CHAPTER ELEVEN

“WHERE THE ZEROES MEET THE ONES”

EXPLORING THE AFFINITY BETWEEN MAGIC AND COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

More than a decade before the emergence and widespread application of the Internet, the mathematician and computer scientist Vernor Vinge published his influential science fiction novel “True names” (1981). Like other authors in the so called ‘cyberpunk genre’ – William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, Rudy Rucker and others – he envisioned a computer mediated, disembodied space called the “other plane”. Although this other world was the product of science, Vinge described it as a deeply enchanted world inhabited by mysterious monsters, god-like creatures and wizards. “The wheel has turned full circle”, Vinge comments (2001[1981]: 241). Society returns from an “age of reason” to an age of “magic” in his book: the protagonists fall back on magical means, models and rituals to control their digital environment:

Sprites, reincarnation, spells, and castles were the natural tools here, more natural than the atomistic twentieth-century notions of data structures, programs, files, and communication protocols. It was, they argued, just more convenient for the mind to use the global ideas of magic as the tokens to manipulate this new environment (Ibid.).

According to many social scientists from the 19th century, such as Frazer, Tylor and Levy-Bruhl, magic can essentially be understood as a ‘primitive’, ‘irrational’ and ‘premodern’ method to control the natural world – a world, they argued, that thoroughly mystified the ‘premodern’ mind. Modern ‘rational’ science and technology would logically replace these worldviews and methods. One of the first authors to de-construct such stereotypical, typically modern and evolutionary schemes was the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. In “Magic Science and Religion” (1954[1925]) he criticizes Levy-Bruhl, who supposes that ‘the
savage’ – as opposed to modern man – was completely immersed in a mystical frame of mind, filled with superstition, mystic participations and magic. On the basis of his ethnographic fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski opposed that pre-modern people used both magic and technological knowledge. For mundane activities such as building canoes, fixing a fence or sowing, cultivating and harvesting the land, Malinowski argued, pre-modern man relied primarily on past experience and technical knowledge.

Malinowski’s position, in short, differentiates the stereotypical image of pre-modern man as being completely immersed in a magical frame of mind. In this chapter I will use a reverse strategy. Not only will I demonstrate that contemporary ‘technological society’ (Ellul 1967[1954]) is not devoid of magic and enchantment, but, moreover, that we are witnessing an ‘elective affinity’ between modern computer technology and magic. This affinity counters the modern assumption that magic and technology are mutually exclusive and that the influence of the latter instigates a progressive “disenchantment of the world” (Weber 1948[1919]: 139). I will therefore first assess such an affinity and will furthermore explain the convergence of magical and digital models by focusing on a group of ICT specialists in Silicon Valley. They refer to themselves as ‘technopagans’.

Magic and computer technology: an elective affinity

Pre-eminent evidence that magic hasn’t disappeared from Western society is the emergence and growth of the neopagan movement since the 1970s (e.g., Adler 1997[1986]; Berger 1999; Hanegraaff 1996; Luhrmann 1991]:1989; York 1995). Consisting of many branches, sub-currents and communities, neopaganism is essentially an animistic and polytheistic ‘nature religion’. Nature, the clouds, mountains, trees and sea, is seen as a vitalizing and essentially living environment. In addition, neopagans worship various gods and goddesses, like the goddess of fertility and her male counterpart, the horned God, in Wicca. An even more prominent place occupy magical practices, since, as one of Adler’s respondent says: “It’s a religion of ritual rather than theology. The ritual is first, the myth is second.” (1986: 170). The neopagan movement is motivated by a critique on modern society, especially scientific and technological ‘progress’ that has alienated modern man from himself and his natural environment (Berger 1999). Through magical rituals