Out of Place in Time & Space

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Spending A Few Minutes With Time

Anachronisms *vs* Reverse Anachronisms

What is time? The interval between events. What is the interval between events composed of? Time.

Obviously, we don't understand time. It may be that we are not equipped to do so, since our perceptual framework depends on it (or, perhaps, creates it.) We are therefore incapable of stepping aside, so to speak, and looking at it.

But while each individual may not be able to step aside and perceive time for whatever it is, there is another complication: we are surrounded by other individuals, each of whom is also in the process of perceiving events sequentially and calling it time. What if synchronization slips?

There is evidence that it does slip—quite a bit, in fact, and on a vast scale.

Consider: we might not be able to perform any lab experiments that isolate the thing called "time" and examine its properties, but the cumulative history of the human race can be viewed as an on-going experiment involving bulk examples of human interaction with time. The resulting data might give us some clue about the nature of time, or it might simply confront us with the severity of our perceptual limitations.

Such data is indeed out there, and takes the form of anecdotes of what might be called reverse anachronisms. Under this meaning (and there are others) a standard anachronism is a thing, practice, belief, or knowledge depicted outside its proper setting in time. Examples would include movies about Ancient Rome where the participants speak English, or wear clothing sewn by machines. There is nothing unsettling about

such anachronisms, as they are the direct result of the decisions or negligence of the people involved in making the movie.

A reverse anachronism, by that logic, is a belief, practice, knowledge, or object from a modern setting that shows up in the past. Such things would seem to be impossible. But if we accept the idea that time is the result of our need to perceive events sequentially, and that mass perception could get out of synch, reverse anachronisms would seem inevitable.

And, glancing through history, you find them everywhere you look:

- The moons of Mars were described in a book of fiction 151 years before they were discovered.

- The Pacific War was described in recognizable detail in a book of fiction 16 years before it started.

- The Apollo Program was described in recognizable detail in a book of fiction about a century before it began.

- A Roman army was defeated in 212 BC by an assemblage of huge machines that we would recognize as tower-style construction cranes. They then disappear from history until the modern era.

- There's a Madonna and Child religious painting done about 1460, hanging in a museum in Europe, where the Christ Child appears to be playing with a flying toy helicopter.

- The Internet was recognizably described in 1945, about 50 years before the first Web server.

- The first scientific paper about computer science was written more than a century before the first programmable computer was built.

- There are ancient buildings constructed with methods we would call modern.

- Beyond that, there have been people who used specific modern technical or scientific methods or techniques decades or even centuries before they were officially discovered.

- Wargames or simulations have been conducted that prophesized with precision what was going to happen, including the Battle of Midway, and Hurricane Katrina. (In those cases no one paid any attention.)

- There have been cases of people who built careers around accurate personal visions of the future. (Sadly, you can't say that they were wildly successful despite their foreknowledge.)

Meanwhile (to use a word that implies the existence of time—sorry about that) if we accept that there are reverse anachronisms from the present showing up in the past, then logic demands that things from the future can also show up. Of course logic also demands that they would be hard to spot. Or, that we would only gradually figure out what they were, as they came into synch with the evolving present.

And that would be a good description of the situation of the Antikythera Mechanism, which was considered a geared oddity when it was found on the seabed in 1901. We now realize that it was a complex mechanical computer—computers having become common currency since 1901. So it was a reverse anachronism from the future when it was found, and became a reverse anachronism from the present as time (that word again) unfolded.

So, are there reverse anachronisms from the future around us right now, which we are not equipped to identify? Of course, that's hard to say, but there's a book from the Middle Ages (the Voynich Manuscript) that is written in no known language, and an ancient building (the Parthenon in Athens) constructed with methods we can't duplicate. Maybe someday we will be in a position to understand them.

Of course, if we are going to elevate reverse anachronisms into a serious field of study, we need to weed out cultural bias and artifacts of technological progress. These can look like reverse anachronisms, but really aren't. The former involves seeing things that are not really there, based purely on our expectations. For instance, some people today see flying saucers in certain medieval and renaissance religious paintings. But artists and worshipers in the medieval and renaissance period probably saw no such thing— they saw religious symbols, whose meaning was standard then but largely forgotten today.

As for technical progress, good engineers are likely to think along the same lines, and some will try to reduce a concept to practice long before it's practical. A prime example is the CSS Hunley, a Confederate submarine built in 1863. It outwardly resembled modern submarines, but consistently drowned its crews.

Meanwhile, since you started reading this article, perhaps three and a half minutes have passed, assuming you're a literate adult who read it for content and did not skim. But the odds are that you did not start reading from the beginning and continue through to this point. Your eyes probably darted to various points, where you read snatches of text. Finding them intriguing, you read more snatches, and then read the material in between. Now, seeing the bottom approaching, you're about to wrap it up, and will move on with the revised impression that you did read this material from the top straight through. If the article's information cemented any opinion you had, within a

short time you'll have a hard time pinpointing how you arrived at that opinion. Mainly, your attention will shift to something else and the act of reading this material will be in the past.

Whatever that is.