'unit' – this has always been a post-hoc device of the critic – but as a resonant atmospheric effect. The endless clicking noises of the printing press that provided its genesis suggests less of a disappearance from memory, but an irritating constant: something *in the air*, both aurally (the click itself) and conceptually (something shifting in the cultural economy; the tension between the production of art and literature, and its mass circulation). It is within this atmosphere that a certain vitality to the cliché emerges: a life, of sorts, which prevents the complete 'wearing out' or 'death' and which exists only within everyday circulation and repetition, both requiring and resisting appropriation into the structures of critique (and, hence, necessitating the re-marking operation that the 'cliché' trope instigates). In this light, the 'cliché' as an alternative trope of modernity *cannot* rest on a binary distinction between good and bad memory alone (which has only led to repeated failure in preventing clichés from prospering). Instead, it would need to engage with the nature of this vitality, and how the advent of modernity conceives of such vitality through the reconfiguration of memory, and in relation to critique.

In what follows, I want to sketch out some ideas on what this trope may look like, through the lens of the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Peter Sloterdijk. For both thinkers, the re-marking operation hinges not simply on good prose or clear thought but on a struggle between different forms of *cynicism*: the cynicism which both argue is inherent to the astonishment and conviction of modernity and the 'performative radicalism'[5] of what Sloterdijk terms *kynicism*. In this way, they allow us to consider the 'cliché' trope as more than a reversed version of Jameson's 'modernity' trope. Instead, the identification of and guarding against the cliché involves drawing connections between, on the one hand, memory and the shaping of the human through repetition which Sloterdijk terms 'anthropotechnics',[6] and, on the other hand, the practices of critique and its place within the broader atmospherics of modernity.

A HISTORY OF FORGETTING

In the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', Nietzsche delineates the ways in which historical consciousness shapes our relationship to critique; or, as he will later surmise: 'the danger inherent in the way we conduct our scholarship, which gnaws away at life and poisons it' through a 'dehumanized cog-grinding […] mechanism'.[7] Our understanding of life, he argues, has become characterized by awareness of memory, to the extent it must always orient itself within a space determined by a particular type of history. As such, the cultivation of history has become a defining principle of modern culture. But this cultivation, and the pride it instils, leads to an 'oversaturation of an age with history', which Nietzsche wants to argue leads to a 'dangerous mood of cynicism' and is 'fatal to the living thing'.[8] Forgetting, he suggests, is just as important as remembering.

Culture needs memories, of course: this distinguishes human flourishing from the happiness of the cattle. The latter remember nothing and thus for them 'every moment really dies, sinks back into night and fog and is extinguished forever'.[9] Like the cattle, society's masses – the 'herd', as Nietzsche dubs them – also have a limited memory.[10] As such, both forget too much to be able to commit to any genuine ideals or sense of longevity; instead, 'the brains of timorous and shortlived animals […] emerge again and again to the same needs and distresses and fend off destruction with effort and then only for a short time. For they want first of all but one thing: to live, at any cost'.[11] Against this life-at-any-cost stands the intellectual, who builds and maintains an awareness of culture, historical progress and the possibility of greatness. But Nietzsche argues that such a figure is actually a symptom rather than a cure. They cultivate the past into a dead object, a usable building block repurposed specifically for their task. Yet all the while the 'man of knowledge' handles the past as inert, it has a corresponding effect on the way the same man lives.[12] If the masses yearn to live at any cost, the intellectual ends up promoting a life which morbidly retains 'the *malady of history*. Excess of history has attacked life's plastic powers, it no longer knows how to employ the past as a nourishing food'.[13] Both thus produce a form of 'living' that is deeply cynical. The cattle's relation to memory is so brief they seem ironically to perfect ancient cynicism with life and convention in harmony with one another; the intellectual embodies the cynicism of modernity, where it acts as 'a general regulative social principle' of 'disillusioned self-interest';[14] life, as Nietzsche will describe in *The Gay Science*, as a special form of death.

Against these two cynical accounts of life, Nietzsche introduces a model of cultural growth and flourishing which is capable of moving beyond such cynicism when memory is managed appropriately. For such a life, history is 'nourishing' in three respects: it informs man as 'a being who acts and

strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance'.[15] This relates to three 'species' of practice for maintaining cultural memory: the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. Nietzsche describes these metaphorically in order to point to their atmospheric design. Each species:

> belongs to a certain soil and a certain climate and only to that: in any other it grows into a devastating weed. […] Much mischief is caused through the thoughtless transplantation of these plants: the critic without need, the antiquary without piety, the man who recognises greatness but cannot himself do great things, are such plants, estranged from their mother soil and degenerated into weeds.[16]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the introduction of *gedankenlosen* to the image brings a range of associated characteristics of the cliché into the picture. Antiquarian history can preserve life but not create it; thus, it is unoriginal. Critical history may condemn the past, but because it acts in the service of the present life, it is also chained to the past it condemns, including its 'aberrations, passions, and errors',[17] for without this the present it serves would not exist; thus, it is disingenuous. Monumental history, while the only truly inventive species, can lose sight of the reality it seeks to represent; hence, a monumental past provides 'the same stimuli'[18] as mythical fiction, and the two can be confused; unchecked, it excites false jingoism. All depend upon repetition for their effect: there is no such thing as a one-off antiquarian collection, just as there is no monument without repeated homage. In this way, the botanic metaphor allows the atmospheric conditions for the cliché to be established: not as worn out or dead memories, but as a cynical form of life which spreads and degenerates the vitality of cultural memory.

To this point, Nietzsche's meditation has provided an exposition of how memory and modernity are interlinked. The saturation of the age with history provides both the conditions of modern knowledge, and the risks of losing a particular sense of existence and, in doing so, devolving into fanaticism. Against this, Nietzsche introduces his own form of neo-cynicism into the trope of 'modernity' that Jameson described. What may *appear* to secure the effect of astonishment and conviction is shown by Nietzsche's cynical meditation to be embedded in the management of history, with the conclusion that conviction necessarily involves a careful forgetting rather than remembering (this is, indeed, a cynicism entirely in keeping with his preceding untimely meditation on David Strauss[19]).

But is this cynical diagnosis only another version of the initial 'cliché' trope that we discarded, with its linear distinction between the cliché and the non-cliché, between remembering badly and remembering well? At first,

the delineation of historical approaches into separate species seems to suggest as much: if the appropriate form of memory is used for the appropriate task, a healthy cultural life follows. However, there is a key significance to the botanical metaphor being used to express this typology of remembering. As Sarah Kofman details, Nietzsche frequently employs metaphors of plants and trees to express the 'necessary link between the work and the life, between the life and a system of forces which constitutes it', as well as 'the deep unity of all living things in their aggressive efforts to conquer a soil for themselves, adapt to it and master it'.[20] Kofman shows, for example, that in *On the Genealogy of Morality* the metaphors affirming different variations of moral thought are inherently rooted to the same thought and genesis; thus, the tree – and with it, the traditional figures of the sun and the light – is nothing less than *the* metaphor for metaphysics. In *The Gay Science*, meanwhile, the same metaphor is re-imagined to express the new philosopher Nietzsche looks for: 'Like trees we grow – it's hard to understand, like all life! – not in one place, but everywhere; not in one direction, but upwards and outwards and inwards and downwards equally; our energy drives trunk, branches and roots all at once.'[21] The new philosopher is not the perfection of metaphysics – growing in accordance with its principles – but instead the usurper who appropriates the whole *atmosphere* of life. In this sense, the repetitions which shape a culture's sense of history are no longer the enemy of the future, to be discarded, but in fact the key to mastering it.

With this in mind, I want to proceed from this account of Nietzsche's essay by making three suggestions, and what they mean for our speculative outlining of the critical re-marking operation captured by the 'cliché' trope. First, when considered in this light, the typologies Nietzsche presents in his essay all ultimately collapse into an antiquarian mode of modern cynicism. Second, this then means that the distinction between monumental, critical and antiquarian history must be based on *something other* than species, genealogy or historical recollection itself. Nietzsche's answer, based on his subsequent works, is that the distinction is metaphorical: but a specific form of metaphor that is repeated to the point of its own erosion. Third, this would lead us to the notion that *all* knowledge is inherently clichéd. But this would return us once again to a collapse into an antiquarian cynicism, such as the likes of Paolo Virno identify in contemporary culture. This raises the need to widen the notion of atmospherics that Nietzsche alludes to, and which is taken up more fully by Sloterdijk.

THE EGYPTIAN SPECTACLE

In his work on the relationship between memory and the contemporary discourse around the 'end of history', Virno argues that Nietzsche's antiquarian

historical mode has gained an acute focus within modern culture. The antiquarian is obsessed with collecting and recording the spectacles of the social in what Nietzsche describes as 'blind mania'. Thus, Virno suggests that 'not satisfied with contemplating the "now" as if it were a "back then", the post-historical collector also nurtures a certain admiration for it, to the extent of concluding that "it's too late to do anything better"'.[22] The excess of antiquarian history creates a monstrous figure with which Nietzsche opens his meditation: a man who is unable to forget. Such a man would 'no longer believe in his own being, no longer believe in himself', instead seeing everything as moving points and forced into permanent inertia.[23] Nietzsche thus draws a likeness between this monstrosity and the antiquarian man who views himself as an 'end' of all historical progress, and the pride of his cultivation of history leads 'further, into cynicism, and justifies the course of his history, indeed the entire evolution of the world […]: as things are they had to be, as men now are they were bound to become, none may resist this inevitability'.[24] In this way, the cynicism of the cattle and the cynicism of the intellectual turn out to be remarkably similar. Both live only for the present, and in doing so, the living moment disappears. By applying the methods of historiography to the actual living moment, 'everything that happens is treated as suggestive *evidence*, while it is still happening; the current moment is consumed by *nostalgia*'.[25]

While we have already encountered Sven Spieker's argument that the antiquarian mode is distinctive of nineteenth-century modernity in chapter 1, Virno sees this mode operating just as vividly in the contemporary enthusiasm for spectacular events; an enthusiasm which Virno describes in terms of Debord's 'society of the spectacle', and Sloterdijk will term, separately, 'catastrophilia'. Crucially, this enthusiasm is driven not by the need to be shocked, but rather by the need to *mediate* such events, and in mediating, master: whether by documenting and sharing via digital recording and upload to media platforms, or by interpreting 'the unprecedented' through critical frameworks that (as if by magic, the theorist reveals) predicted it all along. Either way, antiquarian history produces the cynic: by recording everything – but recording '*too bright, too sudden,* [with] *too varying light*'[26] – we undoubtedly feel that we have seen this all before. In comprehending the world, we find everything a cliché.

For Virno, then, monumental history acts as a safeguard against the 'irreparable damage'[27] the antiquarian model brings by showing greatness is at least possible and may be possible again. Both monumental and critical history, as Nietzsche is keen to point out, involve forgetting a large amount of detail which enables their specific forms of nourishment. The critical historian disconnects, momentarily, the past from the present. Much like the antiquarian, though with different ends in mind, they seek the uprooting and death

of the past: 'The past itself suffers harm: whole segments of it are forgotten, despised, and flow away in an uninterrupted colourless flood.'[28] Monumental history, meanwhile, is less of a reference and more of a generic reminder to a past sentiment, one which fuels the disdain for the present by a general memory of what past glory is 'worthy of imitation'; it 'will always have to deal in approximations and generalities, in making what is dissimilar look similar'.[29]

However, Virno's faith in these safeguards overlooks the fact that both end up repeating the same antiquarian assault on the present. Monumental history is not only deceptive, utilizing 'seductive similarities' and analogies to inspire its users but *also* ultimately an attack on the present itself:

> Monumental history is the masquerade costume in which their hatred of the great and powerful of their own age is disguised as satiated admiration for the great and powerful of past ages, and muffled in which they invert the real meaning of that mode of regarding history into its opposite; whether they are aware of it or not, they act as though their motto were: let the dead bury the living.[30]

The critical species robs the present of life by separating it from its genetic roots; the monumental species renders the present always a poor copy of the greatness that has come before. Both constitute forms of Kofman's 'aggressive efforts to conquer' the soil they are planted in. In *The Twilight of the Idols*, this alignment of the monumental with the critical is clearer still when Nietzsche takes 'philosophers' idiosyncrasies' to task for their lack of historical sense and assigns this a name: 'Egypticity'.

> For thousands of years, philosophers have been using only mummified concepts; nothing real makes it through their hands alive. They kill and stuff the things they worship, these lords of concept idolatry – they become mortal dangers to everything they worship. They see death, change, and age, as well as procreation and growth, as objections – refutations, even. What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not … So they all believe, desperately even, in being.[31]

The mummification of concepts renders critical thought *itself* as a monumental act: the preservation of memory outside of the present. Philosophy requires its concepts to be dead to be of use to it, but this morbidity is masked through the monumentalizing and idolizing of the concept, which gives the false impression of meaning. But as Sloterdijk points out, the spatiality of the Egyptian monument is precisely what allows it to be *mobile*; or at least, deconstructed and reconstructed by 'men of knowledge'. In this sense, however different their ends, the transitory environment in which both monumental and critical memories are tended remains rooted in a fundamentally antiquarian mode of recollection:

> The pharaoh's last abode forms the archetype of a dead space that can be summoned and rebuilt elsewhere – in any place where bodies, including non-pharaonic ones, are to be deposited for the purpose of immortalizing preservation. […] The Egyptian-style dead space is thus reinstalled wherever there are museums, for these are nothing other than heterotopic locations in the midst of the modern 'lifeworld' where selected objects are mortified, defunctionalized, removed from all profane uses and offered up for reverent viewing.[32]

In this way, the kind of 'active forgetting' that Nietzsche promotes in monumental history, which opens up the possibility of a knowledge and criticism fit for present and future life, turns out to be a *curation* of the antiquarian archive. Indeed, Nietzsche's vision of the historian – 'the experienced and superior man' – aligns with the spirit of the nineteenth-century orientalist, plundering foreign archaeology to 'interpret the great and exalted things of the past' in order to 'acquire a living knowledge of the history of great men'.[33] Nietzsche's concludes his essay by contrasting the antiquarian who seeks to possess the past with the Ancient Greeks who took 'possession of themselves' in the face of their culture being overwhelmed by both an excess of history and an influx of foreign ideas. 'The Greeks gradually learned to organise the chaos', Nietzsche claims, 'by following the Delphic teaching and thinking back to themselves, that is, to their real needs, and letting their pseudo-needs die out'.[34] This, he suggests, is a 'parable' for his contemporary audience to recognize their own real needs. Yet, as Nietzsche has noted earlier in the essay, Delphic teaching was based on its preservation of cultural memory; indeed, 'an exact knowledge of the past'.[35] The monumentalist strategy of discovering real need is thus already dependent upon antiquarian roots.

Why not simply declare modern cultural memory to all be antiquarian, then? It becomes apparent that, as with the impossible figure of the man who cannot forget, antiquarian history cannot exist on its own terms. This is because it implies not only mass collection but also mass *storage*. For storage to occur, so must some kind of organization (even if this is weak organization, resulting in the chaos the Greeks faced). As Spieker notes, Nietzsche's antiquarian is obsessed with *possessing* the past; yet, 'where everything is stored, nothing is possessed'.[36] The antiquarian pursuit thus requires a perpetual curation of knowledge so as to keep it immanent and available; the dead space of the archive is not hidden but *practised*. It is in this sense that significance of the metaphor of the plant becomes clearer, as this situates the atmospheric conditions for antiquarian collection within a metaphysical account of being embedded within the rise of modernity's archival practices. History is not analogous to a plant; rather, it is metaphorically embedded within metaphysics.

NIETZSCHE'S CLICHÉS

If this is the case, though, on what basis *can* we distinguish between the sickly life that is saturated by a perverse history, and remembering well, for a future vitality? Or, more simply, between the cliché and non-cliché? The answer can be seen if we understand Nietzsche as outlining, not so much a historiography, but rather a form of what Sloterdijk will later term 'anthropotechnics' forged out of the act of *inscribing a capacity to remember* (i.e. inscribing conscience) in the bodies of humans through repeated training.[37] For Nietzsche, these inscriptions link the creation of the feeling of the New to the ordering of value itself. Nietzsche returns to time and again to these mechanics:

> *Resonance*. All intense moods bring with them a resonance of related feelings and moods; they seem to stir up a memory. Something in us remembers and becomes aware of similar states and their origin. Thus habitual, rapid associations of feelings and thoughts are formed, which, when they follow with lightning speed upon one another, are eventually no longer felt as complexes, but rather as unities. […] in truth they are rivers with a hundred sources and tributaries. As is so often the case, the unity of the word does not guarantee the unity of the thing.[38]

> *Originality*. What is originality? To *see* something that has no name as yet and hence cannot be mentioned, although it stares us all in the face. The way men usually are, it takes a name to make something visible for them. Those with originality have for the most part also assigned names.[39]

> The pathos of nobility and distance, as I said, the continuing and predominant feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to those 'below' – *that* is the origin of the antithesis 'good' and 'bad'. (The seigneurial privilege of giving names even allows us to conceive of the origin of language itself as a manifestation of the power of the rulers: they say 'this *is* so and so', and they set their seal on everything and every occurrence with a sound and thereby take possession of it, as it were.)[40]

The atmospherics of memory are unified by concepts (which are, in Nietzsche's view, a 'condensate of metaphors'[41]); the power to name these unified elements effectively marshals the knowledge of the new and the old.[42] Describing this privilege as 'seigneurial' (a figure of the old French system of territorial distribution) continues Nietzsche's use of the environment to link history, creativity and critique. But this is not as simple as branding power as knowledge. Instead, each name – or nomination – retains within it a compacted reverberation that provides language a means of challenging the restrictive use to which it is simultaneously being put ('What is the task of all

higher schooling?' – To turn men into machines. – 'What method is used?' – They have to learn to be bored. […] 'Who is the perfect human?' – The civil servant'[43]). As is often the case in Nietzsche's writing, this turns out to be both a consequence of the way in which we have evolved to survive (as psychology has argued, complex thoughts becoming heuristic devices save a huge amount of mental energy), and at the same time a sickly, weak form of survival which insists on mediocrity and shallowness ('The way men usually are…'), committed to life for the sake of not-dying: 'to live, at any cost'. In this way, as Kofman argues: '"Morality" and the concept are natural allies: morality uses the generality of the concept to guarantee its universality; the concept uses morality to impose itself as a norm of truth. Both are symptomatic of a will to nothingness and a decadent taste'.[44]

The link between metaphor and memory is established by the physical and mental repetition it draws upon: repeating and endorsing these performances[45] of originality both curates the resonances of metaphor and provides 'peace, security and consistency'.[46] All of this is guaranteed only by the forgetting of the fundamental metaphors that allow for such differentiation: as Nietzsche writes in 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense', 'only by virtue of the fact that a mass of images, which originally flowed in a hot, liquid stream from the primal power of the human imagination, has become hard and rigid'.[47] In this way, concepts pertain to 'truth' by repeatedly appealing to a distinction between their rigidity and the unreliability of metaphor; not only does this ensure the concept as something stable and valuable, but it also forgets its own metaphorical origin.[48] Originality – which becomes the naming of concepts – thus commits us to a particular, mediocre form of life which carefully denounces the dynamism and transience of existence. In other words, 'the most accustomed metaphors, the usual ones, now pass for truths and as standards for measuring the rare ones'.[49] Back in the antiquarian museum, this same process, inseparable from our practices of morality and knowledge, organizes our cultural memory. Everything is collected; but the boundaries of 'everything' are deployed by the 'mobile army of metaphors' with which Nietzsche famously defines truth;[50] the museum presents the Egyptian tomb as hidden, secretive and buried; forgetting, for the sake of satisfying mediocrity's sense of astonishment, that its value lies in being discoverable and transportable.

In this sense, the 'cliché' trope we have arrived at retains its operation of reconfiguring memory, and demarcating remembering well from poorly. But rather than this being enacted through a rigid border between the clichéd and the non-clichéd, Nietzsche presents us with a cynical operation which inverts the pretensions of the 'modernity' trope and exposes its suppression of a more original vitality. For Nietzsche, the astonishment that is core to the trope of 'modernity' is made possible only by practical, cultural and

linguistic repetitions which solidify concepts as general or universal; hence, the authority of such concepts is dependent upon the trope. While shock and astonishment remain caught within this organization of metaphor and memory, modern advancements remain banal. The 'cliché' trope, meanwhile, suggests an operation of re-marking concepts as forged from metaphor; that is to say, an operation of remembering that everything of value must be a worn, forgotten metaphor. It is by confronting this trope – which at first appears as a parody of 'modernity', but ends up as a far better tool of diagnosis for health and sickliness of cultural memory – that the task of the future philosophers becomes apparent.[51]

REPETITION RECONSIDERED

So far, I have been using Nietzsche's cynicism of modern culture as a way of thinking through the cliché as an underlying trope of modernity, including the atmospherics of this operation. There are limits to Nietzsche's range, however. While he provides us one way of reimagining the figure of memory, Osborne correctly notes that Nietzsche's revival of ancient cynicism – the reconnection to the primordial vitality of life through metaphor – must take place in relation to its modern form as well, or risk idealism. In Nietzsche's case, this relation manifests itself through a rejection of everyday and ordinary life that has been poisoned by the metaphysical structures shaping it.[52] Hence, as Kofman argues, Nietzsche's writing implies a select, aristocratic audience. A noble thinker resists being understood 'by the herd, by *common sense*'[53] (hence Nietzsche's recourse to aphorism which, as he notes in the Preface to the *Genealogy of Morality*, is a prompt to exegesis, precisely because of its brevity: only the *proper* listeners will hear their radical ideas). Nietzsche's inversion of metaphorical and 'proper' meaning is not a full reversal, however. While metaphor provides what Kofman describes as a 'unique appropriation of the world',[54] which distinguishes itself from the vulgar language of the common person, it is never purely 'proper' because it still necessarily repeats the same evaluations; just as 'the most diverse philosophers will always fill out a definite basic scheme of *possible* philosophies. Under an invisible spell, they will each start anew, only to end up revolving in the same orbit once again'.[55] This leads Kofman to identify the crucial point of Nietzsche's use of metaphor:

> Nietzsche reiterates old metaphors rather than inventing new ones. It is the philistines who confuse an unheard-of metaphor with a new or modern one; let us rather note the almost complete absence in Nietzsche of metaphors taken from the world of the machine and modernism. The writing of the gay science is a

> repetition which displaces, takes old constructions to pieces and recomposes them by connecting up what is different and separating what is similar: a new ludic construction. To write is to play, a parody. And primarily to parody 'creation' […]. The dismemberment of Dionysus is always followed by his resurrection in unity, and even when it is composed of aphorisms, the book remains a piece of architecture in the grand style: polemic and plurality carry with them 'law and right'.[56]

If Nietzsche describes the atmospherics of thought and thoughtlessness in terms of parodic metaphor, we may well want to ask whether, in late modernity, metaphor alone is too limiting to discern such atmospherics. Does forcing philosophy to recognize its dependence on the tools of literature and myth capture the full spirit of anthropotechnic repetition? After all, the cliché's click is no longer an accident of the mechanics of reproducing cheap copy; clicks, taps, vibrations and bleeps count us in, they allow us to select options on our electronic devices, they indicate whether we have tried turning them off and on again, and they guide the movements of our mouse or finger in starting computational activities. 'These days we click to continue'[57] – even after the actual clicking noise has been removed from the process. Concurrently, 'memory' is no longer limited to a vehicle for recollecting thought and ideas but also involves the intersection of habitual and critical practices. In its traditional form, 'we have no need of memory now we have Google', as Boris Groys has remarked.[58] Instead, memory sustains our laptops, phones and tablets; it allows us to store and to access information to the point memory is always-already an act of forgetting. Hence, Katherine Hayles writes that the materiality of metaphors – the relationship between a figure and its material basis of production – is impossible to ignore.[59] This is why we might now talk, with Virno, of a hyper-antiquarian mode of culture. In such a culture, many of Nietzsche's tools have inadvertently become appropriated by the modern cynic.

This is not to glibly historicize Nietzsche's observations, but rather to suggest that as much as he weaponizes cliché against originality (by suggesting truth as a worn metaphor, metaphor as always impure and so on), the subsequent reception of his work highlights the atmospheric conditions this assault is less well-sighted on. I am thinking here of those specific engagements with Nietzsche on the topic of cliché: that his style – and particularly the repetitive 'strains' of his later works – degrades the philosophical quality of his work;[60] that whenever we try to 'give a philosophically articulate form' to Nietzsche's themes, 'we are always disappointed at finding familiar conceptual frameworks',[61] or 'inherited clichés'[62] and commonplaces of nineteenth-century aristocracy; or, that his work 'threatens to become a cliché'[63] when it is read today's universities, where a philosopher who sought to dissolve

concepts back into metaphors is taught to first-year undergraduates simultaneously downgraded for incorrect referencing.

The theme of these engagements is familiar: Nietzsche's polemical texts are exposed and outwitted by a slower, more detailed and patient approach to the seriousness of the problem. This, as we know, is also a way of fighting the symptoms of the cliché, for the speed of their utterances is a key part of their apparent thoughtlessness. But it is also the spirit of critique, which seeks to unveil the real meaning from behind their enigmatic façades. It is precisely this spirit which prompts Sloterdijk to take up the problem that Nietzsche leaves for our 'cliché' trope: that is, how to reconcile the atmospheric aspect of cliché with the procedures of critique, without unwittingly strengthening modern cynicism. Indeed, for Sloterdijk 'the dominion of "kynicism" lies elsewhere' from theoretical strictures: 'in its habitus, its mood, its infatuation with the current, in its *style*'. It will 'speak first […] of the petty, malignant truths of the commonplace that the blind gaze of theoretical sight has already overlooked'.[64] Yet, to do this, Sloterdijk must also engage with the relationship between memory and cynicism: both to construct a large-scale re-telling of the history of the Enlightenment and to explore the effect of an antiquarian hyper-awareness on the cultural critic.

CYNICAL REASON

Enlightenment, Sloterdijk reminds us in his landmark text *Critique of Cynical Reason*, promised emancipation from the chains of tradition and habit. It was to be guided by rational knowledge created to subvert the commonplace. This promise was immensely persuasive: constituting as it did a loose doctrine adhered to by a full range of philosophical traditions. Yet from all of these, what Enlightenment delivered was a multitude of cynicisms. The principle of an episteme termed 'modernity' entails a break from the past; not only the past in the sense of what has come temporally before but also the mechanisms for celebrating and continuing the past in the form of tradition and custom. In doing so, modernity depends upon a modality of disenchantment and rational critique in the name of progress. 'What is self-evident in this world is fraud, threats, dangers – not openness, generosity, security. Truth is thus […] the product of critique that destroys what seemed to be the case.'[65] As a result, critique chokes the air from the astonishment is was supposed to create. 'Because everything has become problematic, everything is also somehow a matter of indifference', Sloterdijk observes.[66] Cynical reason, he claims, is the conclusion of the ideal that an increase in our understanding of the true nature of the world will necessarily bring about social change. It is historically emergent in the late periods of an epoch, 'when original forces,

value-table naïveté […] have been consumed by strategic learning processes', and when 'the norms and dogmas of culture, buffered by self-irony, begin to play with their inner contradictions'.[67] This heightened cynicism becomes embedded within both the knowledge production of the academy and the social contract of the state, which he defines as a paradoxical 'enlightened false consciousness'.[68]

For the cultural critic, this constitutes an atmospherics of pessimism and despair regarding the inevitability of Enlightenment's promises falling into clichés. Sloterdijk argues that a miserablism has dominated critical theory, fuelled by first the suspicion that one might always be deceived (the necessary precursor to Enlightenment), and, alongside this, an obsession with the catastrophic which he terms a 'catastrophilia' (the apparent effect of postponed Enlightenment).

> The emergence of the enlightening, insightful perspective on reality cannot be comprehended without a thorough cooling down of the ego-world relation, without the deep penetration of suspicion and fear about self-preservation to the very roots of the modern will to know.[69]

> After the decades of reconstruction and the decade of utopias and 'alternatives', it is as if a naïve élan had suddenly been lost. Catastrophes are conjured up, new values find ready markets, like all analgesics. However, the times are cynical and know: New values have short lives. Being concerned, caring about people, securing peace, feeling responsible, caring about the quality of life and about the environment – none of that really works. Just bide your time.[70]

Critique, for Sloterdijk, is premised on the violence of usurping the existing order, revealing the truth behind everyday practices and bringing an end to intellectual, moral and political grip of particular metaphysical systems.[71] As such, the principle of self-knowledge is intrinsically bound to the need for self-preservation. 'I am deceived, therefore I am. And: I unmask deceptions, I myself deceive; therefore, I preserve myself.'[72] Such an approach involves a tactical employment of cynicism: a forgetting and remembering of particular forms, at the expense of others in order to problematize categories of modernity. The bearers of the contemporary Enlightenment project already know – whether they admit it or not – their false consciousness; critique thus becomes a method of avoiding or prolonging this fact through the circulation of particular and restricted lexicons, physiognomies and living practices. If modernity was 'the epoch in which the Old World broke out of metaphysical monocentrism',[73] critique remains stalwartly fixated on destroying monopolies while insisting upon the false monopoly of Enlightenment.

This view shares similarities with the concerns of Bruno Latour's now well-known polemic, published some thirty years after the *Critique of*

Cynical Reason, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.' Both deal with the legacy of an Enlightenment yet to realize its promises; both understand critique as a form of self-knowledge, set against the naïve optimism that knowledge will simply expand for the better; both see this form of self-knowledge falling into traps of its own design. Perhaps most importantly, both read this in terms of a general psychopolitical atmosphere, rather than the more conventional etic approach to argument. Latour suggests that the endless cycle of critique – adding 'iconoclasm to iconoclasm' and practising a form of 'instant revisionism'[74] where every fact must be doubted – risks leaving intellectual pursuit as 'like those mechanical toys that endlessly make the same gesture when everything else has changed around them'.[75] An ironic and non-reflexive blindness, Latour argues, has been built into the suspicions of critique, which unwittingly creates a set of mechanical clichés; hence, we 'are still able to go through the motions of a critical avant-garde', but without the spirit.[76] If the task of critique has become institutionally embedded as debunking reality as a sign or mask of something else (ideology, power, hegemony, etc.) then, Latour points out, these principles manifest themselves in contemporary culture in the form of conspiracy theories. In their 'mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social Neverland', they deploy the same 'weapons of critique' – distrust, suspicion, the need to unmask and expose – which were meant to protect us from just such arguments.[77] Just as Sloterdijk points out the malformation of contemporary cynicism, Latour concludes that critique 'has not been critical enough in spite of all its sore-scratching'.[78] This is down to an undue focus on the idea that 'matters of fact' constitute reality. But matters of fact are only partial elements of 'matters of concern'; they are constituted primarily by the encounter an intellectual establishes (all as part of their mechanical process of critique) between themselves as critics and the naïve, everyday world.

Sloterdijk's picture, meanwhile, is less about the process of intellectuals participating in a circular process of establishing facts in order to debunk them and more about the *atmosphere of exhaustion* within which they act out their critical roles. He diagnoses cynicism as a psychopolitical spirit, rather than political or teleological:

> Psychologically, present-day cynics can be understood as borderline melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work. […] Behind the capable, collaborative, hard façade, it covers up a mass of offensive unhappiness and the need to cry. In this, there is something of the mourning for a 'lost innocence', of the mourning for better knowledge, against which all action and labor are directed.[79]

The cynics of today reject the world as it is; any position of a higher class which involved a necessary commitment to some kind of absolute system – capitalist, Marxist, atheist and so on – has been shown to be untrue by the Enlightenment; yet they must proceed nonetheless with a passion-less commitment to their paths. In the game of critique, he argues, 'one finds a clearly structured playing field with well-known players, established tactics, and typical fouls. Each side has developed certain, almost rigged, moves of critique'.[80] The melancholy of knowing clichés take us further from the places we yearn to be. As a result, the grand metaphysical systems which Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment took aim at do not 'fall' – as Nietzsche predicted – but simply 'stagnate, become boring, old hat'.[81] The more we encounter cliché, the more we look for the catastrophe we expected instead; the more we look for catastrophe, the more we hesitate, bide our time and wait for the next one. Within such an atmosphere, we need no longer think of intellectual activity anymore in terms of qualitative versus quantitative, continental versus analytic or poetic versus scientific. We can simply think in terms of those who are on Sertraline and those who are not (yet).

WEAPONIZING BANALITY

Critique in late modernity thus seems caught between Latour's conspiracy theorists, or Sloterdijk's depressives. When Sloterdijk presents the history of cynicism as a method of instilling a particular belief in the power of rational critique which it knows itself does not exist, embodied in the structural mores of contemporary knowledge production, perhaps he simply takes the 'cliché' trope we derived from Nietzsche's work to its logical next step: now, the same rewriting operation that secured the effect of astonishment in Jameson's 'modernity' is painfully self-aware that it remains only another form of *writing*, awaiting further inscriptive disfigurement of its own. 'Modernity' and 'cliché' would be, effectively, the same trope.

But this conclusion would keep us firmly in the prison of modern cynicism. Instead, Sloterdijk suggests a countervailing approach which takes its archetype from the anti-establishment, everyday vulgarity and publicly pissing *kynicism* of Diogenes of Sinope, as well as his indirect adherents throughout history since. Whereas Latour concludes optimistically that the future critic must be 'not one who debunks, but the one who assembles […] not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather',[82] Sloterdijk's counter-history of Enlightenment involves exploring the roles of bodily parts obscured by dominant rationalities. His work includes chapters on arses and farts, artificial limbs and the modernization of lying, to name only a few. If Latour's

conclusion rests on hope for theoretical inquiry, Sloterdijk's premise for this physiognomic account is that cynicism flourishes when the 'everyday' form of the self is separated (sometimes forcefully) from its practices of rational critique, contrary to the unity with nature that Diogenes preached. Cynical reason obscures and reduces the relationship of proximity to what surrounds us – our bodies and relationships in all their 'banality'; our environments and atmospheres – removing its significance and robbing us of the tools to interpret it.[83] Thus, as Slavoj Žižek summarizes, the alternative of kynicism 'represents the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm' which confronts 'the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology – its solemn, grave tonality – with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule'.[84] To place this on our terms: cynical reason is caught in a melancholy consciousness whereby the rejection of clichés are acted out through constant unmasking and debunking, which perpetuates other commonplaces it is willingly blind to. Kynicism, on the other hand, offers the prospect of weaponizing precisely what the cynics refuse to acknowledge: profane repetition.

The kynical figure of the 'cliché' therefore signifies an act of remembering what has been forgotten through the cynical effects of 'modernity', much like we imagined Nietzsche's to be. But while Nietzsche's account concerned itself with recovering the metaphorical origins of the modern drive for knowledge, Sloterdijk's seems more a reminder of what already exists in plain sight. Of course, to simply point to things we all do without thinking is probably better left to observational comedy than philosophy. In itself, this only preserves the cynical atmosphere that dominates critical thought. When thinking is decried for being used up and stale, this never really leaves the atmospherics of what Sloterdijk describes as modern practical philosophy. Indeed, he notes elsewhere that repetition 'lost its innocence in the anthropological Enlightenment: as people now explicitly understood, the continuance of the world depends on it'.[85] But crucially, the kynical is not aiming to push *away* from the self-shaping of repetitious practices. Instead, the 'cliché' trope in this case would capture the physiognomic presence of that which *disrupts* thinking almost as much as the astonishment of 'modernity', but in a far more irritating way: pointless, absurd and insignificant. It is in this sense that the *Critique of Cynical Reason* adopts the form of a counter-archive: the book's incessant attention to detail provides a parody of Nietzsche's antiquarian history, highlighting the practical consequence to the metaphorical obfuscation of modernity's curating activities.

