

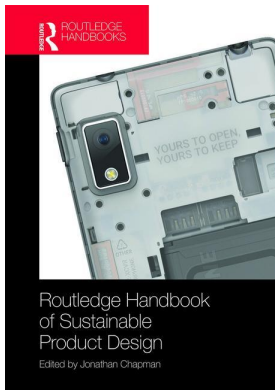
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3

A RENAISSANCE OF ANIMISM

A meditation on the relationship
between things and their makers

Michael Leube

Abstract

It is striking that designers often speak of the *spirit* of good design. That *spirit* is the decisive goal of designers yet it escapes definition, description and often evades discussion. This chapter is a meditation on the complex interaction between design and *animism*. First, an exploration of what is commonly known as *animism* is required, for the difference between *animism* and *post-animism* has only little to do with the belief in the life of things, and actually, is a severely outdated construct of the nineteenth century. Second, the current discussion on *animistic* epistemologies is reviewed in order to further clarify the term and to enable a more inclusive and relational discourse for product design theory. Third, some evolutionary considerations are dedicated to the question of cognitive epistemologies in general and whether or not humans are innately *animistic*, specifically. Finally, purposeful *animism* – the idea of designing animistic relationships between objects and users of objects – is explored. Here *emotional durability* as a design direction is addressed since it seeks to create stronger emotionality and enduring interaction with things, which in turn can lead to a more sustainable use of resources. Things regarded as housing a spirit – it is assumed here – are more likely to be revered and protected.

Keywords: animism, design, unilineal evolutionism, epistemologies

Introduction

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

– Arthur C. Clark

In 1877 Thomas Edison used his ‘talking machine’ to reproduce ‘Mary had a Little Lamb’, which he had just sung into a cylinder and for the first time one was able to listen to a reproduction of one’s own voice. The ensuing discussion caused widespread anxieties about a spirit world hidden in electrically animated objects and one can only speculate on the

reaction of the same people to Apple's launch of Siri (Speech Interpretation and Recognition Interface) as part of the iPhone 4S back in 2011. Talking to inanimate objects is nothing new and humans have likely done it since the beginning of our species but that communication has just transmuted to a dialogue. As our tools' communication improves, users move in a little closer to listen and respond. We already pinch, tap, touch, hold and talk to our devices and it seems that ironically, Modernity has returned to *animism*.

Anthropologist Alfred Gell calls the spell that speaking, beeping and flashing objects have on us the 'enchantment of technology.' He writes that this is 'the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form' (Gell, 1992, p44). When the animated objects around us become interconnected – as in the phenomenon dubbed *internet of things* – our living rooms turn into living entities and we into modern shamans staring in disbelief. Indeed, it has become more normalized to be *animistic*, as the things around us are gaining 'souls'. Of course things have still not literally been animated but the distinction between life and death has become a little trickier, and more complex to manage. As Arthur C. Clark famously stated in his second law, it gets harder to distinguish between technology and magic, the more advanced a civilization is. Our phones communicating with our cars, thermostats, washing machines and us, has become a present scenario; the relationship we have with everyday objects is changing with what might be described as a kind of *renaissance of animism*.

Diametrically opposed to such *enchantment*, stands Max Weber's *disenchantment* to describe a world void of magic, a world predictable and calculable. Weber's *Entzauberung der Welt*, first used in 1919 was a concept borrowed from Friedrich Schiller's poem *Die Götter Griechenlandes* of 1788. Both Weber and Schiller addressed the consequences an overly rational worldview dawning during the Enlightenment might have, and the resulting romantic longing to magical and unexplored times. They insinuated that while the European mindset had accepted that the things surrounding them were void of magic rationally, on a more archaic and basal cognitive level the human mind has not been able to keep up with the rapid technological advances brought by Industrialization. What is striking is that now, when there seems to be more 'magic' around us than ever before we seem to be extremely careless and wasteful with the things producing such magic. Perhaps the most satisfactory explanation for why we have become so careless with our magical artifacts comes from the seminal *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, where Thorsten Veblen combined economics and Darwinian theory to explain why we conspicuously consume (Veblen, [1899]2005). Once basic human needs are satisfied – the argument goes – it makes sense to advertise the ability to consume over and beyond our share of resources. The resulting runaway consumerism seems to follow some archaic patterns and when combined with *planned obsolescence* obviously has detrimental environmental consequences (Slade, 2007). Geographer and biologist Jared Diamond even speaks of *ecocide* (Diamond, 2005) when describing this destructive behavioral pattern.

