

IDOLS AND ART: THE COGNITIVE FETISH

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Drawing upon theories of embodied cognition and the extended mind and the writings of maverick psychologist Julian Jaynes, this paper speculates on the function and roles of anthropomorphism and idolatry in our relationship with technology.

Objects and Anthropomorphism

In her abstract for this panel Nancy Mauro Flude concludes with the question:

“Anthropomorphism continually haunts us, and our machines – have we always been and will we fundamentally remain idolaters?”

From religion to Barbie dolls and the family pet, anthropomorphism is fundamental to the way that humans relate to the world and objects around us. We make god in our own image, and he generally shares our political beliefs and social prejudices. With dolls we can explore our social fears, frustrations and interactions with others, safe from the emotional holocaust of the playground. If we didn't anthropomorphise our pets, we wouldn't empathise with them, and they would cease to be pets.

It is through anthropomorphism that we relate to entities that we see as separate to ourselves, it is a prerequisite for empathy. However a cursory consideration for the history of human interaction with our fellow creatures makes it quite clear we are capable of being selective in our anthropomorphism.

But is it useful to anthropomorphise my toaster and worry that it may be getting bored from cooking too much toast, or fret that my bicycle is feeling rejected because I haven't taken it for a ride recently. Or that my laptop is impatient because of the time I wasted in looking at pictures of robots while avoiding writing this talk.

So the question is, with what and when should we anthropomorphise? To gain some insight into this I'd like to mash up two theories that lie outside the mainstream.

The hypothesis of the Extended Mind

The first is the hypothesis of the Extended Mind, first put forward by philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers in 1999. [1] Clark and Chalmers argue that cognition is not confined to the brain or even the body. As humans we have evolved to co-opt aspects of our environment to augment our thought processes. For instance we can count larger numbers using our fingers, codify abstract information using dirt and a stick, or enhance memory by writing things down on a notepad. Clark and Chalmers argue that by learning to use and rely on these external objects they become equivalent to the internal processes they augment or replace.

Under this view, my laptop is not something that I anthropomorphise, it is actually a part of me, it augments my ability to write, to remember, to visualise and to know. I don't ascribe feelings to it; in the

same way I don't ascribe feelings to a limb or organ. Before I can anthropomorphise a technological other, it has to be an automaton – an independent machine entity.

Julian Jaynes and the ability to Anthropomorphise

The second and somewhat more radical theory I'd like to discuss is by maverick 20C century psychologist Julian Jaynes. Jaynes in his 1977 book "The origin of consciousness in the break down of the bicameral mind" proposes that the structure and organisation of the human mind has continued to evolve since Palaeolithic times. [2] Our modern conscious self-awareness, the introspecting 'I', emerged only 2000 years ago under the pressures of increasingly large and complex societies punctuated by natural disasters and war.

Before then Jaynes believed that our minds were bicameral in organisation, that the two hemispheres operated independently, the left-brain dealing with the routine details of the present. The right brain would communicate with the left through auditory hallucinations in the form of commands apparently from authority figures. At first the authoritative voices were those of the chief or king, and when the chief died his would continue to be heard, and became the first gods. In their left-brain state the people were caught in the moment; lacking introspection they were capable only of dealing with normal routine. When faced with stressful situations or problems outside the norm the voices from the right would provide advice or command a course of action. Jaynes paints a picture of a peaceful ordered society where everybody knew their place, where people literally walked and talked with their personal gods.

It is impossible to do justice to Jayne's theory in a few sentences, and perhaps it sounds a bit like something from the pen of L Ron Hubbard or Eric Von Daniken, but Jaynes's scholarship is impressive and he uses his theory to describe one of the most intriguing explanations for the development of religion that follows the gradual breakdown of the bicameral mind. As the individual sense of self-awareness grew, the hallucinated voices began to fade. The insecurity and loss of certainty that this created drove humans to find ways to try and recapture the direction and wisdom of the gods, and so developed increasingly complex and desperate ways to recapture this connection. Idols, prophets, oracles, seers, prayer, divination, auguries, poetry and art were all at different times used as ways to invoke the lost voices.

For instance the idols of the early first millennium BCE had large exaggerated eyes which command attention, and Jaynes hypothesised that the large eyes of the idols aided the people in entering states where they could again hear the auditory hallucinations. It is hard not to wonder if we still see vestiges of this in the large eyes of anime characters, or in the power of television to captivate us.

Neuroscience and thinking through objects

The insight and knowledge gained from neuroscience over the past twenty years tends to support some of Jayne's ideas. Cognition in the view of Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio involves emotion and physical sensation as much as it does logic or mental reasoning. [3] We say that cognition is embodied, that we use our body and intuition as much as reason to make sense of the world. We all know as artists, that you don't make art through normal verbal consciousness, and while we no longer wait to be possessed by the Muses, we do make use of non-conscious understanding and intuition. A part of the art making process for many is an almost trance like engagement with materials as we think through our work.

Art historian Barbara Stafford talks about the power of art to construct analogy and develops a theory of art where artefacts are cognitive objects that communicate through analogical thinking. [4] In a similar way that Clark describes the way we use objects in our environment to extend our mental capacity, it is hard not to conjecture that when we engage with an artwork we participate in an act of communion or communication with it, it becomes part of our thoughts. In this view the idols of the ancient world are cognitive aids that helped them to enter a mental state where the right side of the brain could direct and advise the 'everyday' left via aural hallucinations.

Idolatry is a contemptuous term, it implies an unreasoning worship, an unfounded abasement before inanimate objects – and so it must have seemed to those who no longer entered the trance and were cut off from the voices. Did the Idolaters anthropomorphise their idols? Their relationship would have been too literal for the metaphorical anthropomorphism that later developed.

Conclusions

In pondering the perspectives that the theories of Clark and Jaynes provide, I've come to the conclusion that we need a different category to describe our relationship with our digital artefacts. They are not inanimate objects, yet neither are they in their current form alive and worthy of empathy. They are the new idols, and we engage in idolatry that extends from the naive to the sophisticated.

At the naive extreme we may anthropomorphise these artefacts and ascribe authority to what they tell us. For example television is the ultimate Idol for the naive, it places us in a trance like state of passivity as it informs and commands.

At the other extreme they are thinking tools, augmentations that we have co-opted and incorporated into our cognitive frameworks, they become part of what we are, not some other. We think with these artefacts and not so much about them.

As technological humans we are idolaters, but that doesn't mean that idolatry is unquestioning worship from those in thrall to the idols, it could be the sign of a fruitful cognitive engagement that can extend our thinking and understanding of the world to places and states that haven't been possible before.

References and Notes:

1. *Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," in Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension, ed. Andy Clark, 220-232 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).*
2. *Julian Jaynes, The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).*
3. *António R. Damásio, Descartes' error : emotion, reason and the human brain (London: Picador, 1995).*
4. *Barbara Maria Stafford, Echo objects : the cognitive work of images (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).*