

THE MEANING OF CLICHÉS

TOM GRIMWOOD

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.¹

The question of what clichés mean is almost inevitably asked from a particular, ready-to-hand disposition. When Jacques Rancière provides a pithy articulation 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 in 2017, when emerging media appear to actively shape political and public debate, and the sound bite, cultural cipher, and social media meme actively influence electoral decisions.³ 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, post-modern, 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 '70s, Guy Debord in the '60s, Theodore Adorno in the '50s, and George Orwell in the '40s.⁴ 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 labeled 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.”⁵

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 artifact. 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. 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."⁶ 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."⁷ 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.⁸ 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 artifact 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ For Zijderveld, this provides an “elective affinity” between “the decline of aura” and the rise of clichés.¹¹

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 cataloged 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 fortified 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."¹²

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"¹³); archival ("The page must be filled. . . . All things are equal: good and evil, beautiful and ugly, insignificant and characteristic"¹⁴); or demographic ("the Duchampian readymade strategy seems to undermine the rights of intellectual private property,"¹⁵ 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 “the supersedure of meaning by function in modernity.”¹⁶ 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,”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ Containers of “stale wisdom of past generations,” clichés are primarily, but not exclusively, linguistic.¹⁹ 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”²⁰ 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,” fueled by what Zijderveld refers to as “cliché power”:²¹ 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.”²² Zijderfeld’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”²³) 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, Zijderfeld’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.”²⁴

The Anti-Philosophy of the Cliché

Zijderfeld’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 Zijderfeld’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;²⁶ 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 centers on three points.

1. Zijderfeld’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."²⁷ 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);²⁸ 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,"²⁹ there is

no such redemptive silver lining for Zijderveld. Modern society cannot escape this clichégenic epoch, nor its “form of brainwashing.”³⁰ But—and here is where Redfern, amongst 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;³¹ the kind of specialism that, it might be argued, Duchamp’s readymades 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 reflects 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 centers 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 Zijderfeld’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 readymade 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 readymade 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 readymades. 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."³² 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."³³ The result is not to leave all sense of meaning, significance, and truth to one side, which would simply affirm Zijderfeld'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."³⁴

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 Zijderfeld'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 Zijderfeld'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.”³⁵

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.”³⁶ 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 reemerging 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, catalogs) 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.”³⁷ 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 artifact 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.³⁸ 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.”³⁹ 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—i.e., 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.⁴⁰ 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.”⁴² 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.⁴³

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”;⁴⁴ the former discerns the “real and the apparent means of persuasion,” whereas the latter does much the same with deduction.⁴⁵ It is not the ability to persuade that makes a man a Sophist, Aristotle argues, but rather the choice to use this ability indiscriminately.⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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 catalog of the workings of public life. To this end, the *Rhetoric* provides endless lists for such catalogs: “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.”⁵⁰

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”;⁵¹ it is in this sense that common topics were “accordingly defined as storehouses for arguments.”⁵² 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.⁵³ 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).⁵⁴ 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."⁵⁵

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”⁵⁶—that leaves the philosopher to only “coordinate” rather than “subordinate” concepts.⁵⁷ 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.”⁵⁸

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.”⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

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.”⁶¹ 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 Zijderfeld, 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 replacing 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.⁶²

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 cataloged; 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.⁶³

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”⁶⁴), 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.”⁶⁵ 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 reintroduces 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,⁶⁶ 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 Zijderfeld’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 Zijderfeld’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 Zijderfeld’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.”⁶⁷ This is precisely what Zijderfeld sees as the affinity between the decline of aura and the rise of cliché: the superseding 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.⁶⁸ 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”;⁶⁹ 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.”⁷⁰ 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 lighthearted 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.⁷¹ 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 encyclopedic pursuit (found in, for example, Nigel Rees, John Rentoul, and Walter Redfern⁷²), 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-first⁷³), 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 which 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. Firstly, 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.

Secondly, 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.”⁷⁴ 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;⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

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.

¹ Rancière, "Art of the Possible," 266.

³ Ricks, "Clichés," 54.

⁴ Rentoul, *The Banned List*; Wheen, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World*; Enzenberger, *The Consciousness Industry*; Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in particular 131–136; Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."

⁵ Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 7–8.

⁶ Struever, *The History of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of History*, 80.

⁷ Derrida, "An Idea of Flaubert: 'Plato's Letter,'" 301.

⁸ Groys, *Art Power*, 24.

⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 254.

¹⁰ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 26.

¹¹ Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 36.

¹² Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*, 149.

¹³ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 254.

¹⁴ Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, 281.

¹⁵ Groys, *Going Public*, 124.

¹⁶ The complete title of Zijderfeld's book is *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity*.

¹⁷ Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ Ibid., 58.

²¹ Ibid., 97.

²² Ibid., 104.

²³ Derrida, “White Mythology,” 225.

²⁴ Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 5.

²⁶ See Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*, 19; and Ricks, “Clichés,” 58.

²⁷ Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 100.

²⁸ 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, etc.—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.

²⁹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” 252.

³⁰ Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 15.

³¹ McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype*, 44.

³² Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xi.

³³ Ibid., xi–xii.

³⁴ Ibid., xi.