One approach to avoiding ecological disaster is the optimistic work of McDonough and Braungart. They believe that the green movement does not have to be based on austerity and to the contrary can be one of abundance as long as the 'technical nutrients' are kept in a healthy cycle (McDonough and Braungart, 2010, 2013). Evolution as an innovative process is very wasteful, and experimentation tends to trump conservatism. Similarly, humans could enjoy a life of abundance as long as the design of our everyday things considers several lives instead of just one. Instead of doing 'less bad', designers should be encouraged to do 'more good', to *upcycle* rather than recycle (McDonough and Braungart, 2010, 2013). Although such considerations are indispensable for a needed design revolution, this chapter argues for greater emotional attachment to the products we already have. As the things around us

become 'alive', is it not feasible to expect more emotionality and experience? It is argued here that that more emotional durability can be achieved not simply through more things 'alive' but by actually overcoming the false epistemology of Cartesian objectivism. In the words of Bruno Latour:

If there is one thing to wonder about in the history of Modernism, it is not that there are still people 'mad enough to believe in animism', but that so many hard-headed thinkers have invented what should be called inanimism and have tied to this sheer impossibility their definition of what it is to be 'rational' and 'scientific'. It is inanimism that is the queer invention: an agency without agency constantly denied by practice.

(Latour, 2010, p10)

Animism then and now

The British anthropologist Edward Tylor (1832–1917) first articulated the term *animism* calling it the 'idea of pervading life and will in nature' (Tylor, 1871). In his *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, he clearly laid out the task of cultural anthropology to discover 'stages of development or evolution.' One of the most important *unilineal evolutionists* of the nineteenth century, Tylor believed in set stages that all societies passed through. In that tradition, analysis of cross-cultural data was based on the assumptions that (1) contemporary societies may be classified and ranked as more 'primitive' or more 'civilized', (2) there are a determinate number of stages between 'primitive' and 'civilized' (e.g. band, tribe, chiefdom, and state) and (3) all societies progress through these stages in the same sequence, but at different rates. It is extremely important to note here that *unilineal evolutionism* built its 'evolution' on Lamarckian not Darwinian premises. Specifically it was the *social Darwinism* of Herbert Spencer with its assumption that cultural evolutionism followed the same laws as natural selection. Hence, 'primitive societies' were like time machines illustrating the different stages of a universal human history (Koeb, 1996). Herbert Spencer, the author of the infamous phrase 'survival of the fittest' was actually far more influential on nineteenth century social theorists than Charles Darwin ever was and most social scientists accepting evolutionism of that time were technically 'Spencerists', not 'Darwinists'. Perhaps the most important distinction to Darwin was that Spencer always included a teleological principle, which he called a *persistence of force* ordained by the *Unknowable*. Thus, it is very easy to hear echoes of Spencer in the following quote from Tylor written in 1889: 'The social habits of Mankind follow each other like geological strata, universally in the same fashion without regards to the superficial differences of race or languages' (Altmer, 1981). Unlike his contemporary Lewis Henry Morgan, who addressed such 'strata' in terms of technological advances, Tylor did the same for spiritual stages. The anthropology of the nineteenth century was a science largely based on library research and grand theories and it was not until the early twentieth century that scientists like Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas pioneered field research by actually visiting the people they wrote about. Peoples foreign to the so called 'armchair anthropologists' of the nineteenth century had and did things Europeans did in prehistory and were thus seen as being stuck in the Neolithic. Indeed the term 'stone age people' has remained popular to this day in popular science. While *unilineal evolutionism* argued that similarity is due to homology, a competing *diffusionism* postulated the spread of items of culture from regions of innovation.

