# Cliché

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**Summary**

A term deriving from the sound of the mechanical printing process able to provide cheap and fast reproductions of literary works, the cliché is at once both a foundation of modern culture, and its constant adversary. Denoting a lack of originality, thought or effort, clichés appear to be the very opposite of literature's aspirations, and there is no end to the warnings for writers to avoid them at all costs. However, few theorists have spent sustained time detailing the workings of the cliché, outside of criticising their use. Indeed, the cliché seems to resist being thought about too much. At the same time, this resistance to theory can also obscure a range of issues that the cliché raises as a problem for literature. Unpacking these problems suggests that the cliché is not simply an issue of unoriginal thought, but arises from, and is perpetuated by, a number of tensions within the production and circulation of writing itself. These include tensions between artistic worth and literary ownership; between organic creation and technologies of reproduction; between localised communications and universal truth; and concerning the status of the intellectual in relation to the masses, and the place of authenticity in late-modern culture.

**Keywords**

Cliché, commonplace, originality, authenticity, rhetoric, invention, banality

**Article**

There is a fundamental difficulty with considering clichés theoretically. For sure, writers and theorists 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 view clichés as simply 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 theorise clichés without assuming their absence from, or hostility to, theory itself. Perhaps reflecting the usage of the idiom itself, theoretical observations on clichés remain largely arbitrary, limited to asides and comments, rather than fully-formed theoretical positions.

Thinking through a lack of thought – rather than simply excluding it – is a challenge. The cliché is simply not an object of discussion; it is the very antithesis of discussion itself. As a result, theorising clichés as privileged loci of study will risk elevating them beyond their fundamentally uninteresting status. When celebrated and studied, the cliché can very quickly cease to be effective *as* a cliché, and becomes something else: perhaps a form of critique, or a reinvented archetype, as Marshall McLuhan once argued.[2] The very obviousness of why

clichés are something to avoid reflects the obviousness with which they first appear: unexamined, immediate thoughts which are often impervious to scrutiny; the very opposite to the activity of theorising. Perhaps this is why Christopher Ricks suggested that 'the only way to speak of a cliché is with a cliché.'[3] In many ways, Wolcott Gibbs's rule for how to identify a cliché remains one of the most informative, as well as the most concise: '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.'[4]

Yet, 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, beyond merely repeating them. It is common to find clichés described as things to be attacked, constituting 'a disease that must be stamped out.'[5] Jean Paulhan remarks that 'more than being pointless or stupid, it seems that it is also *wrong*.'[6] This sense of wrong-ness characterises the placement of the cliché within 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 literary invention: be this 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.'[7] 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.

These tensions – between the banality of the cliché and the threat it appears to pose to literature, and between the general lack of theoretical engagement with the cliché and the perpetual need to reject it – underlie the problems that literary theory faces when approaching clichés in more detail. But they also suggest that the problems posed by clichés open a range of wider tensions around the production, circulation and interpretation of literature. As Redfern notes, 'the study of clichés is inescapably a study of knowledge (and of ignorance), or how we transmit or acquire it, and of what difference it makes to us.'[8] In this sense, while clichés are most readily identified in stock expressions, metaphors, or phrases, clichés are not limited to words, but can also be found in images, thoughts, processes and practices, as well as the relations between them.

These wider issues may be one reason that *defining* clichés has proved difficult for theorists of literature, culture, rhetoric and language alike. 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'[9] this is not to be wholly

unexpected. As Gibbs' 'lack of rules' suggest, 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. 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.[10] As Laurence Lerner notes, the cliché clearly cannot simply be a synonym of repetition.[11] 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.[12] In fact, the common parlance that clichés are 'dead', 'worn' or 'sleeping' introduces more metaphors that can cloud as much as illuminate. For example, Brooks and Warren's seminal work *Modern Rhetoric* identifies that clichés emerge when 'language wears out.' They clarify: '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.'[13] Questioning the usefulness of this metaphorical description, Grimwood comments:

> 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 […] but any specific classification of the moment of their expulsion is missing.[14]

