



The day the world ran out of ideas

A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now.

Opening lines of *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon

Along with several million other people I was in Manhattan on Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

Ever since Friday evening, when my taxi dropped me off at the New York Palace Hotel in Madison Avenue, a small crowd of people, mostly young women, had been gathering on the kerb directly opposite the hotel entrance on 50th Street. They were bored and restless, as though they had been there for some time. A couple of NYPD officers hung around to make sure they respected the flimsy tape barrier that kept them away from the traffic.

My room on the 15th floor looked directly down onto the nave of St Patrick's Cathedral.

On Saturday night I was scheduled to meet up with an old friend from Mexico, whom I had met while working there as creative director of J. Walter Thompson in Mexico City.

The moment the elevator doors opened in the lobby I could hear the hysterical screaming of the crowd. I ran outside to see a white limo turning into the vast concrete cavern of the delivery garage. The police and several bodyguards were struggling to keep the crowd from streaming inside. A slight figure in an iridescent black suit was being hurried from the limo into the service elevator. I caught a glimpse of a single white glove.

'Wow,' I said to Chris when we met up at the Thai restaurant somewhere on the Upper West Side. 'Have I got something to tell the kids when I get back home!'

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On the Tuesday morning two planes appeared out of a clear blue sky and demolished all our certainties. Fukuyama was wrong. Far from having ended, history had been rewound to the beginning of the Crusades.

In the week I spent in a deserted Manhattan waiting for a plane to take me home to London I had plenty of time to think about how it could have happened, how we had been so tragically blind to its inevitability, and how the best brains in the world now seemed so bereft, not only of plausible explanations, but of the ideas we would need to take us forward.

The emptiness of the air above Ground Zero came to stand for that, the space where our ideas should have been.

A few weeks later I got a call from the *Wall Street Journal* asking me whether I thought advertising would ever return to normal. I said that I thought it would, and in due course it did.

But the emptiness stayed with me, and burrowed into my imagination like a worm.

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As one of the global creative directors for J. Walter Thompson I had travelled regularly and extensively on behalf of my multinational clients, seeking out advertising ideas from our many international offices, or striving to manage the consistent application of those occasional few that originated from the global centres in London or New York. The first year or two were wonderfully exciting. The job was challenging, I was being very well paid, and I was visiting many extraordinary places and meeting some extraordinary people.

But after my seventieth or eightieth international flight things began to change. I grew numb to the novelty of each succeeding trip. Not jaded, just numb. I was staying in the very best hotels and eating in the world's finest restaurants. I was conferencing at the world's most exotic resorts, and getting front row seats to the world's hippest events. Perhaps there was a moment when I could have stopped and rebooted my numbing brain. But I was tired and stressed and carried along by the momentum of commitments like a straw in the wind.

The exciting cosmopolitan cities began to merge into one generically cosmopolitan city. The hotel rooms began to merge into one generic hotel room. The

restaurants began to merge into one generic restaurant with the same generic menus, wines and waiters. The conversations at the generic restaurant began to merge into one generic conversation, and the people into shadowy archetypes entirely bereft of individual features, characters and points of view.

When once I was alive to the subtle differences of the locations and languages that surrounded me, I now was seeing only the similarities between things, the stereotype, no longer the thing itself. All the airports seemed to be the same airport. The stuff in the Duty Free was all the same stuff. The New York taxis were still yellow, of course, and the London taxis were still idiosyncratically black. But there seemed to me to be only one universal taxi driver, with the same-shaped back of the head and the same conversation. I went to crafts markets in the hope of finding interesting and exotic mementoes for my children.

I was excited, in Sao Paulo, to find a quaint wooden frog that struck me as truly original. It had a wooden stick, stored for convenience in its backside, which prompted an authentic *ribbit, ribbit, ribbit* when you ran it down the ridges of the frog's spine. A week later I found the same frog at Apt, in France. Then in Hong Kong, and later in Istanbul.

