

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
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Food for Thought is a collection of quotations, definitions and reflections offered for the reader's contemplation. The list is more than a random collection but less than a complete narrative.

Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of thing can satisfy.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Nature

Pluralism: the principled cultivation of a sustained conversation among individuals with widely differing perspectives on the natural and human-made world. Pluralism keeps alive the ongoing search for truth and understanding by focusing inquiry on common problems encountered in experience rather than on the technical refinement, fine points, and stylistic polish of a single theory. Pluralism sustains the ecology of culture, maintaining a gene pool of diverse ideas and methods that enables us to avoid entrapment in dogma by forcing our attention to features of the world that might otherwise be ignored by doctrines that are conceived too narrowly - as it seems all doctrines eventually prove to be.

Richard Buchanan & Victor Margolin
The Idea of Design (p.xii)

What we need, it seems, are not enormous ideas, nor the abandonment of synthesizing notions altogether. What we need are ways of thinking that are responsive to particularities, to individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities, responsive to what Charles Taylor has called "deep diversity," a plurality of ways of belonging and being, and that yet can draw from them - from it - a sense of connectedness, a connectedness that is neither comprehensive nor uniform, primal nor changeless, but nonetheless real.

Clifford Geertz
Available Light (p.224)

There is a mode of vital experience - experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils - that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity." To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world -and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To

be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air."

Marshall Berman,

All That is Solid Melts Into Air (p.15)

Modernity is the condition a society reaches life is no longer conceived as cyclical. In a premodern society, where the purpose of life is understood to be the reproduction of the customs and practices of the group, and where people are expected to follow the life path their parents followed, the ends of life are given at the beginning. People know what their life's task is, and they know when it is completed. In modern societies, the reproduction of custom is no longer understood to be one of the chief purposes of existence, and the ends of life are not thought to be given; they are thought to be discovered or created. Individuals are not expected to follow the life path of their parents, and the future of society is not thought to be dictated entirely by the past.

Louis Menand

The Metaphysical Club (p.399)

What we have to see is not just 'a tradition' but a selective tradition: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification. ... Most versions of "tradition" can be quickly shown to be radically selective. From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded. Yet, within a particular hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, this selection is presented and usually successfully passed off as 'the tradition', 'the significant past'. What has then to be said about any tradition is that it is in this sense an aspect of contemporary social and cultural organization, in the interest of the dominance of a specific class. It is the version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. What it offers in practice is a sense of predisposed continuity.

Raymond Williams

Marxism and Literature (p.115)

The appeal of rationalism lies in the chaste economy of the imagination that it postulates: it asserts that it is redundant and even dangerous to invent or replace forms of urban organization - the street, the plaza, etc. - that have been perfected over centuries. Within this restoration of sanity, it is disconcerting that everything the 20th century contributed to the historic sequence - new types that are demonstrably responses to authentic programmatic demands and inspirations - is excluded. Through this arbitrary closure, the infinitely reassuring dream of a world inhabited by a known series of typologies and morphologies, endowed with eternal life and capable of absorbing all programs, turns ominous, when, for instance, Gunnar Asplund's Stockholm Public Library is shamelessly recycled in Luxembourg as the new European Parliament.

With such theories, culture is at the mercy of an arsenal of procrustean types who censure certain activities and expressions with the simple excuse that there is no room for

them and at the same time proclaim the continuing validity of others simply because they do not disrupt the continuity of urban texture. ... With their obsessive legitimizations from history, both contextualism and rationalism are preemptive tactics that abort history before it can happen.

Rem Koolhaas
S,M,L,XL (p.285)

The truth is, we are living in an age when we crave familiarity rather than the old modernist experimentation. We want novels that have beginnings and ends, plays that tell stories and don't leave us stranded with characters who are passively waiting for someone or something that may not exist. This is the 90's and we're all very busy, so, please, spare us the big cosmic riddles and just tell us how it turned out for Godot. In art, too, we yearn for plot, for the blue circle and red trapezoid to symbolize something beyond themselves. Call it post-modernism or call it Friendly Art; it springs from a fatigue with risk and uncertainty and has brought on a return to narrative in literature, ornament in architecture and representation in painting.

Deborah Solomon
The New York Times Magazine
1 February 1998 (p.28)

The way to achieve a harmony with nature is first to break free of old metaphors and embrace new ones so that we can lift the veils that prevent us from accepting what we observe, and then to make use of technology to study life and life-supporting systems as they are. A harmony between ourselves and nature depends upon - indeed, requires - modern technological tools to teach us about the Earth and to help us manage wisely what we realize we have inadvertently begun to unravel.

Daniel Botkin
Discordant Harmonies (p.189)

In his recent books on cinema, Gilles Deleuze argues that film is a way of thinking, that is, it is also a way of doing philosophy, but in purely filmic terms: its concrete philosophizing has nothing to do with the way in which some film or other might illustrate a philosophical concept, and that very precisely because the philosophical concepts of film are filmic concepts, and not ideational or linguistic ones. In a similar move I would argue that architectural space is also a way of thinking and philosophizing, of trying to solve philosophical or cognitive problems. ...[for example] if Gehry's house is the meditation on a problem, that problem must initially be a spatial one, or at least be susceptible to formulation and incarnation in properly spatial terms. ... The problem, then, which the Gehry house tries to think is the relationship between that abstract knowledge and conviction or belief about the superstate and the existential daily life of people in their traditional rooms and tract houses.

Frederic Jameson
Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (p.125-128)

A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words. ... It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential.

Wallace Stevens

The Necessary Angel (p.32-33)

Poetry ... has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. The Divine Comedy is a great example of this kind of total adequacy, but a haiku may also constitute a satisfactory comeback by the mind to the facts of the matter. As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way.

Seamus Heaney

The Redress of Poetry (p.8)

Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality.

Kenneth Burke

A Grammar of Motives (p.59)

More precisely, what needs moral consideration in production is not so much the producing as the product. ... What remains unexamined all the while is the power of products, of the material result of production, to shape our conduct profoundly. Any moral theory that thinks of the material setting of society as an essentially neutral stage is profoundly flawed and unhelpful; so in fact, is most of modern and contemporary ethics. To lift the veil of moral inconsiderability from material culture we must consider more closely how people shape and follow the course of their lives.

Albert Borgmann

Crossing the Postmodern Divide (p.110)

Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted now. ... Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life - its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness - conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. ... What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. ... The aim of all commentary on art should be to make works of art - and by analogy, our experience - more, rather than less real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.

Susan Sontag

"Against Interpretation" (1964)

For thus says the Lord, the creator of the heavens, who is God, the designer and maker of the earth, who established it, not creating it to be a waste, but designing it to be lived in. I am the LORD, and there is no other. I have not spoken from hiding, nor from some dark place in the earth. And I have not said to the descendants of Jacob, "look for me in an empty waste."

Isaiah 45: 18-19

The task of the present generation is to construct a history of things that will do justice both to meaning and being, both to plan and to the fullness of existence, both to the scheme and to the thing. This purpose raises the familiar existential dilemma between meaning and being. We are discovering little by little all, over again that what a thing means is not more important than what it is; that expression and form are equivalent challenges to the historian; and that to neglect either meaning or being, either essence or existence, deforms our comprehension of both.

George Kubler

The Shape of Time (p.126)