Tylor will forever be held responsible for the anthropological construct known as *animism*. According to him, this was the most primitive stage in belief systems, strongly suggested spiritual or supernatural perspectives and came before the development of organized religion. The *animist* stage of belief was followed by a polytheistic and final monotheistic stage. To Tylor, *animism* has no institution (e.g. a synagogue, mosque, or church), it does not have an unchangeable doctrine (e.g. a belief in a son of God), and it doesn't have sacred literature (e.g. the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, the New Testament). From the Latin *anima* ('breath, spirit, life') it became known as the belief in the possession of a spiritual essence or soul of non-human entities such as animals, plants or inanimate objects. Interestingly the vast majority of cultures do not have a term for such belief and even the described practitioners of *animism* do not use the term, suggesting that the phenomenon is little more than a European construct of the nineteenth century.

The concept is one of the oldest – if not *the* oldest – concept in anthropology and is generally presented as a human universal pushed to the background through the advent of *Modernism*. Although it is generally presented as something existing in all human cultures, the only thing truly universal is its presence in anthropology textbooks. *Animism* stands for traditionalism; for an outdated, even absurd practice no longer done. The term also became part of a larger construct of the notion of a time before and after bestowing souls onto material things, a time before and after Modernity. If all matter has spirit – the logic goes – then the Cartesian duality of mind and matter and that of society and nature becomes senseless. With that juxtaposition, *animism* actually becomes a violation of the Cartesian worldview. Since the social condition and technological accomplishments associated with Modernity are founded on the categorical distinction of nature and society, *animism* became associated with something antiquated, nothing more than an anthropological curiosity. With modern product design, however, such ideas seem to be alive and well.

In all fairness Tylor did not propose a clear-cut division between *animists* and *non-animists*. He did concede that the strange *animistic* rituals that we continue practicing are *survivals* of times past. Examples include the knocking on inanimate wood in order to expel any bad spirits that might interfere with future plans, or the widespread use of talismans and lucky charms. His definition of such *survivals*:

processes, customs, and opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved.

(Tylor, 1871, p16)

Tylor conceptualizes his famous *survivals* as cultural elements or complexes that although once making a certain sense within a specific context they are now anachronistic remnants. It is interesting to note that the concept is similar to the idea of the *meme*. In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins first called ideas that for better or for worse become viral, *memes* and actually founded a new field of inquiry called *memetics* (Dawkins, 2006). *Survivals* are no longer in harmony with current cultural settings and are thus like *memes* of the past. To Tylor they were to be eliminated as he considered them to be merely harmful superstition. Similarly, Dawkins considers religious practices anachronistic and harmful to a scientific worldview.

If we really are Cartesianists, and have moved beyond a spirited world save for a few vestibules, when was that stance really adopted? Nineteenth-century positivism raised technology to Godly heights and with it created a semi-religious faith in techno-scientific

progress and empirical methods. There was no room for a worldview that regarded all natural phenomena on par. Tylor and other *unilineal evolutionists* maintained that *animists* were somehow stunted and maintained a lower conception of the universe and *animism* became a failed epistemology or backward stage in the social development. The danger and far-reaching consequences of such ideas become apparent when considering that *unilineal evolutionism* is intrinsically related to *Modernization Theory* (Rostow, 1990) via the writings of the so-called *Neo-evolutionists* (White, 1954) and thus the idea that all civilizations imperatively have to move through the same stages of development are causally linked to world developmental politics. Therefore, it seems there are two problems with the original perception of *animism*. First, the belief system was wrongly defined, and second the so-called developed world, the West isn't really Cartesian. For modern product design, however there might lurk an opportunity rather than a problem since animistic tendencies could potentially lead to more product attachment and consumer satisfaction.