If this wasn't disturbing enough, the advertising ideas I was seeing from our network agencies began to take on an uncanny resemblance to one another. Here was an idea from Chicago that looked exactly like an idea from Singapore, an idea from Dublin that looked exactly like an idea from Amsterdam. Through exposure to the same sources of inspiration – the *D&AD Annuals*, the Cannes showreels, *Archive* magazine, the internet – the once rich diversity of local thinking had been replaced by the shallow homogeneity of globalism.

And that is how this feeling began; how I came to believe that there were no more ideas left in the world, and that the imaginative capacity of the whole planet had been infected too.

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Down at Blockbuster, the special offer bins were full of DVDs that nobody wanted. I looked through them and I could see why. There wasn't an original idea among them. The movies that weren't remakes of old movies were part twos of box office hits or B-grade versions packaged to look like box office hits of the past. I wondered how *Pirates of the Caribbean* had become Hollywood's hottest property, and why it warranted not just one but two sequels.

Every movie seemed to be based on exactly the same plot, every book on exactly the same premise. In politics and in business, in sport and in the arts, the same handful of familiar tropes appeared and reappeared in transparently thin disguises, in the newspaper headlines, in magazine articles, on the radio, across the internet and on TV.

When I did see a good film, or an interesting one, I scrutinized the credits in search of the source of inspiration. Most of them seemed to be based on stories by Philip K. Dick.

Of course there were others, brilliant gems that gleamed in the dross. Almost without exception they were foreign films, small budget films, or films sponsored by independent studios.

Were there no more stories to be told? Or was it that interesting ideas for new scripts were being buried by nervous actuaries working in the bowels of the Hollywood machine?

There was another possibility, of course. Perhaps the new audiences, grown up on the schlock of poor TV, no longer cared whether they were watching something interesting or not.

I turned to the West End in the hope that Hollywood's apparent allergy to new ideas hadn't infected London's best and brightest.

Billy Elliot, Blood Brothers, Chicago, Dancing in the Streets, Guys and Dolls, Les Misérables, The Lion King, Mamma Mia!, Mary Poppins, Phantom of the Opera, The Producers, The Rat Pack Live from Las Vegas, Sinatra at the London Palladium, We Will Rock You, Dirty Dancing, Daddy Who and Evita.

The most popular of the lot was *Mary Poppins*, sold out for months. Only a couple contained material written in the past two decades. Music of 1950s, 1960s and 1970s was obviously still in huge demand, Abba, Diana Ross, Queen, Sinatra (going as 'live' but dead these 15 years) and the rest were tired old remakes of remakes of remakes.

Somewhere out there, in dark basements or dingy attics, in abandoned warehouses or unused cellars, the various muses of originality were being held hostage by unknown captors, for inscrutable purposes.

As for music itself, the crisis of originality was so public and so loud it was impossible to ignore. During their battle against Napster the big corporations that owned all the music almost succeeded in convincing us that they were the good guys, protecting musicians from the rapacious pirates of the internet. History proved otherwise.

Instead of anticipating the opportunities that the burgeoning internet would provide, the music companies had clung desperately to the tried and tested model that was making a mint out of the back catalogues. Instead of taking a chance on new music, or investing in new talent, they tried to shore up the crumbling walls of their entitlement in the copyright courts.

It took the Arctic Monkeys to prove, once and for all, that the old model was dead. The collapse of the rapaciously expensive CD system saw Warner Music and EMI dancing to the tune of the marketplace, where buyers eventually get what they want at a price they're prepared to pay. It used to cost £12.99 to get the track you wanted together with 19 tracks you didn't want. Now you can download the track you want for a few pence.

But it was a damaging war, and it left an entire generation without any music they could call their own.

Things were no different on the political front. The ill-conceived foray into Iraq had ended in a bloody stalemate as sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite mocked the optimistic plans of Bush and Blair.