This said, Sloterdijk's counter-critique also ironically retains Nietzsche's devotion to heroism. If cynical reason has rendered the world fundamentally boring, ultimately Sloterdijk looks to kynicism to *rejuvenate*. Not for nothing is Adorno's final lecture, when females in the audience exposed their breasts

causing him to storm out never to return, is one of the archetypal examples of the counter-modern physiognomic 'cliché'. But with such a move, it becomes clear that Sloterdijk's focus on undermining the seriousness of high theory does not exclude his work from regurgitating other platitudes in a far from critical manner, as Babette Babich notes:

> As a child of the 1968 generation, Sloterdijk takes the modality of shock […] with a naïve trust that only a child of the 1960s (even in the 1960s in Germany) could muster. This is not theory, it is life, lived in the spirit of a generation persuaded that simply by changing one's clothes (or going without them) or flouting sexual conventions (and going without them), or transcendental meditation and yoga, and natural food, and above all by way of certain musical choices, a folk could for the first time really change the world.[86]

Babich suggests that Sloterdijk's own clichés emerge from a partial unwillingness to recognize the particular discursive community in which his celebration of kynicism is at least partially situated. This means that his images of creative resistance are, for Babich, incomplete. For example, Sloterdijk argues that Diogenes' kynicism is a response to the idealism of Socratic philosophy 'that goes beyond oratical repudiation. It does not speak against idealism, it lives against it. […] [K]ynicism gives a new twist to the question of how to *say* the truth'.[87] Babich responds to this suggestion that pissing into the 'idealist wind' constitutes a form of argumentation by pointing out that: 'Diogenes, wiry and tough as he may be, is no Hercules and pissing, like spitting, into the wind is messy.'[88] To *live* a comedic response to cynicism cannot ignore the discomfort and awkwardness that accompanies it. This is something that Sloterdijk certainly mentions but often seems to be presenting banal responses as simply another heroic response dressed in rags.

This is not to say that, given Sloterdijk's emphasis on the atmospherics of critique, he does not provide detailed environments in which each of his kynics operate. Such descriptions show that kynicism is never meant to be the 'answer' to the diagnosis of cynical reason; it constitutes, rather, a form of atmospheric *pressure*, or what Žižek terms a 'procedure' which 'is more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation'.[89] Unlike Latour's rather idyllic and hopeful conclusion, which amounts to little in terms of everyday practical changes, kynicism offers a momentary release, a temporary respite, from the self-imposed misery of cynicism. This is, after all, what the modulation of the word offers: one change of letter from a /s/ to a /k/, from a serpent's hiss that tempts us with promises of absolute systems we know are about to end, to a hardened realism, a 'gaze [which] is open, realistic, and generous, and

[…] not embarrassed to look at what is naked; it does not matter whether it is beautiful or ugly, as long as it is natural'.[90]

What Babich's critique raises, though, is the need to consider the significance of the 'act' as a figure, in its fullest form. By framing Sloterdijk's work in terms of cultural history (she notes the presence of women in his argument follows an all-too familiar shallowness) and developmental psychology (his fascination with pissing is, she resignedly points out, typical of young boys), Babich once again reminds us that how 'to live' is intrinsically related to how to remember, and if we are serious about comedic banality, then we must not forget the superfluous aspects which so often render kynical interventions as almost instantly passé and, contrary to its intention, slightly embarrassing. The trick is to not forget the impossibility of the antiquarian, and the necessary curation which it entails and demands.

This is why, ultimately, kynicism would remain within our speculative trope of the 'cliché', rather than a third alternative. But Sloterdijk's account shows us that, if we are to consider this trope seriously, we need more than metaphor. Such is the atmospheric conditions of cynical reason, figures that are capable of reimagining the conceptual scene in terms of their environments. In the end, this is what really separates 'cliché' from 'modernity': a rewriting operation that ensures the *success* of astonishment is far more straightforward, and the language far more obvious, than the re-marking operation which accounts for the networks of training regimens, with all of their failures and repetitions, which the vast majority of astonishment ultimately ends up falling into. In this case, as the work of Nietzsche and Sloterdijk both attest to, the figure of 'cliché' would ironically be more magnificent than that of 'modernity' itself.

NOTES

1. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 34.
2. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 35–36.
3. I will use both 'cliché' and 'modernity' in quotations marks to refer to the tropes signifying their operation for the duration of the chapter.
4. Bagnall suggests there are three reasons for clichés to be 'deplored': failing to convey an intended message; offending taste; or being deceptive to either the user or the receiver. While these may at first appear to be very much issues of the present tense, it is clear that any such deploring implies some kind of memory system supporting the stability of references and the conventions of discourse. Bagnall, *A Defence of Clichés*, 129.
5. Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 83.
6. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 4.
7. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 112.

8. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 83, 62.
9. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 61.
10. 'Whoever is of the rabble, their remembrance goes no further back than their grandfather – and with their grandfather time ends.' *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 162.
11. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 68.
12. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 67. This echoes Nietzsche's suggestion that a culture of mediocrity is a consequence of the rise of the 'theoretical man', rather than an antecedent. *The Birth of Tragedy*, 91.
13. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 120.
14. Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition,* 82.
15. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 67.
16. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 72.
17. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 76.
18. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 70.
19. Strauss is denounced by Nietzsche as a typical 'cultural philistine': he 'distinguishes himself from the general idea of the species "philistine" through a superstition: he fancies that he is himself a son of the muses and a man of culture; an incomprehensible delusion which reveals that he does not even know what a philistine, and the antithesis of a philistine, is'. (*Untimely Meditations*, 7) While Strauss is held up as a pinnacle of German culture, his sense of the ancestry of the language he uses is barely visible. Strauss' style is thus evidence of 'poor reading', choosing the wrong books to read and consequently writing with confused references and mixed metaphors which Nietzsche unpicks in laborious detail (e.g. using 'pronouncing' when he means 'addressing' and so on).
20. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 109.
21. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 236.
22. Virno, *Déjà Vu*, 54.
23. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 62.
24. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 107. Nietzsche revisits this relationship between the ends of man and mediocrity later in *Beyond Good and Evil*, when he argues that while the masses will come and go, one species of person lasts longer: the hopelessly mediocre. 'Only the mediocre have prospects for continuing on, for propagating – they are the people of the future, the only survivors.' *Beyond Good and Evil*, 160.
25. Virno, *Déjà Vu*, 53.
26. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 98.
27. Virno, *Déjà Vu*, 52.
28. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 71.
29. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 70.
30. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 72.
31. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 167.
32. Sloterdijk, *Derrida, An Egyptian*, 67.
33. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations,* 94–95. Duncan Large note that 'Nietzsche uses the whole panoply of Orientalist clichés, and in contrast to the sophisticated complexity of his definition of "Europe", he is happy to resort to conceptual

shorthand in his characterisations of Europe's "others" by means of a succession of global (hemispherical) stereotypes' ('Nietzsche's Orientalism', 180).

34. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations,* 122.
35. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations,* 94.
36. Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 30.
37. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 36.
38. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 22.
39. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 261.
40. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 12.
41. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 3.
42. This problem is felt acutely by Nietzsche's Zarathustra in his crusade against what John Russon describes as 'the non-creative discourse of worn-out clichés'. New speech must provide a bridge to open up previously unreachable aspects of being. But in opening this bridge, what was formerly unrecognizable has now become accessible: this is achieved not only through future speech becoming-familiar but a converse activity where past ambiguities of speech are condensed into a single unity, and Zarathustra's accomplishments are named by the 'higher men' he despises. See 'The Child's New Speech', 79.
43. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 206.
44. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 58.
45. 'In the case of everything perfect we are accustomed to abstain from asking how it became: we rejoice in the present fact as though it came out of the ground by magic. […] The artist knows that his work produces its full effect when it excites a belief in an improvisation, a belief that it came into being with a miraculous suddenness; and so he may assist this illusion and introduce those elements of rapturous restlessness, of blindly groping disorder.' *Human All Too Human*, 145.
46. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings,* 148.
47. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings,* 148.
48. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 35.
49. Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth*, 149. Sloterdijk suggests that this is Nietzsche's fundamental intuition: that 'at bottom, the whole of European metaphysics was the delirium of monopolists'. *Neither Sun Nor Death*, 34.
50. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 146.
51. This, then, paves the way for Nietzsche's presentation of the eternal recurrence of the Same: the revelation of which 'would transform and crush you' or create a 'tremendous moment' (a rejuvenated modernity, in Jameson's sense) where one longs '*for nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal'. *The Gay Science*, 194–195.
52. Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 83.
53. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 112.
54. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 118.
55. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 20.
56. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 185–186, n.23. This is an important preface, I think, to Nietzsche's engagement with more prominent clichés, such as the racial and gender stereotypes he deploys throughout his work. Of course, these all

deserve closer attention than can be given here, as Kofman's point accounts only for an underlying concern driving Nietzsche's approach, rather than making them any less problematic.

57. Attlee, 'Click, Click, Click', 2.

58. Groys has made this comment in several interviews. See, for example, Groys and Dillon, 'Who Do You Think You're Talking To?'

59. N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines*, 21.

60. For two contrasting methodologies reaching this same conclusion, see Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, 3; Fink, *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, 34.

61. Descombes, 'Nietzsche's French Moment', 90.

62. Porter, 'Nietzsche's Radical Philology', 35. Porter refers here to Nietzsche's philological approach in *The Birth of Tragedy*; a more commonly discussed, but far more ambiguous, problem is Nietzsche's views on gender, and whether these are also inherited clichés, or deconstructions of attempts to name and master 'woman'.

63. Solomon, *Living with Nietzsche*, 3, 6.

64. Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage*, 59, 60.

65. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 330.

66. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xxxii.

67. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 384.

68. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5.

69. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 330.

70. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xxvii.

71. It is worth mentioning that Sloterdijk wrote the *Critique* in the middle of the 1980s. Much like his wider works, it therefore speaks to both a general trend in the principles of Enlightenment, and a very specific set of circumstances within the German academy, which chiefly influences the eclectic approach he takes to his scholarship. His view of contemporary academic practices in the text is, in many senses, a view of a German system dominated by the legacy of the Frankfurt School; a view which will later develop into two much-publicized disputes with Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, respectively (see *Neither Sun Nor Death*, 45–125; Couture, *Sloterdijk*, 64–93.)

72. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason,* 330–331.

73. Sloterdijk, *Foams*, 20.

74. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' 228.

75. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' 225.

76. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' 226.

77. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' 230.

78. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' 232.

79. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5. Liyan Gao rephrases this: 'When one always expects the worst, one is not surprised by the revelation of oppressive conditions: at an unconscious level there is already an acknowledgement of such conditions, and it is the underlying assumption of their worldview.' 'Ideological Cynicism', 55.

80. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 90.

81. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 356, n.16.

82. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' 246.

83. Sloterdijk writes in his conclusion: 'In modernity, the brackets that in classical thinking held reflection and life together burst apart. It becomes increasingly clear to us that we are at the point of losing the common denominator of self-experience and world experience. Even the most honourable postulate of self-knowledge today is suspected of having been naïve, and what once appeared as a summit of reflectedness is today confronted by the suspicion that it was possibly only a chimera that arose through the misuse of the metaphors of reflection.' *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 537.

84. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 29.

85. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 322.

86. Babich, 'Sloterdijk's Cynicism', 22–23.

87. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 105.

88. Babich, 'Sloterdijk's Cynicism', 23.

89. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 29.

90. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 145. A more developed notion of atmospherics beyond cynicism has been explored in encyclopaedic detail in his magnum opus, the *Spheres* trilogy, as well as *Terror from the Air*.

Chapter 4

Saying It with Flowers

Jean Paulhan's Inappropriate Metaphors

> There's no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.
>
> – Alan Bennett, *The History Boys.*

In 1922, the recently formed British Legion chose the poppy as its official emblem. In no small part due to John McCrae's 1915 poem *In Flanders' Fields*, the Flanders poppy – the red poppy which is now reproduced in paper form every year for public displays around the time of Remembrance Sunday – is worn to stand for memory of all wars. It has, however, always served as an uncanny symbol. As Jennifer Iles once asked, 'how did the poppy, the symbol of unpredictable growth, stupor, and forgetfulness, become Britain's universally respected national symbol of remembrance?'[1] True enough, while the poppy represents all conflicts, it is far less associated with the opium wars, or the more recent military interventions in Afghanistan, where poppies – not paper ones, but actual, opioid flowers – held a key strategic importance for all sides. But to simply point to the murky underside of the poppy's signification – to critique the poppy as a particular form of 'white mythology', perhaps – does not necessarily bring us closer to its 'proper' meaning. The commemorative act involving and surrounding the poppy instead sits between a particular sense of localized cultural memory and a universal imperative for shared identity. Gathered around commemorative obelisks and monuments in small towns and villages across the country, the localized effect is not only based on the legacy of the 'pals' battalions' of the First World War who were recruited from the same area (and thus had significant effects on those areas when said battalions were destroyed); it is also borne from the British government's decision to not return the bodies of dead troops to their families.

Instead, the burial of the fallen was reimagined as a collective endeavour, 'the Greatest Sacrifice'.[2] Today, sitting alongside this localized cultural memory, the poppy remains a visual signifier of ambiguous collectiveness, whereby TV presenters, footballers and politicians alike are expected to wear their poppy 'with pride' – with repercussions for those who don't. Alongside the standard lapel ornaments, one can buy larger poppies for the front of the car; they can be stitched on to sports uniforms and, in some cases, people can dress head to foot in them. The poppy borrows the commemorative potency of flowers as specific interventions within particular, singular events – left at the scene of traffic accidents, planted in memory of a loved one, and so on– and invests into it a wider chronological sense of significance, coupled with performative expressions that can vary between subtle and utterly outlandish. 'Tragic yet uplifting, lethal yet comforting', Nicholas Saunders writes, the poppy 'is international in spirit yet intimately personal'.[3]

In this context, Paul Cummins and Tom Piper's ceramic art installation *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red,* originally hosted at the Tower of London between June and November 2014, provided a site where these tensions – between the familiar, commonplace catharsis of 'remembrance' and the awkward ambiguities regarding the range, distribution and metaphors of memories – were brought together. Originally, the installation consisted of 888,246 ceramic poppies lining the moat of the Tower, one for each British soldier's death in the First World War. Viewable from the main roads around the Tower, poppies were added to the moat each day until the 11 November, and on the following day they would all disappear. The ephemerality of the piece was somewhat disrupted when, following its success, two parts of the installation – *Weeping Window* and *Wave* – were bought and gifted to the nation through the World War I Centenary Art Commission, 14-18 NOW.[4] These parts were then installed in various different sites across the UK, each to coincide with slightly different centenaries and their attachments to a particular place. The *Weeping Window* was in the Orkneys in 2016, for example, to commemorate the Battle of Jutland. By the time it appeared at the Middleport Pottery in August 2018, its last stop before becoming a permanent part of the Imperial War Museum's collection, the commemorative links were multiplied. 14-18 NOW's website suggests the key link is the rise in pottery production during the First World War, which included 'plates with patriotic designs or messages on them', and commemorative memorabilia for both the start and end of the war.[5] The Middleport *Weeping Window* was, then, effectively commemorating the production of commemoration, as well as the medium of commemoration, ceramic. The 'window' was now the open top of a bottle oven kiln, from which the poppies spilled out, down the side and on to the ground below. While the displayed poppies were manufactured ('handmade', the exhibition was always quick to remind us) two miles away in Tunstall,

and several more miles away in Derbyshire, the pottery factory at Middleport was distinct from the more traditional surrounding potteries because of its compact and linear layout, designed around the principles of mass production and efficiency. Now, Middleport was a site of urban regeneration; having fallen into disrepair along with the ceramic industry in Stoke-on-Trent, it had been revived through various charitable grants, and hosted a popular television programme where amateur potters competed for a prize of no monetary value.

Throughout the Poppies' various tenures, there was an acute emphasis on re-invoking a trope once scripted by Alastair Campbell: providing a 'people's' monument. Piper described its success as a 'word of mouth phenomenon';[6] at the end of its run, the installation was taken apart by a thousand volunteers; each poppy was later sold to members of the public. Fittingly, for such a democratic exercise, even the original title itself was open source, taken from an unknown soldier's will (the soldier was, in fact, a woman who had dressed up as a man to go and fight in the First World War). At Middleport, as with other sites, visitors were encouraged to write down their responses to the installation on paper and attach them to a wireframe in an adjoining building. It was perhaps no surprise, given the context, that these painted a mixed picture. Numerous notes simply said: 'Lest we forget'. Directly beneath one such note was another, which proclaimed: 'They died for our freedom.' Of course, the cynic may delight in the irony of this. They might point out how quickly we ('the people') forget that the First World War was not a struggle for freedom, so much as the last huzzah of the vast European empires of the nineteenth century. The literary critic likewise may be at pains to note that 'Lest we forget' originated in a Rudyard Kipling poem dedicated to Queen Victoria twenty-one years before the end of the War; a poem which specifically addresses the transience of empire and chides those 'drunk with sight of power' who 'loose wild tongues' into empty jingoism; a sentiment clearly lost in the subsequent preservation of the phrase.[7] But just as we were careful not to reassemble the history of the poppy without losing its uncanniness, perhaps we should be wary of ironing out too quickly the tensions that these conflations of localized and universal sentiments, and bland repetition[8] and cultural catharsis, create. Rather than dismissing the overtly clichéd sentiment of the Poppies as another example of how public art has become ornamental and non-critical,[9] perhaps we should spend some time thinking through these tensions, and what they may tell us about the concept of the cliché itself.

SAYING IT WITH FLOWERS

I want to proceed, not with a historical deconstruction of commemorative symbolism (others are far better placed to do this than me), but rather with a

problem of flowers: and, as will become obvious, my approach will be less a botanical compendium and more a walk through the park. The problem regards the 'flowers of rhetoric' – the general figure for tropes and rhetorical patterns employed to make speech pleasing – and their relationship to perpetual clichés. Aristotle was the unwitting creator of philosophy's floral problem, when he insisted that pleasant imagery lend their grace to speech: 'the materials of metaphors must be beautiful; and the beauty, like the ugliness, of all words may […] lie in their sound or meaning'.[10] This teaching was passed into the hands of his successor at the Lyceum, Theophrastus; and when the author of *Historia de Plantis* and *De Causis Plantarums*, who was charged with the upkeep of the world's first botanical garden, was prompted to provide his own examples of such beauty, he naturally turned to 'rose-coloured' and 'flowery meadows'.[11] Thus, an association was forged that continues to be drawn upon in subsequent rhetorical textbooks, and metaphors inevitably became the 'flowery' language of rhetoric that philosophy has found suspicious ever since.

But the particular flowers we are concerned with take us to 1936, when Jean Paulhan brings our attention to a sign at the entrance to the public park in the French town of Tarbes that reads:

> It Is Forbidden to Enter the Park Carrying Flowers.[12]

Like the philosophers, the gardener is also suspicious of flowers: he sees young couples walking in the park holding florae which he knows they have picked from his own beds as some kind of act of affection. But when challenged, they say that they didn't pick them from the garden, but had them when they came in. The simple answer for the gardener? Ban the carrying of flowers. Anyone seen holding flowers would be clearly guilty of theft.

Why would a literary editor and anthropologist like Paulhan be interested in the angst of a groundskeeper? As the story of the garden interweaves the multifaceted argument of his book *The Flowers of Tarbes*, what is at stake with the flowers – both those in Tarbes, and the commonplaces of literature – becomes increasingly evident. For Paulhan, literature stands between the two opposing forces of 'rhetoric' and 'terror'. Such an opposition seems to constitute a situation which language has always, and will always, find itself in: for Paulhan, it seems to be a 'universal characteristic'.[13] By rhetoric, Paulhan refers to the modern revival of classificatory systems for ornamental speech, popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which in turn reflect a more general desire to treat language within a fixed set of parameters. The invention of the dictionary as a means of encasing language to a finite set of words was carried through into rhetoric; where, in contrast to the classical emphasis on context – easier to achieve in small city-states and

cultures oriented towards oral traditions – the early modern revival focused on a stricter classification of the rules of literature and tropes. Within such a tradition, the cliché is condemned for lacking appropriate meaning. Against this rhetorical tradition stands the forces of terror, which Paulhan summarizes as the belief in the precedence of thought over language, encapsulated in thinkers such as Bergson, and their constant struggles to supersede the limiting structures of language and attempts to invent new language and forms of expression. Terror describes the urge to invent new language and to find new forms of expression which underlie the literary, artistic and philosophical projects of modernity's avant-garde. The terrorist emerges when the usual identification of humanity with a specific *ergon* is problematized, through social and cultural crisis, and replaced by a renewed emphasis on *spirit*. In such crises, which Paulhan argues give birth to the modern era, 'skill, knowledge, and technique, however, become suspect, as if they were covering up some lack of conviction'.[14] Functionality – in terms of agency, of language and of morality, all of which are conditioned by the operation of commonplace repetition – hides an 'authenticity' of human existence, which the responses to such crises strive to uncover.

Unsurprisingly, the two sides of terror and rhetoric see themselves fiercely at odds with one another. The former accuse the latter of creating clichés by insisting on archaic rules as they catalogue elements of language; the latter accuse the former of emptying words of meaning through misuse and malapropism. Yet Paulhan argues this is deceptive – a cliché, even – because their opposition is paradoxically based on a shared desire for the unmediated communication of ideas through language. As Michael Syrotinski notes, 'The two sides in this exchange are in fact one and the same' because 'what appears to some as verbalism appears to others as expressiveness'.[15] The rhetorician argues against the cliché as a perversion of good writing, seeing the language of the terrorist as unnecessarily flamboyant and misleading; while the terrorist *also* claims that clichés are unnecessary since everybody already uses them, such that their function overrides their meaning. The commonplace is, as Syrotinski summarizes, 'the locus of a deep-seated tension within language and literature, and far from being banal, they are, as Blanchot rightly points out, 'monsters of ambiguity'.[16]

This shared space of rhetoric and terror is manifested in the figure of the gardener at Tarbes. The flowers – like the ornamental flowers of rhetoric – must be left well alone, both to preserve the beauty of the garden (rhetoric) *and* to prevent the young people using them in ill-fated efforts of expressing their amorous spirit (terror). But the gardener's sign will fail: flowers will still be picked and clichés will still be used, but through various tactics of ingenuity from the young lovers it becomes impossible to tell whether the flowers they hold are their own, or ones they have stolen. Likewise, it is entirely

possible to use clichés in interesting ways, just as it is easy for the 'terrorist' author to believe they are using a fresh expression without being aware of its overuse. In fact, Paulhan's work on anthropology suggests this is not an anomaly or mistake, but a key aspect of the commonplace within culture, when he points out that a translator, coming to a new language with fresh eyes, will often misrepresent the clichéd nature of many everyday expressions as a novel or original maxim. As Anna-Lo Milne argues, for Paulhan:

> The key to a successful translation lies in placing the commonplace in such a way as to signal to the reader that this expression requires a double movement: from the image or metaphor to the stock expression, which mirrors the renewal of the cliché that occurs within the source language when we perceive the possibility of reading it as idea as well as mere words.[17]

This double movement is what makes the commonplace effective: it is both a locus of thought and 'a mere expression, a sign of the fact that a writer is always necessarily contending with the shared medium of language'. Milne continues:

> Normally these readings are mutually exclusive, but when deployed in such a way as to leave the reader in doubt about how to read the expression, the commonplace offers the possibility of revealing the two facets of language: its semantic force and its syntactical constraints. In other words, in ideal circumstances, circumstances that cannot be quantified as such, the commonplace has the capacity to be at one and the same time new and derivative, an original idea and a fixed expression.[18]

In this sense, Paulhan argues, neither rhetoric nor terror can successfully police clichés into the enemy they want them to be. Instead, they can only present accounts which artificially obscure the double movement: they present clichés of clichés, in effect. After a detailed survey highlighting such moves, Paulhan reaches the only possible conclusion: the strength of the commonplace is *not* its fixed and decaying meaning, but rather its *diversity*:

> I have no idea whether commonplace expressions are intelligent or stupid, and I cannot see any way of ever finding out in a rigorous manner. But one thing we can say for sure is that *they are not common*, despite their name, and despite their appearance. On the contrary, if they have one character trait – and which is the source of the faults we have seen, from inertia to confusion – it is that they are an *exceptionally vacillating* and *diverse form* of expression, one that lends itself to being understood in two, even four, different ways, and a kind of monster of language and reflection.[19]

Paulhan suggests that this is the real trick of cliché: 'a truth so dangerous to Terror that it needs all the tricks and traps it can to hide it'.[20] Rather than struggling to subvert the fixed orders of meaning, Terror must obscure the fact that these meanings are far from rigid. To expose these tricks, he suggests that writers should recognize clichés *as* clichés, and in doing so reduce the ambiguities of the commonplace which shroud it as a threat to novelty. 'In short', Paulhan asserts, 'we simply need to make commonplace expressions common'.[21] By recognizing the inescapability from cliché, and that clichés are themselves perpetual reinventions of language, he concludes that the sign outside the park in Tarbes should be changed to read:

> It is forbidden to enter the park *without* bearing flowers.[22]

This, he argues, would solve the problem by virtue of the fact that anybody entering the park would have their hands full of their own flowers to be able to pick any new ones. It would therefore no longer require ingenuity to hide whether the flowers are their own or taken from others. If we embrace the cliché as an unambiguous commonplace within invention itself, then we essentially reaffirm the commonplace in its sense of a binding foundation of meaningful discourse. In doing so, Paulhan suggests we not only move beyond Terror but *perfect* it: 'forcing its peculiarities, its taboos, and its tricks to the point where it dissolves back into an old and joyful science', but without losing its 'rigour' and energy.[23] 'Rhetoric, indeed', Paulhan concludes, 'it is no longer a word that frightens us'.[24]

CIVIC DUTIES

Paulhan's allegorical flowers provide what Carol Murphy terms the 'civic equivalent' of the dispute between the terror and rhetoric in literature,[25] and in this spirit we can contrive a horticultural dialogue between the flowers in the garden of Tarbes and the poppies of *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red,* with its specific *Weeping Window* installation in Middleport. Here, can the poppies be re-appropriated under the banner of rhetoric, in the way Paulhan suggests? Is, in this sense, the *Weeping Window* a kind of perfected terror – an artistic spirit of commemoration, beyond the functional signifier that the poppy has otherwise become? But then, given the overt emphasis on the poppies as a public display, what *kind* of propriety determines such a rhetorical appropriation?

True, these questions are complicated by the fact that, as Syrotinski notes, Paulhan's use of rhetoric is fundamentally a traditional one, which in turn leads him to utilize the notion of the 'commonplace' in less disparaging tones

than that of the cliché. From Paulhan's literary perspective, figures and tropes of rhetoric are all commonplaces, in this sense.[26] However, I think there is a case to say that the consideration of the 'terrorist' writer *forces* the commonplace into the form of a cliché, by virtue of the terrorist attack on *all* rhetoric as problematic (or at least, rhetoric as a form of tradition or maintenance of language). Terror claims that, fundamentally, rhetoric *is* a cliché. If the cliché may well be considered as a kind of stable unit that can be differentiated from the commonplace or the stereotype within the conventions of literature, within the wider application of the cliché to the practices of thinking itself – which Paulhan's essay reflects several times on – such a unit becomes harder to sustain. Paulhan's argument necessarily *branches* from the commonplace-in-general to the cliché as a specific iteration, or manner of 'placing' the common. Such branching out is enabled, paradoxically, by the initial 'stability' of the cliché, as Paulhan argues:

> If [terrorists] are in agreement – and us along with them – about attacking clichés with a particular ferocity, we suspect we know the reason why; it is not that clichés are in any way exceptional, since just like rhythm, rhyme, genre (and the family) they are made up on a given material element to which certain thoughts correspond. It is simply that, being shorter, they are a thousand times easier to present, manipulate – and judge – than a play or a lyric poem, and, of course, than a family. So that out of a large number of equally odious characters, we often end up most hating the one that fate has placed directly in front of us.[27]

The fact that clichés are ready-to-hand and easy to manipulate means that they are rendered mobile and applicable to situations beyond their initial use. But this is also the reason that the flowers of Tarbes hold a particular significance (which is really of no significance) for the lovers who pick them. And this is, incidentally, why Paulhan's sign will fare no better than the gardeners. After all, carrying their own flowers into the park does little to commemorate that particular moment or experience in time. The act of picking the flowers marks a highly contextualized and opportunistic act of propriety: to *make that moment their own*, they lay claim to the garden.[28]

Something similar occurred at Middleport, although here the ownership of the moment was complicated by the similitude between the 'flowers' brought to the site – and left on the papers pinned to the wireframe – and the flowers on display. No matter how contradictory to both its original and extended purpose, the value of the poppy within the installation was clearly established by its worth *as* a repeated commonplace. While Cummins and Piper's work remained specific on the number of poppies displayed in each installation, the visual effect surpassed this: all that mattered, really, was that there are *a lot* of them; an overwhelming – literally, overwhelming the kiln – number. While

visually this excessiveness expressed individual artefacts form a collective 'movement' or outpouring – much in line with the original purpose of the Remembrance Poppy – in doing so, it struggles to define what common-ness is being 'placed', what should be excluded and what should be brought into the scene. The poppies on display were, by this time, facsimiles of those sent out to members of the public following the original exhibition: the art was both a monument, separated from the public by a rope barrier, and identical in places to the decoration its viewers may have in their living rooms at home. The comfort of domesticity sat uncomfortably with the Middleport installation commemorating not only the deaths from war but the redundancy of local industry (ostensibly unrelated to armed conflict). The attempt to bring together, via public art installation, a general aesthetics of remembrance resulted in a prominent uncanniness in the curation of the piece. Everywhere, a sense of allegory and metaphor was pressed upon the viewer; but remained ambiguous as to what these are allegories of. Somewhere these flowers were hiding something: not a 'real meaning' that we can retrieve through careful diagnosis, but something that was far more superficial – and owes this superficiality its meaning.

In this way, Middleport reflects Paulhan's claim over the potential inventiveness, and certain inescapability, of commonplaces. But for all his essay's brilliance, it moves too quickly over something fundamental about how the cliché placed 'directly in front of us' can become *overwhelmingly* meaningful in one moment, and one moment alone (and meaningful for the next person in the queue at the rope barrier, and the next). This points to a rhetoric that may, if not frighten us, nevertheless challenge our capacity to appropriate cliché by 'owning up' to the commonplaces we carry: particularly in the case of Middleport, where the carried commonplaces were reflected (or, in the case of those who owned a ceramic poppy, replicated) and mutated in the commonplaces exhibited. In this sense, the interplay of the poppies' clichés suggests something more like an ambient rhetoric:[29] a rhetoric which, unlike Paulhan's initial focus, moves beyond the conventions of the writer and reader, or producer of aesthetics and its consumers. Indeed, it suggests a need to think through the wider logic of this propriety of cliché; and to do this, we need to visit another garden.

METAPHOR AND USURY

Whereas Tarbes led Paulhan to question the stupidity of the commonplace, a reading of Anatole France's *The Garden of Epicurus* leads Jacques Derrida's essay 'White Mythology' to consider the notion that dead metaphors become the habitual concepts of philosophy. Unlike previous discussions on how

philosophical concepts are rooted in forgotten or dead metaphorical origins,[30] Derrida argues that such metaphors are not, in fact, devoid of life. If 'metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produces it', – that is, the metaphorical origins of thought – then 'the scene […] nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest'.[31]

Analysing the history of metaphor in general, Derrida argues, is typified by one metaphor in particular: wear and tear, or *usure*. But as a metaphor, this 'implies a *continuist presupposition*: the history of metaphor appears essentially not as a displacement with breaks, as reinscriptions in a heterogeneous system […] but rather as a progressive erosion, a regular semantic loss, an uninterrupted exhausting of the primitive meaning'.[32] Chapter 1 of this book suggests that each entry in a dictionary of clichés is an expression of the decline from meaningful use to arbitrary loss; a move rooted in need to assert a propriety between the cliché and the non-cliché. This reflects, essentially, the broader operation which Derrida identifies at work in philosophical discussions of metaphor. In a section of his essay named 'The Flowers of Rhetoric', Derrida traces this back to Aristotle, for whom metaphors are embedded within his larger ontological system whereby the noun is the fundamental unit of propriety. Propriety upholds the unity of a noun's essence. A metaphor is a transported noun: a supplement for the more proper noun it represents: thus, 'the sense aimed at in through these figures is an essence rigorously independent of that which transports it'.[33] As such, the sense of metaphor is something separable and secondary (at least in principle) from the sense of philosophy. Once the transport ceases to take us to this proper sense, the metaphor dies. This traditional view, however, obscures the point that the very principle of *usure* means 'dead' metaphors are still subject to *use*.

In one sense, Paulhan, has already made this point with his claim that acknowledging the commonplaces we have will allow for an unending, but more banal, transportation (hence the importance of the flowers of Tarbes being carried in and out of the garden – literally transported – rather than being picked up). But Derrida questions whether this is notion of 'use' as 'appropriating' is, indeed, useful or appropriate. Crucially, the 'use' of dead metaphors Derrida describes is not the same as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's suggestion that 'dormant metaphors' can be raised from their slumber in new discourses; or the sense that Umberto Eco argues dead metaphors can be picked up by any new semiotic system and become new.[34] These both employ the conventional notion of *usure* whereby an original meaning can be re-discovered (or re-created via a new usage), which in turn rests on the classical opposition between proper and nonproper meaning (and, along with this, a series of other oppositions that allow metaphor to be distinguished

from philosophy: signifier and signified, sensible and intelligible and so on). 'Metaphor', in this sense, 'is determined by philosophy as a provisional loss of meaning, an economy of the proper without irreparable damage', which remains within 'the circular reappropriation of the literal, proper meaning'.[35] But for Derrida, this economic principle also forms part of metaphor's *usure*. The undead nature of metaphor comes from *usure* in its broader sense: not simply wear and tear, but also usury, 'the production of surplus value according to laws other than those of a continuous and linearly accumulative capitalism'.[36] The words that form this philosophical basis of metaphor are themselves indebted to metaphorical origins: the word 'idea', for example, circulates in a non-specialist, common sense before it is appropriated into its technical meaning by Plato and his footnotes. Thus, any definition of metaphor always-already includes metaphor as part of its definition. To define metaphor *properly* would require a metaphor which is outside of this economy. This is seen, indeed, when Aristotle describes the inventive power of metaphor when analogous terms are missing: he provides the image of the sun in relation to the sowing of seeds (an early gestation of the flowers to follow). The sower casting the seeds is analogous to the sun casting its flame, for which there is no proper name. In this way, the sun's energy, which is itself a supplement for the sower's act, is only named via a further supplement. Or, as Derrida puts it: 'If every metaphor is an elliptical comparison or an analogy, in this case we are dealing with a metaphor par excellence, a metaphorical redoubling, an ellipsis of an ellipsis.'[37]

Derrida points to a law of the supplement that accompanies the metaphor: because its definition can never be reached, it requires a constant stream of supplementary terms. The continuity of metaphor – which enables its wear, tear, degradation and death – is therefore dependent upon a discontinuous surplus value, which allows for different senses to be transported. Usury is, then, a fundamental 'discontinuous supplement' of metaphor, through which it maintains itself.[38] But it also questions the extent to which one can claim or admit to a particular figure as one's own, as Paulhan seems to suggest, without entering into some kind of economy – and incurring some kind of debt – which underwrites our capacity to use, use up or use again the flowers of rhetoric.

