

Rachel Elizabeth Mulholland : Think Tank, Think Tank, Think Tank

Speeches

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2006 Think Tank Conference

Good evening. I am proud to open the *2006 Think Tank Conference*, brought to you by *Thinking for this Millennium*, this year's program from the Australian commission for the future. The idea for discussion is 'Can we really have original thoughts?' and tonight we have three perspectives.

Our first speaker is a media representative presenting *A Copy of a Copy*. The second is *The Thinker*, delivered by the Time Traveller. And finally *Definition Shake-up*, presented by William Shakespeare. But for now, *A Copy of a Copy*. (Clapping.)

A Copy of a Copy

Good evening Ladies and Gentleman

I'd just like to take this opportunity to thank *Thinking for this Millennium* for holding the *2006 Think Tank Conference*. As I'm sure most of you are already aware, I'm actually here to represent the present time as a part of Australia's leading publishing company, *Your Paper to the Print*, in this stimulating debate, to answer the question 'Can we really have original thoughts?' To this my company says, 'We don't have any truly original thoughts. Even the stuff we think is our own is really somebody else's'.¹ How could we possibly think anything 'original'? To do so, you would have to remove yourself entirely from ideological construction, which means denying the countless influences that shape our thoughts in so many unnoticed ways! Nevertheless, if it were possible to think an original thought, would anyone in the world of 2006 actually choose to do so? It seems that the 'unoriginal' has become the latest fashion, as is exemplified in the text *That Thief of Thought*, which was recently sent to our company. Just listen to this extract, and please, tell me where the originality lies!

I do not like that
Thief of thought.
I do not like him,
Pray he's caught!

He mimics, he mocks,
Makes a fool of you.
Plagiarism prevails,
When one becomes two.
No justice is done,
When clearly it's due.
As he claims this 'thought'
Is certainly 'new'.

I do not like that
Thief of thought.
Oh please, oh please,
Let him be caught!

I think therefore I am,
Or not?
As what one says

¹ David Williamson.

Is soon forgot.
For those that thief
And change one word,
Claim this 'new' thought
Has never been heard!

I do not like that
Thief of thought.
I do not like him,
Pray he's caught!
But caught,
How will he ever be?
When 'original's'
A fallacy.

If two ideas that you have heard,
Mix to form an original third,
Is this 'original' really yours?
Or cognitive regurgitation just because,
The art of the 'original'
Is neither here, nor there,
We're but thought clones
With no brains, but air!

I do not like him on TV,
I do not like him copying me!
I do not like his canny facade,
Why do you all think he's a card?
I do not like his witty word game,
I do not like him claiming my fame!
I do not like that Thief of thought,
I do not like him, pray he's caught!

Pastiche, appropriate,
Call it what you will.
Why think for yourself,
Put down that quill!
Don't give up
If it's been done,
A copy of a copy
Makes this world run!

Not on TV! Don't plagiarise me!
Not copying! Thief! Let me be.

I do not like that thief at all!
But is this simply his downfall?
For I steal thoughts from here or there,
Whose mind they come, I do not care!
Yes I am a thief of thought.
But I shall never, ever be caught.

I do not like that
Thief of thought.
That's you, that's me
We must be caught!

An example of the blatantly unoriginal! This 'appropriation' as they now neatly term such theft, is just that ... theft! I would be condemned for such an argument by writers of today, as works that mock the original, are witty, humorous, and certainly above all, original! In our society this 'work of art' would surely be classified as completely original, as it goes further and parodies the parody of the original. Many of these so-called 'new' ideas are simply created to seize on the idiosyncrasies and eccentricities of past styles, simply to imitate and mock the original, as the old individualist, the novelist and the artist are all dead²! On the other hand, those of us at *Your Paper to the Print* believe that such works that recycle brilliance from the past do not do so in jest, rather out of desperation. They are not works of any quality at all, as they have gambled the last thing that would render them salvageable, their originality ... instead they must leach off the works of others to gain authority.

