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Atavism for the Future
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Atavism—strange word. In the scientific discourse of biology since the nineteenth century, it denotes the reversion or recurrence of phenotypical traits in animals and plants. Rather than resembling its parents, an organism with observed atavism resembles an ancestral type in the past, potentially the very distant past. Examples of atavism include relatively common conditions such as color blindness, but also polydactyly (extra digits), vestigial tails, the reappearance of limbs in certain invertebrates that had evolved to leave them behind, and the reemergence of sexual reproduction in flowering plants. Words like “reversion,” “recurrence,” “reemergence,” and “reappearance” effectively mask the way this discourse tends to treat atavisms as thinly veiled curiosities lurking in the unknown corners of the genome, human or otherwise. Perhaps “recrudescence,” which names the renewal of an undesirable condition like a disease, would be more apt. Or, considered more psychoanalytically, a Freudian return of the repressed. In each case, the Latin prefix re- does heavy lifting in locating the phenomenon in both time and space, simultaneously capturing a sense of repetition and a backward motion.

In modern English, we use a variety of spatial metaphors to talk about time as if they were plainly obvious and natural. We can say, for instance, that “You have your whole future ahead of you” and perfectly grasp the intended meaning. But such metaphors are culturally and historically specific. Strangely enough, the word



“atavism” itself encodes embodied concepts of time and space. Etymologically, it derives from the Latin *atavus* meaning a great-great-great-grandfather. Philologists disagree about the origin of *atavus*, but other Latin words for such distant relations in Roman culture used prepositions to orient them spatiotemporally (e.g., a *pronepos* or great-grandson who is literally *pro-*, or a step forward in the ascending or descending line, with respect to a *nepos* or grandson) in relation to the self (*ego*). These relations could be visualized along a vertical axis in a *stemma*, or family tree, painted in the atrium of an aristocratic household. But they could also be organized horizontally in the form of a funeral procession in which actors playing the role of

the ancestors stood in the front while the youngest members of the family (the *posteriores*, literally “(the ones) behind”), the future of the clan, trailed behind. Unlike us moderns, therefore, the Romans conceptualized the past as being situated in front of you because you can see and grasp its finitude, whereas the future lies behind you because it is perpetually unresolved or deferred, hence invisible.

In his classic essay *The Shape of Time*, first published in 1962, George Kubler tried to unravel the coupling of biological and spatial metaphors in formal analysis to shake the foundations of art history to their core. In place of a history of art, Kubler proposed a “history of things” including “both artifacts and works of art, both replicas

and unique examples, both tools and expressions—in short all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in a temporal sequence.” For Kubler, biological metaphors and their attendant logic of life-stages or life-cycles (divided into tidy periods of infancy, maturity, and old age) were of some use for the formalist study of art but inadequate to account for the sheer heterogeneity of things, or styled objects made by humans, in a given form-class. Nevertheless, Kubler was forced to admit that certain biological metaphors such as *mutants*—a term closely connected to observed atavisms in biology—are useful when talking about what he called “prime objects.” Like a prime number that is indivisible by anything other than itself, a prime object is an irreducibly original archetype: “A prime object differs from an ordinary object much as the individual bearer of a mutant gene differs from the standard example of that species.”

In tracking such mutations in the replica-mass emanating from a prime object across time, Kubler challenged the status of *meaning* as the supreme object of study. With statements like “Meanings undergo transformations by mere transfer, which are mistaken for changes in content,” Kubler anticipated later strands of so-called “German media theory” whose interest in media materialities sought to overturn transcendental systems of meaning-making. At the same time, he was looking to the work of Erwin Panofsky, who had already laid the groundwork for the cleavage of form and content in his iconographic method through what he called a “principle of disjunction” which essentially claimed that one culture can only truly understand another when there is enough space between them. In the Middle Ages, Panofsky claimed, “For want of a ‘perspective distance’ classical civilization could not be viewed as a coherent cultural system within which all things belonged together. ... The ‘distance’ created by the Renaissance deprived antiquity of its realness. The classical world ceased to be both a possession and a menace.” For Panofsky, “perspective” is no mere metaphor, but rather a *symbolic form*, the highest form of meaning at the level of culture (iconology).

Of course, as Kubler realized, the real world is not so neatly compartmentalized. Distance dilates between the durational logic of biological time on one hand and the intermittent events of history on the other. At stake is nothing less than semiotic processes of distancing and the abolition of distance, between symbolization and de-symbolization, of the kind that Aby Warburg theorized in his concept of the “pathos formula” that traced the survival and formalization of psychic movements. Perhaps the most famous model for this temporal collapse is in Warburg’s famous lecture on the Hopi snake rituals delivered in 1923, where he concluded with a grim diagnosis of his technological present:

The American of today is no longer afraid of the rattlesnake. He kills it; in any case, he does not worship it. It now faces extermination. The lightning imprisoned in wire—captured electricity—has produced a culture with no use for paganism. What has replaced it? Natural forces are no longer seen in anthropomorphic or biomorphic guise, but rather as infinite waves obedient to the human touch. With these waves, the culture of the machine age destroys what the natural sciences, born of myth, so arduously achieved: the space for devotion, which evolved in turn into the space required for reflection (*Denkraum*).

The modern Prometheus and the modern Icarus, Franklin and the Wright Brothers, who invented the dirigible airplane, are precisely those ominous destroyers of the sense of distance, who threaten to lead the planet back into chaos.

Telegram and telephone destroy the cosmos. Mythical and symbolic thinking strive to form spiritual bonds between humanity and the surrounding world, shaping distance into the space required for devotion and reflection: the distance undone by the instantaneous electric connection.

One shudders to think what Warburg would have made of our contemporary, chronically online, culture. Drained and divested of any pretense of auratic presence and historical specificity, our relationship to the past verges on the limit to which it was gradually, but inexorably heading ever since the Renaissance: a state of pure contingency, a floating signifier—one that indexes the past about as closely as financial derivatives do their underlying entities. But perhaps a more optimistic place to end is to suggest that we might restore *Denkraum*, “thought-space,” not through some feeble fantasy of primitive immediacy, but rather in the gaps or interstices between the present and the future.

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