For this reason, we should not necessarily look for where the 'terror' and the 'rhetoric' is in Middleport – allegorically or literally. The two have become so commonly interspersed that Paulhan's figures are by now well inverted. Today, after all, it is fundamentalist terrorism that is charged with insisting on rules, orders and limitations; appearing as master rhetoricians, seducing followers through the transmission of visual and verbal persuasion. Conversely, Paulhan's 'terrorist' is now more readily seen as the norm. Innovation, difference and diversity are all the commonplace of the spectacle (this is, we

may recall, one of the reasons the Poppies were criticized: for maintain a far too traditional, clean account of wartime 'sacrifice'; for *not* being terrifying). Instead, recall that the gardener of Tarbes was not concerned with literary etiquette, but more straightforward theft. If Derrida's analysis is based on the ambiguity of metaphor's propriety within philosophical discourse (which one 'dominates' the other) then, in the case of clichés, the issue of propriety manifests itself as one of ownership. The interlocution between Tarbes and Middleport thus rests on a slightly different question: what difference does the cliché make to the usury of metaphor?

RADICAL SACRIFICE

Garrett Hardin's 1968 essay 'The Tragedy of the Commons' concerns not flowers but pastures, yet the problem he raises echoes that of Paulhan's gardener.[39] How, Hardin asks, do we prevent the destruction of shared assets, such as overgrazing of pastures, or over-fishing the sea? By the very fact of their open-ness to everyone, they will (Hardin argues) be inevitably worked to death. Taking this argument as his starting point, Jakob Norberg suggests that language offers a highly particular version of this problem. For, on the one hand, language is available to everybody, and cannot be exhausted in the same way as, say, a flowerbed can be. But there are also cases, Norberg points out, that 'become subject to a dynamic much like the tragedy of the commons', a dynamic which 'unfolds under the name of the cliché, our term for expressions that have lost their value through a process of repetition and overexposure'.[40] For Norberg, the analogy with the commons demonstrates how phrases which may at first capture a sentiment or description clearly become victims of their own success; and, once overused, becomes annoying and boring.

Whereas Hardin argued for an end to the commons, and to introduce private ownership through which the land would be more carefully preserved, Norberg argues that a similar protection of shared expressions occurs with the rise of copyright and its accompanying legislation around authorship. This, however, still cannot prevent the tragedy of overuse of phrases, sentences and sentiments. 'Rules against plagiarism and the conventions that allow for quotation […] provide no fullproof [*sic*] defense against triteness and are not designed to avert the particular tragedy of expressions becoming spoiled from constant use'.[41] After all, words are not consumed so much as circulated: hence Derrida's concern with an economy of communication which necessarily goes beyond like-for-like trade. Nevertheless, a pattern emerges for Norberg whereby the cliché is seen as a form of subverting, not so much the ownership of language but the appropriate benefits of original thought. The

problem is not so much the use of cliché but whether its user receives reward outside of the established economies of authorship, such as when bad writing garners market popularity. There is a reason why athletes are 'forgiven' for – or even expected to – uttering clichés, 'for they earn their money by winning on the field rather than composing texts'. Meanwhile:

> under the modern regime of literary property rights, the exasperation with the cliché stands in some proportion to the benefit that someone expects to derive from an utterance. […] Literary authors who slip in worn-out expressions in books are […] betraying a requirement inherent to their professional activity in the market and can expect a terrible review; now the annoyance is mixed with righteousness – they are not fulfilling the normative expectations of expressiveness and individuality that ground their ownership and justify any received rewards.[42]

But, as Norberg goes on to argue, something is inherently unstable about this approach. Here his approach echoes Ruth Amossy's claim that clichés are a common property which we may not want to own, yet nevertheless do; they are, in this way, the 'stereotypes of thoughts', and subject to the same inevitable usage.[43] Providing a reinterpretation of Amossy's premise, Norberg sees this communal ownership as a potentially disruptive force against systems of propriety within modern thought, such as the legal claims of copyright, the economies of knowledge production, and the value of innovation:

> The cliché is a symptom that cannot be fully eliminated (in capitalism), despite constant attacks on their badness, because clichés are generated when a market logic demands the enforcement of ownership over forever un-ownable words. In this way, the cliché actually serves as a reminder of the radically social character of language.[44]

For Norberg, then, the perfected terror of the cliché is the inverse of Paulhan's. The radical nature of the cliché lies in its ability to 'remind', through a form of ownership which subverts the very propriety of what it is to 'own'. Whereas the communal flower leaves an empty space when it is picked, and the common ground is destroyed from overuse, the cliché itself – not its allegorical form, or the 'clichés about clichés' Paulhan chided, but in its actual use and exchange – is nothing other than an inexhaustible surplus value. In this way, rhetoric can no longer lay claim to terror because the clichés of terror are constantly re-useable.

Of course, to describe a cliché as 'inexhaustible' may appear as something of a contradiction. But this is where our travels through different gardens lead us. The form of surplus value at work must, it seems, be distinctive to that of

Derrida's general account of the usury of metaphor. Whereas the latter rests on a chain of supplements, the cliché – as a particular figure, the recognizable trope placed immediately before us, as Paulhan described – is supplemented in most circumstances by its own repetition. This recurrence, and the continuation of the supplement as each incarnation of the clichéd figure is moved on or picked up, is precisely why the commonplace remains so immediate.

This becomes important when we note that, despite his inversion of Paulhan's victory of rhetoric, Norberg seems to end in a similar same place: the suggestion that we should not fear to use clichés. But while Norberg's claims operate at the level of language in general – that is, that the repetition of language proves it cannot be fully appropriated – Derrida's focus on metaphor instigates a move that takes the 'use' of language from simply wear and tear to the usury of accumulated debt. This, in turn, helps us to understand how Paulhan's account of cliché is *both* appropriate *and* inappropriate in the case of the Poppies.

LEST WE FORGET…

It is an irony hiding in plain sight that up to 1994 the money generated from sales of the Remembrance Poppy went to the 'Haig Fund', named after the First World War Field Marshall who not only launched the charity but whose strategies also generated a good proportion of the war's deaths. However, the rhetoric of the poppy has retained its resonance with command structures. 'Lest we forget' is an imperative; a warning – 'or else!' – of the dangers of poor memory. It is also this command structure that insists on allegory and metaphor in the *Weeping Window* installation: not so much a specific reminder (in the sense better served by a military museum), but a visual exigence *to remember*. In this sense, it captures the open-endedness of 'lest we forget' as a commonplace: remember not to forget, and don't forget to remember.

As we have already noted, the ambiguity remains as to what the allegory is of, and what it is to be remembered. When we amalgamate the obvious answers – a relative, a hero, Haig's misjudgements or even a job in the Potteries – we will, of course, arrive at the general notion of *sacrifice*. The effect of this is to suggest a collective debt incurred: what must be remembered is what is owed to those who suffered (it is, as a side note, precisely the rhetoric of indebtedness which fuels the 'poppy-shaming' controversies over which celebrities have presented a big enough show of not-forgetting[45]). Indeed, given the repetition inherence to the commonplace power of the poppy – that they remind us to never forget, postponing an index of reference in the first instance – it seems appropriate to suggest that the Poppies installations are not signs of individual or collective deaths remembered, but rather of debt.

It is not surprising that this leads to ambiguity over what, exactly, is 'owed'. After all, sacrifice is an act which is necessarily beyond economy. There is no appropriate payment for it, or it is not a sacrifice. Sacrifice is meaningfully useless from an economic perspective, just as instrumental exchange is irrelevant to sacred value. Indeed, a number of other works of public art have engaged with the complexities of this. In her work on remembrance in contemporary art, for example, Lisa Saltzman points to the ways in which artists have questioned the capacity of the visual field to provide an 'indexical' (that is, 'predicated on physical relation) or 'iconic' ('predicated on physical resemblance') figure for memory.[46] In such cases, the use of shadows and vapour, the shaping of refracted light, or the casting of empty space in plaster, suggest, for Saltzman, that the commemoration and preservation of memory are 'at the same time, acts of sacrifice, of letting go'.[47] It is no coincidence that gaps and open spaces, such as the lines of voids in Daniel Libeskind's architectural design of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, dominate such approaches to the erasure which accompanies sacrificial commemoration.

But if such exhibits present approaches to the contemporary *meaning* of memory, the significance of the Poppies installations is that they do exactly the opposite. This is a commemoration which refuses to 'let go', precisely because of its engagement with the commonplaces we are liable to hold. Clichés are, as Norberg rightly points out, unownable and as such no matter how much we invest into the commonplaces of remembrance, the debt remains the same. Yet, precisely because there is no 'proper' end to this circulation, and nobody who owns the balance, the 'loss' which forms part of the *Weeping Window*'s commemorative task is not addressed through emptiness but an excessive exchange of Paulhan's 'flowers'. Indeed, the loss which *is* presented is not the loss of life but the necessary loss of an impossible debt: a debt which was not formed out of any kind of bargain or negotiation, and as such is never able to be paid off. The debt – and the 'meaning' of the poppy itself – is only ever an endless trail of supplements, amplified and extended by its indivisibility from the usury of the cliché.

As the various incarnations of the *Weeping Window* demonstrate, such supplements are traversed through localized repetition: this is precisely upheld by its premise as a democratic installation, and the ability of the same commonplaces to renew themselves in the Orkneys or in London, Carlisle or Stoke-on-Trent. In this sense, Paulhan's account rightly identifies the potential inventiveness that arises from what Milne termed its semantic force and syntactical constraint. But what remains less developed in Paulhan's work is the repetition at work in the notion of constraint. That is to say, if such a constraint is made visible by 'carrying' our own clichés, this does not equate to a straightforward use-value of figures and tropes we can pick up and deploy. The cliché is necessarily embedded within a larger system of supplements

which both prevents anybody appropriating the cliché for themselves, or, conversely, getting rid of them completely.

A cliché will always be inappropriate, in this sense. When the Poppies sit within the Middleport potteries, it is no surprise that debt and repayment becomes a rush of aimless flow, just as the red ceramics rush from the top of the bottle kiln in a way that renders the function of the kiln utterly redundant. This is the aesthetic demand of the commonplace: and once this is recognized, it is difficult to find fault with Cummins and Pipers work. If art critics were quick to call this a toothless monument, they were not wrong: but where should the 'teeth' be? What, in the end, are we commemorating at all, except the repetitious act of remembering a debt to someone or something we can't quite recall? In the end, such an aimless banality may be the ultimate commemoration; it may also be the ultimate flower.

NOTES

1. Iles, 'In remembrance: The Flanders poppy', 202.
2. Rooney and Heartfield, *The Blood-Stained Poppy*.
3. Saunders, *The Poppy*, 2.
4. https://www.1418now.org.uk/news/14-18-now-take-poppies-around-uk/.
5. https://www.1418now.org.uk/news/poppies-weeping-window-at-middleport-pottery-stoke-on-trent/.
6. Cummins and Piper, 'How we made the Tower of London poppies'.
7. Kipling, *The Recessional and Other Poems*.
8. Art critic Jonathan Jones, for example, described the installation as 'toothless', and questioned the lack of 'gory, vile and terrible to see' representations which might be more fitting for commemorating the war. See Jones, 'The Tower of London poppies'.
9. On this, see Belfiore and Bennett, 'Rethinking the social impact of the arts'.
10. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1405b1.
11. Theophrastus' examples are quoted in *Dêmetriou peri hermêneias* (*Demetrius on Style*), one of the earliest documented post-Aristotelean treatise on style.
12. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 9.
13. Syrotinski, 'The Rhetoric of Illness in Jean Paulhan', 58. Elsewhere, Syrotinksi contextualizes Paulhan's writing on the concept of terror within the French intellectual scene of the 1930s and 1940s; see *Defying Gravity*, 79.
14. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 24.
15. Syrotinski, *Defying Gravity*, 85.
16. Syrotinski, *Defying Gravity*, 86.
17. Milne, 'Placing the Commonplace', 132.
18. Milne, 'Placing the Commonplace', 131.
19. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 78 (my emphasis).
20. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 79.

21. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 79.
22. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes,* 93.
23. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes,* 82, 84.
24. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes,* 82.
25. Murphy, 'Re-Presenting the Real', 72.
26. This is helped by the more technical meaning of *lieu commun* in French, as Syrotinski points out. *Defying Gravity*, 91. See also Milne, 'Placing the Commonplace', 129.
27. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 51.
28. Allan Stoekl's critique of Paulhan addresses this point in more violent terms: he argues that Paulhan's case depends upon the 'force of arbitrary expulsion' which must precede the appropriation of Terror, and is 'possible only when it is opposed to Rhetoric'. But once Terror is subjugated, and becomes reciprocal with Rhetoric, there remains a more fundamental 'ostracizing' force underlying rhetoric's activities. 'The flowers of Tarbes turn not toward a waring and happy sun but toward a black hole; the comfort promised by the harmonious public space illuminated by that sun in inseparable from a self-rending violence.' *The Agonies of the Intellectual*, 159.
29. On this, see Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric,* and Barnett and Boyle, *Rhetoric through Everyday Things*.
30. Notable examples of this view can be seen in Nietzsche (see chapter 3 in this book); Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; Vico, *Selected Writings*, particularly 223–243.
31. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 213.
32. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 215 (emphasis original).
33. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 229.
34. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric,* 405–410; Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 128.
35. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 270.
36. Derrida, *Psyche,* 56.
37. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 243.
38. Derrida, *Psyche*, 61, 52.
39. Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons'. Cited in Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 71.
40. Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 71.
41. Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 74. Norberg notes the recent rise in cases in the music industry where artists have filed lawsuits to protect particular lyrics, chord progressions and characteristic rhythms. This trend, of course, deserves a book of its own to be analysed appropriately.
42. Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 77.
43. See Amossy and Rosen, *Les Discours du Cliché*.
44. Norberg, 'The Tragedy of the Commonplace', 79.
45. See Saunders, *The Poppy*, 151–152.
46. Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter*, 13.
47. Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter,* 97.

Chapter 5

The Shock of the Same

Boris Groys and the Metanoia *of the Cliché*

> In the Bible, we can find the famous statement that there is nothing new under the sun. That is, of course, true. But there is no sun inside the museum. And that is probably why the museum always was – and remains – the only possible site of innovation.
>
> – Boris Groys, *Art Power*.

The notion that clichés are ideas, images or language that have 'worn out' suggests a chronological progression. Clichés are used until they are used up. Yet, as suggested in chapter 1, the original rhetorical use of the commonplace in its broader form was dependent less on linear time and more on kairotic opportunity. Kairos, we will remember, refers to a timely or appropriate moment and was a concept largely neglected in the Enlightenment quest for the rational grounding of modern knowledge, a quest far more invested in *chronos,* the passage of linear time. Kairos is inherently contextual: it marks the 'emergence of a provisional subject, one that works on – and is worked on by – the situation'.[1] It is not just a moment which we seize, the 'it' that Nike adverts long commanded us to just do, but rather one that mediates subject and context, time and place; it focuses on the broader fluctuating interactions between individual and context. Kairotic discourse is not an object, but an event; with, in Carolyn Miller's words, a 'constantly changing quality of appropriateness'.[2]

If modern chronological time insists on the worn nature of the cliché, does Kairos offer an alternative framing? Its mysterious and 'elusive'[3] character, requiring such careful attention by the rhetorician, may seem entirely at odds with thoughtless, ready-to-hand expressions. Indeed, if Eric White is correct that Kairos is essentially a 'principle of occasionality' which serves

as a 'point of departure for rhetorical invention',[4] we seem a long way from repetitious predictability. But the point here is not to suggest that clichés form an example of kairotic activity by themselves. Rather, this opportunistic, discontinuous and momentary temporality seems, contrary to expectations, resonant with an *effectiveness* we find in certain clichés. This is not so much the effectiveness that Paulhan noted when he pointed out that what constitutes a cliché is not stable or fixed because nobody can predict when a phrase will become saturated, and someone may always hear it for the first time with its original vigour and energy. Instead, kairotic effectiveness is present when the use of an overused term still serves as a powerful and opportune rhetoric. D. J. Enright, for example, notes a 'shared, almost you could say sacred, acknowledgement of inadequacy' when we respond to moments of suffering through 'harmless banalities':[5] sometimes, it can be entirely measured and opportune to face the utter indescribability of tragedy with phrases that are self-evidently insufficient. If clichés convey a general gesture of meaning which is easily understood, and if 'the tendency behind using clichés, in general, has less to do with surprising the audience with originality and more to do with seeking connection with that audience',[6] then this does not completely bar them from negotiating the surprising. In this way, the kairotic element of invention is not reducible to a creative, subjective agency, but more the interaction between the timing of an innovation and how ready an audience is to receive it.[7]

Unfortunately, this does not address the more fundamental objection that a key component of a cliché is repetition, and Kairos is necessarily a moment that is lost once it has happened. Classical representations of Kairos show him as a divine figure, with long waves of hair flowing from the front of his head to signify the opportunity to be grasped, while the back of his head is completely bald, as the opportunity cannot be grasped after it has passed. But Kairos is often accompanied by a shadowy figure who renders this rather binary allegory more complex. Metanoia – literally, 'after-thought' – is the figure of regret and repentance that appears once an opportunity has passed. While artists favoured the melancholy of this goddess, rhetoricians noted that *metanoia* implied a process of correction. As Kelly Myers reminds us, it represents a change of mind and heart, a transformation of the way we think. Because the afterthought is still a thought, and can therefore bring new knowledge, it becomes 'a reflective act in which a person returns to a past event in order to see it anew'.[8] Indeed, throughout his work on art, philosophy and politics, Boris Groys has argued that a secular form of *metanoia* has traditionally driven the work of philosophy: a 'radical 'change of mind' through which a subject rejects everything that connected this subject to the 'old', ordinary, limited life perspective, and opens itself up to a new, universal, infinite perspective of philosophical evidence'.[9]

The hope for such an experience of *metanoia* in its traditional form has long been questioned. Given that we no longer believe in an immortal soul, Groys argues, the 'universal and the infinite' seem no longer tasks for the self. After all, to what extent can a subject truly reject their cultural horizons? How often have feminist, Marxist and postcolonial critics demonstrated that 'universal' and 'infinite' translate into a localized, finite account masquerading as philosophical self-evidence? Despite the persuasiveness of these critiques, Groys is keen not to lose the fundamental aspect of *metanoia*: the capacity to change one's mind and, in doing so, elevate thought. But rather than imagine this elevation as a form of pure thought or critique, rising above the commodified practices of everyday thought, Groys instead takes his lead from the 'anti-art' of Marcel Duchamp. He suggests we look for a 'readymade philosophy that ascribes universal philosophical value to certain already-existing practices, in the same way in which practices of the artistic readymade ascribe artistic value in ordinary objects'.[10] In this way, he argues, 'antiphilosophy does not abolish *metanoia*, but rather democratizes it'.[11] It celebrates how the ordinary and the banal can, paradoxically, transform thinking by providing fleeting, utopic visions of the universal in the most ordinary of things.

If clichés exhibit a certain kairotic temporality, then is it also possible for the lingering repetition of the cliché to inhabit the performative space of *metanoia*? Is it possible, using the framework that Groys provides, to conceive of clichés as changing minds? To explore this, we need to understand an overview of Groys' account of the way in which the ordinary and the everyday can constitute a more radical – even shocking – performance of the new.

ON THE NEW

The question of whether clichés can provide a form of critical *metanoia* rests on the larger issue of the typical exclusion of the ordinary and the everyday within the practices of philosophical critique. There are three obvious reasons for such an exclusion: that dullness often leaves critique struggling for sustained interest; that representing the everyday within the confines of critical and philosophical interest can distort its everydayness, whereby the ordinary is filtered by philosophy's predisposition to *reveal* or *transform*;[12] and such revelation is often performed from a position which bases its criticality precisely on its detachment from the everyday. Rita Felski has gone as far as to suggest that this obscuring of the everyday creates a limited field of what constitutes 'critique'. In this sense, Felski argues, the everyday does not just serve the role of a border between proper, critical thinking

and it's other; it also raises the traditional structure of *metanoia* into a position of elevated blindness. Because critical thinking has developed an unbalanced focus on critique and suspicion, at the expense of thinking as an embodied practice in time and space, Felski argues that 'both aesthetic and social worth, it seems, can only be cashed out in terms of a rhetoric of *againstness*'.[13] This emphasis on 'the vigilance of its detachment', Felski suggests, obscures a problem for the traditional view that 'critical thinking is restricted to one side of the intellectual encounter, and everyday thought is pictured as a zone of undifferentiated *doxa*'.[14] Imagining the everyday as a series of non-reflexive rituals allows the philosopher to ignore his own 'sacred texts, rites of passage, and articles of faith'; artefacts which do not, as Felski rightly notes, demonstrate 'a deplorable lack or shameful failing' which is best 'corrected by an industrial-strength dose of yet more critique'.[15] Instead, they suggest often-unchallenged *conventions* of critique which make intellectual 'exceptionalism' harder to sustain on the grounds it claims for itself.[16]

Working across the fields of art, aesthetics and philosophy, Groys takes this problem seriously. For Groys, such an exceptionalism is itself based upon the mechanisms for distinguishing what is of value from what is forgettable and ordinary, which he frames as the separation of the sacred from the profane. Thus, he asks: how must 'an artistic or theoretical work […] be made in order to count as culturally valuable'?[17] In responding to this question, he challenges many of the assumptions at work in these three objections to the everyday in both the work of creativity and the validity of critique. It is through such challenges that his concept of a secular *metanoia* takes shape, which in turn offers, I think, a line of response regarding the relationship of that concept to clichés.

Culture, Groys argues, is defined by what is preserved in archives and museums, and in doing so forms the basis of our available visual and written discourses. The technicity of the archive prefigures the concept of the new, for 'only when the social and technical means for preserving the old appear to have been secured does interest in the new arise, for it then seems superfluous to produce tautological, derivative works that merely repeat what has long been contained in the archives'.[18] In other words, the establishment of a stable archive within a culture renders repetition itself as redundant and profane. In this way, the new can only occur when existing values are archived or where archives are 'constructed in conformity' with a culture's value hierarchy. Cultural archives are constructed according to a basic principle that integrates what is new and rejects the derivative and the repetitive.[19]

But this creates a tension in the modern idea of the new. At the same time, any new work created – artistic or theoretical – begins from outside

of the archive; new work reflects the 'profane and "real" concerns' of the artist or author to society.[20] Contrary to the Nietzschean view that the idea of the new is illusory, Groys suggests that every cultural work carries out an *attempt* at a revaluation of values by engaging the concerns of the profane with the archives. For those who want to produce work that is 'alive' and 'real', the cultural archives indicate the *death* of an idea, by virtue of its preservation: encased or entombed in the museum, it is no longer *vital* but something to be challenged and superseded. It is not surprising, then, that Western modernity instils a deep-rooted tradition of 'bashing' history, museums, libraries and archives.[21] Such a tradition thus provides us with the most typical account of what constitutes the new: it is something that is *different* (from what already exists) and is *recent* (because the most up-to-date difference is the least likely to already exist). This is, of course, not just the process for recognizing the new, but conversely for attributing the cliché, which is either similar or old. But Groys argues that this concept of novelty does not, in fact, *oppose* the archive or the museum (despite its claims to the contrary). Rather, it works in a complimentary relationship, which is key for understanding the place of *metanoia* within his concept of 'antiphilosophy'.

To make this case, Groys first challenges the relationship between the archive and reality. The museum is only a limited representation of a particular epoch, a particular taste, a particular set of values, and as such would appear to be secondary to the lived experience of the present 'reality'. But, he argues, what is really 'real' can only be defined in comparison to the museum collection. In other words, one can only ascribe difference and recency in relation to what is the same and old. It thus follows that this interpretation of reality is secondary to the archival collection. Furthermore, 'any change in the museum collection brings about a change in our perception of reality', because 'reality can be defined in this context as the sum of all things not yet collected'.[22] And if this is followed to its conclusion, it can no longer be said that novelty is a case of comparing the new with what already exists; instead, newness is established *prior* to a work being produced because it is essentially already dictated by what exists in the archives. 'The museum is, in this respect, not so much a space for the representation of art history as a machine that produces and stages the new art of today – in other words, produces "today" as such.'[23] As such, anyone wanting to free themselves from the strictures of the past, and create something utterly new, is only following a hegemonic 'logic of museum collecting'.[24] In many senses, Groys revisits Nietzsche's account of the use and abuse of history discussed in chapter 3. But for Groys, there are no cases of 'use' or 'abuse' to discuss, for the whole conditions of an account presuppose this archival logic in the first place.

ARCHIVAL LOGIC AND THE HEGEMONY OF CRITIQUE

This means that innovation is determinate – in the sense that 'anyone who wishes to work and produce in the cultural realm is basically in the same position as all other cultural producers before and after him'[25] – but not deterministic. Groys' own position is instead somewhat relativistic. If he is right that 'cultural values are nothing more than archived memories of events in the history of the revaluation of values',[26] it follows that these will be necessarily limited to particular spaces and times. As such, what is new is always 'something valuable that a particular historical period privileges, assigning the present precedence over both past and future'.[27] In assigning such a precedence, culture insists on the value of particular differences over and above other differences, which are deemed to be culturally valueless.[28] Thus, the archive is not a structure for monolithic preservation, rigid and unchanging (as Nietzsche tended to suggest), but rather a system which is constantly changing its boundaries by virtue of what is not inside it:

> The introduction of the New occurs specifically through the creation of a new connection, a new comparison, a new difference. A system of differences can be established only within the archive. We cannot know whether the things of reality are differentiated, first, because they are infinite in number, and second, because they are all equally transitory. […] Rather, an exchange takes place between archive and reality, that is, between the differentiated and the nondifferentiated. Every time the border between the archive and reality is transgressed in either direction, we experience joy over the possibility that this border may now be suspended or deconstructed for good. Yet these transgressions instead confirm the stability of the border, which guarantees the very possibility of such transgressions in the first place.[29]

Second, it becomes apparent that, in practice, the logic of the archive does not conform to modernist assumptions of the museum, whereby 'universal and transparent' preservation ensures the representation of a universal and transparent history of culture. The technical capacity to store more in the cultural archives not only opens up more 'sacred space' but also, and by virtue of this, becomes a *contested* space, as just about anything profane can be potentially counted as sacred.[30] Equally, the profane spaces are not themselves value-*less*; they simply present fleeting and unpreserved values which can challenge, provoke or mock the sacred: what Michel de Certeau called the 'modes of use – or rather re-use' that constitute practices which 'produce without capitalizing' within everyday life.[31] Just as Felski criticized the view of critique which framed the everyday as 'undifferentiated *doxa*', Groys

understands the profane realm to reflect the values of the cultural archives – it is 'constantly renewed, because it is constantly filled with the refuse and waste products of valorized culture'.[32]

These two facets ensure that the storage of values is consistently re-evaluated; and, while the stability of its borders remain, the 'universal museum' is realized in actuality as fragmented, wrought with differences, constant rearrangements and competition. In this way, attempts to de-sacralize the archive suffer from precisely the same problem as the enthusiasm for collecting in the nineteenth century: far from removing the border between the sacred and the profane, it re-asserts it and multiplies it. Positing a 'different' account of novelty is, ironically, not possible within a cultural economy based on difference.[33] Instead, the new is determined by certain differences being recognized 'because we already have the capability to recognise and identify this difference as difference. […] To recognise means, always, to remember'. But, as Groys continues, 'a recognised, remembered difference is obviously not a *new* difference'.[34] One example of this logic in practice is the case of critical discourse itself, which, despite its constant outputs and new works appearing on a daily basis, Groys finds 'astonishingly homogenous' in the West. 'It is always the same things being criticised by the same arguments', he claims, with the only difference being its direction.[35] For the Right, the non-West is oppressive; for the Left, the West is subject to its own oppressions; and for the middle, both the Right and the Left are as oppressive as each other. This homogeneity, Groys suggests, 'can be attributed principally to the fact that critical discourse in the West circulates primarily as a commodity on the media market'. Indeed, Groys finds this notion of critique as a commodity as far back as Plato's dispute with the Sophists: while at first it seems the philosopher critiques the rhetorician for charging money in exchange for wisdom, he is nevertheless still arguing for the *value* of his commodity – that is, philosophy – over and above the Sophist's within a competitive market.[36] In fact, the constant renewal demanded by critique makes it perfectly suited to the market:

> After all, where is the body not suppressed? Where are people not traumatized? Where is the subject who is not seized by contradictory desires? Where is the human not threatened by the machine? The answer is that this is the case everywhere. The sales potential of this critique is therefore potentially infinite.[37]

At first, this may appear much like the aforementioned Right critics, pouring scorn on the tribulations of identity politics; or a cynical appropriation of intellectual inquiry by capitalist market forces. But Groys' point is precisely that most attempts to think 'outside' of such forces – whether these are utopic (Left) or dystopic (Right) – almost inevitably support them. Far from landing

a death-blow to the universality of *metanoia*, they participate only in its commodification. In this sense, the task for understanding the new as something radical, rather than the mere perpetuation of the existing cultural economy, is not to deny its logic – value established by the cultural archives, reflected in the market and practised by artists and critics alike – but rather to unpack the specific configurations by which difference is constituted. In other words, to understand (and embolden) the museological and curatorial practices of value-creation.[38]

DIFFERENCE WITH A DIFFERENCE

Reversing the more intuitive relationship between reality and the archive allows Groys to establish that, a bit like the poor, the new is always with us. At this point, though, his account seems open to criticism from the echoes of Adorno's condemnation of mass culture.[39] After all, surely Groys has only really described art produced for the market, and as such his account of the 'new' is simply a commodity rather than the unexpected or shocking? If what is culturally valuable is what carries economic worth, this ever-present new is only a marketing strategy; and aesthetic interventions within it only a form of what Donald Kuspit once branded 'Gallery Leftism'.[40] However, just as Adorno's critique has long been criticized as inadequate – a sweeping gesture that brought together drastically diverse forms of 'culture' into one 'mass' – such a suspicion assumes that culture is only mimetic, and merely a reflection of the activity and laws of the market for art, literature and other potentially sacred artefacts.[41] Groys suggests, once again, this assumption should be reversed. Such a criticism, he argues, assumes that the market is an extra-cultural activity. But this is not the case. Indeed, the market in fact follows a logic of culture itself because it is fundamentally concerned with value. The temporal dimension of culture is precisely what economic logic follows because 'an actually won or anticipated position in the cultural archives is the greatest incentive for the commercial market […], for such a position is regarded above all as a solid investment'.[42]

On this particular point, it could be noted that Groys' argument is not as detailed as its audacity requires. Perhaps it is enough to say that his position involves rejecting outright the traditional views of the Frankfurt School that aesthetic innovation must be opposed to commodification.[43] Instead, Groys is essentially ambivalent about the market's role. It is simply *there*, and in being there it reflects deeper principles of culture, rooted in the task of separating identity from non-identity and difference from the undifferentiated and the indifferent.[44] In this sense, he shares the view of Andreas Huyssen points that 'there is no pure space outside of commodity culture, however much we may

desire such a space'; and, as a result, commodification does not inevitably lead on its own to unilateral banality.[45]

Nevertheless, Groys does seem to want to draw a distinction between the instances of the new which are necessary to the perpetuation of the cultural economy, and those which constitute a form of *metanoia*: 'a renunciation […] of always doing the same thing, of always following the same path'.[46] Such renunciation is not so much an act outside of his model of innovation as a form of cultural exchange, but rather a performance of this exchange par excellence. To recap, briefly, perception of the new is often based on difference and recency, a perception which cements the cultural archive as the key determinant of innovation. Beyond this familiar model of the new, however, is a further differentiation which occurs when a shift occurs between the boundaries that separate the valorized, archived cultural tradition from the profane realm. The former is, in effect, a smaller, more localized version of the latter. Both look for difference, but the latter accomplishes 'difference beyond difference' or 'beyond all pre-existing differences'.

> It is a difference not in form, but in time – namely, it is a difference in the life expectancy of individual things, as well as their historical assignment. […] If I move a certain ordinary thing as a readymade from outside the museum to its inner space, I don't change the form of this thing but I do change its life expectancy and assign to it a certain historical date. The artwork lives longer and keeps its original form longer in the museum than an ordinary object does in 'reality'. That is why an ordinary thing looks more 'alive' and more 'real' in the museum than in reality itself. If I see a certain ordinary thing in reality I immediately anticipate its death […].[47]

It is no surprise that Groys' seminal example is Marcel Duchamp's exhibiting of a urinal at the Grand Central Palace, New York, in 1917. The *Fountain* is now remembered as a moment when the concept of the ready-made revealed the entire profane realm as potentially culturally valuable. The significance of the ready-made was precisely that it rendered the traditional question of the meaning of art to be irrelevant. Instead, it brought attention to the 'thing-ness' of the object and its language, whereby what matters 'is the question of placement, localisation, displacement, and contextualisation – that is, the operations beyond all signification that deal with signs as if they were "meaningless" things'.[48] Not for nothing does Walter Redfern describe Duchamp's ready-mades as 'metaclichés'.[49] Considered outside of the context of art history, and in the context of, say, a public toilet, the *Fountain* is completely ordinary. But placed within the art gallery, it constitutes a 'new' new because, for Groys, the work 'becomes, for a moment, a locus in which hierarchical differences disappear, traditional value oppositions lose their

validity, and the power of time – in the guise of a contrast between the valuable past and valueless present and future – is overcome'.[50] The shock of the new turns out to be the shock of the same.

This moment of utopic vision is only fleeting. As much as *Fountain's* success was to shatter the taboos of high culture (the choice of a urinal was deliberate in this respect – Duchamp was literally taking the piss, after all), it quickly re-affirms them. After all, the difference the ready-made introduces is secured only by a secure system of preservation; which includes the preservation of the narrative surrounding its installation (it was, in the end, hidden behind a screen in its first exhibition). Groys' point is not that the distinction between the sacred and profane can be disbanded, but that it is the logic of the archive which ultimately introduces new differences, differences which do not repeat existing differences, but rather presents its choice of 'objects for musealisation […] as unfounded, unexplainable, illegitimate'.[51] And in this sense, Duchamp provides an example of *metanoia* as something which 'remains ultimately groundless, purely performative, revolutionary'[52] because the opening between the profane and the sacred is always passing: a vision of the universal and infinite possibility of the new; not as a recollection or reimagining of the other, or a clarification of the obscure, but:

> rather as a new reminder that the obscure remains obscure, that the difference between real and simulated remains ambiguous, that the longevity of things is always endangered, that infinite doubt about the inner nature of things is insurmountable. Or, to put it another way: the museum provides the possibility of introducing the sublime into the banal.[53]

And here is Groys' answer – which is simple, yet far from straightforward – to the question of how a work is made in order to be culturally valuable. The author of any work, critique or cultural intervention 'finds herself bound hand and foot to the cultural-economic logic, and quite helpless in the face of it'. Each situation of innovation takes place in is determinate, whereby the author's role is to act as a mediator: they may choose to follow a cultural tradition in order to attempt to gain valorization for their work within that tradition; but 'her work will inevitably deviate from the cultural norm, because every human being necessarily makes a personal, and thus partially profane, interpretation of that norm'.[54] Unlike the economic market, cultural innovation takes place before value is ascribed to it, and is largely dependent on where the boundary between the sacred and the profane is at that particular moment in time. Therefore, every attempt of producing something new is at risk of failing on its own terms. But within such failure also lies the possibility of a different difference becoming apparent – if only for an opportunistic, contextual moment.

'THE MOST PROFOUND THINGS ARE INEXPRESSIBLE'

This re-envisioning of the kairotic element of cultural production leads Groys to the notion of antiphilosophy which, he suggests, democratizes *metanoia* by recognizing the role of the profane and constant exchanges with the valorized. On this point, it is important to remember Groys' insistence that such a *metanoia* is secular. Secularism implies a rejection of the notion of a soul surviving the body. Once we have abandoned the idea of an immortal soul, we are left to see the universal and the infinite in its remains: that is, a soulless corpse. Secular immortality is only granted to the corpse from within the museums and the archives, whose role is to preserve them as completely as possible. Thus, the 'difference beyond difference' which Groys identified in Duchamp's work involves curation as much as creation.