Mistaken epistemologies

Ever since Descartes's *Discourse on Method* (1637), modern Europeans have decided to think in terms of subject/object dualism but such a mode of classification was just that: a classification. To a large degree *Modernism* is actually based on objectifying nature, of doing away with any notion of a subject–subject based relationship. *Animism* – as defined in the nineteenth century – rejects Cartesian dualism and is now – truly like a *survival* of itself – anchored in the esoteric, non-scientific traditions. Recently, anthropologists and comparative-religion scholars have re-defined *animism* to mean something different (Bird-David, 1999; Descola, 2005, 2006, 2009; Harvey, 2006; Ingold, 2000). Thus, our relationships with the world, and the frontiers between human and nonhuman – even between living and non-living – are being reconsidered.

Until recently, the core of anthropological research was indigenous knowledge, seen as mistaken epistemologies, as un-scientific and irrational worldviews. Lately the tables are being turned and indigenous thought is used to critique modern epistemology, which is closely linked to Western *modernization theory*. Tim Ingold (2000), Nurit Bird-David (1999) and Philippe Descola (1994) have shown that not only ancient but also contemporary people with diverse systems of subsistence continue to approach their non-human environments through what is now being called a *relational* stance. Radically, such *posthumanism* has spawned discussions on building a new Modernity after the present world order (Hardt and Negri, 2009). Indeed *animism* is going through a thorough reassessment (Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2006; Descola, 2013). Guthrie, in an extensive and comprehensive discussion of animism and anthropomorphism, defines animism as humans 'attributing life to the nonliving' and anthropomorphism as 'attributing human characteristics to the nonhuman' (Guthrie, 1993, p52). *Animism* is now treated as an alternative, relational ontology allowing a rethinking of the problem of matter and agency and as a worldview that goes beyond human exceptionalism and superiority; one that embraces all non-humans.

For example, in Descola's writing, a new classification of the term hinging on two sets of variables is offered. Cultural groups perceive a basic similarity or a fundamental dissimilarity between humans and non-humans in terms of (1) interiority, which could include such categories as *intentionality*, *reflexivity* and *subjectivity*, and (2) *physicality*, which include substance, form or phenotype (Descola, 2009, p150). He writes:

Either most existing entities are supposed to share a similar interiority whilst being different in body, and we have animism, as found among peoples of the

Amazonian basin, the Northern reaches of North America and Siberia and some parts of Southern Asia and Melanesia. Or humans alone experience the privilege of interiority whilst being connected to the non-human continuum by their materiality and we have naturalism – Europe from the classical age. Or some humans and non-humans share, within a given framework, the same physical and moral properties generated by a prototype, whilst being wholly distinguishable from other classes of the same type and we have totemism – chiefly to be found among Australia's Aborigines. Or all the world's elements are ontologically distinct from one another, thence the necessity to find stable correspondences between them and we have analogism – China, Renaissance Europe, West Africa, the indigenous peoples of the Andes and Central-America.

(Descola, 2015)

For Descola, *animism* is thus an articulation of one of four options. It is an understanding that all classes of beings (human and non-human) exchange signs, similar to the tenet of the field of *biosemiotics*, where everything that occurs in the universe is a semiotic event (Hoffmeyer, 1996; Barbieri, 2008; Wheeler, 2006). What emerges is a scientifically sophisticated *animism*, which understands all things as related in their nature as signaling entities, but different in their physical appearances or phenotype. Entities such as plants or even rocks may be approached as communicative subjects rather than the inert objects perceived by rationalists. And indeed smartphones and microwave ovens that beep and blink are signaling entities and if we respond to them in a purposeful manner then communication is complete. This new perception of *animism* is important because it overcomes the nineteenth century conundrum of animism as nemesis to *Modernity*. Here *animism* is something that could be shared by all peoples regardless of their technological advances, something that can lead to more emotional attachment to things, and in turn more sustainability. Thus, Graham Harvey has used the *new animism* as a way of more sound ecological harmony with all things (Harvey, 2005) since for humans it is likely easier to exploit and abuse a soulless entity. Tim Ingold, too has contributed much to a relativist understanding of the phenomenon labeled *animism*. He writes of the people we typically label *animists* of the Amazonian and the circumpolar North:

First, we are dealing here not with a way of believing about the world but with a condition of being in it ... The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation.