This, Grimwood suggests, is linked to the problem that the circulation of a word, rather than its classification, renders it a cliché, and as such '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.'[15] This means that theorising clichés may easily become an exercise in theorising 'good literature' over and above 'bad', which, while a noble endeavour, is not quite the same as theorising clichés in and of themselves. Indeed, the exclusion of clichés from 'proper' thinking and writing can be so instinctive as to appear itself as a habitual, learned response – a cliché of practising theory, even. On that note, the role that humour or pleasure play in the identification of the cliché and its effect on discourse are also prominent: it is worth noting that 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: identifying something core to the notion of encyclopaedic knowledge which created a lack of creation. For all of these reasons, it makes little sense to understand consider the cliché from a stock definition. Instead, it is better to consider it *as a problem*; not just for literature in itself (because the cliché is a sign of bad writing), but for the theorising of literature.

**Clichés are Lazy**

The notion that the cliché lacks literary merit is often aligned to the effort it implies for the author. Redfern remarks:

> 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.[16]

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.[17] Clichés are heuristic, in this sense, in the same way as their aligned and sometimes converging ally, the stereotype.

But why is laziness, in itself, bad? The answer depends upon how literary production is framed. With only a few exceptions, definitions of clichés are issued as part of a command to expel them from discourse, rather than detailed examination of their dynamics and emergence. Understanding the cliché outside of the demand for its removal is difficult, because, as Redfern notes, the demand typically 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, in his analysis of the wealth of college writing handbooks for their insights into cliché, Stark aligns the aversion to laziness with a distinctly Romantic view of authorship. As Stark argues, 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.'[18] Such a notion might be summarised 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.'[19]

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. As such, Anton Zijderveld argues that the cliché provided a foundational contribution to modernity itself as a 'rational procedure to quickly and massively reproduce cultural material.'[20] 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 industrialised 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.[21]

One can see clear resonances here with Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, and its loss within the mechanical reproduction of works of art.[22] 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. For example, Q.D. Leavis criticized the fiction most heavily stocked by booksellers for being 'mere tissues of clichés'.[23] These incited passivity in the reader, cultivated by the consistent use of 'stock phrases to evoke stock responses', and resulting in an inauthentic, vulgar 'fantasying' in the place of reading itself. Far removed from the challenging modernist literature, which the reading public could not easily find in bookshops, Leavis likens popular fiction to 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.'[24] The stock response it gives rise to is not only stale, it is fundamentally misleading: when popular novels try to narrate complex sentiments and deep emotions using blunt idioms ill-equipped for such an undertaking, Leavis argues this 'inevitably vulgarizes whatever it has to convey,' damaging the 'reader's spontaneities' and reducing them to 'fantasying'.[25]

Thus, whereas the Romantic denigration of cliché takes place for the sake of literary genius and its capacity to rise above industrialised culture, the modernist critique chides the over-use of clichés for indulging in cheap fantasies which prevent readers from engaging with the complexity of the world in a suitably challenging 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).

Yet there is a further danger in laziness arising from the machinations of literary production. In this case, it is not the spontaneity or originality of the author which is put at risk by cliché, but the legal reaches of copyright which accompanied the rise of mass literary production.[26] 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.'[27] The requirement to legally separate creation from imitation means that clichés mark a 'failure to honor the legally and economically significant imperative of originality.'[28] According to Norberg, 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.[29]

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. It also suggests that the distinction between authentic literary production and cliché is not manifested in the words or expressions themselves, but is embedded in broader oppositions which create the conditions for originality and repetition to be identified as such. Marcus Boon, for example, has detailed the fundamental need for mimesis within the world:

> Both appropriation in general, and ownership as a particular form of appropriation, are mimetic in that they bestow a particular name on something – a name that identifies and frames it. The named, labelled, identified form (including that of the subject, i.e., ourselves) is always already a copy.[30]

The foundations of originality are, for Boon, illusory, and always involve a mimetic aspect. This means that cliché cannot be mere repetition, as repetition forms a fundamental part of not only our learning, but also our creative expression. Nevertheless, Boon suggests, it is in the sphere of practice that these aspects of mimesis can be articulated, because copying itself is a 'multitude of practices'. Without recognising this practical element, Boon argues, the avant garde desire for the New produces 'a vast accumulation of gestures now contained in the huge bubble that is the gallery and museum system';[31] whereas subcultures continue to involve practices of mimesis which provide a form of temporary autonomy before developing into either mainstream or marginalised practice.