What prospect does this leave, then, for a *metanoia* of the cliché? Clearly, the positioning of cultural value as a form of living corpse brings it ironically close to traditional descriptions of cliché as 'dying' or 'undead' expressions. But if the preservation of the dead underlies cultural value in the first place for Groys, this would seem to render such a traditional description of the cliché as unhelpful. Indeed, Groys' focus on the archives of culture is itself a call to re-engage with the notion of death, commemoration and memory. This does, of course, not entail that our museums are full of clichés (although this may depend on the museum). It would perhaps be more tempting to align the cliché in Groys' account to a broader sense of the 'average': that is, the work which follows cultural traditions but fails to last; profane attempts to enter the sacred but quickly fall back into profanity. Clichés re-take their place on the rubbish pile of culture, as Marshall McLuhan would say. We would, on this definition, be justified in condemning all work which is unsuccessful in its revaluation of value and target the kind of endless paper trail of philosophy which Nietzsche and Schopenhauer both warned us of, which exists but isn't read; its value is only in its place on a list for that year's annual faculty review. But this, too, seems to miss what we began to discuss in the chapter, that is, the kairotic effect which is present in any localized interpretation of the boundary between the sacred and the profane – an effect which separates the clichéd from the anodyne.

Given the potential paradox of such an effect, it would make sense at this point to consider specific examples of interventions which invoke clichés precisely to challenge the distinction between the everyday and the critical: not so much as illustrations of Groys' theory in action, but as sites where the boundary of value and non-value is negotiated via the expression of clichés. The first example that comes to mind is Jenny Holzer's *Truisms.* In this series of works, Holzer's aim was to 'make most people stop' in the midst of their everyday actions; not through shock and awe but by suggesting different

patterns and connections in the very flow of these actions themselves.[55] This work took inspiration from suggested reading lists on academic courses; in particular, a list from one course on the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program which provided a seemingly endless list of titles preserving the sacred culture of the West from Plato onwards. The list, Holzer claimed, was overwhelming: presented in this curated, alphabetized form, it seemed an impossible task to approach it in its entirety. She therefore created her own list, replacing literature with condensed one-line slogans which were then similarly arranged alphabetically to reflect contemporary social mantras. These were then distributed anonymously: initially as posters across Manhattan (using the same typeface for each entry), and later in a variety of forms from t-shirts and hats to the sides of taxis and condoms. Holzer has thus been called a 'manipulator' of art, rather than producer:[56] presenting the maxims of culture within the very environment they prospered, only to exhibit their contradictions.

Holzer's work has often been framed as a performative critique. For example, Brian Wallis has argued that she uses 'language masquerading as conventional or official speech' in order to 'foreground the hidden social and political assumptions of everyday speech'. In this way, for Wallis, the *Truisms* project demonstrates 'alternative capacities to generate ambiguous, complex and experiential forms of knowledge which are collective and cultural but not equitable with bourgeois norms'.[57] Likewise, Dan Graham enthusiastically aligned Holzer's 'street art' with the principles of graffiti: expressing a subcultural resistance to the conformities of the everyday.[58] But there is something all-too familiar about these accounts. In the course of situating Holzer's work as significant, they ascribe it the promise of perpetually destabilizing social mores via posters on the wall. In some cases, the curation of Holzer's maxims is indeed overtly involved in this: as in the oft-lauded time when her work in an exhibition in the New York Marine Midland Bank was taken down due to an anonymous complaint about a poster which read: 'It's not good to operate on credit'. But as much as this pleases the inclinations of critique, with its subversion and exposure, the effectiveness of *Truisms* is precisely *not* the power of any single artefact. Graffiti is a public act of destructive inscription: Holzer's work is a de-authored product of cheap mechanical reproduction. And her expulsion from the bank exhibition is less radically poignant when one considers that the bank had already signed off on the (largely anti-capitalist) proposals; the bankers were, in fellow exhibitor Mimi Smith's words, 'the people who buy art'.[59] Indeed, as Holzer's work gained prominence in public spaces, and in particular her shift to the use of neon signs, its production became inseparable from the layers of planning bureaucracy: negotiating the interests of business people and local politicians as well as artist sponsors.

In other words, it is questionable to see Holzer's work as simply an artistic transformation of everyday signs into a deeply wounding criticism of systematic injustice.[60] The economy of subversion remains aligned with the different and the new, and in doing so renders it part of the economy Groys outlines. If there is a temptation to focus on the apophthegmatic style of the work – that is, as an ephemeral but devastating intervention into the consumerist world of the neon spectacle – this surely misses the *redundant* element of the work: the fact that we have, in fact, seen and heard this all before. Its critical aspect, rather, is far more superficial; by which I mean it remains attached to the medial surfaces of the work. It is in this sense that Groys' view of the 'mediator' seems more relevant than 'manipulator'. For example, Holzer displays 'The most profound things are inexpressible' next to 'There's no sense being anywhere but the top of the heap'. 'Enjoy yourself because you can't change anything anyway' is posted in a space one expects to see an unchanging sign. 'Everything that's interesting is new' is reproduced in a range of cheap formats. In each case, there is a resonance with critique, but one that eludes specific alignment with any position 'outside' of the everyday which Wallis or Graham claim: 'Government is a burden on the people' could be celebrated by both the political left and the right. None of these signs claim to differentiate themselves, in the usual sense, because they are not one-off statements but a perpetual repetition of slogans. This repetition amplifies not only the medial aspect of cultural knowledge but also the commodification of critique. There is a kairotic element, no doubt, to each installation of the *Truisms*. But underlying this effectiveness what one could justifiably term a glimpse into the infinity of the banal: a democratic *metanoia*.

This medial aspect is also emphasized in a second example. Caroline Bergvall and Nick Thurston's samizdat-style pocketbook *The Die is Cast* is a piece of conceptual writing consisting of sixteen folded pages; its professional print contrasts with the surface of cheap recycled paper.[61] On each page is a common expression, which is divided by the fold and a single staple. Thus, by virtue of the same physical techniques that give rise to the original cliché as an imprint of a stereotype, each expression (bar the centre of the book) is re-configured. 'You can't judge a book by its cover' and 'call a spade a spade' become 'you can't judge a spade' and 'call a spade a book by its cover'.

Unlike Holzer's sprawling twenty-year project, *Cast* was a small bookwork produced in a 1000-copy print run. *Cast* is not site-specific in Holzer's sense; the arbitrariness of the work – a small, throw-away format of botched throw-away lines – is based upon an emphasis on the profane, with its absurd renditions of expressions long removed from the valorized phraseology. It nevertheless retains a type of specificity in terms of the exchange it stages between the production sites of dead language. In other words, it attempts

to situate proverbs – marked by their floating and mutating across cultural contexts – at a specific moment of their cliché's production. *Cast* is thus playfully embedded within the chronological process of printing: taking printing at its word, so to speak. As such, the arbitrariness of the work is produced not by human error or affect but rather in the mechanism of repetition itself. There is no new, nor is there difference. Neither is there recency: Bergvall and Thurston use particularly old-fashioned idioms and proverbs, and there is no claim to re-invigorate them. As Thurston once commented, 'my kind of appropriation never takes the source material out of circulation'.[62] There is, though, a creative intervention: and if one finds a universal truth in the work, the fact that it is one which we should already know serves the bookwork's purpose well. Because *Cast*'s performance recycles every element of cultural value production *except* for the final, protected and preserved realm of innovation, the work projects a vision of a world which is purely reused, recited and reprinted. In this sense, it echoes Duchamp who, regarding whether ready-mades could be considered paintings in the 'high art' sense, wrote: 'Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and ready made products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'readymades aided' and also works of assemblage.'[63] The appropriation at work in *Cast* obviously contests the Romantic ideal of artistic creation of the new.[64] Yet, it does so through no claim to originality: engaging instead the material production of the cliché as a form of art.

AFTERTHOUGHT: THE CLICHÉ AS ANTI-ARCHIVE

Do these two examples show that there can, contrary to all expectations, be a form of *metanoia* from clichés? One problem with answering this question is Groys' suggestion of a democratic *metanoia*, which adds a necessarily relativistic dimension. Neither *Truisms* nor *Cast* produce a consistently accessible image of the universal; in part, by virtue of the different ways they appear as site-specific. Groys' sense of democracy is not so much that it is open to all but precisely that the universal and infinite view opened up will be paradoxically finite, and as such fail to work for everybody in the same way. This is the difference between the claims of universal truth made by the Platonic, Kantian or Hegelian systems and the more mundane glimpses of the universal raised by both antiphilosophy and anti-art.

But this relativism is rooted in the idea that meaning and value are always contextualized by the system of cultural exchange they take place in. Relativism is not, then, 'anything goes', so much as a necessary aspect of the cultural archive's determination of reality, and the constant and unexpected challenges to its borders from the profane realm outside. In this sense, the

key point to take from Groys' approach is that artefacts themselves do not constitute a changing of mind, or an elevation to the universal, but rather their curation in relation to the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. *Metanoia* is, we will remember, always an afterthought; and as such, always the re-arrangement of a kairotic moment that has already passed. In this sense, the cliché suggests a peculiar reversal of the traditional divine image: rather than the moment passing from the god Kairos through to the goddess Metanoia's afterthought, a cliché can be passed back: it is a lingering artefact of something that once changed minds, and its effects are released in opportunistic and contextual curating activities.

But this also returns us to the initial problem that was raised about the cliché and its kairotic effects: that is, the repetitious dullness of the former and the ephemeral passing of the latter. On this point, I want only to suggest a final afterthought on how *Truisms* and *Cast* might suggest a further possibility for the *metanoia* of the cliché. It is not simply the case that either represents clichés in different forms: after all (and importantly) they offer less a fully fleshed utopic vision and more a one-line quip (quite literally). However, particularly in the case of *Cast*, its disposable and moveable form – very much the work of mechanical reproduction which Benjamin referenced in his famous essay – nevertheless depends upon certain systems of preservations, based on the very persistence of, for want of a better term, cultural rubbish: the energy or affect of the archival techniques, without necessarily committing to its full valorization process.

We have already seen, in chapter 1, that this awkward performance of preservation contained within clichés was why Zijderveld saw them as stable points of reference in an increasingly vertiginous culture: seemingly unchanging, but nevertheless open to manipulation in the tyranny of the clichégenic society. Indeed, Zijderveld's argument prefigures Herman Lübbe's suggestion that the growing musealization of everyday life – not just in the sense of a proliferation of institutions from the 1980s onwards, but the obsession with the past that dominates popular culture as well – is nothing other than compensation for an ever-shrinking space for the present, given the rapidity of technological advancements.[65] Yet, while Lübbe and Zijderveld are concerned with those sites that enable us to cope with the loss of traditional structure of preservation, they both insist on the museum and the cliché operating within much the same tradition. In other words, for as much as the museum and the cliché provide a form of compensating stability to the collapse of the present – as sites which preserve the past and the familiar – neither Lübbe nor Zijderveld account for the role of the vertiginous and the dynamic within contemporary musealization itself and the dynamics of the cliché which *Truisms* and *Cast* attest to. Instead, these artworks raise the possibility that clichés are not so much memories of traditions, but rather can be engaged with as

forms of archives in themselves: mobile museums which, building on Groys' account, might constitute a third realm in between the sacred and the profane. Or, to use the Duchampian lens, anti-archives. Such an anti-archive would be controlled, not by the walls or guarded thresholds of a museum but the surfaces of the everyday and the ways in which such surfaces connect and relate to the interior of the cultural archive. Perhaps, when curated successfully, this would might constitute a different difference of a new kind.

NOTES

1. Hawhee, 'Kairotic Encounters', 19.
2. Miller, '*Kairos* in the Rhetoric of Science', 310.
3. Race, 'The Word *Kairos* in Greek Drama', 197.
4. Wright, *Kaironomia*, 161. For Wright, Kairos is a passing instant when an 'opportunity must be driven through with force if success is to be delivered' (13).
5. Enright, *The Alluring Problem*, 156; see also Hargraves, *It's Been Said Before*, who makes a similar point.
6. Stark, 'Clichés and Composition Theory', 457.
7. See Miller, 'Kairos in the Rhetoric of Science'. Miller's example is Oswald Avery's 1944 paper which first demonstrated DNA as a genetic substance, nine years before Watson and Crick: however, it was premature in terms of the general discourse of genetics, and too cautious in its approach, to convince its audience of the radical discovery that had been made.
8. Myers, 'Metanoia and the Transformation of Opportunity', 8.
9. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, ix. Plato's Cave remains the archetype, in this sense, for the task of the philosophy to challenge the everyday with its knowledge of higher or more authentic truths.
10. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xi.
11. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xiii.
12. For a brief but fascinating overview of these two points, see Nancy, *Philosophical Chronicles*, 38–41.
13. Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 17.
14. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 138.
15. Felski, T*he Limits of Critique*, 134.
16. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 6.
17. Groys, *On the New*, 17.
18. Groys, *On the New,* 21.
19. In this sense, whereas the cliché may nominally relate to the printing press (as discussed in chapter 1), its lack of value is based on a different mechanism, which is that of the archive. The profane realm still deals in exhaustive repetition, but the sacred remains sacred because its uniqueness removes any need for it to be repeated (much as Benjamin described with his concept of aura).
20. Groys, *On the New*, 64.
21. Groys, *Art Power*, 24.

22. Groys, *Art Power*, 24.
23. Groys, *Art Power*, 30.
24. Groys, *Art Power*, 26.
25. Groys, *On the New*, 55–56.
26. Groys, *On the New*, 70.
27. Groys, *On the New,* 30.
28. Groys, *On the New*, 33.
29. Groys, *Under Suspicion*, 30.
30. This is not to say that the profane is completely subsumed by the sacred, however. Groys considers the 'ecological' arguments that the profane has disappeared, and thus the new is impossible. First, there is the view that the liberalization and pluralization of culture means that everything has now been integrated into cultural memory, and the profane realm has been absorbed by the sacred. Second, there is an alternate view that 'valorized culture' has 'invaded and repressed' the profane; through the medium of mass communications, the profane is only an aesthetic simulation of itself. Against the first, Groys replies that valorizing the profane is always determined by the valorising culture; in this way, the profane can never be fully absorbed. When an African mask is utilized in Western art, it is valuable not for its original function, but for the aspects of its function that Western art values; however sympathetic those values may be. 'All valorisations are always simultaneously interpretations, and every interpretation alters the profane, for it introduces it into a system of references initially foreign to it' (*On the New*, 119). Against the second, Groys points out that the threshold between the sacred and the profane still remains, as cultural values which pass into the profane realm cease to be values, and instead 'like a plague […] begin to spread unchecked and then mutate' beyond their original meaning (123). Likewise, those objects that enter the cultural archive lose their profaneness: as when Jeff Koons, for example, presents kitsch everyday forms as art, these have already lost its profanity by virtue of their projected lifespan, which is necessarily longer than that of the original profane object. Indeed, 'since nearly all contemporary art is in some way oriented to the aesthetic of the ready-made […] [they] scrupulously respect the boundary between valorised and profane even in their purely formal structure' (126).
31. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 30, xx.
32. Groys, *On the New*, 128.
33. Groys, *Under Suspicion,* 101.
34. Groys, *Art Power*, 28 (my emphasis). Derrida makes a similar point that 'invention' must be publicly certified, in the manner of a patent, and thus already-dispersed amongst a community or institution for validation: for something to be legally recognized as New, it must 'exploit a largely common stock of rule-governed resources and possibilities in order to sign, as it were, an inventive proposition'. Invention thus 'begins by being susceptible to repetition, exploitation, reinscription'. *Psyche*, 4–6.
35. Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, 85.
36. See Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xix. 'Philosophical criticism […] has led to a situation in which every truth is identified as a commodity, and

accordingly also discredited. This result, however, allows a different suspicion to emerge: is it not philosophy itself that transforms truth into a commodity?'

37. Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, 86.

38. While Groys focuses on the realms of art and politics, this challenge can be equally extended to the current use of 'innovation' in management discourse. The term has become not only commonplace but *the* commonplace of the contemporary professional: professorial chairs, university research centres and numerous private and public organizations dedicate themselves to the mantra of innovation. Glossy brochures lay out the 'innovation landscape'. National Institute of Health Research careers are forged in its fires. At first, the term seems to be a perfect example of Groys' account of the new as a curated difference. The innovation of management discourse openly embraces the emphasis on recency and difference at the expense of deeper novelty; and hence, what counts as innovation in this sense has long departed from the early modern vision of the radically new. Innovate UK's Mike Biddle points to the different between something that is 'new' and something that is 'new to me': a distinction which captures how innovation no longer necessarily requires invention, but rather concerns doing something different with something that is the same (see Biddle, 'Defining Innovation'). It is the act of appraising something as new (or as the now-defunct UK Department of Business, Innovation and Skills put it, 'the successful *exploitation* of new ideas'), when the radical new is too difficult, complex or impossible to achieve. This is exemplified in management guru Peter Drucker's dictum that 'there is only one way to make innovation attractive to managers: a systematic policy of abandoning whatever is outworn, obsolete, no longer productive, as well as the mistakes, failures, and misdirections of effort' (*Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 151). As Drucker's quote suggests, innovation not creating the new, but instead creating and curating the old. This requires framing the failures of past innovations in terms of the promise of success of future ones: they become, literally, profanities.

The effects of this shift from invention to innovation are not to be underestimated, reflecting as they do a broader shift from what Byung-Chul Han described as the move from a disciplinary society to an achievement society. For Han, social theorists have become insistent on using immunological models to describe culture and society; but since the end of the Cold War at least, the Other is no longer a threat, but a burden; the problem is not otherness but difference within the Same. Indeed, Han points out that Orwell's account of the dystoptian state that controls language, however popular as a comparison to the rise of digital surveillance, is fundamentally wrong precisely because 'today's society of information is not characterised by destroying words, but by multiplying them without end' (*Psychopolitics*, 37).

Yet, within such a shift in language, managerialist innovation still requires to present itself as holding significant value, rather than function as a basic form of value exchange underlining culture, as Groys argues. As a result, it refers to itself by borrowing from far more traditional metanarratives from romanticism to archaic religions (hence, e.g. the 'gurus' of management). Such language suggests a power on behalf of the 'innovators' to shape their creations as individuals, rather than through the mechanisms of cultural economy. However, Stefano Harney astutely identifies that 'when management literature opens its mouth to speak it seeks the safety of what

is already in circulation, already subsumed in the universe of exchange. Isolating its words in aphorisms, lists, doggerel and trite metaphor, management has an affinity to the banality of its commodified form and it will call what is already currency, new' ('Why is Management a Cliché?' 583). As a result of the obfuscation between sacred and profane, and the related insistence of a discourse of radical novelty, the clichés utilized within the innovation landscape are far from functional tools – brands, slogans, soundbites – and instead an expression of the unaccountable – the 'crisis of management' – where indexicality and accountability cease to operate amid the combination of endless semiotic multiplication and individual fantasies of novelty (589).

It is not coincidence, given Groys' focus on the museum as the site of realizing the work of the new, that one of the best illustration of innovation's limitations can be found in the wonderful Museum of Failure, found in Stockholm and Los Angeles and curated by Samuel West. Here, each exhibit shows not only that our practices to drive towards difference, novelty and innovation rest on such a boundary (each promises profound progress in its area), but also that these boundaries are fragile to sustain, susceptible to deception and based on curating practices within the everyday business of innovation. In this sense, it is less a commemoration of failure so much as a preservation of dead success.

39. See, in particular, Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 98–106.

40. Kuspit, 'Gallery Leftism', 24. Kuspit refers here to 'political' art speaking only to a small audience who are often already left-leaning; thus what appears to be challenging the wider system of sociopolitical representation is 'calculated to have a certain impact' such that it speaks to and perpetuates the logic of the museum.

41. Groys, *On the New*, 39.

42. Groys, *On the New*, 39–40.

43. In *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, Groys puts forward this view in different terms: philosophical criticism rejects every claim to truth by first checking it and identifying it only as a commodity, rather than a universal truth. The suspicion then arises that it is, in fact, philosophy which is transforming truth to commodity, rather than exposing some hidden commodified facet of it. By subjecting truth claims to such checks, the philosopher is, in this sense, the ultimate consumer. However, truth loses its commodity form only when 'a person no longer spends time going through this [philosophical] procedure of checking, but rather simply takes what comes into their hands by chance […]. [I]t is no longer checked out but rather practised'. *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xix.

44. Groys, *On the New*, 53.

45. Huyssen, 'Present Pasts', 29.

46. Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, 112.

47. Groys, *Art Power,* 36.

48. Groys, *Under Suspicion*, 139.

49. Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*, 147.

50. Groys, *On the New*, 103.

51. Groys, *Art Power,* 42.

52. Groys, *The Communist Postscript,* 113.

53. Groys, *Art Power,* 42.

54. Groys, *On the New*, 191–192.
55. Holzer, 'Wordsmith', 74.
56. Foster, *Recodings*, 100.
57. Wallis, 'Telling Stories', xv.
58. Graham, 'Signs'.
59. Cited in Morgan, 'Mimi Smith's Battle'. There is a further step to this point that we do not have space to cover here regarding late capitalism's harnessing of artist's critical practices for its own ends. This is pursued in more detail by both Groys in *Going Public* (particularly 40–49) and Boltanski and Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.
60. This is also why I am not convinced, in this specific case, by Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between the cliché and the slogan. They view the cliché as a tool for circulating the inevitability of particular ideologies within social relations, by re-emphasizing certain patterns and arrangements of social action; what they will term 'major language'. Slogans, meanwhile, offer a critique of everyday ideological structures and intellectual laziness (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 81–85; see also Porter, 'From Clichés to Slogans'; Conway, *Gilles Deleuze,* 19) While it might be tempting to characterize Holzer's work as sloganizing, I think this over-emphasizes a particular model of critique, based on novelty and difference, at the expense of the more nuanced (though potentially more powerful) difference-making I outline below. In short, while I agree with Deleuze that clichés can be utilised as disruptive forces (*Francis Bacon*, 74), I am less convinced that as clear line between the cliché and the slogan can be drawn. The focus needs to be less on the type of tool in play – cliché or slogan – and more on *what kind* of disruption we can describe at work, which is perhaps one step along the production line from Deleuze's focus.
61. http://www.informationasmaterial.org/?LMCL=Vt6M6m
62. Voyce and Thurston, 'Of the Subcontract', 101.
63. Duchamp, *Writings*, 142.
64. Voyce and Thurston, 'Of the Subcontract', 102.
65. See Herman Lübbe, *Zeit-Verhältnisse*; Huyssen, 'Present Pasts', 32–33.

Chapter 6

On the Problem of Saying Something New

Kierkegaard's Archetypes, McLuhan's Clichés

> Memory is immediate and assisted immediately, recollection only reflectively. This is why it is an art to recollect.
>
> – Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*.

The writings of Søren Kierkegaard express a continuous – and ambiguous – fascination with the possibility of the new. In response to what he perceived as a crisis of authenticity in Christendom and the subsequent despair and boredom within the modern epoch, Kierkegaard explores the ways in which different forms of invention shape the human condition. His books document both the frustrations of the modern 'aesthetic' attitude that constantly searches for new stimulation, and the creativity of 'religious' experience which moves beyond the impersonal conventions of rational responsibility; in doing so, creating a subjective 'truth in which to exist'[1] that rearticulates the 'new-ness' of Christianity which St Paul once promised[2] in a contemporary context. Stylistically, his articulation of the new is not through grand systems of thought, but rather through the material practices and social memories of ordinary life. Kierkegaard creates lengthy and minutely detailed analyses of that which philosophy has previously treated as the banal and the everyday, exploring the possibilities of newness within boredom, habituation and commonality.

How does this anti-philosophical approach affect Kierkegaardian invention, and how does the new emerge as a critique of the cultural malaise he perceives? On the one hand, the answer is well-known: Kierkegaard employs an 'indirect communication' which uses a number of pseudonyms to express different ways such a 'truth in which to exist' might be constituted,

encouraging readers to interrogate them and arrive at their own decisive, subjective truth. His book *Stages on Life's Way* is, in many ways, a summary work of these 'spheres of existence'. It explores three different scenes (or stages) discussing the topic of love through archetypal characters, who reflect 'existential attitudes' reduced to their fundamental drives: the aesthete driven by pleasure (the first part of the book, 'In Vino Veritas'), the ethicist driven by respect for the law ('On Marriage', the second part), and the religious subject torn between their 'leap of faith' to subjective truth and a safer, yet inauthentic, religious attitude which remains dependent upon aesthetic certainty (the final, and longest part, 'Guilty'?/'Not Guilty'?').

But on the other hand, this answer is a little *too* well-known. As much as *Stages on Life's Way* employs archetypal figures as part of its communicative strategy, the text is also bothered with a recurring problem. In attempting to express the inexpressible and challenging the unthinking reproduction of cultural malaise, it is difficult to ignore that this is a remarkably *repetitive* text. In over 400 pages of the Princeton edition, it appears to add nothing substantively new to Kierkegaard's philosophy that has not already been presented in his previous books. Indeed, it is questionable whether the repetition even adds the clarity one might reasonably expect from a summary text. The recurring archetypes which flood the text from both Kierkegaard's own corpus and from those of others (Shakespeare, Cervantes, Plato and so on) are accompanied by ambiguous allusions and noticeable mis-quotes and mis-references, undermining a 'coherent final word on the authorship' and leaving 'its interpretation inherently indeterminable'.[3] If we were blunt, such is the familiarity of the themes covered throughout the book – aesthetic, ethical and religious spheres; subjectivity and inwardness as truth; suggestive echoes of Kierkegaard's own relationship with Regina Olsen and so on – that if Kierkegaard were a Mills and Boon writer, it would be easy to dismiss the text as one more generic entry in a series of similar books. Such are the constant allusions to both his previous works and other texts that, if he were a student, we might even suspect plagiarism.

True, such criticism might lack the seriousness which the philosophical study of Kierkegaard's work demands. But its anti-philosophical approach already challenges those conventions. In this sense, rather than defend Kierkegaard against such spurious charges, perhaps the opposite tact is more appropriate. For even if *Stages on Life's Way* reiterates views Kierkegaard has already expressed through figures and narratives we are already overly familiar with, it seems to me that it *may yet* be saying something significant, *precisely* about the relationship between the concept of the new and the established practices of critical thought; and that this relationship is carried, undermined and reinvented by the performance of these repeated archetype. To make this claim, it is informative to read Kierkegaard alongside Marshall

McLuhan's reimagining of the cliché as a unit extension of the mind, a probe into past repetitions and archetypes in order to create new forms of cultural practice. Without suggesting any congruity between the two thinkers – that is, without attempting to frame one with the other – such a side reading may leave us better placed to ask what is 'new' in *Stages on Life's Way*.

DIFFERENCE AND THE NEW

First, though, when we ask whether *Stages on Life's Way* says something new, what 'new' are we referring to? The question initially seems to invite some kind of re-assertion of Kierkegaard's *difference* or *distinctiveness*: whether we do so historically (in other words, what is different in Kierkegaard relative to the work of his peers and predecessors), or contemporarily (in other words, that Kierkegaard's work still speaks a distinctive universal novelty by virtue of the dynamics of his philosophical approach). Kierkegaard's newness can be based on his critique of Hegel, his resistant to Kant, his rejection of dogmatic systems of thought including his view of the nineteenth-century Christian church; or his distinctive contribution as a precursor of twentieth-century existentialism, his explorations of narrative identity over logical continuity and so on.

Distinction and difference, in turn, necessarily invoke certain systems of preservation that allow such comparisons to be made; and, furthermore, compel the Kierkegaardian corpus into a particular form that befits such a system. In its more extreme form, Roger Poole has described this as the 'readerly tradition' in Kierkegaard scholarship, which presides over 'the creation of a useless corpus of secondary comment' that embodies the desire 'that Kierkegaard should (at the end of the day and shorn of all the trappings of indirection and pseudonymity) say something that is both intelligible and relatively simple'.[4] This approach does not, of course, deny the significance of the indirect communication: it is seen as a key part of Kierkegaard's thought, but its role is to articulate philosophical concepts such as identity, truth and authenticity. Narrative is a sense-making tool, in this case, and it follows that the archetypes within Kierkegaard's writing are those figures (aesthete, ethicist and so on) that are instrumental for reconstructing a coherent existential philosophy.[5] This, in effect, enables philosophical comparisons to be made. Within such an approach, the textual archetypes within *Stages on Life's Way* would represent established and preserved forms (in the Fryean sense of a recurring symbol that connects texts across different registries[6]).

The comparative task of finding out what is new in Kierkegaard, and the view of his use of archetypes as fundamentally representative, is always subject to a space in-between creation and preservation. This space serves as an

authenticating function that essentially prioritizes what is culturally valuable over and above the culturally profane. This space forms a particular aspect of preservation which Luciana Duranti describes in physical terms in her history of archival practices. Referring specifically to the Roman organization of the archive, she writes:

> Somewhere between the outside and the inside of the archival building, the documents must unfold into evidence and memory, prior to being ensconced within the building as testimony of past actions. There must be a space, an in-between space, where this happens, a space bound by two limits, one bordering the documents and the other bordering the evidence: the *archii limes* or 'archival threshold'. The archival threshold is the space where the officer of the public authority takes charge of the documents, identifies them by their provenance and class, associates them intellectually with those that belong in the same aggregation, and forwards them to the inside space. At the archival threshold, and beyond it, the authenticating function took place.[7]

Poole's 'readerly tradition' would be a somewhat caricatured version of Duranti's public authority officer, but it serves essentially the same function in terms of authenticating what is important – that is, what should be preserved of Kierkegaard's work – and what is best ignored. As Boris Groys has long argued,[8] such a threshold is key to the identification of the new. But at the same time, as Groys has also argued, due to the systematic structure of this threshold – the placement and security of the archive which allows it to preserve ideas, artefacts and documents – this rarely constitutes a *radically* new 'new'. Indeed, the structure of what counts as the new in Kierkegaard's work remains similar even in readings such as Jegstrup's edited volume *The New Kierkegaard*, where newness is predicated on deconstructive interpretative techniques. Despite being sharply opposed to the 'readerly' tradition, there is an almost inevitable point where this 'new' Kierkegaard shows only what was never new in Derrida (after all, '*he* [Kierkegaard] begins the deconstructive project…'[9]). Derrida is *exchanged* for Kierkegaard; but the threshold and its function remains.

The point of raising this is not to write off vast swathes of scholarship, but rather to bring attention to how the necessity of such an authenticating function contributes to excluding the amount of cliché, repetition, reference and self-reference within Kierkegaard's writing. This becomes more significant when we look again at *Stages on Life's Way*, and it becomes apparent that not only does it re-tread familiar paths, the book is also noticeably preoccupied with the issue and function of the archival threshold. Throughout the book, there is what we might describe as a continuous *archival impulse*;[10] and alongside this, an ongoing concern with the *propriety* of authorship. In

other words, it seems to hover around the systems of preservation, and consequently the very conditions of the new, we have just outlined.

ARCHIVAL IMPULSES AND CONCERNS FOR PROPRIETY

We can schematically outline these preoccupations and how they return the book to the issue of an archival threshold:

1. Each stage of existence Kierkegaard presents is invariably described in relation to its documentation, its registry and its archive, as well as the tensions this relation creates for the indirect communication. Sometimes this is more explicit than others: the towering figure of a Judge, for example, commands the 'ethical sphere' of existence, where meaning and value is prescribed through deontological laws, laid down through the heavy hand of a pseudonym intent on documenting at length the correct moral imperatives through essays such as 'On Marriage'. Against this, the aesthete – embodied by pseudonyms such as Johannes the Seducer or the Fashion Designer – resists such a deadening law, but their efforts to live through perpetual fresh stimulation are performed through an uncanny resemblance to literary and philosophical figures that have come before them from Plato to Shakespeare, Cervantes to Hans Christian Anderson. In this way, their striving for invention is constantly returning to the figures and motifs of inventions past. The third archetype – the bearer of 'subjective truth' – is mired in the paradox of attempting to express in textual form (i.e. objectively) what can only be achieved subjectively. Marshalling all of these 'attitudes' are pseudonymous editors: William Afham, Hilarius Bookbinder, Frater Taciturnus, all tasked with binding together the documents they have gathered into one literary site. The concern for the methods and modes of *storing* and *retrieving* ideas frames the book: from Afham's opening reflections on the difference between memory and recollection and the risk of an incomplete recollection which would 'turn one's soul into a transit warehouse for damaged goods',[11] to Taciturnus' closing remark of 'how fortunate that there is no reader who reads all the way through' the text.[12]
2. This archival impulse goes beyond characterization. Negotiating the text depends upon its own series of reiterations, citations and suggestions: in the absence of a 'signed' text, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are constituted, philosophically, by systems of secondary ordering.[13] Ironically, the same Kierkegaard who calls for a philosophy for life is one who's name – as a philosopher, as an authority, as the naming of a text

– is itself created through a particular circulation of deferred references: not just in terms of his pseudonyms, or the veronym 'S. Kierkegaard', but also through assumed authorities (e.g. the epithet 'S.K.' that circulates around the secondary literature as a way of distinguishing the 'real' Kierkegaard from his pseudonymous voices), the 'Kierkegaard' of specific traditions and disciplines (the existentialist Kierkegaard, the radical orthodox Kierkegaard, the deconstructive Kierkegaard, etc.) and so on.[14] Thus, Foster's description of an impulse that 'not only draws on informal archives but also produces them, and does so in a way that underscores the hybrid condition of such materials as found and constructed, factive and fictive', but also 'arranges these materials according to a matrix of citation and juxtaposition'[15] seems entirely apt. As Joseph Westfall has argued, Kierkegaard is a 'fictional author' in this sense: the author of the pseudonymous works is himself written into his own texts as a role (or veronym), rather than an originary and stable reference 'outside' of the production of the text itself.[16]

3. This then raises a concern with the propriety of this authorship. This is not just in the sense that the 'readerly tradition' may be concerned with – that is, how do we discern the *proper* meaning of the text? How do we know if Kierkegaard *meant* to repeat? – but in a wider sense of validating the authenticity of writing, motives and actions. This is pressed most prominently in the third part of the book, 'Guilty'?/'Not Guilty'? Here, two pseudonyms appear, who could both be considered archetypal figures within Kierkegaard's writing: the 'editor-archivist' Frater Taciturnus, who possesses a diary which he has found in a lake, and a 'young man' who he names Quidam (literally, 'somebody'), the supposed writer of the diary. Quidam's diary documents his pursuit of a young girl, who he becomes betrothed to, before breaking off the engagement as a result of his effort to understand the 'religious' attitude. While the format of the text is a diary and commentary, both pseudonyms continuously present the Quidam's predicament in terms of legal defence. They speak at various points of his 'case', and, indeed, both provide testimony – whether Quidam's splintered memories of his romantic engagement, or Taciturnus' forensic observations which attempted to provide an objective account of the events. The aim for both is to render the paradoxical situation Quidam describes as serious: philosophical, not farcical; in Taciturnus' words, to 'drain off the almost comic aspect of the affair'.[17] In short, there is an effort on the part of both pseudonyms to emphasize that they speak *properly*, and they do this before a law: a law unnamed, but constantly implied, which recognizes the individuality of he who speaks (and thus guarantee the originality of their testimony) and authorizes the seriousness of what they say (by virtue of their originality).