(Ingold, 2006, p10)

Parliament of things

French philosopher, sociologist and *post-constructivist* Bruno Latour writes: 'There is no way to devise a successor to nature, if we do not tackle the tricky question of animism anew' (Latour, 2010, p9). His *parliament of things* is probably the most radical notion emerging in a discussion on a new *animism* (Latour, 1993). He argues that *Modernity* was never more than a mode or ideology of sorting and that *pensée sauvage* (primitive thinking) was not displaced by a dualistic *pensée modern* (modern thinking). Of course Latour writes in accordance with structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who thought the *savage mind* not to belong

to primitive people but as a kind of mind untamed by rational domestication (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). Thus, we have actually ‘never been modern’ and the notion of modern people cleanly separating the world of subjects and objects might have been an illusion from the start (Latour, 2012). Modern, industrialized Westerners animate objects around them more than the so-called *animists* and in reality humans everywhere attach *animacy* and personhood to things. We talk to our cars and give them anthropomorphic forms. We have favorite trees, houses, cars and teddy bears. We curse at our computers, give our boats names and – at least children – sleep with inanimate forms resembling animals. According to Latour, such hypocrisy must be addressed by first accepting that the Cartesian dualism we are socialized to accept is phony in order to then recognize a new *parliament of things*. He writes:

However, we do not have to create this Parliament out of whole cloth, by calling for yet another revolution. We simply have to ratify what we have always done, provided that we reconsider our past, provided that we understand retrospectively to what extent we have been modern, and provided that we rejoin the two halves of the symbol broken by Hobbes and Boyle as a sign of recognition. Half of our politics is constructed in science and technology. The other half of Nature is constructed in societies. Let us patch the two back together, and the political task can begin again.

(Latour, 1993)

Truly, Latour did not invent this kind of ‘anthropology of things’ and it does have a considerable history. At the end of the 1800s Émile Durkheim, for example already used his term *social fact* to mean equally a thing and a structure. Marcel Mauss’s *Gift* (1950) gave a solid foundation to this analytic of things and is enjoying a kind of rebirth in discussions of post-capitalistic economies. And thus also can be understood Daniel Miller’s current analysis of material culture in such books as *A Theory of Shopping* (Miller, 1998). However, what sets Latour apart is his clear, persuasive approach. By creating symmetry between human and non-human entities, Latour sees society as humans assembled around things instead of vice versa. In this way, he breaks down the heavy barriers between the realms of nature and of culture that we have learned to accept just as between the subject and object. This *principle of symmetry*, when coupled with John Law’s actor-network theory shows a highly complex world where humans and non-human things and animals interact freely. It is a world where the non-human actors are granted the same amount of agency as humans. Latour’s analysis is a fascinating exploration of hybridity of different ‘network-players’. Ignored by the rigorously divided chambers of science and politics, the *parliament of things* would finally lend a voice to the hybrids of Modernity. An example of such a hybrid – a network player that is both thing and structure – is the ghetto of most modern cities. But most importantly, Latour’s model is the rejection of the basic distinction between nature and culture and with that a rejection of modernity itself. Modern society itself seems to have rested on a collective self-delusion from the start.

The savage mind

There is no before and after in history. A modern, rational mind never replaced a superstitious, primitive one just like the *conquistadores* of various eras and nations never found *savages* on lower evolutionist strata. In short, mistaken epistemologies aren’t replaced. Rather, the human mind perceives and makes sense of the world on different levels of abstraction simultaneously and it is thus important to inject the above epistemological discussions with

some biological considerations. Here, we won't satisfactorily answer the question if humans are naturally prone to *animism* or not but we can assume that the human species – like all living organisms – is a complex product of evolution. We are so good at reasoning on the basis of design from birth onward that it is very likely a genetically evolved adaptation (Wilson, 2011), and thus each one of us truly is a designer.