**Clichés are Dangerous**

The idea that clichés may be harmful or dangerous develops somewhat naturally from the notion that they are lazy. If, as Attlee notes, the 'cliché is understood as less than other forms of speech' because 'it is a manifestation of prepared language, of received knowledge,' then this indicates a potential separation of words or phrases from their original meaning.[32] The perpetuation of language through uncritical recitation only, with the true meaning lost or non-apparent, has clear political ramifications; as does the capacity of the cliché to mislead (either the author or the reader).

In *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell argues 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.'[33] In his case against political writing, he picks out the cliché as a form of undead language; not meaning*less*, but a strange 'in-between' category:

> 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.[34]

Furthermore, such metaphors can be separated from their original meaning without the user even being aware of the fact. Orwell thus laments that '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]

The political implications of clichés are thus 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 which are less sense-worthy (but perhaps more appealing to a crowd or mob). Anton Zijderveld has developed this notion into a more systematic view of the 'clichégenic society', whereby clichés become used in everyday language as functional replacements for meaningful interaction. Zijderveld argues that the progression of modernity leads to a decline in the traditions and practices that previously grounded shared social identities. Clichés can, and do, supplement the loss of these stable and fixed cultural truths. Similar to ancient myths, but far more malleable, these provide fictional points of social cohesion which can be picked up, changed and used according to the dominant narrative of the time.[36] 'Fixing' particular viewpoints, metaphors or expressions both removes them from their lived context, and sets them on an immediate path to a state of decay. However, clichés also obscure their lack of temporality – the fact that clichés are ever-present and ready-to-hand by virtue of their ease of use – and therefore appear as uncontroversial truisms.

In this sense, the cliché's association with forms of political violence can be traced not only back to the use of the stereotype in mass media, first documented in Walter Lippman's essays, but also more deeply ingrained images of culture throughout the history of Western literature, as presented in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. More recently, arguments over the language of political correctness and disputes over the status of 'hate speech' have added extra layers of complexity to the problem of clichés. Contrary to the likes of Orwell and

Zijderveld, who both view clichés as symptomatic of the deterioration of particular safeguards around the meaning of language, other writers have noted that the *deployment* of clichés, rather than the cliché in and of itself, constitutes its political dimension. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, for example, highlights how the war criminal uses the clichés of bureaucracy and middle-management to enforce a further cliché: that he was simply following orders. Here, the deployment of cliché serves to stifle and close down discussion of certain actions, whilst creating an image of the defendant as foolish and unworthy of the charges against him. The interplay between subjects 'using' clichés, and clichés creating their subjects, is far from straightforward.

Neither is the notion that clichés necessarily mark an *erosion* of meaning. Contrary to Orwell, H.G. Wells 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.'[37] Indeed, the role of repetition in creating rather than exhausting sense has been highlighted by a range of thinkers: in philosophy, Nietzsche's charge that 'truth' is only ever a consolidation of worn metaphors allowed his work to challenge traditional metaphysics; in semiotics, Barthes' account of cultural myths revealed the different orders and *jouissance* involved an invented ornament gaining the stature of signification.[38] In political theory, the more recent work of Ernesto Laclau on populist politics, which highlights the role of shared metaphors as the basis for collective identity which depend in part upon the kind of vagueness, equivalence and movement between different rhetorical figures Orwell criticises clichés for.[39] This is why, Laclau argues, political theory struggles to conceptualise populism and dismisses it. 'The name – of a social movement, of an ideology, of a political institution – is always the metaphorical crystallization of contents whose analogical links result from concealing contingent contiguity of their metonymical origins.'[40]