The intention was clear enough – to create a capitalist paradise in the oil-rich centre of Islam. All of the major corporations were lined up in advance. There were going to be Wal-Marts from Basra to Kurdistan. All the Iraqis needed to come round to democracy were Pantene and Coco Pops at really keen prices.

Among the collateral victims of this unfolding tragedy were ideas good enough to resolve it.

I began to see the same pattern in the business pages.

Skype was – and is – a brilliant idea. Free telephony across the internet. Why didn't BT think of that? I loved Skype, the simplicity of the branding, the ease of use, the free phone calls to South Africa. Skype proved what we'd always suspected – you didn't need to pay £100 a month to use the phone. The telecoms companies had been having a laugh all these years.

When Skype sold out to eBay for \$2.6 billion many users feared the worst. Fresh and surprising new ideas like Skype don't come along very often. And no sooner had they arrived than they were snapped up by monster companies whose financial advisors identified them as opportunities for growth. What the critics forgot, of course, was that eBay, too, was a fresh and surprising idea when it first appeared.

eBay, Skype, Google, YouTube – the pattern was clear. The really good ideas were coming from individuals or small groups who worked independently

of the major players, outside of the corporations or the existing business structures. The Arctic Monkeys, Brin and Page, the Skype guys, the auteurs, Berners-Lee himself.

The big companies seemed to be very good at exploiting ideas once they'd bought them, but pretty awful at coming up with them themselves. When was the last time you saw a good idea from an oil company or a bank? Why couldn't Microsoft have invented Google?

In film, theatre and music, in broadcasting and in advertising, in publishing, software development and now, apparently, in business in general, the organizations with the most resources, with the most talent and the most money were consistently failing to deliver the one thing their CEOs claimed to covet above all else, the ideas and innovations that would translate their steady curves of growth into quantum leaps of fortune and fame.

It would be easy enough to blame their risk aversion on shareholders who preferred steady growth to the chance of failure – even glorious failure. But the lack of imaginative adventure has somehow infected the non-commercial creative sectors, such as public broadcasting and state-sponsored cultural endeavours like the theatre, ballet and those other arts in the UK and elsewhere that benefit from public coffers.

In July 2007 that most venerable of creative public institutions, the British Broadcasting Corporation, was accused in a nationwide poll of viewers to be failing to deliver fresh and original programming. Rather than being sheltered by public money from the cold winds of commercial pressure, the BBC had become a bellwether of a steadily cooling creative climate. The BBC is a special case that we will go into in more detail a little later. It is the case that will prove that the imaginative malaise of almost all of the world's large organizations, including governments and the larger NGOs, goes deeper than a conservative regard for the bottom line. We shall see that it is rooted in a profound misunderstanding of the nature of creativity, and the way creative people have come to be managed.

Ever since 9/11 I had been marking the days when it seemed as though ideas had run out forever. The day that Leo Sayer's 'Thunder in My Heart' got to number one on the UK charts. The day that James Blunt got to number one in the US. The release of *Pirates of the Caribbean III*. The beginning of *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* on the BBC. The Harry Potter phenomenon for proving that there were no other books to get excited about. The sale of YouTube. The day Google sold out in China. The UK advertising industry's disastrous per-

formance at Cannes in 2007. The bill to cut PBS funding in the US. The Danish cartoon madness. The ‘surge’ in Iraq. The Hamas debacle. The war in Lebanon. There were too many to count, and I gave up in frustration.

But then there were the exceptions that proved the rule: breakthroughs in genome research, extraordinary new drugs – if only for people who could pay for them; advances in astronomy, physics and technology in general. And the exceptions had a pattern, too. In every instance they were achieved by individuals or small groups whose specialist knowledge protected them from the organizational idea-killers. Or, in the case of exceptional consumer brands like Apple or Dyson, they were driven forward by CEOs with an emotional stake in the success of the company.

It wasn’t, I realized after all, that the world had run out of ideas. It was simply that the world had forgotten how good ideas were created in the first place.

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