At the dawn of speciation, *Homo habilis* developed the first artifacts, *culture* was synonymous with *design* and the designer was Promethean. Ancestral Hominids have failed to evolve many defensive characteristics (Lorenz, 1964), but without a doubt they advanced to become the species most sophisticated at *niche construction* since we deliberately change most aspects of our environment (Odling-Schmee et al., 2003). The blueprint for the things we design – hand axes, houses and smartphones – are never genetically anchored but the potential to shape existing matter into new forms and in new ways likely is. Dennis Dutton believes all forms of design including art are innate. He speaks of the *art instinct* and argues that the production and acquisition of aesthetic objects has brought our ancestors a survival advantage (Dutton, 2009). Most importantly here, is the consideration that while the designer has to design for the circumstances of the twenty-first century, they should never forget that the end user has an archaic mind.

Tim Ingold has addressed what he has labeled the 'logic of inversion,' according to which 'the person, acting and perceiving within a nexus of intertwined relationships, is presumed to behave according to the directions of cultural models or cognitive schemata installed inside his or her head' (Ingold, 2006, p11). Thus a person is not able to experience the world the way it truly is but is 'sealed off by an outer boundary or shell that protects their inner constitution from the traffic of interactions with their surroundings' (ibid.). When accepting a Darwinian evolution of the brain itself, it becomes plausible that individuals experience life on several epistemological levels simultaneously. Thus, it becomes plausible that the most archaic level of the human brain has set the basic belief that all things are acting entities as a default position. From the research of paleoanthropology, primatology, archaeology and genetics we now know that the vast majority of our evolutionary history was tribal, nomadic and sustainable and thus radically different to life today (Diamond, 2005, 2012; Wilson, 2012). If we just paid attention, we would realize that we are often ill adjusted to the niche we have designed around ourselves for hundreds of thousands of years. Hominids living in small tribes of hunter-gatherers evolved a decision-making pattern for archaic – not modern – circumstances and if that pattern led to their survival then their descendants' – our – heads hold a similar pattern to solve challenges today. Since cultural evolution has been much faster than biological evolution, however, our mental algorithms are often inept for the travesties of modern life. Science writer Michael Shermer puts it this way:

What may seem like irrational behavior today may have actually been rational 100,000 years ago. Without an evolutionary perspective, the assumptions of *Homo economicus* – that 'Economic Man' is rational, self-maximizing and efficient in making choices – make no sense.

(Shermer, 2008)

Long before the systematic evolutionary study of the human psyche began (Barkow et al., 1992) an evolutionary foundation to human behavior was predicted by Charles Darwin in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Darwin, 1872). *Evolutionary psychology* now stands as an explanatory framework with the potential for understanding all psychological

phenomena. The aim of this young discipline is to understand why humans do what they do and it has the following main tenets:

- 1 Our ancestors faced many dire challenges during our species' evolutionary history and natural selection designed our ancestors' neural circuits to solve them.
- 2 Only those ancestors that were able to solve problems passed their genes on and those genes were used to build more successful neural circuits.
- 3 Thus, our modern skulls literally house Stone Age minds.
- 4 Most of the activity in our minds is unconscious and hidden from us.
- 5 The mind is modular and different types of neural circuits are all specialized for solving different adaptive problems (Dunbar and Barrett, 2007).

Interesting for the discussion on whether or not humans have animist tendencies is the psychological phenomenon called *pareidolia*, which lets humans wrongly perceive a random visual or auditory stimulus as significant. Seeing animals or faces in clouds or the man in the moon, and hearing messages on Black Sabbath records when played in reverse are examples of this sub-category of *apophenia*, the perception of patterns within random data. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, a recent book actually sees *pareidolia* as part of *animism*, positing that this might be a fitting evolutionary explanation for the birth of religions (Guthrie, 2015). It seems that we might actually be wired to see life rather than no-life in things. In the (critical) words of Tim Ingold:

Thus we have all evolved to be closet animists without of course realising it. Intuitive non-animists have been selected out, due to unfortunate encounters with things that turned out to be more alive than anticipated.

