



The last word

The baby and the bathwater

IT'S OKAY TO USE CLICHÉS, SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO THROW THE BABY OUT WITH THE BATHWATER, BUT BEFORE YOU GO AHEAD, CHECK ON THE BABY AND MAYBE PUT THE BATHWATER ON THE GARDEN, SAYS STEVE HOLDEN.

Do you really know what a cliché is? I thought I did, but I didn't know the word first came into use in the 19th Century when French typesetters started using metal printing plates, called clichés, so they didn't need to set individual letters when they were setting frequently used words or phrases – so hand me the cliché; they're evidently useful things.

Mind you, as Martha Brockenbrough points out in 'In defence of the cliché,' the French typesetters' cliché is also where the pejorative sense of worn overuse comes from. 'By design, it was something meant to be used over and over again, reproducing something exactly,' Brockenbrough explains, 'until it was worn out' – in the fullness of time, at the end of the day, at this point in time.

Read today's paper and chances are there'll be a report somewhere of a tragic death, newsworthy perhaps in the absence of any comic deaths, but less newsworthy than a bloodbath, which in turn is less newsworthy than a tragic bloodbath.

That's not to say that a cliché is a bad thing, as James Parker explains in 'Let us

now praise... the cliché.' The value of the French typesetter's cliché was that it was 'a concrete unit of communication that minimised labour and sped things up.' The thing to remember, though, if you were a French typesetter, was to be careful as to how you used these things since they could leave a fuzzy printed mark once you'd used them too much.

Look over the shoulder of a typesetter in a 19th-century French printing shop and you start to understand our contemporary ambivalence about clichés.

We use them because they can be handy shortcuts to meaning; equally, we abuse them when a thoughtless shortcut takes us down a blind alley to a tragic bloodbath – fuzzy words that mean nothing at all.

Buried within our ambivalence and hardly noticed, though, is our weird Western fascination with originality, something we owe to 19th-century creative types, mostly in Britain and Germany, who distinguished between 'originators' and 'copyists,' for the purpose of positioning themselves higher up in a cultural hierarchy of their own making. Originality, since the

19th Century, has been a claim to higher value.

The trouble with that, in this day and age, is that nothing stays original for very long. The internet can take an original phrase, use it over and over again, reproducing it exactly until it's worn out *in a matter of hours*. As Parker puts it, 'You can say "Leave Britney alone!" at 10 in the morning and it's a fully-accredited cliché by noon.'

A cliché is just an original phrase that everyone likes so much that it gets worn in and out of use. As the saying goes, what goes around, comes around, or, put neatly otherwise, an object that moves in an orbiting manner travels a roughly elliptical path, in all likelihood, if you will.

So go ahead and use clichés, but don't believe people who say you can't have your cake and eat it too, unless they actually give you some cake and then take it away, in which case you ought tell them to stop messing about with cake in the first place. **T**

REFERENCES

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This month's Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, and last year's highly commended winner in the Best Columnist category of the Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards for the Last Word, who accepts that it does take two to tango, but notes that it takes more than two to do the Macarena properly.