4. Underlying this issue of presenting a proper testimony – affirming a guilt or non-guilt before the law – is a further issue of propriety. Who actually '*owns*' this text? Quidam's diary is placed between a preamble ('Notice: Owner Sought') and an afterword ('Letter to the Reader'), both written by a Frater Taciturnus. Continuing its relationship to the law, the 'Notice' is not simply a frame for the diary's narrative. It is also characteristic of a legal preamble which, as Cornelia Vismann describes, contains 'the concerns, the legislator's motives, and the historical context of a given law', therefore providing the 'hermeneutical access to legal texts'.[18] Within this preamble, the issue of ownership is paramount. Taciturnus describes how he discovered the diary in a chest in a lake, and in order to return it to its original author he publishes its contents; the manuscript, 'by its nature, unlike the handwriting, will not betray anyone'.[19] As with all of the indirect communication, the text speaks to the tension between a certain commonality of activity – the archetype of romantic failure – and an intense individuality (the 'handwriting') that resists the mindless distance of a mere commonplace. However, following the reproduction of the diary, the letter to the reader reveals that it is Taciturnus himself who is the author: creating Quidam as a character to express the movement between the spheres of authentic existence and delineates the aesthetic, ethical and religious sphere so often ascribed to Kierkegaard's thought.[20] In this way, Taciturnus' letter attempts to reassert propriety over the diary by delineating its systematic aspects. While continuously insisting on his authorship – stressing the 'imaginary construction' of the diary, re-tracing the structure of its writing, and in particular declaring that Quidam 'is right where I want him to be' – Taciturnus' claim to propriety is problematic. Far from offering a perspective for the reader *beyond* the confused banality of the diary, Taciturnus merely repeats; a repetition resonates with the entire text of *Stages of Life's Way* from the epigraphical quote from Hamann, '*Periissem nisi periisem*' ('I would have perished had I not perished') onwards.
5. Yet, as prominent as this concern for legal propriety is, any claim the text may make on this point continuously undermines itself by seeming to only repeat. As noted before, the story and characters reveal themselves to be remarkably similar to Kierkegaard's preceding works: Frater Taciturnus is not far from Hilarius Bookbinder, the 'editor' of *Either/Or*, or even Constantin Constantinus, the narrator of *Repetition*; Quidam is no different to the frequent 'young man' characters throughout Kierkegaard's work; and both, almost emphatically, represent Kierkegaard himself, especially given the diary's almost unavoidable allusions to the relationship between Kierkegaard and his former fiancé, Regina Olsen; a relationship which many have argued previously defines his entire

aesthetic output.[21] To be sure, Quidam's diary echoes – and in some cases replicates exactly – both Kierkegaard's reflections on this, and his own direct communications to her. But if in some cases the diary replicates exactly these events, just as significantly the text's constant allusions to other texts is marked by a trail of mis-references and mis-quotes.[22] The characters appear as what Gregor Malantschuk described as 'demonic' replicas of their previous forms, in this sense.[23] In short, the book seems to insist upon the inadequacy of its own position: not only in its capacity to present something new but even to repeat accurately, however much it presses its own repetitive nature.

In short, *Stages on Life's Way* is preoccupied with the process of documentation, reference and representation itself in relation to its capacity to *say* anything at all – concerns which converge on the role of the archetype within the text. But the fundamental *awkwardness* of the archetype's performance – broken plotlines and unnecessary banality – it falters in front of the 'archival threshold' we previously identified. In this sense, the threshold becomes a site where propriety and property equivocate, and the book is not first and foremost concerned with representing or arguing for the 'subjective truth' of the religious, but instead with situating such a truth within particular techniques of recollection and retrieval from the cultural archive: that is, the preservation of Kierkegaard's philosophical project itself. As a result, its concern is with the medial nature of the archetype, rather than its mythical or religious form.

THE BANAL ART OF RETRIEVAL

This medial nature is considered in detail by Marshall McLuhan in *From Cliché to Archetype*. Here, McLuhan describes an act of bringing forth 'huge quantities of unconscious archetypal materials', selecting 'for use […] one feature out of a vast midden heap' of mythologies, and then forgetting them again.[24] This act, for McLuhan, is nothing less than a function of the cliché. His notion of the cliché, however, is not simply that of an overused phrase or expression, but rather a *probe*: they provide an interface between us and our environment, and are as such a form of perception based within a closed system of reference. On this definition, 'all media of communications are clichés serving to enlarge man's scope of action, his patterns of association and awareness';[25] yet, because our environment is relatively predictable, our association and awareness are necessarily repetitive. This informs his subsequent reimagining of the archetype as a form of cultural memory: the archetype is nothing other than 'an old cliché retrieved by a new cliché'.[26] In this way, the archetype is not so much a representative figure (as it has traditionally been

seen), but rather 'a retrieved awareness or consciousness'. Consequently, it is 'a retrieved cliché – an old cliché retrieved by a new cliché. Since a cliché is a *unit extension* of man, an archetype is a quoted extension, medium, technology, or environment'.[27]

It follows that, for McLuhan, neither cliché nor archetype should be seen as a restricted to the domain of literature, but should also be considered in terms of an environment: 'Language as a gesture and cadence and rhythm, as metaphor and image, evokes innumerable objects and situations which are themselves nonverbal'.[28] Such non-verbal clichés are identified on the human body (gestures, perceptions), and the technological extensions of the body (such as print media or the internal combustion engine, both of which entail technologies of repetition). Developing arguments from his earlier work in *Understanding Media*,[29] McLuhan suggests that technologies such as the printing press did not only give us the noise that became the term 'cliché'; more than this, 'the Gutenberg technology of imposing and impressing by means of fragmented and repeatable units was the cue for all succeeding mechanization of the social and educational and political establishments'.[30] Thus McLuhan would agree with Walter Redfern's claim that the cliché is a labour-saving device.[31] But rather than see this as a form of laziness, McLuhan instead suggests clichés therefore constitute something akin to storage cells for energy. By saving labour, banality becomes 'a great reservoir of psychic power'.[32] Such a reservoir can, in the right circumstances, be channelled again: this is precisely what new clichés do. Repetition in this sense is not simply dull and mechanical; it also embodies the techniques and technologies for retrieving old materials from the rubbish pile of culture, which is, in turn, nothing less than the fashioning of new ideas from out of those endlessly discarded in the course of our cultural practices. The repetition of both verbal and non-verbal clichés constitutes McLuhan's definition of the cliché as a 'unit extension' of the human being: clichés are not simply memories, but storage assemblies, linking the mind's capacity to recall with the archive's capacity to retrieve. McLuhan thus sees the archetype not as a ready-made, established figure of narrative, but rather a creative technique for new repetitions, new clichés. In this way, clichés themselves can be considered as 'breakthroughs […], a probe into a new dimension'.[33]

Is this what is happening in *Stages on Life's Way* – the use of the clichés of Kierkegaardian writing to retrieve archetypes that inspire new ways of living, new clichés? And if it is, have we really found something 'new', if we are only applying McLuhan's lens to the book, or using it as some kind of extended illustration – exchanging one property for another? The answer is both yes and no. For all that McLuhan's medial focus opens a route into thinking through the innovations of *Stages on Life's Way*, it is their

differences – their 'different differences', to channel Groys' term – that marks out the possibility that the book says something new.

It is worth noting, on this point, that McLuhan's own engagement with Kierkegaard is limited. In *Understanding Media* he remarks that Kierkegaard published *The Concept of Dread* in 1844, the same year that the first American telegraph was established. At this point, McLuhan claims, the 'Age of Anxiety had begun'.

> For with the telegraph, man had initiated that outering or extension of his central nervous system […]. To put one's nerves outside, and one's physical organs inside the nervous system, or the brain, is to initiate a situation – if not a concept – of dread.[34]

The relationship between telegraphic technology and Kierkegaardian anxiety is not explored further by McLuhan[35] (although it is of minor interest that Kierkegaard also invokes the figure of somnambulism within *The Concept of Dread*, a figure through which McLuhan distances his own view of archetypes from more dominant literary accounts[36]). However brief, the comment is still significant because it helps to flesh out the provisional relationship between the McLuhan's medial thought and Kierkegaard's proto-medial philosophy; the 'yes and no' I alluded to just now. Clearly, Quidam's diary is charged with the anxiety. He is, as we have noted, a subject called before a law; but continuously unclear as to which law he is subject to: ethical, aesthetic or religious; property law or prenuptial agreement. In this sense, the notion of extending one's nervous system through communication devices – whether this be a telegraph or in the case of Quidam in 'Guilty'?/'Not Guilty'? writing itself – seems central to Quidam's problem of how to speak appropriately of what he wishes to articulate. Indeed, Quidam's diary appears to bear all the hallmarks of the typical Kierkegaardian young man seeking to articulate the inexpressible nature of religious truth – that is, wrench what he terms his 'innermost meaning' into an external system of representation; he claims that 'cannot entrust myself to paper in that way, even though I see it in what is written'.[37]

So far, there is a clear alignment between the two. But McLuhan's formulation by itself does not quite capture the *archival anxiety* Quidam returns to time and again. The heart of his concern is not communication, so much as *storage*:

> Think what could happen! The paper could disappear; there could be a fire where I live and I could live in uncertainty about whether it was burned or still existed; I could die and thus leave it behind me; I could lose my mind and my innermost being could be in alien hands; I could go blind and not be able to find

> it myself, not know whether I stood with it in my hands without asking someone else, not know whether he lied.[38]

There is a link here between the loss of certainty in the telegraph – the exposure of oneself to an immediate, unseen audience which McLuhan focuses on – and Quidam's worries about 'outering' his innermost meaning. Alongside this, the lack of recording techniques – that is, the lack of a system of preservation appropriate to the task – means that Quidam can provide no discernible, documentable distinction between the religious truth he seeks to express and any other truth. He only has what he lives, feels and experiences (that is, a subjective truth). If this is the only basis of the distinction between his truth and others, and his only justification for his actions with regard his romantic liaisons, then this 'lived experience' of truth cannot be exhibited through momentous events. There is no road to Damascus or mountain in Moriah here. Regardless of who the subject was who experienced it, a momentous event would still require a storage capacity; something to mediate this 'new' truth from the old, some form of archival threshold. But because Quidam protests that he is without such a threshold – and, in fact, continuously searches for one – he can only instead recall, repeat, mis-remember and mis-quote. And, of course, Quidam is himself only an archetypal façade, who's very vitality (and certainly any sympathy the reader may have for him) is rooted in his repetition of previous forms. To all extents and purposes, 'Guilty'?/'Not Guilty'? presents the same moral as Kierkegaard's earlier book *Repetition*: 'Unable to speak himself, the young man is forced to express himself through the words of others. But those words do not express his problem, for his problem is inexpressible.'[39] As such, his anxiety is not *only* the inability to communicate, or the 'outering' that McLuhan suggests, but rather forms a necessary aspect of what subjective truth must be. A lived truth, in this sense, is a truth with no access to the archives themselves: a truth so pointless that no storage system will hold it. McLuhan's telegraph introduced an 'immediacy of participation' in public discourses;[40] Quidam's 'truth' sees endless circulation take the place of preservation and repetition take the place of differentiation.

QUIDAM'S GUILT/NON-GUILT

This repetition of *Repetition* is in this case, however, framed by what I have already suggested is Quidam and Taciturnus' concern with an unnamed law which they attempt to testify before. Their attempts to render the paradoxical and the farcical situation of Quidam into something more 'proper' – first in Quidam's diary, and again in Taciturnus' letter – may seem to be a further

aspect of articulating subjective truth via aesthetic or ethical means. But the archetype has its own relationship to the notion of the law, and this helps to develop our answer to the question of what is new in *Stages on Life's Way*.

For ancient cultures, the absence of a meaningful storage capacity for history meant that any creation or innovation was carried *only* by its repetition and ritualization. Drawing on the work of Mircea Eliade, McLuhan argues that living in a traditional culture meant living 'in the heart of the *real*', which was 'in conformity with archetypes'.[41] For such cultures, nothing was truly real except archetypes, and living in conformity to them 'amounted to respecting the "law", since the law was only a primordial hierophany, the revelation in *illa tempore* of the norms of existence'.[42] This, for McLuhan, results in an archetypal repetition and ritual which requires 'no past, no history […] All is present'.[43] The hierophanic 'breakthrough' into a deeper understanding of reality was an accomplishment reserved solely for the extraordinary, achieved only through the 'repetition of paradigmatic gestures and […] ceremonies'.[44] But over the course of time, the technological systems of preservation became architectural rather than verbal or physiognomic. Under such conditions, the archetype is no longer a sacred breakthrough, in Eliade's sense. McLuhan suggests Plato's *Republic* first challenges the notion that clichés are probes into new dimensions by presenting archetypes as artefacts stored within a cave which the philosopher must escape from. And indeed, from this point on, the sacral nature of the archetype is rooted in the *space* within which it is housed: the archive, the necessary 'work of civilised man with his literate, historical perspective' in re-sacralizing the archetype via the boundary between the inside (the sacred) and the outside (the profane).[45] Derrida, commenting on the root of both archive and archetype, notes that the space signified by the *arkhē* 'coordinates two principles' – one of commencement, one of commandment – into one. In Classical Greece, for example, the superior magistrates possessed the right to make law, and the *arkheion* the store of their official documents. Hence, the place of the *arkhē* is both where things commence (a literal site where recordings of reality are stored) and from where order is given: 'These documents in effect speak the law.'[46] The *arkhē* carries both the law of the land (the rules of conduct and so on), and its threshold which serves as the 'authenticating function' which Duranti described earlier.

The archetype thus bears a strong relationship to a particular form of hermeneutic law. Kierkegaard's return to this function is conspicuous because the development of modern existentialist thought is effectively a series of attempts to subvert just such a law. Indeed, it is common to describe Kierkegaard's project as an attempt to outline not a designative formula, but rather a creative commitment placed in opposition to the strictures of documented – and thus, determined – existence. Hence, Poole suggests that

'retrieving what is original and what is valid in the philosophy of subjectivity' is the major conceptual task of reading Kierkegaard, precisely in order 'to trust my own subjectivity, and to claim its existence as real, something that can survive the implied threat of [for example] biochemistry and the Genome Project';[47] and Weston argues that, for Kierkegaard, there 'is not first the determination of what that truth is, and then a relating to it: rather, its determination is the relating, is taking it as the measure of life'; a truth discovered only in 'the living of one's life'.[48] All of this may explain why the more mundane aspects of Kierekgaard's archetypes feature less in the scholarship. But as I have been trying to show, Kierkegaard's clichés do not sit as comfortably with the romanticist *auter* he can inadvertently appear to be. As before, this is best shown through the deviation from McLuhan's account of the cliché and Kierkegaard's performance of the archetype.

McLuhan's view is that, due to the growth of technological capacity, we are now in a position of instant access to any past; and, subsequently there is no history. This is why the advent of the printing press, the telegraph, the radio, the television and so on have heralded the return of the archetype: our environments are piled on top of one another, including those of the ancient cultures. All is present, once again. McLuhan's criticism of previous theories of the archetype, such Northrop Frye's, is therefore that they see it as something essentially fixed at its point or origin, rather than being unused clichés (in the fullest sense of technologies of retrieval). In making this case, the cliché as a form of technology becomes something *of use*. But this usefulness introduces into his argument the same problem which he encounters with his celebrated claim that the medium is the message. That is, for McLuhan, the technologies of medial carriers (in this case, the cliché) operate in a distinct and non-human reality, beyond the control of either the speaking subject (in *Understanding Media*) or the norms of literary theory (in *From Cliché to Archetype*). At the same time, as Groys points out, this distinction has 'an inherent tendency right from the start to rehumanize the media'.[49] Rather than being distinct from the subject, the media becomes another subject – and a somewhat infallible subject at that; in McLuhan's work, the medial carrier is 'always already absolutely sincere'.[50]

The result of ascribing such sincerity to the medium is that the cliché, for all of its anomalous techniques of retrieval, can simply be re-appropriated as a functional form that the subject can appropriate: 'the banal, as such, is rich in energy for the artist who has the skill to trigger it'.[51] The probe – with its connotations of controlled invasiveness – becomes a tool subservient to the right kind of artist. Ultimately, 'all media of communications are clichés serving to enlarge man's scope of action, his patterns of association and awareness'.[52] This situates the entirety of the profane realm as a cliché in-the-making: 'such can be the function of cliché at any time for anybody. Initially any cliché is

a breakthrough into a new dimension of experience'.[53] All that is required, McLuhan argues, 'is simply the scrapping of all poetic innovation and cliché when it has reached a certain stage of use'.[54] What remains intact in this very act of scrapping, though, is the significance of the threshold between the sacred and the profane realms. In effect, McLuhan has simply supplemented 'invention' with 'cliché', but maintaining the linear progression of old to new, and new back to old; non-verbal technology to verbal cliché, to innovation to archetype. McLuhan's presentation of the cliché as a method for innovative interventions in literature thus ends up, paradoxically, merely repeating a rather traditional sense of the new.

CLICHÉ ON THE THRESHOLD

Something else is happening in Kierkegaard's text. Here, neither the archetype in its traditional form, nor the cliché, appears to be something inherently 'useable' or sincere. It seems to do quite the opposite: the bombardment of repetition threatens to annihilate the subject within its own banality. Taciturnus is clear about this in his 'Letter to the Reader':

> The poetic hero wants to inspire by his victory, wants to depress by his suffering (have the interest of actuality); the comic hero wants to provoke laughter, but Quidam of the 'imaginary construction' wants nothing at all; he cannot inconvenience anyone, for in this respect, too, he is at your service, so that you can ignore him without any risk at all, so much the more since it is absolutely indeterminable whether anyone who paid attention to him gained something thereby or was harmed by it.[55]

Taciturnus thus labels Quidam a 'ridiculous' figure.[56] Why, then, construct such a tedious and familiar narrative? It is because this ridicule is brought upon him by a specific demand, which is, after all, the title of the chapter: an effort to speak before a law – whether he is, as the title asks, guilty or not guilty – and justify his testimony as proper or appropriate. Quidam (Taciturnus argues) attempts to justify his love in terms of the religious sphere but fails because he lacks the necessary passion. Neither can this subjective truth cannot be recognized through the language of legal accountability, as this is to reduce the religious attitude to the ethical. And it cannot be recognized through a great work of poetry because this reduces it to the aesthetic. Instead, the construction of Quidam collapses under the weight of the representations he has attempted to authorize: 'Forget her? – It is impossible. My edifice has collapsed. […] I have become a prisoner in the appearance I wanted to conjure up'.[57] His attempt to *write* his way through his decision to

ultimately end his relationship is a fundamental error: attempting to reside in the law of the recognized, preserved archive, these representations fall short of the dynamic embodiment which this leap of faith requires. This means that, as Groys puts it:

> Kierkegaard's hero cannot be judged or condemned, since his motives remain undefinable. We have no criteria, as spectators of his deeds and hearers of his words, by which we could judge whether he is led by lower, aesthetic motives or higher, sacred ones. Neither the hero himself nor anyone else can settle this question by conclusive evidence. But so that this uncertainty could arise, the whole immense literary work that Kierkegaard completed is used to put himself into this situation of undecidability.[58]

Rather than the poststructuralist thrill of undecidability, though, perhaps the more prominent result is that the diary is overly long, tedious and thoroughly melodramatic. 'How fortunate that there is no reader who reads all the way through', Taciturnus comments.[59] Despite its pretensions, the whole text appears to exist in a realm of profane superfluity. It is precisely this profanity, though, which rescues the text from promoting a form of moral or aesthetic relativism. Rather than cross the archival threshold back and forth in the way McLuhan seems to suggest clichés allow, Kierkegaard's sense of the new emerges from nothing other than the exaggeration and repetition of the same laws and figures on which the modern archive depends; that is, clichés of the laws which guarantee invention itself. If he were to insist on the collapse of these laws, or their open-ness (which would amount to the same thing), then he could well be charged with a caricatured relativism. Yet, it is the *repetition of the mechanisms of repetition* that emerge most prominently from the text.

Such a prominence is, of course, paradoxically caught up in the full milieu of a discourse which endlessly seeks some form of *metanoia*, or at the least what Claire Colebrook once described as a mode of 'chronological repetition' where a text delimits itself from its predecessors and frames them 'through the recognition of a blindness, error or misinterpretation, which the current author can then remedy'.[60] The 'new' of recency and difference assumes a chronological sequence of steps towards overcoming the problems contained in existing thought. In doing so, each claim to novelty effectively attempts to not only cross but also remove the threshold, rendering the archive redundant (just as interpretations of Kierkegaard's 'living philosophy' have suggested). But as Colebrook points out, 'what we lose in such a practice, and necessarily so given the idea of thinking as instrumental, is the notion of our textual archive as more than a body of materials' with a clear sense of the difference between the 'received past and the active present'.[61]

As such, while difference and distinction are still important markers of the new – the threshold still exists, and constantly presents itself as a law to answer to for both Quidam and Taciturnus – their repetition points to a difference which is, in effect, *without* difference; or at least, a difference undetermined by the authenticating function it approaches.[62] In this context, archetypal figures such as Quidam or Frater Taciturnus can never express a fully appropriated philosophical 'view' not because of the insufficiency of language, so much as because they are, to reappropriate McLuhan's phrase, 'unit extensions' of the boundaries which philosophy depends upon for discerning new from old, truth from error, reference from mis-reference. Unable to offer a view, they can offer nothing different. Performing this indifference opens the possibility of a more significant newness. In the case of *Stages on Life's Way*, incurring archetypes suspends the question of guilt or non-guilt that Quidam poses; instead, it works through, again and again, the grounds upon which such terms might be meaningful. The *uselessness* of the text is precisely its *inventiveness*, in this sense, and the responsibility of a new 'new' which goes beyond the archival law. In this way, it is not through grand system or transparent representation that a genuinely new 'truth in which to exist' appears; but rather, through those minor experiences, amid the endless profane practices of everyday life – the mundane, the overly familiar and the clichéd – that the universal aspect of subjective truth appears.

NOTES

1. Weston, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*, 137.
2. 2 Cor. 5:17.
3. Davies, 'Heidegger's "Indirect Communication"', 702.
4. Poole, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Communication*, 7.
5. There has been a resurgence of interest in the role of narrative in Kierkegaard's philosophy in the twenty-first century. See, for example, Lippitt and Stokes, *Narrative, Identity, and the Kierkegaardian Self*; Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative*; and Davenport and Rudd, *Kierkegaard after Macintyre*.
6. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 99.
7. Duranti, 'Archives as Place', 243.
8. See chapter 5 of this book.
9. Jegstrup, *The New Kierkegaard*, 8, emphasis original.
10. I borrow this term, aware of the anachronism, from Hal Foster's phrase to describe contemporary art in the 2000s. See Foster, *Bad New Days*, 32.
11. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 9.
12. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 94.
13. For a more detailed exposition of this point, see my paper 'The Concept of Reading'.

14. Elsewhere I have discussed these deferred references as a 'doubling' of Kierkegaard's authority:

> The purity of 'S. K.' is established in its brevity: it is figured as an immediate closure, often for the sake of practicality. As such, it would seem to provide a mark of authority that escapes the possibility of irony. However, as an original point of the work – an 'immediate' manifestation of the author stripped to his intention and no other tricks of style – this epithet is not without certain irremovable ironies. The paradox of such a substitution is that it simultaneously displaces the specificity of that unmediated presence behind a more undisclosed generality of the sign – the simple two letters, 'S' and 'K'. For this epithet to authorise one interpretation over another, it is dependent for its meaning on a context established not within the text itself, but rather within the secondary sources that perpetuate its use. In other words, the act of moving closer to understanding the authorship of Kierkegaard through an invocation of his 'life' is simultaneously a move away from the written text into an accepted biography, a received set of received ideas. Taken as a whole, this might seem strangely alien to the spirit of an 'inward truth' grasped only by the reader. However, it would be difficult for us to proceed as if this secondary imposition of an authorial presence could be altogether ignored. Indeed, it would seem nonsensical to attempt to read Kierkegaard without a signifier, 'Kierkegaard'. 'The Concept of Reading', 478–479.

15. Foster, *Bad New Days*, 35.
16. Westfall, *The Kierkegaardian Author*, 18.
17. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 236.
18. Vismann, *Files*, 21.
19. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way,* 190.
20. It is worth noting that this question of propriety also surrounded the most immediate impact of *Stages on Life's Way*, which was the review it prompted in the satirical journal *The Corsair* by Peder Ludvig Møller, asking whether Kierkegaard would be able to write proper (i.e. complete) texts. Kierkegaard responded with a critique of his own (both of Møller and of *The Corsair*), and invited them to satirize him. The subsequent assault on Kierkegaard's personal traits had a severe effect on his writing, and his view of the effectiveness of indirect communication.
21. See in particular Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*; Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*.
22. See, for example, my 'Kierkegaard's Printing Errors', which notes that towards the end of *Stages on Life's Way*, the Frater Taciturnus mis-quotes the critic Börne's review of *Hamlet*. Taciturnus here attempts to argue an original point that Shakespeare has not achieved a truly 'religious' drama. To make this case, he refers to Börne: the critic had said that Hamlet was a 'Christian tragedy'; Taciturnus renders this a 'Christian drama', before changing it again to a 'religious drama'. The whole point – first, that Shakespeare intended to write a religious drama, and second, that he failed to do so – arises solely from Taciturnus' twisting of Börne's words.
23. Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, 279. Roger Poole has argued that these aspects of the text, which utilizes heteroglossia to remove any final closure or single meaning to the text, have often been dealt with too bluntly in Kierkegaard's reception. Thus, Poole argues, there is a further veil of mistranslation and misappropriation at

work in order to obscure or trivialize the problematic elements of the text, and to support the view that the philosopher's texts are primarily 'religious' tracts. See Poole, 'The Unknown Kierkegaard'.

24. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype,* 33.
25. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype,* 46.
26. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 17.
27. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 18, my emphasis.
28. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype,* 17.
29. Indeed, McLuhan's approach to the cliché is in keeping with the general form of his criticism, which ironically aims to move beyond the surface meaning that carries so many commonplaces. By understanding our environment as an artificial landscape, and exploring the effects of new media on human perception within this environment. In Elena Lamberti's words, 'From the very beginning […] the "form" of McLuhan's writing is conceived according to 'artistic paradigms': the reader is asked to interact actively with each line in order to overcome the first level of exegesis (the evident "cliché" or "slogan"), and reveal new and more complex meanings through a careful analysis of the overall effect.' 'Marshall McLuhan', 69–70.
30. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype,* 96.
31. See Prologue of this book.
32. Watson, cited in Tiessen, 'Shall I Say', 114.
33. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 95.
34. McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* 273–274.
35. There have, however, been interesting analyses of the possible relationships: for an account of Kierkegaard's approach to the problem of 'the medium' in the context of McLuhan's famous dictum that the medium is the message, see Taels, 'A More Primitive Thinking'; for a comparison of the hermeneutic issues raised in both thinkers, see Houe, 'Communication between Two Ages'.
36. McLuhan describes Frye's archetypes as inducing somnambulism (and thus failing to see they are, in fact, clichés); *From Cliché to Archetype*, 14. Kierkegaard uses the example of the somnambulist being awoken by a specific word as to illustrate how the growth of spiritual life can break out of the 'inclosing reserve' of the demonic; *The Concept of Anxiety,* 127.
37. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 386.
38. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 386.
39. Poole, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Communication*, 75. For a fuller discussion on Kierkegaard's *Repetition* and its relationship to media theory, see Weber, 'Religion, Repetition, Media'.
40. McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* 275.
41. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 97.
42. Eliade, cited in McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 97.
43. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 95.
44. Eliade, cited in McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 97.
45. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 96.
46. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1–2.
47. Roger Poole, 'Reading *Either-Or*', 53–54.

48. Weston, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*, 137.
49. Groys, *Under Suspicion,* 71.
50. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 72.
51. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 171.
52. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 46.
53. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 47.
54. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 103.
55. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 446.
56. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 400.
57. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 350.
58. Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy,* 27.
59. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 494.
60. Colebrook, 'Uses and Abuses', 47.
61. Colebrook, 'Uses and Abuses', 47, 48.
62. In this sense, it is possible to read Quidam as a form of anti-Christ; for Kierkegaard, Christ himself at first appeared indistinguishable from any other ordinary person. Thus, as Groys describes, 'for Kierkegaard, Christianity is based on the impossibility of recognising Christ as God – the impossibility of recognising Christ as different. Further, this implies that Christ is really new and not merely different – and that Christianity is a manifestation of difference without difference' (*Art Power*, 29). Yet Quidam, similarly indistinguishable from 'anyone', remains fixated on the need for difference – which is precisely how his writing unravels.

Chapter 7

Stock Images of Madness

Rhetoric and Cliché in Video Games

> 'The definition of insanity' is the most overused cliché of all time.
>
> – Daniel D'Addario, 'The Definition of Insanity'.

Reflecting on his personal experiences of mental health, the poet William Styron comments that 'to most of those who have experienced it, the horror of depression is so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression'.[1] And yet, of course, this horror is expressed all the time. Western culture has always provided a glut of discursive tropes, tools, caricatures and clichés which not only articulate the meaning of depression and wider mental health concerns but also actively shape its contexts. Indeed, as Schoeneman, Schoeneman and Stallings remark, for all that Styron looks to poetic invention to express such horrors – and has been lauded by clinical and lay readers for his articulation of them – his work abounds with banal idiom. And perhaps this should not be surprising: objectifying experience into a representational form must, after all, be comprehensible to be successful; and a reader's comprehension is rooted in images and metaphors that are consistent with existing implicit or explicit cultural knowledge, thus allowing them to 'resonate with stereotypical images of mental illness, metaphoric conceptions of emotion (e.g. "happy is *up*/sad is *down*"), the medical model of mental disorder, and literary traditions of describing depression and related concepts'.[2]

Given that experiences of mental health can be reported in paradoxical and obscure accounts,[3] utilizing a commonplace of shared metaphors and similes are, no doubt, useful strategies for making sense of the experience, whether poetically, therapeutically or clinically.[4] But the fact that those experiencing mental health problems often frame their experiences in terms of the stigma they encounter[5] suggests that such a cultural rhetoric permeates both popular

culture and individual experience, often without a clear boundary to separate the two. Consider, for example, the case of dementia. Asking what the available images of personhood are for those diagnosed, Susan Behuniak argues for a link between the representation of dementia as 'the walking dead', and a broader cultural interest in zombies in the United States.[6] Mitchell, Dupuis and Kontos likewise note that popular literature – replete with book titles such as *Death in Slow Motion* or *The Living Dead: Alzheimer's in America* – is beset with a discourse of decaying monstrosity: 'These images', they argue, 'coupled as they usually are with the tragedy discourse of being doomed, gutted, ravaged, taken over by a beast, and turned into the living dead, perpetuate a deep and pernicious fear of, and disregard for, persons with dementia'.[7]

Such permeations mean that, whatever the function it serves, the language of mental health is clinically and culturally embedded within a genealogy of 'madness' which long precedes the clinical specialism of 'mental hygiene' William Sweetzer first identified in 1843. Consequently, while there are frequent calls to challenge the cultural clichés of mental health in favour of a more authentic 'first-hand' experience,[8] it is far more difficult to distinguish between the motifs which result in exclusion and those that allow a 'genuine' experience to emerge and be expressed. The functional use of a trope within a particular clinical or therapeutic practice is no less embedded within this broader cultural rhetoric of madness than those of popular culture. As Schoeneman et al. argue: 'making up truly novel metaphors for depression and recovery seems to be impossible'.[9] In the place of novelty, they argue that 'Styron's assemblage of available cultural metaphors could be better described as reobjectification – a refamiliarization that perhaps adds depth to the usual signifiers of […] disorder'.[10]

To what extent can we apply this notion of 'reobjectification' to the representation of mental health in video games? The relationship between the cultural concept of 'madness' and video games has historically been dominated by scientistic discussions of whether gaming itself causes mental or behavioural change. This is the case whether these are critical discussions (the extension of the 'video nasties' debate of the 1980s), or encouraging discussions (such as the more recent growth of 'serious gaming' aimed at translating 'traditional evidence-based interventions into computer gaming formats'.[11] But these approaches, rooted in model of direct cause and effect between game and player, are clearly problematic on a number of levels, not least because they typically limit their analysis of the game *in itself* to a 'black-box' artefact. When a game is seen only as an object that causes certain behaviour to take place, the inner workings of that object are frequently left under-examined. The result is that far less work has been done on examining the actual assemblages of trope, narrative and interactivity of gameplay within contextualized situations, and the question of how the

expressions of madness within games draw upon and develop its cultural genealogy is left unattended.[12] Yet, given the huge influence of the gaming industry on contemporary culture, it is entirely reasonable to assume that such assemblages actively shape the available imagery and language of mental health as much, if not more, than the storehouse of literary metaphors Styron draws on.

I want to suggest that the *rhetoric* of video games is a distinct medium for the kind of 'reobjectification' of mental health commonplaces which Schoeneman describes. This is not to claim, of course, that there is a direct correlation or unique connection between gaming and the experience of mental health; or that games 'represent' inchoate experiences better than literature. Rather, the chapter argues that video games can engage reflexively with these experiences and some of the key tensions within them: namely, control, expression and knowledge. In the case of gaming, this is not limited to a lingual or visual rhetoric: as Rehak argues, games are not 'conceptually separable' from their technologies, and the interface between player and game surface – including touch, control, image and graphical engine – is not secondary to play.[13] In his development of this idea, Ian Bogost has employed the notion of 'procedural rhetoric' as a way of understanding the effects of this on representation.[14] Bogost argues that these aspects of gaming constitute a persuasive (and, thus, rhetorical) act of sense-making, which goes beyond the more traditional tools of representation found in other cultural forms.

I want to develop this approach by examining video games that juxtapose the 'horror' of madness with the 'heroic' acts of the player. In this particular context, games negotiate the cultural rhetoric of madness by both building directly from the existing literary and cultural tradition of heroic madness, melancholic geniuses and countercultural renegades, and developing this in terms of the interface between the human and the nonhuman which the procedural aspects of gaming requires. In turn, the significance of the commonplace, as a rhetorical function, becomes a key site for the interaction between procedural and aesthetic aspects of sense-making, and between the individual player and the contextual order of mental health. The apparent clichés of games' representation of mental health constitute a rhetorical 'topic', which links the technical structure of gaming procedures with the tropes and figures that enable them to make sense within their cultural context and tradition. Two such topics are particularly prominent in the re-objectification of madness within video games: the monstrous double and the reaching tentacle. While these purposefully draw on existing tropes and processes associated with the cultural meanings of mental health, a rhetorical analysis of their use of commonplaces suggests that they are not simply recycling older clichés, but constitute a 're-objectification' of mental health.

THE LIMITS OF INSANITY

Video games have long employed images of madness as a narrative trope (e.g. *Alice: Madness Returns* or *Fahrenheit: The Indigo Prophecy*), a plot device (such as *Arkham Asylum* or *Condemned*) or, in some cases, a condition of play itself (e.g. *Catherine*). But madness most frequently appears in games as it does in literature, film and television: as a ready-made narrative foil to the traditional 'heroic' characters. With its long association with 'otherness', deviance and villainy, these figures follow the clichés of mad scientists, insane despots and chaotic evil-doers whose abnormality very much defines the boundaries of accepted and 'decent' behaviour. Given the cartoonish caricatures at work in such narratives, these rarely engage in depth with the notion of madness: by positing an insane despot as the dyadic opposite to the rational hero, the aim of the game becomes to restore order, and in doing so 'complete' the game. The Joker in the *Batman: Arkham* series is thus 'chaotic' rather than mad, which allows the game to throw unexpected obstacles and tasks in the way of the player's Batman. *Alice: Madness Returns* plays on the hallucinogenic properties of a world turned topsy-turvy. Vaas in *Far Cry 3* combines both by quoting Lewis Carroll while committing random acts of violence, but these are in cut-scenes rather than gameplay. This kind of madness is reserved for non-playing characters and hence, typically enemies or villains: the player themselves can never 'be' the evil genius within the game, far less employ the logic of the super-villain, unless each and every player possessed that level of intelligence (not to mention evil). The player can never inflict absolute chaos in a game-world, because game worlds are environments authored by designers and programmers. Even if the range of ways those processes are used can be flexible, these forms of representation ultimately result in rather straightforward procedural paths for the player to follow. Thus, in both the examples above, the employment of madness is a veneer to what are, otherwise, relatively traditional First Person Shooter (FPS) and platform games: *Alice* is no different, operationally, from the earliest *Super Mario Bros.* platform games.