**Clichés are Practical Figures**

So far, the problem of the cliché has never been too far from the distinction between the 'popular' and the 'intellectual'. The theoretical roots of this division can be traced back to the longstanding dispute between philosophy and rhetoric. Indeed, the history of rhetoric provides a complimentary account of the cliché as a modern reworking of the commonplace. Commonplaces, or common 'topics' (in Latin *locus communis*, in Greek *koinos topos*), were first given an in-depth treatment by the Sophists of Ancient Athens. The Sophist 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; using everyday and contextualized common sense over and against the universalist pretensions of dialectic.[41] The 'topics' were 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'.[42] Whereas topics provided a technical mechanism for 'reasoning from generally

accepted opinions (*endoxai*) about any problem in a way "which will avoid contradiction",' 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 to individual discourses. [43] These discourses were embedded within the structure of the language and issues affecting a community, and '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.'[44] In this sense, Aristotle argued that rhetoric was the counterpart of dialectic, and constructed a catalogue of commonplaces which would provide their speaker with 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: the former discerns the 'real and the apparent means of persuasion,' whereas the latter does much the same with deduction.[45]

Scholars disagree on the precise relationship between the rhetorical commonplace and the modern cliché. Ernst Robert Curtius ties the expansion of commonplaces to the re-purposing of rhetoric into a tool not just of political oratory, but also literary genres as well. Dispersed in this way, Curtius suggests, '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.'[46] In the contemporary context, Perelman suggests that:

> 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.[47]

However, there have been several efforts to separate the rhetorical commonplace from the cliché. Ezra Pound, for example, described axioms as 'the necessary platitudes of any science,' and the commonplace as 'things which we all know and upon which we for the most part agree', whilst elsewhere eschewing the cliché as a blight on poetic verse.[48] Walter Nash differentiated between 'shop-talk' and 'show-talk': the former (which Nash suggests is more sympathetic, as it is generally more useful) are esoteric phrases used in particular 'regular occupational service' that has become taken up by the general public, 'who conspire to neglect the specific source of the term, using it ever more loosely, until at length it becomes so well established as standard idiom that its original sense is lost.'[49] These phrases are not in themselves bad, 'so much as the habit of indiscriminately thrusting them into congested company, on jostling with another.'[50] Show-talk, meanwhile, is the purposeful interjection of inflated and verbose language beyond the need of the sense expressed.

The justifications for drawing this distinction are rarely systematic, other than to discern what is useful – or useable – for the author's purpose from what is not. The usefulness of clichés is often embedded in their relationship to the communal practices of language which resist the

abstractions of theory. Clifford Geertz, for example, argues 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.'[51] This provides the cliché with a particular benefit to localised communication: Orin Hargraves asserts that 'when you use a cliché there is little chance of being misunderstood, and at the same time you have made a declaration of unity with your audience, invoking an instantly recognised commonplace that puts you "on the same page" (if I may) with them.'[52]

While Hargraves sees this as fundamental for general everyday conversation, others note specific times and places when the cliché is useful, or at least beyond immediate criticism: D.J. Enright, for example, notes a 'shared, almost you could say sacred, acknowledgement of inadequacy' when we respond to suffering through 'harmless banalities.'[53] Sometimes, this view suggests, it is entirely appropriate to face the utter indescribability of tragedy with the words and phrases which are self-evidently insufficient. Instead, they convey a general gesture of meaning which is easily understood:

> 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. The throwing stones expression is a clear example of seeking connection with an audience by appealing to a good maxim in common sense (recalling the distinction between good sense and common sense).[54]

On this account, the rhetorical dimension of cliché effectively renders the notion of *locus communis* as a subsidiary of the classical *sensus communis*. Clichés would therefore carry a learned sense of existence derived from what Gadamer terms the 'concrete situation' of the common sense which typified classical thought. This kind of knowledge is rooted in *phronesis*, practical wisdom, rather than the *sophia* of universal truth.[55] 'Good' clichés might be defined in terms of whether they are applied common sense, or non-sensical repetition.