Being a publisher, I fully endorse the notion that there are no original thoughts, but I will go further to say that our society is becoming ridiculous! We not only cannot think up anything original, but are burdened by context, as the sheer volume of knowledge makes it impossible to be original. To get a total understanding of just how dead the 'original' is, you'd just have to take a look at some of the texts that are sent for publishing these days. *'The Websters New Explorer Dictionary of Quotations ... an indispensable reference for your writing and speaking needs'* Or is it rather a way to steal others' intellectual property? The current view can be spoken in one sentence ... that it is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations³!

² Fredrick Jameson.

³ Winston Churchill.

Rifle through the countless 'novels', 'poems' and 'short stories', if I can even call them such, that are sent to my company. There is an insightful quote to respond to the most complex and intellectual propositions! All of you from past and future societies must be looking at our society and thinking ... it's great, where is the need to think for one's self? We are a society of parasites, latching on to others to feed on their ideas, opinions and intellectual property. We can't and don't have original thoughts, rather through technological exploitation and the guise of the 'satire', thrive off the thoughts and views of others. The consumer society of today also doesn't help the quest for the 'original'. Who cares about 'originality' if a copy of a copy brings the bucks rolling in? Why should we care about the art in itself? Is the author dead because they no longer influence one's interpretation of a text⁴? No, no, no ... he died when the art of writing itself fell into the unlaboured hands of the dabblers and money hungry!

If you ask me, our society of echoes, mirrors and mimics...we have gone beyond a lack of originality and have instead fed the decline of high art. We only have the ability to comprehend and regurgitate the ideas of others, and even if having an 'original' thought was possible, it would be rejected! As I said earlier, to be popular nowadays a work must lack originality completely. What happened to the real aspects of creativity in art, poetry, writing, architecture, music and dance? Instead the 'artist' is setting out to be too clever to think as an individual, and instead becomes the 'critic', who mocks a standard of work that could never be achieved! Original thought ... I think not!

⁴ Roland Barthes.

THE THINKER

Gentleman, Gentleman, I beg your pardon for this notably late arrival, but I have just come from the most extraordinary journey, travelling back to our antediluvian past, and through to our distant future, along the time continuum. I came across a fascinating futuristic place of 2019⁵, rather dystopic I thought, as everyone kept articulating that there was no spoon,⁶ when I was clearly clenching one between my fingers! ... oh, but I mustn't discriminate against these lesser academics, as there may be some from that epoch here present! More importantly, more importantly, I am so pleased to have such a marvelous opportunity to speak at the *2006 Intellectual's Think Tank Conference* in a very stimulating debate. But, moving on, moving on, you propose the question ... 'can we really have original thoughts?' Being an intellectual, one would find this notion ridiculous; to think there is no difference between the workings of a clock and I, for without original thought we would be but robots, clones, replicants ... merely a copy of a copy. 'I think, therefore I am',⁷ but if the thoughts are merely verbal regurgitation of whatever indoctrinating ideology I may belong to ... am I really what I think I am?

Just because a thought is built upon one previous, does not make it unoriginal. Consider some contemporary examples and try to deny their originality, such as the light bulb, Eisenstein's Theory of Relativity, every medical advance to the present or ... computers (for those of you from my era, they're the most brilliant electronic devices that simulate cerebral processes like recollection of data and even recombinations ... only more precise!). My point is that these flowers did not bud from nothing, but from the fertile soil laid down before seeds were sown ... as the originality of an idea is relative to the context of its origin. Take my innovative time travelling contraption for instance. You cannot deny the ingenious inventiveness of this delicate device, but I similarly cannot deny that 'If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants'.⁸

A spark is needed to start a fire, just like the first original thinkers. Precisely two weeks ago I found myself, six-hundred years removed ... 'an eddying murmur filled my ears, and a strange, dumb confusedness descended on my mind'⁹ as the 'year-o-meter' whizzed anticlockwise

⁵ *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott.