On the one hand, this seems to be an obvious limitation to the value of the gaming genre; after all, what is the Joker in *Arkham* if not a stock narrative for the lone-hero adventure genre? Is there a difference that marks any kind of authenticity to this characterization of madness? In many senses, probably not. In this sense, video games are as open to the modernist criticism of 'stock literature', existing for the benefit of consumerism rather than artistic creation; the type of criticism we find in Q. D. Leavis' claim that contemporary fiction was 'mere tissues of clichés':[15] 'stock phrases to evoke stock responses'.[16] The comparisons between Leavis' critique of stock phrases and the video game medium go further. For Leavis, popular fiction is no more

than 'a drug habit', which 'destroys the ability to distinguish between literature and trash' and 'creates a positive taste for a certain kind of writing, if only because it does not demand the effort of a fresh response'.[17] The stock response it gives rise to is not only stale, but it is fundamentally inauthentic: for example, when romance novels try to 'dramatize problems of feeling and sentiment far too complex for their handling, and in an idiom which inevitably vulgarizes whatever it has to convey', they damage a 'reader's spontaneities' and reduce them to 'fantasying'.[18] Writing well before the advent of any kind of Xbox or Playstation, Leavis has summarized a vast majority of criticism aimed at gaming as a cultural form in general and its representations of mental health in particular.

Perhaps more interestingly, the criticism of 'stock' writing and reading is, in many ways, based on a physical engagement with literature, that is, the interface between reader and literary collection. Leavis criticizes popular fiction precisely because it is kept in stock by booksellers, whereas the likes of D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf are harder to find. This notion of a well-piled stockroom then supports Leavis' view that stock writers interfere with readers' responses by placing too many phrases at ready-to-hand. Once our literary warehouses are full of stock writing, then any 'spontaneous' movement will inevitably end up with one in our hands. All else follows from this: the reader indulges in fantasying due to an immersion in vulgar accounts of emotion, but this immersion comes from the most ready accounts available being the most vulgar. Furthermore, it is because they are ready-to-hand that they are vulgar, because emotional complexity cannot be reachable by anybody who stretches their hand out in a bookshop.

But at the same time, within the video game medium such limitations themselves are created from the unique way in which the expression of computer game imagery is bound with a particular sense of engagement between player and game. It is, then, important not to approach the concept of representation in gaming too simplistically by assuming a passive or linear relationship between screen and viewer.[19] As Atkins and Kryzywinska suggest, 'It is only in the act of playing a game, becoming subject to those formal regimes that act to interpolate the player and shape their experience, that we are able to understand at a deeper level the experience of playing video games.'[20] Sageng likewise suggests that while computer games exhibit some highly traditional 'semantic mechanisms' of representation and narrative, such 'mechanisms of representation cannot account for […] the nature of *gameplay*', which 'involves a number of on-game actions attributed to the player herself (or her avatar) rather than some non-existent fictional subject'.[21]

In this context, Ian Bogost has argued that video games should be understood as a form of rhetoric, that is, a persuasive discourse aimed at securing the 'adherence of minds'[22] in a given audience. This, Bogost argues, situates

them as a cultural form, for 'just as photography, motion graphics, moving images, and illustration have become pervasive in contemporary society, so have computer hardware, software and video games'. But the latter group differs from the former in terms of the 'unique properties of procedural expression'.[23] Hence, just as the 'new rhetoric' of Burke, Perelman, Booth and so on translated the oratorical focus of classical rhetoric into one of texts and written media, so Bogost develops a rhetoric which utilizes the specific aspects of gaming as a form of persuasion.

This provides an important counter to what Bogost terms the 'naïve-behaviourist view': that is, where gaming content matches real-world contexts, the game will reinforce particular behaviours across one to the other. Instead, a rhetorical approach insists on the materiality of communication and as such, in Laclau's words, it is this 'rhetorical milieu' which 'ultimately dissolves the illusion of any unmediated reference'.[24] Just as rhetoric organizes its presentation around specific configurations of speech and audience – the key to successful oratory is connecting what matters to whom, at a given point – so too Bogost argues that

> videogames do not just offer situated meaning and embodied experiences of real and imagined worlds and relationships; they offer meaning and experiences of particular worlds and particular relationships. […] Put differently, rhetorical positions are always particular positions; one does not argue or express in the abstract. A game's procedural rhetoric influences the player's relationship with it by constraining the strategies that yield failure or success.[25]

The 'meaning and experience' that is of interest in this chapter is not the typical representations of madness as villainous or evil. Rather, it is those which situate madness as a *heroic* construct, utilizing the tensions surrounding the experience of madness in order to position the game's 'hero' – typically, the character controlled by the player themselves – and, in doing so, constituting a re-objectification of commonplaces around both heroism and madness.

RHETORICS OF *SUFFERING* AND *DARKNESS*: MONSTROUS DOUBLES AND REACHING TENTACLES

Agency in gaming typically requires a 'controller' – both the player and the interface through which they play – which must conform to a set number of buttons one can press (or movements one can make, or voice commands one can give). Indeed, the functional role of the game in providing this sense of agency through a 'functional relationship between the gameworld

environment and the game system that lies beyond the interaction and governs it'[26] has prompted much critical discussion.[27] But this clearly sits in tension with aspects of 'madness', and the loss of control or struggle with sense-making which is frequently associated with it, both culturally and clinically.[28] In order to be persuasive, then, a game seeking to express some kind of 'heroic madness' must perform through certain tensions around control, expression and knowledge, which convey a sense of madness that can, nonetheless, be 'played' and played successfully. Drawing on the long-established archetypes of melancholia (the unstable and fundamentally misunderstood characters who *through these deviations* come to reinterpret and challenge the accepted cultural norms: Nietzsche's Madman alerts us to the death of God; Gogol's Poprishchin exposes the nonsensical bureaucracy of middle-management; Lautréament's Maldoror who takes on the apathy of moral sentiments, and so on), gaming procedures must create something that is both painfully integral and wholly other to madness itself, while at the same time retaining a sense of engagement based on the player as a 'hero', with its corresponding sense of control and autonomy.

Two figures or motifs are remarkably commonplace across the span of video games that attempt to negotiate these challenges and express madness in relationship to the hero-player. These commonplaces can be broadly identified as the *monstrous double* and the *reaching tentacle*. The figure of the monstrous double typically involves confronting players with a 'dark side' to a character's personality, an uncontrollable (or less controllable) 'other' whose relation to the player is usually embedded within a wider moral choice within the game's plot. In the FPS video game *The Suffering*, for example, the player takes control of a protagonist wrestling with a madness linked to an ambiguous set of memories and a seemingly uncontrollable anger. To persuade the player of this, the game persistently subjects the player to a tortuous and uncontrollable monstrous aspect: as the game proceeds, they hear whispers and voices in their heads and were constantly bombarded with violent images of their own murdered children at seemingly random times. The player not only battles monsters – as enemies *and* as inner voices from their 'past' – but once they have filled up an 'insanity meter', they are also able to transform themselves into a fiery monster. This transformation was a gameplay mechanic to help traverse difficult levels: the monster is stronger and more resilient to damage but also harder to control. But the extent of the player's use of that mechanic is one factor in determining whether the ending of the game shows the protagonist to be guilty or innocent of the crime they have been incarcerated for (killing their family); the more the monster is used, the more likely they are guilty.

The figure of the reaching tentacle also plays on conventional horror motifs in order to disturb the player's sense of control of the 'hero' of

the game. Whether attached to an enemy (among many examples, *Death Stranding, Darksiders*) or the player themselves (*Prototype, The Elder Scrolls: Dragonborn*), the tentacle expresses an unpredictable and slippery force, which defies conventional gameplay strategy. In the latter cases, where the tentacle is embedded within the players' in-game agency, this lack of control and predictability is almost always tied to the protagonist's loss of memory. The loss of self-identity is, of course, a common trope for any figure of heroic madness; but whereas the monstrous double tends to use memory as a means of directing the player's choices in the game (an either/or which corresponds to whether the protagonist is 'really' a monster or a hero), the tentacle's relationship to memory is less decisive. For example, the FPS *The Darkness* places the player in the game as a lost and confused protagonist with no sense of identity, who's only guide is a haunting voice in their head. The voice itself is actualized through shadowy, and at first uncontrollable, tentacles that are released from the protagonist's body. The tentacles that the player is able to summon thus become a trope for both the protagonist's madness itself but also the weapon against it: as the player masters the game, the tentacles can be controlled in order to complete the storyline and, consequently, recover the protagonist's identity. The problem of memory is, then, not simply narrative (the protagonist loses their memory or is haunted by memories) but also operational: the player does not know how to play the game at the beginning and (presumably) does by the end. In this sense, the fracturing of a player's experience of memory – an experience which crosses between the narrative of the game and the physical immersion of its playing – is, in effect, an operationalizing of 'heroic madness'.

IMMERSION, REPRESENTATION AND COMMONPLACE PROCEDURES

Of course, it could well be charged that neither of these figures constitutes a 'reobjectification' of madness in the sense that Schoeneman et al. described, but instead simply recycle conventional horror tropes in order to increase the immersive value of the game. *The Suffering* is clearly designed to shock, just as *The Darkness* is designed to unsettle. On this reading, the figures of madness are commonplace tools used to induce a greater response in the player; what Rehak refers to the 'prison of presence' at work in FPS games, when 'embodied vulnerability (*they're coming for me!*) deliciously complimented its violent agency (*take that, you bastard!*)'.[29] This prison of presence defines immersion in terms of the player's sense of the game's 'reality': in short, the game replicates a terrifying situation, and the more real this situation feels to the player, the more enjoyable the game will be. On such a reading, the

immediate violence of the figure of the monster, or the disgust at the figure of the tentacle, can tend to dominate their meaning over and above the ways in which they are constructed as part of the game's procedures themselves.

But the problem with this particular notion of immersion is that it assumes the game is *replicating reality* in some sense. It is true that, in Bogost's words, 'the interactivity of (good) video games might locate those games higher on the 'vividness spectrum'.[30] But when considering the more 'vivid' aspects of video games such as *The Suffering* or *The Darkness,* it would be a mistake to assume that such vividness relates to how closely it depicts 'real experience'. Instead, Bogost argues that such 'vividness comes not from immersion, but from abstraction',[31]

> meaning in video games is constructed not through a re-creation of the world, but through selectively modelling appropriate elements of that world. Procedural representation models only some subset of a source system, in order to draw attention to that portion as the subject of the representation. Interactivity follows suit: the total number and credibility of user actions is not necessarily important; rather, the relevance of the interaction in the context of representational goals of the system is paramount.[32]

This is a key point as, for all of its cartoonish violence, the visual depiction of the protagonist's 'madness' within *The Suffering* resonates with accounts of those experiencing psychotic episodes (e.g. 'the physical symptoms, the feeling of being burnt […]. Something was biting my head as well. I had a few occasions where I felt I was being eaten alive'[33]). It would be tempting, therefore, to align the monster-infested world with a paranoiac condition, or inner voices with that of the schizophrenic. But, as Bogost's argument suggests, this link between the game's depiction and patient experience is *not* a representational likeness, so much as an *abstraction* of the principle which both try to express. This approach requires avoiding the straightforward visual representation of madness within the game or the more traditional and heavy-handed black-box interpretations of video games as somehow causally affecting the individuals who play them. He thus uses rhetoric as a route to developing an object-oriented ontology as a way of sidestepping the traditional focus on gaming as a form of linear representation.

If procedural rhetoric is used to make the case that gaming forms a distinctive version of what Schoeneman et al. identified as a re-objectification of madness, something of a tension seems to emerge. On the one hand, Bogost's argument that video games constitute a form of procedural abstraction which embeds the core act of gameplay into a series of choices, tropes, narratives, and establishes the game as a persuasive activity 'through rule-based representations and interactions',[34] is convincing. On the other hand, in the case

of a game such as *The Suffering* or *The Darkness* this abstraction is not procedural alone, but employs longer-standing motifs, cultural genealogies and straightforward clichés: in short, commonplaces.[35] While Bogost argues that procedural rhetoric is a process of abstracting particular worlds and particular relationships, the sense of madness conveyed by the monstrous double and the reaching tentacle depend on multiple and overlapping resonances which seem to render the game world ambiguous, rather than particular. This means that, in the games discussed above, the boundary between the 'me' and the 'bastard' within Rehak's account of embodied vulnerability are in a constant supplemental exchange as each of the game's choices presents itself. The 'rational choice' for the player is in fact rendered constantly suspect, as is the nature of the 'control' being exercised.

In the specific case of 'heroic madness', then, it would seem that more needs to be said about the procedures of rhetoric, than the rhetoric of procedure. When Bogost claims that 'procedural expression must entail symbol manipulation' and that the 'computer magnifies the ability to create representations of processes',[36] the commonplace figures of madness employed in the examples above form a *particular kind* of symbol or process. The particularity of such processes needs to be accounted for if we are to avoid a simplistic 'black box' interpretation, and see them instead as something like Schoeneman's notion of an 'assemblage of available cultural metaphors'.

Such a particularity of symbol or process finds a form in the commonplace of classical rhetoric. The topics, as discussed in chapter 1, consisted of generally accepted arguments which could be applied to persuade particular audiences through the application of syllogism, which Quintilian described as the 'storehouses of trains of thought'.[37] Whereas the topics provide a technical mechanism for 'reasoning from generally accepted opinions (*endoxai*) about any problem in a way 'which will avoid contradiction',[38] the separation of this mode of reasoning from formal logic over time led to what had been initially headings of a very general nature ('more is better than less'; 'the cause is superior to its effect', etc.) becoming far more specific 'oratical themes'.[39] These were themes embedded within the structure of the language and issues affecting a community, and, according to Crowley and Hawhee, 'available to anyone who spoke or wrote the language in which they were couched and who was reasonably familiar with the ethical and political discussions taking place in the community'.[40] The strength of such arguments was precisely their familiarity to an audience; certainly from Aristotle onward, for the skilled orator such common topics could be deployed procedurally once enough of the context of an audience was known.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that the very familiarity (and, indeed, banality) of the topics obscures both their recurrence and their persuasiveness, involving as they do 'primary agreements in the sphere

of the preferable'.[41] One will invariably end up using them, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue, whether one wants to or not. This is, in many senses, a confirmation of the point which began this chapter over the ways in which discourses of madness draw, intentionally or not, on its cultural genealogy. But more than this: as a particular form of topic, the commonplace is not simply a passive reflection of the cultural milieu. Rather, its use is determined within the 'particular argumentative situation in which the speaker finds himself'.[42] That is to say, the content of a particular set of topics does not necessarily determine their meaning, as this is determined instead by the interaction between topic and contextual use. As such, 'conceiving them in terms of *loci* that one considers fundamental, can give *loci* a variety of aspects and the same locus, the same hierarchy', but 'when given another justification, may lead to a different vision of reality'.[43]

How does this account of the commonplace develop the preceding analysis? Fundamentally, it suggests that the commonplaces of the monstrous double or the reaching tentacle operate not by the power of representational vocabulary itself, but rather according to a configuration of associated meanings; after all, it is the circulation of a word, not its classification, which renders it clichéd. That is to say: as well as understanding the nuances of video gaming as a medium through its procedural aspects, it is also necessary to understand the procedures of the commonplace as a rhetorical technique, in order to interpret the form of 're-objectification' at work in games such as *The Suffering*. This rests on a crucial difference between the search for an articulation of the experience of madness, and its presentation through the medium of gameplay. The mechanical repetition which is inherent to understanding a commonplace *as such* – that is, as a cliché – is fundamental to this re-objectification process.

Recall Styron's claim that the experience of heroic madness was 'indescribable';[44] and his reflection that 'since antiquity – in the tortured lament of Job, in the choruses of Sophocles and Aeschylus – chroniclers of the human spirit have been wrestling with a vocabulary that might give proper expression to the desolation of melancholia'.[45] Styron limits 'expression' here to words (and, to a lesser extent, sounds and images) which are invariably treated as direct, linear substitutions for experience: in searching for a vocabulary, he is pursuing a meaningful object of representation that can relay his experience. For example, Styron describes the phenomenon of those in depression 'being accompanied by a second self – a wraithlike observer who […] is able to watch with dispassionate curiosity as his companion struggles against the oncoming disaster'.[46] This wraithlike observer may well constitute a form of the monstrous double motif encountered in video games; here, it is used to express the detached voyeurism that Styron feels as he prepares for his own death. Because this monster is only mentioned once, its specific character is

left largely assumed. It is not clear, for example, why the double would be a *wraith* in this case and not, say, a shadow, a statue, or a spider (which Styron references later, again to highlight its inadequacy as an image). The problem in this case is not with the *vocabulary* available to Styron, but rather with the sense of how 'wraithlike-ness' affects the activities the trope is being used to describe. It is thus limited to a brief analogy, and as such does not *abstract* any particular relationships the wraith may typically invoke between subjective experience and the broader regimes of mental health – that is, the ethical, legal and procedural management of social space and movement. In attempting to sidestep the unnecessary or superfluous excesses of the cliché (by limiting with brevity each figure he employs), Styron in fact empties such figures of their potency.

The point here is not to critique Styron but to contrast his representational approach with the notion of the commonplace as a form which enables the configuration of a particular set of persuasive relations, drawing on both implicit and explicit syllogistic reasoning. In many ways this echoes de Man's famous reading of Proust's clichés, whereby the referential structure of the text is embedded within a broader rhetorical foundation concerning grammatical relations and habits: 'The coupling of words, in a cliché, is not governed by the necessary link that reveals their potential identity but by the contingent habit of proximity';[47] and the 'mechanical, repetitive aspect of grammatical forms is shown to be operative in a passage that seemed at first sight to celebrate the self-willed and autonomous inventiveness of a subject'.[48] The procedural basis of video games provide a distinctive type of what de Man refers to as 'grammatical forms', and the underlying theme remains essentially the same: the figures of heroic madness in *The Suffering* and *The Darkness* draw upon a set of *loci* in order to establish what Perelman termed a 'sphere of the preferable'. This sphere constitutes a ground which interrelates player choice, vividness, experience and understanding into the gameplay decisions available to the player. While both games work predominantly with clichés – indeed, *The Suffering* is overtly saturated with them – these commonplaces are drawn upon as *procedural techniques in and of themselves* which allow a range of associated images and meanings (violence, burning, horror, and a lack of control) to be drawn together and present the player with a coherent, convincing sense of 'heroic madness'.

In this sense, it could well be argued that the stronger examples of 'heroic madness' in gaming are *precisely* those which are overloaded with clichés, because it is these which draw most explicitly on these procedural commonplaces, which exposes the procedural relationships at work in the cultural meaning of 'heroism' and 'madness'. As discussed, the linearity of Styron's approach means that the idea of mental health as a form of ordering and managing of both the circulation and movement of communities, and the

integration of the individual within it, is inessential to his employment of the figure. Contrast this with *The Suffering*, where the mechanic to transform oneself into a monster, and its effect on the game ending, is dependent upon a particular set of familiar relationships: between ethical–legal 'right' (being innocent or guilty of murder) and procedural functionality (completing the game satisfactorily). In this case, the use of the monster mechanic is precisely to reduce guilt and innocence to a *function*.

HEROISM RE-OBJECTIFIED

Both the figure of the monstrous double and the reaching tentacle subvert the conventional figure of the hero to different ends by arranging the commonplaces of mental health in specific relationships to the gameplay itself. Each figure does this to different ends, by drawing on different *loci*. The interactivity of *The Suffering*, for example, consists of a functional arrangement of the gaming environment, and the configuration of a number of traditions in and around the motifs of control, fear, madness and heroism; or, in line with Bogost's account of rhetoric, it offers 'meaning and experiences of particular worlds and particular relationships'. Its first particular relationship is borne from its excessive invocation of generic horror tropes: the game takes place in a high security prison, which is built on a suspicious Second World War bunker, near to an abandoned mental hospital which used to be an orphanage; at various points, the player battles the sadistic prison warden, encounters a moral but mistreated prison guard, recruits a cowardly sidekick and so on. Second is a relationship between the ordeal of *The Suffering's* protagonist (in particular their metamorphosis into the monster) and its resonance with accounts from individuals with paranoiac delusions. Interlinking both of these particular relationships are meanings which can only be understood in terms of their procedural context and that make sense only in the game's relationship with its predecessors in the genre. In one level, for example, the game uses on an old FPS cliché of the toilet cubicle. It has been long-established within gaming design (from *Duke Nukem 3D* in 1998 onwards) that, if a player encounters a toilet with a series of cubicles, some kind of reward will lie behind one of the cubicle doors: a health pack, an amusing scene of an enemy using the toilet, and so on. In *The Suffering*, the player encounters just such a room; but upon opening the cubicle door, discovers their (dead) child facing the wall, a flashback image of a bloodied floor appears suddenly, and the player is immediately attacked by a monster.

Importantly for the commonplace to be effective, there is no discernible hierarchy between these relationships: instead, they constitute an interwoven rhetoric of madness that shifts between generic cliché and unsettling twists

on the player's control. As such, madness within games is embedded in relation to a particular mode of sense-making, which very often only becomes intelligible in the actual performance of playing the game itself (after all, how else can one explain why a player chooses to take the time to search in every toilet cubicle of an abandoned prison, otherwise infested by killer demons?). To put it another way: the monstrous double which emerges may appear as an image of violent irrationality, but the sense of agency that this produces in the player – in Bogost's terms, the abstraction which situates the player's interaction with the game – itself follows a logic of procedure, a logic generated *both* from the language of computer programming *and* from a range of particular cultural logics surrounding and resonating with those images. It is in this sense that the commonplace operates as a threshold between the rendering of mental health as an order or regime within the game world and without it.

This is emphasized in *The Darkness*. In his work on the horror genre, Eugene Thacker points to the relationship between the scientific taxonomies which create the boundaries of monstrosity in the first place (by establishing the boundaries for 'normal' genus and species) and the failure of these taxonomic efforts to remove the threat of an 'in-between' or displaced being.[49] *The Darkness*' figure of the tentacle situates the player within the tension of 'control' that was present in the figure of the monstrous double: as the player learns how to control the reaching tentacles, these specifically takes the place of the protagonist's *hands*; they become, in this sense, an expression of the player's possibilities of interacting with the game world, replacing more standard interactions (a gun, a sword, a 'press button' symbol) with a shifting, slippery 'feeler'. In this way, the tentacle marks an ambiguous line between the human and the inhuman; both in a narrative sense (the tentacle emerging from the human body is monstrous) and in a procedural sense (the apparent randomness of the tentacle imposes a barrier between the player and the game's controls). But the reaching tentacle also invokes a particular crisis of *knowledge*. It both raises and destabilizes the question of 'what is going on?' both procedurally (the player cannot fully control the tentacles attached to them) and visually: *The Darkness* employs low-lighting, inky shadows and winding corridors to create an effect of what Thacker describes as 'alienation':

> Whether one puts it in the language of fiction or science, the result is the same – the sudden realisation of a stark, 'tentacular' alienation from the world in which one is enmeshed. For these and other texts the cephalopod stands in as a manifestation of that indifference of the black, inky abyss.[50]

Discourses of mental health are, of course, replete with the commonplace of the abyss.[51] But, as before, in this case, the figure is not straightforwardly

referential. The very prevalence of the figure raises a further point of note about its rhetorical performance: while tentacular movement within games like *The Darkness* remains procedurally generated – it is destabilizing to the player, but never really truly 'random' – its metaphorical and metonymic movement always-already overloads the trope: it invokes a glut of possible associations, from the mythical symbolism of the all-consuming strength of 'the depths', to the inherent sexuality of the trope as an uncontrollable yet dangerously alluring supplement seen more commonly in images of the tentacle within, for example, Japanese manga.[52] In other words, the procedural aspect of the tentacle as a commonplace figure involves a necessary indifference to knowledge, and the techniques of certainty, itself. The tentacles within *The Darkness* continue and develop this set of relationships between knowledge and control which establish not only the figure as a general literary commonplace, and subsequently appear as ready-made illustrations of aspects of mental health but also a convincing world for gameplay.

In this way, the figure of the monstrous double emerges from a configuration of commonplaces which, whether drawn from visual, cultural or procedural sources, all encourage players to identify an either/or between hero and monster, and in doing so create a tension between the player's control and the narrative resolution of the game. Likewise, the reaching tentacle draws on a wider cultural association with otherwise unrelated threats, which create a tension around the notion of knowledge and understanding. For both, it is entirely possible to argue that a 'reobjectification' of madness has taken place in the sense that Schoeneman et al. identified in Styron's work: 'a refamiliarization that […] adds depth to the usual signifiers of […] disorder'. But whereas Styron's work was an ill-fated pursuit of a more 'sincere' account of madness, explorations of the rhetorical relationship between process and commonplace suggest a more complex set of relationships – from the seemingly banal to the blatantly grotesque – concerning the ways in which the ordering of mental health is constituted.

NOTES

1. Styron, *Darkness Visible*, 83.
2. Schoeneman et al., 'The Black Struggle', 330–331.
3. See, for example, McCann et al., 'The Experience of Young People with Depression', 337.
4. See Lawn et al., 'Examining the use of metaphors', and Rofè, 'Metaphorical Stories'.
5. Quin and Chaudoir, 'Living with a Concealable Stigmatized Identity'.
6. Behuniak, 'The Living Dead?'
7. Mitchell et al., 'Dementia Discourse', 2.

8. For a good example of this argument, see Repper and 'Julie''s 'Challenging discrimination within mental health services'.
9. Schoeneman et al., 'The Black Struggle', 338.
10. Schoeneman et al., 'The Black Struggle', 339.
11. Fleming et al., Serious Games and Gamification for Mental Health'. Fleming et al. provide an overview of a number of 'serious games' aimed at educating players on mental health. 'Serious games' are mostly educational by design; in contrast, attempts to capture the affective experience of depression through game mechanics can be found in efforts such as Videodante's 'game poem' *Depression Presented Ludically in the Style of a Videogame*. Here, though, I am more interested in the relationship between procedures of gameplay and the circulation of commonplace imagery, and how the medium of gaming exploits the commonplaces of madness to create a form of re-objectification. As such, the games examined are from mainstream entertainment, which have madness as a core feature of gameplay, but without an 'educational' agenda such as those in the 'serious gaming' category.
12. In some respects, this follows what Lawn et al. identify as a more general lack of consideration of tropes and metaphors and, while abundant around mental health, a lack of work on how these *actively shape* decision-making by both service users and mental health workers ('Examining the Use of Metaphors', 2).
13. Rehak, 'Of Eye Candy and ID', 141.
14. Bogost, *Persuasive Games.*
15. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 250.
16. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 194.
17. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 31.
18. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 195.
19. See Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*; Vahlo, 'An Enactive Account of the Autonomy of Videogame Gameplay'.
20. Atkins and Krzywinska, 'Introduction', 5.
21. Sageng, 'Agential Properties in Computer Games', 263.
22. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 8.
23. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 29.
24. Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, 79.
25. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 241–242.
26. Jørgensen, *Gameworld Interfaces*, 2.
27. See, for example, Juul, *Half-Real*; Taylor, 'When Seams Fall Apart'.
28. See McCann et al., 'The Experience of Young People with Depression'.
29. Rehak, 'Of Eye Candy and ID', 140.
30. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 45.
31. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 45.
32. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 46.
33. Rhodes and Jakes, *Narrative CBT for Psychosis*, 57.
34. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, ix.
35. Hence, the difference between these games and more 'direct' representations of mental health, such as in the aforementioned *Depression Presented Ludically in the Style of a Videogame*, where the game mechanics simply prevent the player from

achieving typical gaming goals, and thus produces frustration which may be akin to depression:

> And every time you fall a nasty message appears. 'You suck'. 'Stop trying'. This is what it feels like. The tired climb, the obstacle too great, the eerily slow fall back into the abyss. Overcoming depression is never a straight shot upward, and [the game] represents that. (Dalbey, 'Representing Depression through Game Mechanics'.)

This clearly veers toward the didactic rather than the rhetorical. In games such as *The Suffering* there may well be direct representations of specific conditions, but I would argue that their *persuasiveness* lies in their interlinking of a range of procedural and aesthetic commonplaces which constitute an order of mental health, hence, my use of the deliberately broad and ambiguous term 'madness'.

36. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 5.
37. Quoted in Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 70.
38. Swearingen, *Rhetoric and Irony*, 112–113.
39. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 84.
40. Crowley and Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics*, 76.
41. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 84.
42. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 96.
43. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 99.
44. Styron, *Darkness Visible*, 16.
45. Styron, *Darkness Visible*, 82.
46. Styron, *Darkness Visible*, 64.
47. de Man, 'Semiology and Rhetoric', 31.
48. de Man, 'Semiology and Rhetoric', 32.
49. Thacker, *Tentacles*, 53.
50. Thacker, *Tentacles*, 153.
51. Atwood, *The Abyss of Madness*.
52. Vigilant and Powell, 'Way Better Than Real'.

Chapter 8

'This Will All Make Sense When I Am Older'

Rebooting Clichés

> No doubt, the world is being musealized, and we all play our parts in it. Total recall seems to be the goal. Is this an archivist's fantasy gone mad? Or is there perhaps something else at stake in this desire to pull all these various pasts into the present – something that is indeed specific to the structuring of memory and temporality today and that has not been experienced in the same way in past ages?
>
> – Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts'.

In the 2019 Disney film *Frozen 2*, an anthropomorphic snowman named Olaf wanders through a magical forest trying not to be unnerved by the sights and sounds around him. 'This will all make sense when I am older', he sings, in a melody heavily indebted to *The Sound of Music*'s 'How do you solve a problem like Maria?' Like the nuns before him, Olaf deals with the innocent and wayward imagination of youth and its collision with the seriousness of 'making sense'. After spending much of the film pondering how he feels about growing up (an issue most snowmen do not last long enough to face), he is uneasy about the shifting dimensions of his surroundings, the strange noises in the dark, and the sense that he is being watched. However, as he sings: 'one day, when I'm old and wise/ I'll think back and realize/ that these were all completely normal events'. Unlike Maria, who's 'problem' is suggested to be solved when the song is reprised during her wedding to Captain von Trapp, Olaf's song is amusing because it misconstrues adult understanding. His expectations that the fantastical needs only to be perceived by older eyes to be less frightening ('cause when you're older/ absolutely everything makes sense') transpose his immediate experience into his future self's memory, which guarantees – at least for a moment – that he is not in danger.

What is this world that will make sense when we're older? The adults watching the film will know, whether they are schooled in semiotics or not, that all of the apparent dangers are nothing more than standard tropes of Disney animation: faceless eyes in the darkness, anthropomorphic trees which move when the protagonist isn't looking, and so on. In this way, the song is not just suggesting that (or doubting whether) there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for what is going on: 'When I'm more mature/ I'll feel totally secure/ being watched by something with a creepy, creepy face'. Olaf's fetishizing of growing up means he attributes *anything* strange to an effect of his youthful ignorance. We, the audience, know that the only way to genuinely make sense of magic is to understand, with a knowing wink to the fourth wall, that it isn't really there. Yet, in knowing it isn't there, *really*, we also create the very need for it to exist. We remain in the theatre, and perhaps return for a second or third time, to watch Olaf's ironic song again and again. Fittingly, the song reflects the film's larger premise, articulated in the earlier song 'Some Things Never Change', that core traditions of Disney franchises – always, in some way or other, concerned with growing up and self-realization – provide a way of making sense of the complex dangers and threats. At the same time, this is also presented as at least half-ironic. The line 'like an old stone wall that will never fall' is sung as said wall crumbles to the ground; 'that's why I'm holding on tight to you' references the importance of true love, but the film concludes with 'true loves' of the first *Frozen* film – princesses Anna and Elsa – living far apart, one of them an ambiguous half-human, half-spiritual symbol.

Because, of course, it doesn't make sense. Even when you're older. The simplicity of traditional Disney 'growing up' narratives clashes with the complexities of late modern entertainment culture. The faith that this will all make sense when we're older is not rooted in the naivety of childhood, but the ironic sensibilities of a twenty-first-century adulthood which is steeped in an unnerving preoccupation with nostalgic repetition. In this way, Olaf's harmonizing with Maria von Trapp appeals to the auto-archival sensibility of a pop culture saturated with the 'addiction to its own past'.[1] Such a saturation, Andreas Huyssen argues, is one of the key contrasts between 'the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity 20th century' and the 'emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies'.[2] This is not limited to the academic interest in memory practices which Huyssen documents, but also in the realm of film, television and music:[3] what Simon Reynolds describes as 'neophilia' turning into 'necrophilia'.[4] If Olaf looks forward for the security of looking back, this security is provided not by enhanced rationality, but an expanded archival capacity of a mature culture whose age is testified to by the sense of its own past. Yet it is this same seemingly unlimited archival capacity which problematizes making sense of the present.

The problem lies in the very meaning of nostalgia, which, as Svetlana Boym has pointed out, is split between the two aspects of its Greek name: νόστος, 'return home', and ἄλγος, 'longing'[5]: a split which manifests itself as a core tension within contemporary media. Turning a threatening present into a future memory is both a way of creating and owning a sense of narrative. In this sense, the snowman's anticipatory nostalgia embeds *returning home* within a specific and familiar *procedure* of remembrance (in this sense, he channels Frederic Jameson's description of nostalgia as metonymic pastiche[6]). But just as Nietzsche's antiquarian found, the archival technology enabling this sense-making procedure also produces a bewildering array of memories which in turn confuse and perplex any sense-making task. In Reynolds' words, we are engaged in a 'crisis of overdocumentation triggered by digital technology' where the dematerialising of cultural data 'means that issues of space and cost no longer deter us from keeping anything and everything'.[7] Consequently, Mark Fisher argues, an anachronistic cultural *inertia* is 'buried, interred behind a superficial frenzy of 'newness', of perpetual movement'. Cultural production is no longer concerned with the shock of the new, but the shock of the same. Olaf's grown-ups are less likely to encounter the innovative future they were promised, and instead 'more likely to be startled by the sheer *persistence* of recognisable forms'.[8] In this way, the very tools of ensuring, as the song goes, 'absolutely everything make sense' – that is, technologies and modalities of recollection – have produced what Fisher describes as 'a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion' in the twenty-first century;[9] an exhaustion which Franco 'Bifo' Berardi phrased as the malaise of thinking 'what can be done, when we know nothing can be done?'[10]

It is not surprising that this malaise of archival complexity is in turn accompanied by the second aspect of nostalgia: an inescapable *longing* (ἄλγος), not for the *return* of the past, but rather for a non-existent simplicity and narrative certainty that the procedure for rendering the past 'past' enables. Such a 'narrativeness', as Gary Morson once described it, is ironically a far more fragmented and disparate cultural phenomena than the narrative 'turns' which precede it in academia.[11] It constitutes what Christian Salmon describes as an 'unprecedented development' within the twenty-first century of a 'narrative net that filters perceptions and stimulates useful emotions'.[12] Such a net consists of 'determinate narrative sequences' that provide heroic heroes and villainous villains: 'shared legitimizing figures'[13] utilized not to *deny* the complex and fragmented knowledge of an exhausted present, but to precisely and impossibly engage with it, and make sense of it.