(Ingold, 2006, p11)

Another fascinating line of research suggests that we attach more significance to 'original' artifacts than to copies as if the former somehow bestows a soul or spirit. Psychologist Brandy Frazier and colleagues have found that college students consistently preferred 'authentic' objects (paintings, signatures...) to imitations even when the two cannot visually be differentiated (Frazier et al., 2009). Similarly, in a 2008 study, Bruce Hood of Bristol University demonstrated that school age children were fooled into believing that an object can be 'copied' but always preferred the original one to the 'copied' one (Hood and Bloom, 2008). Hood and his team of scientists demonstrated in three separate studies that the destruction of a photograph of an object dear to the subjects produced significantly more electrodermal activity than the destruction of photographs of other control objects (Hood et al., 2010).

Designed animism

We can only speculate whether or not the first 'product designers' considered their creations to be *animate*. All organisms that were observed as coming to be – in the sense of being born – have always been observed as being animate and thus the first designers likely saw their creations in the same way. Describing the *animist* ontology Tim Ingold writes eloquently, '[O]ne is continually present as witness to that moment, always moving like the crest of a wave, at which the world is about to disclose itself for what it is' (Ingold, 2006, p12). Is it possible that we have become so removed from the creation of the objects around us that we have dropped all parent-like affection? Industrialization and in a sense industrial design

have removed the production of things by one degree creating a system where things are mothered by things. Further research might address any correlation between the Cartesian dualism and the Industrial era.

The idea of ‘designed animism’ actually dates back to the 1970s when design theorists treated the impact of pervasive computing on the human experience and design as a discipline (Laurel, 2008). Recent approaches in design research have been steered towards purposely increasing emotional durability of products through design. Jonathan Chapman’s research has shown that emotional bonds with consumer goods reduce the likelihood of such goods to be discarded (Chapman, 2005). Importantly, the writings of Donald Norman consider the often-overlooked factor of cognition on design. He writes of three levels of human processing – visceral, behavioral and reflective – requiring three types of design considerations. Our everyday things might also be longer-lasting by adding *animacy* (Norman, 2004). One type of design, interactive design, actually requires a level of *animistic* thinking for the user experience to be a positive one. As shown in a recent conference paper, *animism* can actually be used as an appropriate design metaphor for interactive design (van Allen et al., 2013). Not all types of design share such intrinsic relationships with *animism*, but all would arguably benefit from the ongoing discussion of a *new animism*.

Conclusions

Wake up to find out that you are the eyes of the world

– Robert Hunter

It is tempting to ridicule followers of the famous cargo cults of the Melanesian islanders for their use of *sympathetic magic*. But, it was easier for them to believe that the control towers, headsets, and runways were the cause of the cargo-carrying airplanes rather than an effect. ‘Modern’ people make the same kind of mistakes, when for example it is assumed that wearing certain outfits worn by celebrities one is in turn transmuted into a celebrity. Similar to the *cargo cults*, we talk of *animism* with disdain as if it’s only about ignorant, primitive people with a fascination for stuff.

In the end we can ask if *animism* is a vice or a virtue. Is it something to be encouraged or renounced for society to work? The evolutionary process is not teleological and, as Popper remarked, ‘the future is open’; he added, ‘Thus it is our duty, not to prophesy evil, but, rather, to fight for a better world’ (Popper, 1967). It is argued here that there can only be a better world with better design solutions. It is safe to say humans have a deeply ingrained fascination with stuff, which has become a serious concern when considering the resources required in making all such stuff. *Animism*, understood as a deeply rooted understanding of a world unfolding, alive with things could very well lead to a more sustainable future.

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