⁶ *The Matrix*, Warner Brothers.

⁷ Rene Descartes.

⁸ Isaac Newton.

⁹ *The Time Machine*, H.G. Wells.

causing immense alacrity. Clambering out of the machine, I was clipped on the ear by a racing arrow! Startled, I turned to find myself face-to-face with one of the earliest philosophers known to man, Zeno of Elea from around 400 B.C. This man, ingenious as he was, proposed an explanation of the world involving motion, change and spatial structure. He apologetically explained:

in observing the arrow, one can see that time is a series of instances, but if we were to comment on the arrow at any one instant in time, would it be moving or at a stand-still? How could the arrow thus be moving in an instant, which has no duration? Therefore, how is this arrow actually moving at all?

Zeno could not answer such a question, nevertheless his inquisitive nature and scientific observations fuelled the thoughts of other men like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, but are not their thoughts also original?

To prove that we can have original thoughts, I must explain how experience is the basis for knowledge and the development of thought. The sixteenth century philosopher Locke believed that each of us is born a blank slate, upon which experience writes. Similarly, in epistemology one would consider the brain a sponge and judge the relationship between absorbed experiences and beliefs that we express, as an analogy for the process of human thought. We must also consider the argument about the relationship between the knower and the known, as coupled with experience; this prior knowledge leads to the formation of ideas that can then be combined into new and more complex ideas.

In a seemingly incredulous age as this, one would not trust the garrulous rambling of one such as I, or anyone for that matter, as articulation of a concept cannot be freed from the entangled web of language ... semiotics and symbolism, typology and taxonomy! Nietzsche, who regards himself as a 'postmodernist', believed, or being from the 1600s, he will believe in the near future, that language creates restrictions on human thought as it imposes a shape on the way human beings think about the world. Language appears as the foundation for all thinking and is a foundation of humanity. However, it is never to be entirely trusted ... for 'You cannot stand outside language to understand it.' So you cannot stand outside context and thus your ideas are merely ideological mimicry uttered through the restraints of language. So logically I would expect all of you to parrot precisely the same point, would I not?

Consider the concept of intelligence. Is it the capacity to reason, the size of your vocabulary and memory, the ability to compose and unravel mathematical problems; or is it the aptitude of one to manipulate their surroundings, to think abstractly? As many erroneous claims as there may be, human beings are not conditioned to follow one set of ideals and principles. The unconscious process is vital as it helps to drive the mind. Sigmund Freud believed that people are governed by thoughts and instincts that exist 'below the surface' and from the experience of time travel, I have just learned that Jean Piaget proposed that humans have significant milestones in their development and that from twelve onward we learn to think hypothetically in order to solve problems. So if we cannot think originally, we are simply solemn simulations of society and our surrounding environment. What would set us apart from one another, if we were unable to alter our thinking processes from those of everyone else?

Think about what you think you are thinking ... are your neighbours thinking what you are thinking, or are your thoughts but yours and yours alone? I could take one other stance on such a ludicrous notion that would require adopting the mindset of an extreme sceptic ... if such a proposal is permissible in this frame of mind. Obviously now every thought must be totally original, as my mind is the only one that exists, everything is a creation of my mind alone ... a pleasing conclusion but a pessimistic end.

Oh fellow thinkers ... one only needs to be part of this conference to validate my stance.

I bid you adieu!

Definition Shake-up

*If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
The age to come would say, this poet lies,
Such heavenly touches ne'er touch'd earthly faces*¹⁰.

Nothing that I have heard in the past or could hear in the future would convince me that these words are unoriginal. They are written in verse as many lines and poems that went before mine. They comment on the beauty and grace of women, an art that poets and all men had mastered well before my time. They speak through a language the origin of which I cannot even trace. Yet I myself will still wholeheartedly claim that these thoughts about the beauty and exquisite nature of the human form are original, as they serve to express what was in my heart at the time of writing, and as such, what shaped them is irrelevant.