In this sense, asking what nostalgic longing can tell us of some prevailing sense of loss in late modernity, or what it seeks to regain, will lead us wide of the mark. After all, as Fisher observes, amid the potentially infinite archival platforms, 'in conditions of digital recall, loss is itself lost'.[14] Instead, the

question is how such a re-rendering of the past allows sense to be made amid the shock of the same that Fisher describes. More specifically, the question is whether, within this context, it is possible that nostalgia itself has become a cliché – or whether, conversely, clichés have become an embedded part of the nostalgic culture that Huyssen describes? In other words, is this perceived nostalgia – the nineteenth century 'archivist's fantasy gone mad' in the twenty-first century – merely a generalized ruse, an ineffective platitude which obscures its complicated and contradictory origins? Or is the cliché now a *function* of that fantasy, and of that madness – a form of retrieval better suited to its demands than memory alone? Does this mean that cliché, in this sense, needs to be re-imagined for contemporary culture – or even rebooted?

A CRISIS OF INFINITE REBOOTS

The word 'rebooted' is deliberate here, because the act of rebooting a media franchise raises these questions directly. Explicitly couched in the cultural 'wave of nostalgia',[15] reboots of films and television series have become a common industrial strategy. Partly this commonality is rooted in the ambiguity of what constitutes a reboot rather than, say, a remake or a sequel. Reboots can, of course, appear to be everywhere if we define every act of media repetition as a reboot. This has only been accentuated with the adoption of the term in management culture, particularly in relation to combatting not only creative stagnation but, more prominently, workplace stress: in discourses where images of finely tuned machines abound, the metaphor of 'switching the machine on and off again' borrowed from computing is pushed together with the demonstrable economic benefits of rebooting media franchises.[16] For this reason, theorists such as William Proctor and David Hollands have argued that the term requires a tighter definition to avoid it succumbing to the ambiguity of a buzz-word.[17] Yet if, functionally, 'the reboot seeks to give the audience the familiar narrative, but to modernize it',[18] in practice there seem to be almost necessary crossovers between the concept of reboots, remakes, sequels and prequels.

My interest is therefore less in arriving at pure definitions, and more in thinking about the reboot as an exercise in cliché: an exercise which specifically arises from the ambivalence between nostalgia as a cliché, and a cliché as nostalgia. Like nostalgia, the meaning of 'reboot' is split: the 'boot' – derived from the 'bootstrap' which assists the putting on of a boot, first used in computing design from the 1950s to describe the process of machines starting their complicated initiation processes automatically[19] – and the 're-', to do again. Its computing origin entailed that 'starting again' also required a 'switching off' beforehand: hence, the reboot being associated with fixing

some kind of error ('have you tried switching it off and on again?' as the weary protagonists of *The IT Crowd* would tirelessly ask). It was this sense that the comic book industry took on when it required a reworking of an existing character or hero: said hero would have to be 'switched off' in some way as to enable a fresh narrative to be brought in. While this process was seen in comics, like computer, since the 1950s, the most prominent reboot was the monumental DC Comics series published in 1985–1986, *Crisis on Infinite Earths.* Troubled by the long and sometimes contradictory history of its main heroes, DC introduced a radical exposition technique which effectively killed off multiple characters, precisely so that they could be resurrected by new writers without the baggage of complicated existing storylines.[20] It is therefore interesting to note the etymology of the term because it explicitly ties repetition to a sense of death, as well as a form of self-sufficient start-up: that is, a form of 'beginning' which interlinks the creative human agency and mechanical processes.[21] Thus, while it is true that the prominent examples of recent film reboots almost always 'seek to return us to 'year one' […] so that the story can be retold in a different format or style',[22] the practice of rebooting also harnesses the activity of the cliché; and, of course, reaps its treatment.

In this sense, the reboot appears to be a vehicle for invoking nostalgia as a clichéd trope. It is a consequence of what Janet Wasko describes as an 'ongoing reliance on recycled ideas' in the film industry, largely due to films based on previous works typically returning high profit margins.[23] Reboots can be introduced because of the 'critical or commercial exhaustion' of a franchise, in order to reinvigorate its profitability;[24] re-reminding the audience of a past before the exhaustion of the present. They are a relatively safe choice for development, being built upon previous successes, and do not require the time and investment of developing an original intellectual property. Equally, the property of the reboot is also subject to contractual ownership, which leads to studios protecting certain properties through releasing films, without necessarily wanting to create entirely new storylines.[25] In both cases, the familiarity of the franchise is the key to its economic returns, and hence, nostalgia operates as a cliché; at least in the Deleuzian sense of an 'affective schemata' which film utilizes to represent images in a condensed format of space and time. Deleuze thus defines the cinematic cliché as an 'image of an image', not in the sense of a representation but rather a *sensation*.

> A cliché is a sensory-motor image of the thing. As Bergson says, we do not perceive the thing or the image in its entirety, we always perceive less of it, we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving, or rather what it is in our interest to perceive, by virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological demands. We therefore normally perceive only clichés. But, if

> our sensory-motor schemata jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty […].[26]

For Deleuze, then, the cliché initially forms a key part of the sense-making role of film: clichés are 'producing-machines'[27] which normalize (or 'territorialize') functions of representation. As a simulacra, they function by not only hiding the vitality of the original image through familiarity and repetition but also providing ready-made ways of narrating the world (much in the way that Deleuze notes in his work on Francis Bacon, the canvas is never 'a white and virgin surface', but instead full of historical and embedded clichés of representation 'already lodged on the canvas before the painter even begins to work', which limit aesthetic expression[28]).

If the reboot is simply part of the film industry's 'recycling' model, any 'reimagining' of past franchises seems to offer little beyond this same sense-making function. And if reboot culture simply utilizes nostalgic affect as a form of cliché in this sense, then it is not surprising that it receives criticisms from those alert to what C. Day Lewis once termed the unthinking 'womb deep sleep' of the cinematic experience.[29] Hence, for example, we find John C. Murray arguing that the coupling of repetitive content and the demand for 'intuitive and multiplatform services' has 'nurtured a synthetic culture of passive voyeurs'. The reboot depends upon 'affiliational thinking', and thus can only repeat 'a metanarrative of mass populism as the new form of anticritical intellectual banality'.[30] Such criticisms have been familiar since Adorno's arguments on the inescapable links between stereotypes and the technology of television watching.[31] However, if the critical theorist instinctively turns against the consumers for buying what they're being sold – that is, for opting for the familiar rather than the challenging through passivity or laziness (as Calvin once declared to Hobbes: 'Man, there's nothing I hate more than paying five bucks and having to deal with some new plot') – then this risks overlooking the fact that reboots are not *simple* repetitions. A reboot differs from a shot-for-shot remake, most explicitly in the role of the cliché within them; as Proctor argues, 'while the cash nexus is a crucial part of understanding how the industry operates, […] the reality of the situation is a rather more complex affair than bemoaning the passivity of fans bowing to every whim and whimsy of a corporate entity force-feeding them'.[32] Likewise, Deleuze affirms that because the cliché is embedded within 'sensory-motor images' and the links between them, it is not enough to simply challenge them with alternative or new images because the image itself 'constantly sinks to the state of the cliché'.[33] Instead, clichés must be worked through: 'to combine the optical-sound image with the enormous forces that are not those of a simply intellectual consciousness, nor of the social one, but of a profound,

vital intuition'.[34] In this sense, the second half of Deleuze's definition of cliché points (somewhat inadvertently) to the possibility of reboots employing an 'excess of horror or beauty', not to *break away* from clichés – an image without metaphor – but rather to reimagine the cliché function *itself*.

BRINGING THE PAST INTO THE PROBLEMATIC PRESENT

I don't propose that reboots constitute the 'explosion' of cliché that Deleuze promises, or indeed a 'vital intuition' of the image before it collapses. Rather, I find the idea that the reboot simply deploys nostalgia as a cliché for the sake of marketing and economics risks overlooking the ways in which reboots address the challenging of making sense of things when we're older: the act of bringing forward a familiar term into the present moment, playing on its past sense (the original film) but applying it to a new audience, *precisely* to address what Huyssen and others describe as the *disappearance* of the present into an infinite archival recollection. In this way, we can think of the cliché as a function of the nostalgia fuelling the present: a 'grown-up' cliché. Developing from its 'normalizing' function, the cliché instead serves a repetitious function which enables the narration of the very dissolution of narrative, or the making-present of a present fixated on the past. In this way, Deleuze's view that 'what maintains a set [*ensemble*] in this world without totality or linkage […] are clichés, and nothing else' remains appropriate to an extent.[35] But whereas Deleuze saw clichés as 'floating' and 'anonymous', this is challenged by the particularity with which the cliché functions in the reboot.

The exact form of this making-present depends on less on the specific memories of the past being invoked and more on which particular sense of the present the reboot simulates. Within the reboot catalogue, three characteristic senses emerge, which we can cast as the present of the future (in the form of technological enhancements to the cinematic experience), the present of the now (in the form of what I will term the 'democratizing' of a franchise), and the present of the past (dominated by darker, more 'realistic' forms of cliché). These characteristics are by no means exclusive from one another, but shape the ways in which the cliché functions to different effects of accounting for the present.

For example, the first characteristic is for clichés to frame a present of technological progress. Previous instalments of a franchise, limited by the available tools of cinema-making, can be re-presented with the latest groundbreaking techniques. This is done by recycling previous content, which not only ensures an audience but also invites comparisons to be drawn between the older, now defunct, version and its successor. The development of such

techniques also call for adjustments to the original source material to take advantage of, or bring specific attention to, the enhancements they bring. Much in the same way, the second characteristic of making-present aims to increase the accessibility and representation of a franchise for a contemporary audience. This has always been a principle of the medial reboot: *Crisis on Infinite Earth* was, after all, essentially a democratizing of the DC Universe – for both writers and prospective readers – who found the range of competing narratives and backstories from its long history too daunting to engage in fully. A restart which makes-present certain core clichés of a franchise allows audiences that are aware of the original and those entirely new to it to watch on a relatively equal footing: the reboot thus directly appeals to the strength of the *demos*. In recent film and television reboots, such democratizing takes the form of recasting established characters as different genders, ages, sexualities or ethnicities. The 2004 reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* replaced Dirk Benedict's character Starbuck with the female role of Kara Thrace, but keeping most of the original character's attributes;[36] the 2018 Dreamworks Animation *She Ra and the Princesses of Power*, a reboot of the 1985 Filmnation series, changed the ethnicities and sexualities of many of the protagonists to reflect LGBTQ inclusivity.[37]

In both first and second characteristic senses, the cliché functions as a sign of outdated convention (be this technological or representational), and simultaneously enables the contemporary to be realized by its re-use. They constitute what Thomas Leitch calls an 'update',[38] in that they depend upon a certain rhetoric of progress to authenticate the aspects of each franchise they repeat. This rejuvenation results in a double movement whereby core figures of the original are invoked both to secure the difference between the technologically superior present and the limited past and to secure a continuity between them: thus retaining the fundamental role of the cliché. In keeping with the character of clichés, such 'improvements' have a history of making simultaneous retrograde steps. For example, the promises of 3D cinematic experience which drove Tim Burton's 2010 reboot of *Alice in Wonderland* was itself a reboot of the same 3D technique that the film industry has revisited time and again since the nineteenth century. Developments in computer-generated imagery (CGI) allowed for familiar narratives and characters to be reimagined, much in the way that many films were remade with the advent of sound and colour; the parallel arrival of high-definition video unwittingly has exposed flaws in much CGI.[39] Likewise, the 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters*, this time using an all-female team, was critiqued for demeaning *both* the original 1984 film *and* the idea of female empowerment, by relying too much on stereotyped representations.[40] In this way, the progressivist rhetoric is always being undone, and dragged backwards into the repetition of the clichés it works with.

The third characteristic of making-present, however, confronts the contradictory anachronisms of the previous two with a distinct absence of progressivism. In these cases, the reboot brings an old franchise into a present fixated on its own past in order to confront the cynicism and malaise that such a fixation brings about. Rather than rejuvenate, the emphasis here is on a franchise 'growing up' through a re-presentation driven by the complexities of an every-growing storage of cultural knowledge. Far from the whimsical, jingoistic or common points of collective nostalgia found in dictionaries of cliché, these explicitly engage in different forms of darker narratives to present 'realistic' clichés to what Adorno called a 'hard-boiled' audience.[41] The effect is to retrieve the past through the lens of a present exhausted by its own perceived loss of innocence. In other words, now that we *know* the world is complicated, and are fatigued by this unending repetition of self-knowledge, the task is to re-interpret the past in order to *both* escape the present into the comfort of a familiar narrative, *and* to perform a critique of naïve escapism based on the unbearable knowledge of the present.

THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS, AGAIN

Perhaps the most notable aspect of these representations of 'reality' is an increased level of brutality. Reboots such as Rob Zombie's *Halloween* and Jonathan Liebesman's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* focus on the spectacle of violence: as Hollands notes, unlike the 1978 original, 'every violent action in Zombie's version is designed formalistically to create the most visceral reaction possible in spectators'.[42] If its original advertised itself as based on a true story in order to highlight audiences' apathy towards violence, the rebooted *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* accentuates the aesthetics of ritual murder: an ironic twist on Deleuze's 'excess of horror' which, rather than rid the screen of clichés, attempts to reinvigorate them. However, while this emphasis on visceral conflict is undeniably prominent in this style of reboot, increased violence does not *by itself* constitute a different characteristic of making-present. It is just as much a consequence of better resolution cameras, and the more widespread availability of violent imagery raising the bar on what counts as horror.

That increased violence is only part of the 'realism' of the grown-up cliché is illustrated by the archetypal film reboot, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy.[43] While the director's focus on a specific 'contemporary' atmosphere (in stark opposition to the fate of the previous Batman film series), saw more explicit violence on screen, it is also the case that the Batman franchise has *always* been engaged with the darkening of the

superhero genre: with the exception of the highly camp television series of the 1960s, each screen incarnation has sought to return the hero to a 'darker look and tone' (as the 1992 animated series *Batman: Series Writers' Bible* puts it).[44] Perhaps because of this, *The Dark Knight* series was able to – or was required to, to separate itself from its forerunners – exhibit the full range of the fundamental aspects of these 'grown-up' clichés.

Because the reboot tends to return the audience to a new 'year one' for the franchise, 'grown-up' clichés tend to focus on the very idea of growing up. In Nolan's trilogy, not only is Batman's origin story retold, but his ageing forms the narrative centre of the film series. Batman is defined by the wear and tear on his body and mind: he has no super powers, other than.[45] Like Derrida's *usure*, this wear and tear is also a form of value-interest: the wounds of the hero are presented as an investment with returns for an audience rooting for his success. The tired old ways are, in the end, successful with enough repetition: as *The Dark Knight Rises* showed fairly literally: waves of policemen charging at armed mobsters, refusing to use guns themselves, while Batman defeats his nemesis Bane in a good old fist fight.

Such origin stories are typically retold through an awareness of the complexity of the present. Mark Scahill, for example, notes that 'rebooted horror franchises tend to make their killers more humanized than their former counterparts. Jason in *Friday the 13th* becomes a sort of mentally unstable isolationist, attacking teenagers who dare to venture onto his land – more Ted Kazinsky than Frankenstein'. Furthermore, both *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* 'revisit their character's childhood as a means of eliciting an almost-but-not-quite sympathy for the homicidal maniacs at their center'.[46] The reboot is not simply tasked with making a nastier version of the original. Instead, there is an acute awareness that even maniacs require some kind of explanatory narrative behind the predictability of their actions. As a grown-up cliché, evil can no longer simply 'appear' from out of nowhere (smashing through a window, hiding in a cellar), and nor can crime in Gotham be the isolated operations of its past representations. For a reboot that makes-present the present of the past, the 'real' evil is less an autonomous agent or uncontrollably savage monster, but rather the very complexity that surrounds our ability to determine good from evil in an age which forgets nothing. Possibilities of multiple dysfunctional psychosocial conditions mix with standard 'bad guy' tropes. It is telling, this sense, that in *The Dark Knight* the character of the Joker repeatedly retells his own origin story, changing it each time from stories of abuse to psychopathy.

The heightened 'reality' of the origin story can be contrasted with the converse cliché of the all-knowing antagonist. Not only do the plots of all three of Nolan's films show an increasing number of layers of crime, each

one more corrupted and embedded in the world than the last, these narratives also depend upon an uncanny and excessive insight by Batman's enemies as to how he will act and respond. The League of Shadows in the first and third instalment are a hidden organization of assassins with seemingly unlimited access to information and people. In the second, the Joker is ostensibly presented as an anarchic loner, or the embodiment of chaos; but nevertheless manages to stage atrocities requiring astounding foresight and planning. This is replicated across a range of darker reboots: each step the hero makes is anticipated by the villain, furthering their plans rather than halting them. This constitutes a key element of the 'darkness' that we have already noted in this form of reboot. An all-knowing enemy is persistent and inescapable and therefore, just as with the complexity of the individual monster, collapses the naivety of straightforward escapist narratives where good outnumbers evil. The making-present of the past therefore produces a tension within narratives of evil. On the one hand, there is an awareness that monsters are produced from psychosocial contexts (a medical-political awareness a 'grown up' audience may have); on the other hand, there is an awareness that psychosocial contexts can be manipulated by monsters (a cultural–political suspicion of a cynical audience caught up in Nietzschean *ressentiment*).

More often than not the off-shoot of these darker, detailed accounts can be villains that are near-omniscient and seemingly unable to die; fully aware of the dangers of naivety, cynical realism ironically produces faintly ludicrous plotlines. Perhaps one of the more nuanced examples of this at work, though, can be seen with Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's 2016 version of the frontier myth-laden 1973 Michael Crichton media franchise *Westworld*. Both are set in the amusement park of Delos, where androids (or 'hosts') are designed to resemble humans, and carry out whatever fantasies park visitors demand. In the former, android cowboys develop faults in their programming and set out to destroy the humans. The lustful humans are killed, and the innocent survives; good and evil are clearly defined (to the point of the antagonist burning to extinction in hell-esque fire). In the latter, the humans and androids interchangeable as heroes and villains, and the series is shaped around a fundamental struggle for ownership of what is termed 'the narrative' (the programming that the androids will follow). Each time a host goes off-programme, it transpires they were acting on another level of programming. But as a result, there are no 'good' characters, and only a few that are 'bad' in the conventional sense. In the end, there is simply repetition: particularly when it is revealed that the hosts are themselves reproductions of park visitors. In this sense, the tension between the 'grown-up' knowledge of a musealized world and the need for a sense-making narrative is played out without resolution.

DISAVOWAL, FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING AGAIN

Given the reaches of nostalgia, it is tempting to look for the more psychological aspects of these darker reboots: remembering its divided meaning, one may well ask what perceived longing or lack they address, or what home they wish to return to. My interest remains with the cliché though, and how it functions to form a cohesive narrative; not only in terms of a plot, but visually and technically, echoing Deleuze's 'set' (whether this narrative is ultimately persuasive to an audience or not). Similar to Nietzsche's view of antiquarian culture, it seems to me that this process involves the cliché's role in enabling a distinctive form of forgetting.

As Leitch argues, forgetting is a key part of any media remake. While often paying homage to the original films, Leitch points out that remakes are not *advertising* these films, but instead *competing* with them: as such, they 'cannot risk invoking memories of the earlier film too fervently even though they are limited in the kinds of novelty they can introduce, since they are telling the same story again'.[47] They must employ, he argues, a 'trope of disavowal'.[48] But unlike the remake, the reboot *must* retain the memories of its previous incarnation – otherwise it is essentially a new film, pitched at an *entirely* new audience (and in which case would not need to reference, say, 'Batman' or 'Star Trek').[49] As Hollands argues, these films suggest they are continuing a legacy of previous films, but the legacy is a 'cryptic one'.[50] I find this choice of words is important, as it seems to me that what this reveals is precisely the utilization of nostalgia and remembrance via the cryptology of the museum: the living corpse of cultural value which we have encountered in the work of Boris Groys.[51] Rather than a trope of disavowal, reboots necessarily incorporate the trope of curation.

The artefact in play can vary from a single film, a character or a prop, but is always effectively a museum piece. As we saw in the origins of the reboot in both computer engineering and comic books, the reboot was inextricable from the switching off or killing. In a similar way, media reboots draw on their own past as 'mortified, defunctionalized, removed from all profane uses and offered up for reverent viewing', but also 'an object that can be sent on a journey […] [to] those areas of the modern world in which people are obsessed with the notion that artistic and cultural objects should be conserved at almost any cost'.[52] What travels and what does not – the curator's arbitration – is fundamental to the reboot appearing as 'new'. Thus, Zombie's *Halloween* references the original film, but not its sequels (in contrast, David Gordon Green's 2018 version uses the original actors of Michael Myers and Laurie Strode, but disregards any other sequels to the original). *Westworld* also makes direct reference to the original film – including, fittingly enough,

a figure of Yul Brynner's 'man in black' gathering dust in the storage unit of Delos, while also reworking the man in black motif into a new character – but not to its sequel or short-lived television series in the 1980s.[53] Likewise, the J.J. Abrams reboot of the *Star Trek* franchise retains characters names and personalities, but otherwise the past storylines of the franchise are 'literally erased'.[54] Scahill meanwhile notes that the primary artefact in the horror reboot genre is the 'mask' of the killer; they 'turn on the moment in which the troubled child 'discovers' his identity as a monster by donning his mask for the first time. […] [I]n masking, they become authentic'.[55]

This is, then, why Deleuze's notion of an anonymous, free-floating cliché is not quite satisfactory in this case. This authenticity is carried by the artefact ensuring a continuity with a particular past – that which draws on the longing of nostalgia, typically – while purposefully obscuring or forgetting any actual historical continuity. Authenticity is thus premised on a double exposure within the reboot: presenting the past as dead and revered (the decontextualized museum display; the consignment to storage), but in order to energize and rejuvenate it (the recontextualization of the artefact within the 'present' of the reboot). Such a process of curating a particular object, name or narrative, de-contextualizing it and re-contextualizing in order to negotiate a present unable to escape its past, is *only* possible as a specific function of the cliché. It is what we have described elsewhere as the mobile anti-archive of the cliché,[56] providing a temporary narrative resolution which supports the paradoxical authenticity of the reboot, while also, crucially, forgetting: providing sense without reference, or at least a reference which also forgets much of the original context.

A RETURN TO NARRATIVE

It goes without saying that this can result in cynicism, both on screen and in critic's reviews. As already noted, the reboot's attempt to harness the mobility of the cliché leaves it open to much the same lines of attack. At the same time, we have also noted that the reboot is not mere repetition, and in the case of the 'grown up' reboot it is this museological aspect which becomes the key process. All else – violence, complexity, near-sympathy – follows from the curating of specific figures of the past *into* clichés, in order to re-situate them as a past in the audience's here and now.

There is one last element to consider. Museal curation involves assembling a cohesive narrative around a decontextualized artefact: an artefact which, by virtue of being displayed within the archives, is always separated from the materiality of its profane narrative. Likewise, the reboot curates particular artefacts in order to cultivate a narrative – which necessarily, and outside of

any script writer or director's control, employs clichés in order to mark it *as* a particular narrative – while at the same time presenting a disbelief in the innocence of narrative alone. Heroes and villains are complex, ambiguous and, so often in reboots, *tired*: this presents disbelief in nostalgic innocence. Conversely, these level of complexity – finite, individual villains replaced with almost-ludicrous levels of insight – then requires a hero, a narrator or a protagonist: this simulates nostalgic innocence.

This paradoxical state of narrative requires another contradiction in terms: what we might call 'clichéd creativity'. It is this aspect of the cliché – its rootedness in an archival, museal structure of determining value from profanity – which ultimately drowns Deleuze's optimism for a 'pure image'; it does so precisely by being more creative than his account anticipates. In this way, the task of sense-making in reboots is less similar to Adorno's account and more to the logic outlined in Roland Barthes' 'Operation Margarine'. From films and novels about the Army to *Astra* margarine adverts, Barthes shows how established values are exposed for their 'pettiness' and 'injustices' (the Army is stupidly tyrannical; margarine is cheap) but are then saved not only '*in spite of*', but 'rather *by* the heavy curse of its blemishes'. The discipline of the Army allows the hero of the story to overcome the wrongdoers; margarine is, in fact, just like butter but cheaper. In Barthes view, 'to instil into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it'.[57]

But we need to be clear. A reboot can successfully innovate in its double exposure of the cliché, or it can collapse into a lurid and generic copy; it is not my purpose to provide judgement on that question. Either way, though, rendering a franchise as darker, more serious or indeed more 'grown up' will not provide more depth, meaning or reality. As Huyssen notes, 'the past cannot give us what the future has failed to deliver'.[58] From the perspective of the cliché, and its re-imagined function within the nostalgia of our necrophiliac culture, there is no procedural difference between *The Dark Knight* and Olaf's concerns in *Frozen 2*. It will, it seems, only make sense when we're older if we accept the ironies of the reboot's sense-making practices.

NOTES

1. Reynolds, *Retromania*, 403.
2. Huyssen, 'Present Pasts', 21.
3. On film, see, e.g. Herbert and Verevis, *Film Reboots*; Jorrest and Koos, *Dead Ringers*; on television, see Bevan, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia TV*; Pallister, *Netflix Nostalgia*; Lavigne, *Remake Television*; and on music, see Reynolds, *Retromania*.
4. Reynolds, *Retromania*, 411.

5. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii. Boym also notes that the term does not originate in Greece; the word nostalgia is itself 'nostalgically Greek'. Nevertheless, this meaning suggests for Boym that nostalgia can therefore be divided into restorative and reflective forms: the first is a desire to restore a lost home (and thus would underlie political manifestations such as 'taking back control' or 'making America great again'), whereas the second focuses on the longing for a past that can never be retrieved (which is more manifest in popular culture).

6. See Jameson, 'Postmodernism and the Consumer Society'.

7. Reynolds, *Retromania*, 56.

8. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 7, my emphasis. This point is important in the distinctive aspect of the digitized archival culture. For example, in his lecture 'Postmodernism and Consumer Culture', Fredric Jameson argues that a particular form of nostalgia characterizes cultural production, wherein films strive for a sense of realism but without direct reference to outside of the viewer's memory. The only 'realism' left, Jameson suggests, is that 'we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach' (10). But the widening of our archival capacity – not only in media sharing platforms such as YouTube or Spotify but also the introduction of specific exchange systems such as eBay which allow greater access to past artefacts – troubles Jameson's notion that the past is 'forever out of reach'. Fisher's point is thus all the more prescient: the problem is not that the past has passed; the problem is that it is still here *at the expense of* the present.

9. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 8.

10. Berardi, *Heroes*, 200.

11. See Morson, 'Narrativeness'. Matti Hyvärinen notes that this general 'cultural turn to narrative has many different aspects and facets', which means that 'it neither renders narrative inquiry as a continuation of media practices, nor as an unproblematic basis upon which to celebrate narrative studies and turns' ('Revisiting', 77). As such, I am not too interested in the question of narrative itself here; only the role of the cliché in supporting a form of contiguous sense-making.

12. Salmon, *Storytelling,* 10.

13. Salmon, *Storytelling,* 49, 94.

14. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 2.

15. Lavigne, *Remake Television*, 3.

16. On the use of reboot in management, see Pederson, 'Tune in, Break Down, and Reboot'.

17. See Proctor, 'Regeneration and Rebirth', 10; Hollands, 'Towards a New Category'.

18. Scahill, 'Motel Rebates.'

19. See, for example, Bauer: 'The data are read into the computer by means of a bootstrap technique from punched cards' ('An Integrated Computation System', 182); Buchholz: 'There is a load button and a selector switch on the machine, but they do just barely enough to get the process started. The rest is accomplished by a technique sometimes called the 'bootstrap technique'' ('The System Design', 1273).

20. See Friedenthal, 'Monitoring the Past', 5–6. Perhaps ironically, this arch-reboot has recently itself been re-imagined in television format, crossing over several episodes of different DC superhero shows. This also involved, true to the 'archival addiction' previously noted, appearances from several actors who had appeared as DC protagonists in other media formats, dating back to the 1960s.

21. For further exposition of this etymology, see Proctor, 'Reboots and Retroactive Continuity', 226–229.

22. Tryon, 'Reboot Cinema', 433.

23. Wasko, 'Financing and Production', 44.

24. Tryon, 'Reboot Cinema', 433.

25. The most notable example of this is the *Spiderman* film franchise, which has a long history of film studio contractual battles resulting in Sony being required to produce a new film every five years. Indeed, 2017's *Spiderman: Homecoming* (produced by Marvel Studios) was the third film to retell the exact same origin story within only a fifteen-year timespan. Chuck Tryon suggests *Spiderman* presents clear evidence of the 'accelerated process' of franchise rebooting. 'Reboot Cinema', 432.

26. Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 20. Deleuze's understanding of the effects of art as sensory-motor event rather than a rational deliberation provides an interesting affinity with McLuhan's 'cliché-probes' (see chapter 6), even if they are otherwise distinctly opposed. For a discussion of this affinity, and the intellectual genealogy it makes use of, see Crocker, *Bergson and the Metaphysics of Media*, 17–44.

27. Kramp, 'Unburdening Life', 9.

28. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 10–12. Thus, for Deleuze:

> The painter has many things in his head, or around him, or in his studio. Now everything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work. They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it. He does not paint in order to reproduce on the canvas an object functioning as a model; he paints on images that are already there, in order to produce a canvas whose functioning will reverse the relations between model and copy. *Francis Bacon*, 86.

29. See Day Lewis, 'Newsreel'.

30. Murray, 'The Consumer', 57–58.

31. See Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 171–176.

32. Proctor, 'Beginning Again'.

33. Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 21. Hence, 'even the reactions against clichés are creating clichés', because they remain enthralled in representational narratives (*Francis Bacon*, 89).

34. Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 22.

35. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 208.

36. For an interesting discussion of this gender shift, see Conly, 'Is Starbuck a Woman?'

37. See Maurice, 'She-Ra'.

38. Leitch, 'Twice-Told Tales', 47.

39. For a detailed history of these continual relaunches see Zone, *3-D Revolution*.

40. Ben Child referred to this as 'Hollywood hitting peak reboot', as the controversy provided a full itinerary of charges around originality, recycling, nostalgia and sexism. See Child, 'Ghostbusters'. For an interesting argument against the perceived misogyny of the criticisms of the film, see Proctor, 'Totemic Nostalgia'. Similar controversies emerged with Disney's series of live-action versions of older animated films (see, for example, Newby, '"Lion King", Originality, and the Backlash against Remakes'), although these were straightforward remakes, and lacked the rhetorical complexity of the reboot.

41. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 162. Adorno, writing in the 1950s, noted the prevalence of television rejecting the 'overt "naivete"' of past screen media, and the need for 'realistic' ('or posing as realistic') representations which kept culture 'up to date' (162). Much of what Adorno writes on the pretensions of realism is still relevant. However, as I have tried to suggest, the work of the reboot is complicated by the ambiguity of the present it is trying to be 'up-to-date' *with*; an ambiguity resolved only by drawing on the function of the cliché, which is an altogether more complex procedure than Adorno's critique of the mass audience.

42. Hollands, 'Toward a New Category', 10.

43. It was the co-writer of 2005's *Batman Begins*, David S. Goyer, who first suggested the film could be seen as 'the cinematic equivalent of a reboot', thus bringing the term from comics into cinematic media. Cited in Proctor, 'Beginning Again'.

44. Timm et al., *Batman: Series Writers' Bible*, 1, 10.

45. On this point, E. Paul Zehr argues: 'Only through his years of rigorous training has Batman pulled himself to near-superhuman status. This part of the Batman mythology is what makes him so attractive and accessible to so many – it seems well-grounded in the reality of hard work and achievement'. *Becoming Batman*, xv. More cynically, Robert Terrill comments on the Tim Burton *Batman* film that when the audience accepts a protagonist as 'terminally unbalanced, psychologically disintegrated individuals', it enables them to avoid the 'hard work that psychic maturity demands' ('Put on a Happy Face', 334).

46. Scahill, 'Motel Rebates'.

47. Leitch, 'Twice-Told Tales', 41.

48. Leitch, 'Twice-Told Tales', 38.

49. In this sense I disagree with William Proctor, whose work on the reboot is otherwise highly informative, that reboots aim to *remove the memory* of the original. Instead, I find that it is more the case that the reboot often actively brings attention to their removal of the memory of the original, thus using memory as an artefact, rather than a hidden or silent aspect.

50. Hollands, 'Towards a New Category', 9.

51. See chapter 5 of this book.

52. Sloterdijk, *Derrida, An Egyptian*, 67.

53. Writing more broadly of the costumes in *Westworld*, Alex Bevan suggests that 'quality nostalgic television situates props and costumes for audience engagement overall. […] [W]e are encouraged to engage the historical periods through them and through the characters' relationships to these pieces of material history' (*Aesthetics*,

159–160). *Westworld* highlights the curating of such pieces, emphasizing that it is not so much a historical period on film but a recollection of a particular set of Western tropes.

54. Hollands, 'Towards a New Category', 12.
55. Scahill, 'Motel Rebates'.
56. See chapter 5 of this book.
57. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 41.
58. Huyssen, 'Present Pasts', 37.

Chapter 9

Gatekeeping the 'Noise'

Expertise, Open-Mindedness and Public Debate

> The proliferation of information spells the drowning of meaningful experiences in a sea of random noise. In an informational culture the middle zone of meaning is increasingly difficult to construct and maintain, in as much as the noise always implicitly carried by information hedges in from all sides. In this sense, an informational culture marks the point where meaningful experiences are under siege, continuously undermined by a proliferation of signs that have no reference, only statistical patterns of frequency, redundancy and resonance.
>
> – Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture*.

I am always surprised when I hear people complaining that there is not enough critical thinking going on in the world today. Not completely surprised, of course: after all, the call for students, voters, audiences and populations in general to pay more attention, be less passive, inquire into more details and *dare to know* has long been a common refrain in Western modernity, if not before. But today, the complaint that critical thinking is in jeopardy is typically linked to the dominance of social media, and *this* is what is surprising: for, at the mundane level of the daily flow of posts, tweets and below-the-line comments there is a constant array of criticisms and arguments going on.[1] Within this mundane flow, rhetorical principles that were previously established on the basis of specific, identifiable audiences are now invoked in contexts where – due to the indeterminable reach of social media postings – the specificity of the audience can only be represented and/or stereotyped, but not secured. And, remarkably, rather than fall flat as generalizations or stereotypes, the very insecurity of these arguments tends to create new specificities, in order that critical activity can resume. This, in many ways, would be my definition of the current 'post-truth' epoch.

My purpose here is not to demonstrate, through clear analytic rigour, how these do bear all the hallmarks of 'proper' argument. When I suggest that this still constitutes a form of criticality, I am not propounding some naïve view that what we once called 'new' media is an idyllic open domain for free thought that will bring the pretensions of established academia crashing to the ground. I agree with Byung-Chul Han that, while we 'owe the cultural achievements of humanity – which include philosophy – to deep, contemplative attention', deep contemplation is being displaced not by a lack or negation of attention, but rather 'hyperattention' or 'a rash change of focus between different tasks, sources of information and processes'.[2] What I am interested in, though, is how the hypercritical everyday flow which evolves from such hyperattention is so often characterized within critical discourse as merely circulating clichés and obstructing genuine, *open* discussion; less hyper, and more *in*attentive. What interests me further is how the characterization of this flow as 'noise', as Tiziana Terranova puts it, comes to depend upon a curatorial figure, one which is invoked in order to legitimize online public debate and keep out the random fluctuations and interruptions to the clarity of a message. This is the 'gatekeeper', a figure who is not merely a defender of critical reasoning, but, as we shall see, is invoked to ensures public debate can *happen*, and can happen without being senseless 'patterns of frequency, redundancy and resonance' that Terranova describes.[3]

The suggestions I will only sketch out here are twofold. First, it is impossible to invoke the figure of the gatekeeper without two other motifs, which together form a kind of triptych structure for critically appraising the state of public debate, which I term *open-mindedness* and *bombardment*. These repeatedly occur and interweave across a whole range of critical approaches and political dispositions: open-mindedness is threatened by a bombardment of excessive amounts of uncontrollable content; bombardment is negotiated through the recovery of critically informed open-mindedness. As such, these two motifs frame the need for a gatekeeper to curate information appropriately: that truth is more accessible than lies and that experts are heard louder than amateurs, for example. Second, due to the purposeful ambiguity of these motifs, the gatekeeper figure is typically premised on an inherently unsustainable boundary between criticality and cliché. Nevertheless, the principle of gatekeeping is not obsolete; it merely needs to be re-thought from the figure of the redundant 'noise' it seeks to keep out.