However, at a wider level, the idea of what is 'useful' cannot always be separated from the operation of the cliché. From a certain perspective, the history of ideas itself is a perpetual cycle of new thinkers initially exciting bored audiences; their works circulating until they become accepted, and eventually boring again; at which point a new thinker emerges. Murray Davis described this as the cycle of 'conceptual charisma', whereby orthodoxy is premised on the continuous introduction and cessation of the excitement of the new.[56] Derrida notes the irony that the European philosophical tradition, with its desire for critical and free thought, lends itself 'more readily to stereotyping than anywhere else.' Premising thought on the critique of the 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.'[57] Susanne Langer, in contrast, 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.[58] The

untethered enthusiasm dies down once new ideas are placed; and once location, and topologically bounded, they nestle into unspectacular stock: to borrow Nash's terms, show-talk becomes shop-talk. In this way, the operation of the cliché is not separate to the production of intellectual ideas, but in fact central to it.

**Clichés are Inventive**

While these views may suggest an inescapability of the cliché, this does not necessarily entail resigning oneself to endless banality. In Jean Paulhan's *The Flowers of Tarbes*, he identifies two opposing forces regarding the clichés of literature, and language in general: 'rhetoric' and 'terror'. On the one hand, the modern European revival of classificatory systems for ornamental speech, popular in the late 18th and 19th centuries reflects a more general desire to treat language within a fixed set of parameters; on the other, the belief in the precedence of thought over language, and the 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. Paulhan argues against the idea that clichés present either the death knell of originality, or an embedded sense of shared language. 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.[59]

Paulhan adds that those who rail against them employ various ways of hiding the essential non-commonality of the commonplace. To expose this 'trick', he suggests that writers should recognise 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.'[60]

By recognising the inescapability from cliché, and that clichés are themselves perpetual reinventions of language, Paulhan argues we can focus on maintaining good clichés and avoiding the bad. In a similar vein, Norberg returns to the notion of language as a communal endeavour which continually subverts efforts to define the limits of such a community. In this sense, he argues that the cliché is not only unavoidable, but potentially radical in its persistence:

> [T]he 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.[61]

Other writers have approached the symptoms of the cliché as a way of re-articulating the human experience within, and beyond, a contemporary epoch saturated with media of repetition, citation and replication. In other words, rather than insisting on a Romantic distinction between the authentically human and inauthentic clichéd repetition, they make a case that the latter can reflect at least a part of the current human condition far more effectively than the former. If the decay and separation of meaningful language from mechanical repetition is a symptom of modernity, then there is a sense in which avoiding clichés might, paradoxically, produce inauthentic writing.

In doing so, writers have often drawn, implicitly and explicitly, on the notion that clichés form a readymade language.[62] Drawing on the role of readymades within the dada movement in the early 20th century, for such works the cliché's removal of meaning allows the reader to refocus on the 'thing-ness' of language and its circulation. 'What matters instead 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'; 'the cliché's placement in the poem, like the suspension of the Duchampian readymade in the gallery, arrests its usual movement or use, permitting the generation of new relationships, new "shades of meaning," through wordplay and puns.'[63]

Taking this line of thought beyond artistic expression alone, Marshall McLuhan's *From Cliché to Archetype* makes a case for the cliché as a 'unit extension' of man. Here, the cliché is reinvented as a tool for mining the rubbish pile of culture and creating new archetypes. McLuhan suggests that the archetype itself provides a way through the existing economy of invention, by virtue of its specific relationship to memory and the retrieval of past forms and ideas. For McLuhan, the archetype is not so much a figure to draw upon, but rather 'a retrieved awareness or consciousness.'

> It is consequently 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.[64]

McLuhan thus sees the archetype not as a readymade, established figure of narrative, but rather a creative technique. The banal repetition of the cliché 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. In this way, 'all media of communications are clichés serving to enlarge man's scope of action, his patterns of association and awareness.'[65] Such clichés can be considered, for McLuhan, 'breakthroughs […], a probe into a new dimension.'[66]

While McLuhan is mindful of the cliché's origin as a mechanical part of a printing press, he argues that this origin highlights the necessary technicity of our understanding of the new (rather than aligning the cliché with the dissolution of authentic meaning into circulated soundbites for the crowd). The rapid expansion of the technologies of retrieval mean that while old clichés can become archetypes, archetypes can become new clichés: as in, for example, Joyce's *Ulysses*, which uses the archetypal figure to explore the contemporary consciousness of Dublin, or Yeats' 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'. The result of ascribing such sincerity to the medium is that the cliché, for all of its 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.'[67]

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