



Loose ends

Description

Nobody knows where anything comes from any more. DNA testing reveals horse meat in hamburger mince. Do British food authorities have sufficient measures in place to cope with the increasing globalisation of the food supply chain? ([Independent](#))

Not being able to identify where things start is a bit like the problem of origins in philosophy: 'The desire for the origin becomes an indispensable and indestructible function situated in a syntax without origin,' said Jacques Derrida.

The Internet age makes this even clearer. Texts, ideas, and memes circulate like rumours, without identifiable source. Who started it? The answer could just as well be everyone or no one. In any case, according to a Mail Online [article](#), we humans share a lot of our DNA with horses unless that's just a rumour.

The idea of the origin suggests a tree-like structure. Everything starts from the trunk and then spreads out in lots of branches, each dependent on the one beneath, but otherwise unrelated to the branches on the other side of the tree. In the Internet age we prefer to think of complex interconnections and of networks and threads. Emails, messageboards, tweets and blogs follow threads, weaving in and out, and sometimes without end, or beginning.

Threads of ideas



Sigmund Freud identifies the importance of threads in an

anecdote about a joke â?? which itself constitutes a convoluted thread of associations. He quotes Goethe, who has one of his characters in his short story *Elective Affinities* say

â??There is, we are told, a curious contrivance in the service of the English marine. The ropes in use in the royal navy, from the largest to the smallest, are so twisted that a red thread runs through them from end to end, which can not be extracted without undoing the whole; and by which the smallest pieces may be recognized as belonging to the crown.â?•

The full text of Goetheâ??s story is available online. Itâ??s about the correspondence between chemistry and human passions, but thatâ??s yet another thread.

D  nouement

D  nouement is French for the unknotting or untangling of threads. Itâ??s an appropriate metaphor for the point at which a story resolves itself and the loose ends are untangled â?? or neatly knotted. What are stories after all but so many threads, the interweaving of lives? For most stories, as told, thereâ??s a single dominant thread, like the red thread in the ropes of the Royal Navy.

There are lots of ways of tying up the threads in a story, not least the resolution by which the powerful, the corrupt, the evil, or even just those who we envy receive their just deserts. Cultural theorists Steve Cross and Jo Littler see this as a circular process.

The cultural desire for meritocracy or â??making it against the oddsâ?? exists simultaneously with desires for degradation and humiliation of those â??above themselvesâ?? or deemed to be at the end of their celebrity lives. It is in such a social and political formation that Schadenfreude functions: as the flip side of meritocracy whilst imbricated in its logic. For in this framework of understanding, just as people â??go up,â?? so too do they â??fall downâ?? (p.408).

Thereâ??s something satisfying and necessary about this economy, which they refer to as the rise and fall of â??celebrity stock.â?• Itâ??s a cyclical process, of adulation and humiliation, the turning of the â??wheel of fate,â?• an alternation of extremes. Much as some of us feel like gloating over those multinational food chains that flog hamburger meat.



References

- Cross, Steve, and Jo Littler. 2010. Celebrity and Schadenfreude: The cultural economy of fame in free fall. *Cultural Studies*, (24) 3, 395-417.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. C. Spivak. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press (quotation is from page p.253)
- Freud, Sigmund. 1960. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: W.W. Norton
- Goethe, J.W. von. 1994. *Elective Affinities*. Trans. D. Constantine. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. First published in German in 1809.

Notes

- A quote from *Elective Affinities*: “Just so is there drawn through Otilie’s diary a thread of attachment and affection which connects it all together, and characterizes the whole. And thus these remarks, these observations, these extracted sentences, and whatever else it may contain, were, to the writer, of peculiar meaning. Even the few separate pieces which we select and transcribe will sufficiently explain our meaning.”
- See [Pleasure with malice](#).

Category

1. Media

Tags

1. denouement
2. Derrida
3. Goethe
4. origins
5. Schadenfreude

Date Created

February 2, 2013

Author
rcoyne99

default watermark