

“Are AI and IoT Magic? An Anthropological Perspective”

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Arthur C Clarke’s famous third law once argues that sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. For consumers of innovative technologies, and sometime for its creators, this observation - even if obviously simplistic - may appear commonsensical. This talk, eschewing a patronizing judgement over non-industrialized societies (also referred to as supposedly “primitive cultures”), discusses this argument from a professional anthropological perspective. It contends that, when comparing non-industrialized cultures to present-day industrialized cultures - especially regarding magic, religion, art and technology - similarities outweigh differences. Those include the human minds’ elective affinity for symmetry and binary structures; Human’s propensity for anthropomorphism (i.e the attribution of human-like features to non-human agents, notably in anthropomorphic technology); Human’s understanding of the manipulation of the natural world through magic; and most importantly, the concept of agency as related to objects of art. The latter draws on anthropologist Alfred Gell’s notion of “technology of enchantment” – the idea that the formation of an object of art’s fascinating qualities are related to the extent that the process through which they were created, is either absent or eminently visible. Eventually, such comparisons challenge both the conception that technology is deeply dissociated from supposedly non-rational modes of thought, as well as any reactionary longing for an imagined ideal “technology free” past – These insights hold meaningful practical implications for both creators and consumers in the realm of Ambient Intelligence, IOT and embedded systems.