³⁵ Susan Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists*, 33.

³⁶ Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 170; my emphasis.

³⁷ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 5.

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 71.

⁴⁰ See Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*, 162–67 for a brief review of how the philosophical ideas of the early modern period effected a rejection of rhetoric.

⁴² Plato, *Protagoras* 313d; my emphasis.

⁴³ Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, xvi.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1354a1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1355b15–17.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1355b18–22.

⁴⁸ Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 5.11.41.

⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1358a21.

⁵¹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 85.

⁵² Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 83.

⁵³ 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).

⁵⁴ See Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*. Paulhan distinguishes between the forces of “Terror” and “Rhetoric” as two fronts in the war against cliché. The former accuse the latter of creating clichés by insisting on archaic rules as they catalog elements of language; the latter accuse the former of emptying words of meaning through misuse and malapropism. Both, Paulhan suggests, in fact depend on clichés for their own operations.

⁵⁵ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 30–31; my emphasis.

⁵⁶ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:74.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:439–40.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 83.

⁵⁹ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 84.

⁶³ Brooks and Warren, *Modern Rhetoric*, 420.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 421.

⁶⁵ Gibbs, *Backward Ran Sentences*, 649.

⁶⁶ 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 humor), 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" ("An Idea of Flaubert," 304–5).

⁶⁷ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 253, 254.

⁶⁸ Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 24.

⁶⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 265.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 269.

⁷¹ Examples of these dictionaries focused on explaining the origins of clichés include Rees, *Cassell Dictionary of Clichés*; Kirkpatrick, *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Clichés*; Rogers, *The Dictionary of Clichés*.

⁷² Rees, *The Joy of Clichés* and; Rentoul, *The Banned List*; Redfern, *Clichés and Coinages*.

⁷³ , 21-24. Gourmont describes clichés as words that bypass a person's conscience (*Le Problème 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).

⁷⁴ Groys, *Going Public*, 65.

⁷⁵ Groys, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, 102.

⁷⁶ Groys, *Under Suspicion*, 139.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, 2:2152–269.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version.”

Translated by Edmund Jephcott. In *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, edited by Howard Eiland and

Michael W. Jennings, 251–83. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Brooks, Cleanth, and Robert Penn Warren. *Modern Rhetoric*. London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970.

Conley, Thomas M. *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Translated by Willard R. Trask.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Derrida, Jacques. “White Mythology.” In *The Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, 207–72.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

- . “An Idea of Flaubert: ‘Plato’s Letter.’” Translated by Peter Starr. In *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, 299–317. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- Enzenberger, Hans Magnus. *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1974.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Translated by Mark Polizzotti. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Gibbs, Wolcott. *Backward Ran Sentences*. Edited by Thomas Vinciguerra. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011.
- Goldberg, Jonah. *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas*. New York: Sentinel, 2011.
- De Gourmont, Rémy. *Le Problème du Style: Questions d’Art, de Littérature et de Grammaire*. Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1902.
- Groys, Boris. *Art Power*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.
- . *Going Public*. New York: Sternberg Press, 2010.
- . *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*. Translated by David Fernbach. London: Verso, 2012.
- . *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media*. Translated by Carsten Strathausen. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodore. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Jarratt, Susan. *Rereading the Sophists*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.

- Kennedy, George A. *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.
- Kirkpatrick, Betty. *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Clichés*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996.
- Lanham, Richard. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- McLuhan, Marshall, with Watson, Wilfred. *From Cliché to Archetype*. 1970. Edited by W. Terrence Gordon. Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2011.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." In *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazendale, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, 57–124. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Methuen, 1982.
- Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language." In *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 4, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 127–40. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1968.
- Paulhan, Jean. *The Flowers of Tarbes; or, Terror in Literature*. 1941. Translated by Michael Syrotinski. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- Perelman, Chaïm, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969.
- Plato. *Protagoras*. In *The Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, 308–52. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Quandahl, Ellen. "Aristotle's Rhetoric: Reinterpreting Invention." *Rhetoric Review* 4, no. 2 (1986): 128–37.

- Quintilian. *Institutes of Oratory; or, Education of an Orator*. Translated by John Selby Watson. London: George Bell and Sons, 1856.
- Rancière, Jacques. “Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière.” *Artforum* 45, no. 7 (2007): 256–69.
- Redfern, Walter. *Clichés and Coinages*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1989.
- Rees, Nigel. *The Joy of Clichés: A Complete User’s Guide*. London: Futura Publications, 1985.
- . *Cassell Dictionary of Clichés*. London: Cassell, 1996.
- Rentoul, John. *The Banned List: A Manifesto against Jargon and Cliché*. London: Elliot and Thompson, 2011.
- Ricks, Christopher. “Clichés.” In *The State of the Language*, edited by Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks, 54–63. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Rogers, James. *The Dictionary of Clichés*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1985.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. 2. Translated by E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications, 1958.
- Spieker, Sven. *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.
- Struever, Nancy S. *The History of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of History*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009.
- Welch, Kathleen. *The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric: Appropriations of Ancient Discourse*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Wheen, Francis. *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions*. London: Harper Perennial, 2004.
- Zijderveld, Anton C. *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity*. London: Routledge, 1979.