

Artifacts, Entanglements & Deep History: A Reflection on the Sublime in Art and Science

The emergence of deep history is shaping a contemporary concern with the origins of the human and its artifacts, beyond a reliance upon the written word of the (more shallow) past, which has formed a somewhat materialist history constituted by persons and things. Instead of a reliance upon documentary written evidence, a deep history attempts to re-instate the 'pre-history' of the written word – a genealogical and archeological history - through the *traces* of human consciousness left within human made artifacts, which themselves become containers for meanings and social relations (Shryock and Smail, 2011). Shryock and Smail insist that materials, just as the written word, contain *traces* of human kinship relations and exchanges. Seen within fossils, tools, pictures, household items, ecological change and genetic variation, these traces thus 'document' a deep history of the human mind, that extends into the material world. Such a reading of a deep history of the human through artifacts, may give evidence for an imaginary dimension of human desire (Punt, 2000), and by extension human perception, which opens up a deep history of the human beyond that of an axiomatic materialism.

Such a deep history would comprise a symbiotic treatment of material and immaterial - (im)material - dimensions of human experience, engaging within a world that itself is comprised of materials, forces and energies. Manuel DeLanda's non-linear geological history provides a useful guide, documenting the deep geological time and energy flows, which change speeds and momentarily harden to form the very crusts and landmarks of the environment (2000). Makers, such as designers and painters, have been sensitive to such an (im)material symbiosis through their practices. The painter Paul Klee's elementary theory of creativity recognised that form is always "set by the processes of giving form" (1964, p. 269), that energies and forces which are external to the practitioner, the properties of the materials used, beget movement and allow forms, such as painted lines and strokes, to emerge or grow. Such *form-giving* processes of growth involve not merely a single 'human' agent's intentions, but as contemporary studies in material culture have recognised, the very material properties, tensions, and resistances of matter itself (Ingold, 2010).

These (im)material *form-giving* processes of material engagement comprise, as the time geographer Torsten Hagerstrand termed, the texture of the world, a "Tapestry of Nature which history is weaving" (1976, p. 332), in which every constituent of the environment – human, animal, plant, stone, building - has (and is) a continuous trajectory (or thread) of becoming in counter-point to the rest of the tapestry. As the constituents move through time they encounter one another, and the trajectories of these diverse constituents are bundled together in diverse combinations of entanglements or knots. The Human, for Hagerstrand, as well as the human artifact, is always a counterpoint to trajectories constantly becoming, and as such is constituted by these trajectories just as much as their own threads of life. The origins that a deep history alert us to are, thus, not be found through an analysis of the traces left captured within the object themselves, but through the tracing of the *form-giving* process and trajectories that leave the traces.

Such thinkers concerned with this 'materiality' of form-giving maintain that the *origins* of human made tools, pictures or artifacts, are not to be traced backwards - from the outcome through a sequence of antecedent conditions, to an idea in the mind of an agent, but forwards - in recognising that the maker's role is to bring forth form through joining and following the forces and flows of materials themselves (Ingold, 2010). The 'creative origin' of an artefact lies, not in the tracing backwards to a single idea down a network of relations, but in the tracing of the forward movement, of the entanglements, following the flows of materials that give rise to things - the trajectories of diverse constituents, a tapestry or a meshwork.

An artifact is not, in this sense, an object (in distinction from a subject), or a 'thing' (as distinct from, but impacting upon humans), but is brought forth - is an *entanglement* of the joining and following of forces and flows of materials (Ingold, 2010). The origin of form is then not a single point of origin, but an *entanglement* of lines of movement in counter-point, the *form-giving* process itself. To trace a deep history of the distributed human through artifacts, then, is a question of tracing not an origin, but the form-giving processes - the trajectories of which the artifact is a counterpoint - the meshwork behind materials such as tools and pictures. Such a move could reveal a model of the human in which the (im)material nature of the meshwork, with the properties and energy flows of the material world, acts as

an extension of human agency. Human desire, as much as a desire of the materials themselves, play out through degrees of resistance, dependency and engagement.

This (im)material meshwork of *entanglements* could constitute the very sublime experiences revealed by the preceding editorials, the “thrills of connection to a larger reality” (Malina) which come with the thrill of discovery, leading to a “feeling that there is something more to an experience than what is expressed or grasped at that point” (Sarukkai), a “fascination with the infinite unknown” (Punt). Such a feeling, however, could describe not an internal bodily affect, but could comprise a momentary reveal of the distributed entanglement of the human within a wider meshwork, which comprises the very fabric of the larger reality. Situated within this meshwork we could suggest that Science doesn’t necessarily deal with the altogether different world of instrumentation to that of the human senses that may be believed. Nor to that of the artist. Rather, Scientific instruments- just like fossils, tools and household items- could be seen themselves as a material trace of *kinshipping*, of desire, cognition and imagination (Drayson, 2011), entangled within the meshwork of the world. As the presence of the sublime within the disciplines of science and art could reveal the very connecting fabric of their interwoven nature, the sublime itself could be a key (or a thread pick) to unraveling this deep inter-woven tapestry of reality. A historiography of the human, and by counterpoint - of disciplines themselves, could be achieved through the very deep history of the artifacts, knots, entanglements and meshworks that give them form.

References

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