In making these suggestions, I will not focus on one particular debate or one form of digital communication. Instead I want to willingly own my hyperattention, and pass through the centre of a number of discussions on the publicity of critical thought: given the amount of time and space invested in defending public debate from the threats of new media, it seems pertinent to offer a wholly superficial and schematic reading alongside these.

WE HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF HAVING ENOUGH OF EXPERTS

Let's begin with some examples of the triptych in action. Lev Manovich was warning some twenty years ago that digital media spelled the end of rhetoric in its traditional form by reducing persuasion to the single trope of metonymy. This is done, Manovich argues, through the procedural medium of the hyperlink, which 'has privileged the single figure of metonymy at the expense of all others. The hypertext of the World Wide Web leads the reader from one text to another, ad infinitum'. This then affects the ability to construct critical arguments: 'Rather than seducing the user through a careful arrangement of arguments and examples, points and counterpoints, changing rhythms of presentation', hypertext '*bombards* the user with data all at once'.[4] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi states that 'everywhere, attention is under siege' by 'uninterrupted noise'.[5] The sheer complexity of our socio-economic and communication networks in late capitalism thus produces 'positive feedback' in the social field: 'in conditions of info-acceleration and hypercomplexity, as the conscious and rational will becomes unable to check and to adjust trends, the trends themselves become self-reinforcing up to the point of final collapse'.[6] More information does not lead to a clearer picture of the world, but rather a panic to channel trends into deficient forms of sense-making; what Eli Pariser, working from an altogether different critical tradition, termed 'filter bubbles'. The combination of personalized algorithms presenting information to a media user they are likely to agree with, and the social-psychological principle of groupthink, produces a limited reality tailored to views and beliefs we are already comfortable with.[7] Thus, what is ostensibly 'noise' appears as pseudo-meaningful content, simply because it is familiar. And while channelling yet another philosophical approach, Susan Haack nevertheless agrees that the 'overwhelming flood of information' in the current media age not only makes discerning fact from fiction difficult, but it also leads people to '*give up trying* to distinguish useful material from dreck'.[8]

Dark times indeed. Politically, the crisis point in this widespread concern emerged in the midst of the campaigning around the 2016 UK referendum to leave the European Union, when then-Education Secretary Michael Gove declared that the British public had had enough of experts.[9] The academic community, somewhat expectedly, immediately rallied in defence of experts; and soon, as terms such as 'post-truth' and 'fake news' began their ascendency, Gove's declaration became a cipher for all that was uncomfortable for the defenders of public debate.[10] The statement captured a zeitgeist: it appeared as the ultimate anti-intellectual populist sentiment, the enemy that intellectualist nostalgia for an academic world which had long-declined had been looking for.

It is fair to say that more ink has been shed warning of the dangers of this zeitgeist than in favour of it. Two years before Gove's infamous interview, such nostalgia had been spelled in an article in *The Federalist* where Tom Nichols lamented: 'I fear we are witnessing the 'death of expertise': a Google-fuelled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laymen, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers – in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all.'[11] The motifs of bombardment and open-mindedness are at the fore of Nichols' critique, and work to weave together numerous familiar tropes. In both his article and the full-length book that followed, his response targets some well-worn surfaces: universities are catering for students rather than instructing them; Google makes information too readily accessible; and the proliferation of media formats encourages relativistic approaches to information. These targets reflect a key aspect of the *motif* of open-mindedness (as opposed to a technical category): as a repeated trope, it assumes a distinction between the open-ness of one's *mind*, and the openness of, say, better access to tutors in higher education, or more ways of expressing viewpoints through media that only twenty years ago would only be available to a handful of people. Hence, Nichols comments that if you 'tackle a complex policy issue with a layman today, […] you will get snippy and sophistic demands to show ever increasing amounts of "proof" or "evidence" for your case, even though the ordinary interlocutor in such debates isn't really equipped to decide what constitutes "evidence" or to know it when it's presented'.[12] By all means make public debate more accessible, he suggests, but remember the times in which the everyman's intervention in public debate has led to genuine change are all too rare. We need experts after all.

It is the deployment of both bombardment and open-mindedness as tropes that allows Nichols to ignore the supporting ground on which these surfaces rest: that is, the marketization policies which frame higher education students as consumers, the role of language as a core aspect of late capitalism,[13] or, indeed, the history of justified calls for 'the layman' to distrust expertise in the face of new or poorly understood events.[14] While he defends the value of intellectual capital to public debate and the importance of defending it from counterfeit or simulated intellect, he does not need to examine the *actual* value of it in terms of the wider cultural economy. Instead, the twin motifs lead to a familiar refrain over the noisiness of public debate, manifested as disruptive anti-intellectualism:

> There are no longer any gatekeepers: the journals and op-ed pages that were once strictly edited have been drowned under the weight of self-publishable blogs. There was once a time when participation in public debate, even in the

> pages of the local newspaper, required submission of a letter or an article, and that submission had to be written intelligently, pass editorial review, and stand with the author's name attached. […] Now, anyone can bum rush the comments section of any major publication.[15]

The point is not limited to polemical pieces such as Nichols'. Susan Haack's deeply considered account of the 'post-truth' era also repeats a common tagline, that 'in our "age of information", there is more communication, more information – and hence, more misinformation, and more avenues by which the *unscrupulous* and the careless may spread misinformation'.[16] Priscilla Meddaugh's detailed argument regarding the effects of the new media ecology on critical thought represents a broad approach to problematizing public debate in the current age:

> The media convergence of cyberspace – the blurring of distinct identity, ownership and authorship between print, radio, and television – presents new challenges in critical thinking for audiences […] Cyberspace citizens consume more information in less time, and with less attention. The democratic promise of the internet produces an 'orgy' of information, with no guideposts to establish legitimacy of such information.[17]

This lack of guideposts – as with Nichols, Meddaugh cites 'the gate-keeping role of the traditional press' as an example of this[18] – characterizes much of online debate as unfiltered knee-jerk reactions, or worse (in Meddaugh's work: holocaust denial).[19] While comments on social media may appear to be critical, the argument would go, they are not critically 'thinking'. In fact, they are base, appetite-led instincts: 'orgies', no less. Bombarded with repeated clichés, the expert is drowned out, and open-mindedness suffers. The lack and the answer is clear: a scrupulous gatekeeper.

CONFLICT AND RESONANCE

We want less orgies, I suppose. But things are not helped in this respect by the problem that drawing a boundary between what and what does not constitute critical thinking, attentiveness and depth, or which frequencies are 'noise' and which are the signal it disrupts, all seems to tempt us into a set of Manichean dualisms. These dualisms enforce even more familiarity: common belief versus intellectual expertise, *doxa* versus *episteme*, dogma versus open-mindedness.[20] But is gatekeeping simply the setting of a clear boundary between the rational and the non-sensical? Consider the title of a recent anthology: *Anti-Science and the Assault on Democracy: Defending*

Reason in a Free Society. Here, the editors link (via, ostensibly, commonplace syllogism) what they see as a pervading cynicism towards expertise with a denial of free thought and, as such, democratic politics. Why, though, is anti-science rebutted with a defence of *reason*, though (as opposed to, say, *science*)? In attempting to explain this in the first few pages of the book, the editors instead demonstrate that there is relatively clear reasoning at work in the notion of the 'anti-science attitude' they seek to criticize. They write, for example, that 'the anti-science attitude predisposes one to view science – as a mode of inquiry – as belonging solely to educated elites, who use it to 'disenchant' the world and to control those with differing worldviews'.[21] Even in this rather generic caricature, what is presented is still attributable to a form of *reasoning*; and the book has already made clear that its issue is not truth itself, but rational processes, not evidence but the processes for acquiring it.

Of course, the response from our examples so far suggests that such reasoning is only the ill-equipped simulacra of proper debate: 'the kinds of beliefs that many people have', rather than 'elaborate lines of reasoning, such as the kinds of reasoning we find in journalistic inquiry and criminal investigation'.[22] But if we are happy to call such an argument *sophistry* – whether accomplished sophistry or not – we must also acknowledge that the Sophists still provided arguments, embedded within the everyday than the high theory of dialectic. Indeed, it was the Sophists who made clear that attitude and atmosphere help shape rational inquiry and that the material economy framed how successful certain arguments were over others. If, as Susan Haack suggests, 'the Sophists of ancient Athens might be described as having been mired in 'post-truth' *avant la lettre*',[23] it would equally make sense for Sophistic techniques to be, at least potentially, well-suited to critically negotiating (rather than debunking) the current mediascape and its problematic noisiness. It could even be argued that it was the Sophists who created the logical structure of a core currency of online discussion, humour and critique, which is the meme (even if this is more commonly attributed to Richard Dawkins).[24]

As I have already made clear, I find little point in trying to mark out the sophistication of the anti-science attitude, whatever this may be or showing that both sides somehow end up in equivalence. Rather, my point is far more mundane: that the need for gatekeeping is framed by particular motifs which effectively mediate a clear and particular sense of proper public debate. But such motifs depend on decontextualizing repetitions – frequencies far wider than their original signal, in effect – which blur the distinction between the critical and the cliché. As such, they inevitably promise a clarity that they are unable to fulfil.

In the case of bombardment, clarity is achieved by the distinction between aimless noise and common chatter on the one hand, and the intellectual on

the other. But for the intellectual to be identified by their opposition and vulnerability to common sense,[25] bombardment suggests a far more consistent and unchanging barrage than reality bears out. While the amount of information circulating on the internet may suggest an oppressive bombardment, the flows of content around us are always subject to filters of some kind; be these algorithmic, corporate or user-generated. As a result, in the course of what he terms the 'mediatization of politics',[26] Nigel Thrift suggests that the interplay between screen and surface for communication forms a 'new structure of attention which is more and more likely to pay more than lip-service to those actions which go on in small spaces and times, actions which involve qualities like anticipation, improvisation and intuition'.[27] As Kerr, Kücklich and Brereton have suggested, users of new media experience different and unique combinations of both 'cultural' and 'sensual' pleasure, in more manifold and heterogeneous ways than uses of traditional media.[28] The motif of bombardment works well to pitch the intellectual against the masses, but only because it is too general, and too clichéd, to do justice to the micro-engagements which constitute new media.[29] Such engagements are, of course, open to manipulation and noise, but they also involve degrees of interpretation, judgement and critique not always accounted for by the overriding figure of overwhelming bombardment. Media bombardment turns out to be less consistent than its motif suggests; an inconsistency which would be more in keeping with the scientific use of 'noise'.

But this is key to the term being a repeated, ready-to-hand turn of phrase. Orin Hargraves notes that certain figures 'are subject to descent into clichédom when they are used in contexts that don't fully support the baggage that the expressions carry with them'.[30] Far from a 'descent', this is in fact a vital function of the cliché in public debate. It provides familiar timbre in order to bridge gaps left in the compressed formats of online argument. Consider one of the more prominent topics for online public debate from the last twenty years, which focused heavily on the importance of rational critique and open-mindedness: the New Atheist debate on religious belief.[31] The very identification of two 'sides' as a prerequisite for debate here lends itself to a series of generalized types: 'New Atheists', fundamentalists, creationists, soul-less rationalists and so on. The clichés emerge here in the accompanying figures and images which substantiate them: the Islamic terrorist, the bird-flu creating scientist, Creationist theme parks, paedophile priests and so on. Such images do not necessarily *just* signify lazy generalizations but, by virtue of what meanings they absorb and how they travel through different discursive contexts – in other words, by virtue of being clichés – they also signify a series of complex concerns at stake in the debate itself: violence, sexuality, power and so on.

Precisely because the figure of open-mindedness essentially presents a promise to an unknown future – I will listen to what I may not have heard

before – it lends itself to this travelling signification. Take, for example, Martin Amis' claim that cliché-mongering is a deliberate obstacle to sensible debate on religion. He thus denounces followers of radical Islam not simply as women-haters and misolygist, but – far worse – as thinking and speaking only through clichés. Religion's offence to contemporary debate is that it does not invent or innovate; 'it is a massive agglutination of stock responses, of clichés, of inherited and unexamined formulations'.[32] Positioned against this clamour of inherited responses is not atheism or secularism, but 'independence of mind – *that's all'*.[33] The simplicity with which Amis distinguishes it from religious zealotry is, of course, only persuasive because of the familiar commonplace motif which stretches back to Enlightenment thought, a motif recalled with particular intensity in the philosopher William Hare's work on articulating the nature of open-mindedness. First, Hare reminds us, it is *difficult*. It is 'all too easy to fall short of the norms embedded in the moral and intellectual virtues'.[34] This difficulty is framed in terms of violent confrontation: 'fears, temptations and pressures *weaken* our resolve',[35] and as educators we '*resist* alternative formulations', or '*refuse* to admit […] mistakes'. When teaching controversial issues, schools 'fail to challenge the relativistic ethos' that holds back student appreciation of other viewpoints.[36] Preluding open-mindedness as 'difficult' creates a sense of not only challenge but also antagonism towards an 'enemy' of some kind, even before a single thought has come to mind. It is something to be defended, something under threat – either from others or from our own weaknesses.

In short, the idea of open-mindedness defending itself against bombardment is not achieved without a metonymic substitution. To revisit Terranova's term: these clichés *resonate*. Thus, even the most concise accounts of open-mindedness release a salvo of implicit and explicit references to traditions of thought which justify why open-mindedness is worth defending from the bombardment of Terranova's 'proliferation of signs with no reference'. This resonance may blur the frequencies of a signal, but at the same time it is vitally important for conveying meaning when brevity is of the essence (for the sake of the text characters available on a media platform, for the sake of a reductive clarity, or for the sake of an archiving process where we assign speech to 'sides' or 'traditions'). Both 'sides' of any impromptu debate will support their public arguments via pre-established commonplaces, all the more accentuated because of the extent to which such debates are essentially repetitions of those from the eighteenth and nineteenth century.[37] But whereas these affective notions of debate fuel further clichés – in particular, the figure of the valiant and necessarily lone individual practising what Dawkins described as the 'unsung virtue of intellectual courage'[38] – they also suggest a further question. That is, given how much the figures of both bombardment and open-mindedness depend upon commonplace enemies and well-worn

heroes, how is it decided what is already known and what needs to be said again?

KANT'S ARCHAIC IDYLL

In the industry of arguments it has since provoked, it is often missed that Gove comment declared war on *experts*, but not necessarily *expertise*. He later clarified that his target was 'experts from organizations with acronyms that have got things so wrong in the past';[39] implying that the time and space taken up by experts was no longer tolerable, given that when it came to certain facets of politics it was wrong to suggest voters had no expertise of their own. This is not to justify or defend Gove's intervention, nor is it to legitimize every voice claiming knowledge on something. Rather, it is to point out that, alongside the overabundance of condemnatory responses in which the phrase has become an anti-slogan by those seeking to defend expertise, there is a case for a more nuanced examination; one which does not involve repeating the same old intellectualist mantras which seem so repetitive and ineffective.

What would the difference be between the figure of the expert as a gatekeeper of public debate and expertise? Given both Hare's and Amis' indebtedness to it, perhaps we can explore this all the way back to the emergence of the sphere of public debate in Kant's 1784 essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' This work provides a seminal moment for the modern coordinates of gatekeeping public discourse. For Kant, the contemporary age is characterized as a time not to celebrate but to actively escape from, to grow out of, to self-reflect *beyond*. Enlightenment is thus premised on a distinct image of rational and free dialogue where new, plausible reasons force us to give up old, untenable opinions: in Sloterdijk's words, a future 'utopian archaic scene – an epistemological idyll of peace, a beautiful and academic vision: that of free dialogue of those who, under no external compulsion, are interested in knowledge'.[40]

This promise is reliant upon the distinction between private and public exercises of reason, a now-familiar division between the mechanical reproduction of thought and humanist authenticity. For the private uses of reason, Kant explains that a 'certain mechanism' is required whereby 'some members of the commonwealth must conduct themselves passively'.[41] The army officer cannot question orders, the citizen cannot refuse to pay taxes, and the clergyman cannot instruct his congregation outside of his church's doctrines. They are, in effect, by virtue of their lack of creativity, merely mechanical instruments. However, 'as a scholar, who through his writings speaks to his own public, namely the world, the clergyman enjoys, in the *public* use of his

reason, an unrestricted freedom […] to speak in his own person'.[42] The transparency of public debate reproduced through pamphlets and books creates a congregation of equals, regardless of their actual social or geographical position. For Kant, then, the noise of everyday life is filtered through a distinction between the 'real public' as an abstract universal audience and our day-to-day instrumental interactions (with what we would otherwise think of as 'real' people). Public discourse becomes meaningful when it breaks out from our accepted views, which requires an audible clarity to address an audience we will not physically meet. This requirement is inherently linked to speaking as one's 'own person' in opposition to the mechanical structures that support the everyday running of the commonwealth (a move echoed in Amis' claim, some 200 years later, that 'all writing is a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart'[43]).

The success of public reason's challenge to tradition is based on a reconciliatory promise that such a dialogue *can* take place, given its requirements for otherwise unknown and unseen interlocutors. In this way, Berardi argues that 'the modern figure of the intellectual finds philosophical justification in Kant's thought'.[44] This intellectual provides the template for the expert gatekeeper: a figural schema for humanist arbitration between the flow of everyday mechanical noise and meaningful, independent discourse. Within it, we can easily recognize the groundwork for the model that was heralded in the early days of the World Wide Web as the model for a new form of open-access participatory democracy, the Habermassian public sphere.[45] In Berardi's words:

> The intellectual emerges as a figure independent from social experience, or at least not as socially influenced in the ethical and cognitive choices s/he makes. As the bearer of a universal human rationality, the enlightened intellectual can be considered as the social determination of Kant's 'I think'. The intellectual is the guarantor of a thought freed from any boundaries, the expression of a universally human rationality. In this sense he is the guarantor of democracy.[46]

THE PROCEDURES OF EXPERTISE

The problem for such a guarantor is that Kant's promised idyllic scene never actually exists as a concrete place. The ease with which certain rationalities can be dismissed from public debate as insufficient to their task means that, in the place of the promised cosmopolitanism, we are left instead with a process of banishment and annihilation: a war on prejudice, tradition and (consequently) the war on cliché that the likes of Amis propound. Consequently, as Sloterdijk notes, 'in the confrontations of enlightenment with preceding

stances of consciousness, everything *but* truth is at stake: hegemonic positions, class interests, established doctrines, desires, passions, and the defence of "identities"'[47] The reconciliation necessary for the utopian scene of free discussion is prevented by the perpetual contest for *who* the expert figure is.[48] No surprise, then, that Hare begins his defence of open-mindedness from the middle of a battleground; or that the figure of the gatekeeper is frequently invoked less as a helpful access assistant and more as a menacing bouncer.

Kant's model proposes a clear filter between the pitch and tone of an order to be followed and that of a critical response, predicated on the capacity for the latter to sustain its frequency beyond the immediate context of working life. In this way, however, there *is* a sense in which Kant's idyll 'exists' in more material terms: that is, as a distinctive form of archival threshold. This is not created from speaking freely and publicly – that is, guaranteed by the 'expert' – but instead through a particular territorializing of knowledge, that is, the conditions of 'expertise' which, as Michel de Certeau shows, takes place within the history of the European archive. From the seventeenth century onwards, Certeau argues that knowledge became *interesting*. Against the backdrop of the counter-reformation and the early modern natural philosophy, knowledge gains a new role not just as liberator but also as organizer, distributor and archivist: a means of classifying a fragmented society. Ecclesiastical and political authorities organized knowledge around specific and 'archaeological' conceptions of what constitutes knowledge and what constitutes ignorance.[49] Thus, the rule of Fredrick the Great that Kant's essay pays homage was marked by a new freedom to publish, a lack of censorship supported by the increased autonomy and assets for the Royal Library.[50] Consequently, Berardi's 'guarantor of democracy' figure finds itself dependent upon specific acts of both writing and storage, a point emphasized in Kant's insistence that to communicate with the world at large, one cannot simply speak, but must *write*. Hence, he declares specifically that the 'oath' of the ecclesial synod is superseded by the written contract or treaty, and the officer and the cleric's writing must be reproduced in order that the universal audience can be reached.[51] The dictum of Kant's essay – '*argue, as much as you want and about whatever you want, but obey!*'[52] – is not only a call for balance between private reason and enlightening public debate but also a procedural mechanism underwriting reason itself.

We've come a long way since Kant, of course. But his essay illustrates an original tension which later translates into the clichés of public debate: persuasive as the figure of the expert intellectual is, it emerges from oft-hidden sub-medial conditions. As Berardi's work shows, this tension is heightened when the traditional 'mechanisms' of private reason – the physical apparatus of the assembly line, for example, are now 'replaced by the digital telecommunications network' where 'productive life is overloaded with symbols that

not only have an operational value, but also an affective, emotional, imperative or dissuasive one'.[53] The issue is no longer alienation from communication – as it was with Kant, in the form of tradition suppressing enlightenment, or in Marx, where the individual is alienated from the very work they produce – but an oversaturation of semiotic flows. Communicating with those we will not meet is part of private *and* public reason; it is a fundamental part of both industry and culture.

In such a context, it is easy for the figures of bombardment and open-mindedness to appear: to argue that there is no way of distinguishing meaningful debate from noise, or conversely that the exclusivity of the archives is now blown open by the potentially infinite circulation of digital media. Both lead us back to the Kantian intellectual expert; in the first argument the figure is defeated, and in the second democratized. As such, the triptych structure for appraising public debate remains focused on this reconciliatory figures struggling to guarantee a site of intellectual discourse. But in doing so, it fails to address the core repetition and unoriginality which powers these motifs.

NOISY CLICHÉS

What, then, of the gatekeeper? To recap: we began with Terranova's concern about the effect of informational culture on 'meaningful experience'. This presents public debate with the problem 'of clearing out a channel through a noisy mediascape, of establishing a contact with the audience out there'. When noise is the enemy, Terranova continues, the audience become 'not a rational ensemble of free thinking individuals, endowed with reason, who must be persuaded, but a collective receiver to which a message can be sent only on condition that the channel is kept free of noise'.[54] But just as the gatekeeper begins to appear here less as an intellectual expert and more of a sound engineer, the problem of noise itself is supplemented with (highly persuasive, thus oft-repeated) motifs concerning the prospective intellectual. Hence, gatekeeping is immersed in the figures of humanist endeavour and defence of the virtues of public reason. Are we not missing another way of thinking through gatekeeping and figuring the threshold of public debate?

In a world of digital recall, a constitutive part of Han's hyperattention, there seems something ill-fitting about defending against hyperattention and criticizing the everyday critical flow of the internet through a figure of quasi-enlightenment humanism. In much the same way that clichés prompt eager divisions between the thinker and the mere machine, the arbiter of what can and cannot be repeated focuses on the individual, the intellectual, or the 'keeper' of the gate, rather than the mechanics of *the gate* itself. I have suggested that the triptych of motifs underlying the discourse of gatekeeping

cannot enforce a rigid boundary or dichotomy, because they themselves depend upon facets of cliché to maintain their persuasiveness. Instead, we require a different figure – no less of a trope than what we have discussed, but one more procedurally relevant. Just as Kant's idyll was realized in the form of a threshold, the same notion can be applied to the 'noise' of debate: that is as a noise gate; a filter allowing certain frequencies to become audible and not others for a particular channel, at a particular time, within the limits of the filter's effect. In short: we need less emphasis on a 'keeper', and more of a nuanced sense of the 'gate'. If we are intent on understanding the realm of public debate in terms of its operational values and the mobilization of attention, then we should also understand the work of gating in those same terms.

Where does this leave the expertise, though? In a 1936 essay, Jean Paulhan questions the 'prince of intellect' as the leading figure of public reasoning. Resonating with Michael Gove's distrust of the experts, but with more clarity in his playful yet applied argument, he concludes:

> God forbid I speak ill of intelligence. We need it. We need scholars and technicians. It's just that I think – at least, if and insofar as I am a democrat – that in those situations where the technicians and scholars disagree (as they are in the habit of doing) the last word should go – rather than to a mongrelized agreement among specialists that apparently makes everyone happy and does no one any good – to the Arbitration, to the Arbitrariness of someone who is neither learned, nor artful, not the champion of any sport. Of someone who doesn't owe his station to his brilliant merits, or to his charm, or to a plebiscite. Or, I'll say it again, the first comer.[55]

Paulhan reverses the common celebration of a 'first comer' as a radical vanguard, to one who is first by the pure accident of being asked to make an arbitration before anybody else, and as such remains embedded within the flows of everyday life: the very mechanisms Kant sees only useful for obedience. Paulhan's first comer thus preludes de Certeau's account of the 'anyone' that is essential for the fluid running of any public space. The 'anyone' is 'a common place, a philosophical *topos*. […] Rather than being merely represented in it, the ordinary man acts out the text itself, in and by the text, and in addition he makes plausible the universal character of the particular place in which the mad discourse of a knowing wisdom is pronounced'.[56] The purpose of 'the Arbitration' is to repeat, beyond the obligations of intellectual property. Thus, I interpret Paulhan's figure less as a triumph for the 'man on the street' who has had enough of experts – a qualification which is increasingly hard to attain, in the current climate – but instead a procedural figure, placed within the flow of expert and non-expert voices, who essentially performs an act of 'gating' that filters or compresses rather than judges and excludes.

It is the case that sound engineers often find that the harsher the gate's threshold is, and the more noise is excluded, the thinner and quieter the overall signal becomes. It seems likely that the same will happen to public debate should gating be enforced too enthusiastically. At that point, it will not be the case that public debate is limited to only a chosen, small audience; the technologies of digital communication are well beyond that point. Instead, I suspect it may well be realized just how indebted to the noise of clichés our notions of criticality are. And there is no better illustration of this than finding that when we invest in the expert as somehow above the noise of the mechanisms of everyday dialogue, the figures we use to represent this case end up as clichés. They are effective clichés, as can be seen by their sheer abundance, but, to the extent that they depend as much on their content as their brute repetition, de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing within the same flows of everyday practice that they seek to escape, clichés nonetheless.

NOTES

1. I am not thinking here so much of the extreme ends of the logic revival on the Internet: on the one hand, the alt-right triumphalism of so-called 'logicbros' for whom, according to Ben Burgis, 'the words "logic" and "argument" are wielded almost like magical talismans with mysterious powers to reduce opponents to quivering piles of urine and soiled garments, the parochial conspiracy theorist' (*Give Them an Argument*, 5); on the other hand, the parochial conspiracy theorists, on who Latour muses:

> 'What has become of critique when my neighbor in the little Bourbonnais village where I live looks down on me as someone hopelessly naïve because I believe that the United States had been attacked by terrorists? Remember the good old days when university professors could look down on unsophisticated folks because those hillbillies naively believed in church, motherhood, and apple pie? Things have changed a lot, at least in my village. I am now the one who naively believes in some facts because I am educated, while the other guys are too unsophisticated to be gullible' ('Matters of Fact', 228). I believe there are aspects of both these cultural 'turns' in the general circulation of criticality in public debate, but I am – as might be predictable by now – interested in the more mundane regurgitation of critical thought, which may well cross through or utilize the discourses above, but does not explicitly seek to weaponize logic.

2. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 13.
3. Terranova, *Network Culture*, 14.
4. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 77–78, my emphasis.
5. Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 108.
6. Berardi, *The Uprising*, 12.
7. Pariser, *Filter Bubbles*.

8. Haack, 'Post "Post-Truth"', 265, emphasis original.
9. See Farrar, 'Michael Gove on the Trouble with Experts'.
10. A representative example of this reaction is Sharon Coen's 'Sorry Michael Gove'. Coen again invokes the two motifs: first, 'we are bombarded by contrasting "expert" opinions all the time, and we don't always have the tools to evaluate such evidence. The internet provides us with an arsenal of "studies" we can use to confirm our preexisting attitudes and beliefs'. However! 'This is not to say that scientific knowledge represents the "truth", but […] [w]e start from the assumption that we are wrong. We try to debunk our own theories and positions, and we embrace criticism.'
11. Nichols, 'The Death of Expertise'.
12. Nichols, 'The Death of Expertise'.
13. See Marazzi, *Capital and Affects*, particularly 86–102.
14. I think here, for example, of artist and curator Douglas Crimp's work on AIDS activism, which challenged the notion that accepted scientific evidence could be entirely uncontaminated by politics: 'We cannot afford to leave everything up to the "experts". We must become our own experts.' *AIDS*, 6.
15. https://thefederalist.com/2014/01/17/the-death-of-expertise/.
16. Haack, 'Post "Post-Truth"', my emphasis, 265.
17. Meddaugh, 'Holocaust Denial', 138.
18. Meddaugh, 'Holocaust Denial', 138.
19. I want to put to one side the way that such interventions often conglomerate a number of media platforms into a single entity – whether 'social media' or 'the internet' – even though these platforms have, and continue to, approach gatekeeping in a range of different ways. Following the intense use of social media for political campaigns from at least 2016 onwards, involving the use of personal data to inform targeted advertising, and the furore which followed the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Google, Facebook and Twitter have markedly different policies on how online debate and political intervention is regulated. It is likely, in fact, that even in the time this sentence was typed, that one or more of these will have changed. For a summary of the scandal, see Common, 'Facebook and Cambridge Analytica'.
20. I am tempted to suggest that the reliance on such dualisms marks out a progressive line from the online presence of New Atheist arguments, through the Brexit debate in the UK, the rise of the alt-right in US politics, to the discussions of Covid-19 on social media platforms, not to mention the smaller public debates on, for example, the benefits of veganism or the appropriateness of breastfeeding. All of these are rooted in the confrontation of 'reason' (fact, evidence and knowledge known to a few) and 'reality' (the ignorance of the masses). But this suggestion would require a far larger work than the space available here.
21. Thompson and Smulewicz-Zucker, 'Introduction', 7.
22. These are two of Peels' conditions for something constituting a 'common sense doxastic sources', which need to be challenged by philosophical inquiry. Peels, 'Ten Reasons', 13.
23. Haack, 'Post "Post-Truth"', 262.

24. Dawkins discusses how he was trying to describe a natural mutation whereby cultural ideas spread along the same principles as natural selection, as opposed to ideas deliberately created to be shared (such as the internet meme, which Dawkins initially distanced his idea from). Dawkins writes:

> We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'. (*The Selfish Gene*, 192)

This 'new' name seems uncannily similar to Aristotle's enthymeme, which is not only a unit of cultural transmission but one embedded within social memory and an audience's ability to see similarities across situations. While Dawkins gives a nod to classicists, he shows little interest in rhetoric – which is perhaps too old fashioned, too familial, too close to a *mémé*, an unwanted grandmother. This is not to deny that the term took off directly from Dawkins' coinage (although the neologism only gained wider cultural traction in the mid-1990s). The allure of this neologism was undoubtedly its root in not only science, but genetics, the ultimate science of hidden truths uncovered only by experts. In this way, the tension of scientism is borne out by the meme itself: on the one hand, rejecting both the classical tradition and everyday profane practice in the name of original genius; on the other hand, expressing this fascination with genius through ready-mades and appropriated ideas that the avant-garde had long tired of.

25. A point made voraciously in Menand, 'Dangers Within and Without', 16.

26. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, 183.

27. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, 186.

28. Kerr et al., 'New Media – New Pleasures?'.

29. And before, of course – think of Heidegger's argument in *Being and Time* that 'what we "first" hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking waggon, the motor-cycle […]. It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to "hear" a "pure noise"' (207). Heidegger's target here is the division between subject and object; it could well be argued that new media necessarily collapses this division, but retains (as I will argue below) the figural language of the early modern intellectual.

30. Hargraves, *It's Been Said Before*, 20–21.

31. While the industry of publications on religion and atheism has subsided since its heyday of 2004–2011, it remains a benchmark for the utilization of commonplace to justify the rationality of public discussion – as can be seen by the gradual morphing of New Atheist *topos* – the dangers of Islam to society, the threat of irrationality to politics and the heavy sense of conspiratorial ressentiment – into those of the aforementioned 'logicbros' of the alt-right.

32. Amis *The Second Plane,* 19.

33. Amis, *The Second Plane*, 78 (my emphasis). We will overlook the most obvious comebacks to this point regarding Amis' questionable grasp of Islamic fundamentalism; or the host of cultural phenomena that directly appeals to a form of collectivism at the heart of atheism (ranging from online social networking, to the

rather more old-fashioned 'irreligious summer camps' that parody – but serve much the same purpose – as Christian camps); or, indeed, the more basic fact that no writer, and certainly not Amis, is ever free from stock phrases (as Bradley and Tate wryly demonstrate; *The New Atheist Novel*, 42).

34. Hare, 'Helping Open-mindedness Flourish', 9.
35. Hare, 'Helping Open-mindedness Flourish', 9, my emphasis,
36. Hare, 'Helping Open-mindedness Flourish', 10, my emphasis.
37. As Bradley and Tate note, 'The New Atheists do not make any particular claim for their own novelty. […] [T]heir thought is almost cryogenically suspended in the early nineteenth century as if philosophy came to an end somewhere after Hume.' *The New Atheist Novel*, 112 n.4. On the reliance on nineteenth-century worldviews to frame the New Atheist debate, see also Painter, 'New Atheism's Old – and Flawed – History'.
38. Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*. There is a clear irony in Dawkins' claim that such a virtue is 'unsung', given how much visibility the New Atheists had in the years following the 9/11 attacks; although a more charitable reading would link the notion of the 'unsung' to the anti-institutional principles of contemporary public debate; a reading which links the heroism of Dawkins' public intellectual to Gove's attack on the intellectual experts.
39. Farrar, 'Michael Gove'. Gove claimed that he had been misquoted due to the interviewer interrupting him before he could complete his sentence.
40. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 13.
41. Kant, 'An Answer to the Question', 60.
42. Kant, 'An Answer to the Question', 61, emphasis original.
43. Amis, *The War Against Cliché*, xv.
44. Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 30.
45. On the enthusiasm for the Habermassian model of public debate, see Hague and Loader, *Digital Democracy*.
46. Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 30.
47. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 13, my emphasis.
48. On criticisms of the 'open-ness' of the public sphere, and its tendency to privilege certain voices over others, see for example McKee, *The Public Sphere*; Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*.
49. This practice, de Certeau argues, continues to govern modern interpretations of deviance. What is placed under the 'rubric of ignorance' arises from the fact that 'all these groups attest together to the social *a priori* [...] which makes participation in knowledge (as defined by the elite) the prerequisite for belonging to a society, and makes this very knowledge the means by which a society hierarchizes its members or eliminates the "deviants" who do not conform to common reason' (*The Writing of History*, 136).
50. See Aarsleff, 'The Berlin Academy'.
51. Kant, 'An Answer to the Question', 61.
52. Kant, 'An Answer to the Question', 63, emphasis original.
53. Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 107.
54. Terranova, *Network Culture*, 16–17.
55. Jean Paulhan, 'Democracy Calls on the First Comer', 213–214.
56. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 2.

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