'Can we really have original thoughts?' ... this question begs many an answer. For 'there are no facts, only interpretations',¹¹ and clearly the answer to such a question is intertwined in how one interprets and defines the term 'original'. Does 'original' mean something that precedes all others in time? Is it that which is not copied, derived or translated from anything else? If one defines 'original' as only those thoughts of origin and not ideas that have been built on those previous, then it would be in keeping that all thought be regarded as unoriginal. One may believe that 'there is nothing new except what has been forgotten'.¹² But I must disagree with such an understanding, as every idea and concept has come from another somewhere back in history, which cannot account for its total originality. Has it not got original worth in itself beyond its point of origin?

Certainly it is possible to deconstruct anything so that it can no longer claim the status of original. In fact, I won't even claim to have invented many of the basic storylines in my plays, as it is true that I reinterpreted the works of others many a time. In doing so, we could examine my play *Twelfth Night; or, what you will*¹³ ... because it certainly wasn't what many would term 'original'. The plot of this play in particular was taken from an Italian play called *Gli Ingannati*, but the originality lies in the purpose of my interpretation and the many

¹⁰ Extract from Shakespeare's Sonnet XVII.

¹¹ Fredrick Jameson.

¹² *Marie Antoinette*.

¹³ *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*.

messages that the work encapsulates. This comic play does not thrive merely on this borrowed storyline. It is about the madness of love, jealousy and mistaken identity! It is about happy endings!

*Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them.*¹⁴

It is messages, values and what you now call 'universal truths' such as this that I sought to convey.

I was baffled to find that the American writer Henry James said:

*I am ... haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practised on a patient world.*¹⁵

Such thought fails to see that the plots I have adapted, shaped and moulded are inconsequential, as I have only used them to hang my deep knowledge and understanding of human nature on, which is why my works have stood the test of time.

*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*¹⁶

*The common curse of mankind – folly and ignorance.*¹⁷

The worth and originality of each of my plays lies in such ideas! What about the music of the language and the power of the action?

A good fellow Samuel Johnson said 'he is the poet of nature and holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and life'.¹⁸ This man sees beyond borrowed tales and characters from poems, ballads, legends and history books, to the revelations about the human condition that has changed so little, though time has marched forth. I must also certainly abhor the words 'he never blotted a line' uttered by Ben Jonson,¹⁹ a writer of my own time, for my characters are enriched and transformed, not merely direct copies of the original. I may not have created what they did, but how they felt about it is my creation ... what they say is original. I have embellished the bare sketches and created colourful characters with thoughts and feelings, and above all, a beautiful language with which to express these feelings ... I have brought them to life. Who can deny the beauty of Romeo's speech to Juliet when he declares that:

*parting is such sweet sorrow,
that I shall say good night till it be morrow.*²⁰

¹⁴ *Twelfth Night; or, what you will.*

¹⁵ 1843–1916 American-born author and literary critic.

¹⁶ *King Henry IV, Part II.*

¹⁷ *Troilus and Cressida.*

¹⁸ English literary critic 1709–84.

¹⁹ Benjamin Jonson 1572–1637 was an English Renaissance dramatist, poet and actor. He was a friend and rival of William Shakespeare.

²⁰ *Romeo and Juliet.*

Although the story of Romeo and Juliet is an age old tale, my characters convey beauty in the expression of their love for each other, and lead all to weep at their tragic demise.

All of my works portray that it is what comes from an individual's heart that matters. It may be that the words of others touch one's heart so deeply that they strike an inner chord. A sound may make a hundred echoes, but each time it recoils from a wall, it changes with new vibrations. Likewise, it is through new vibrations combining with reinterpreted words that artists can convey new meaning and express their ideas. Why should such reinterpretation be regarded as unoriginal? Many critics throughout the ages have tried to ridicule the notion of 'original', based on the idea that a new development on something old cannot be called such. I myself believe that originality lies in the purpose that these borrowed words, thoughts and ideas are made to achieve.