

5 Bright Light, New Religion

τί θεός; τὸ κρατοῦν;

τί βασιλεύς; ἰσόθεος

What is a god? That which has power

What is a king? Equal to a god

—Anonymous second-century CE catechetical text

from Egypt, Pap. Heidelberg. Inv. 1716, in Albert Rehm, *Philologus*

There is only one truth. Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world.

—Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Once again, Jim felt reality blurring into fiction.

—Jim Carrey and Dana Vachon, *Memoirs and Misinformation*

In this chapter some themes from previous chapters come together—in particular around concepts of natural information, agency, fiction, and creativity—to offer an account of the modern-day cult of celebrity. I argue that new media technology repurposes these concepts, especially through the manipulation of our most salient form of natural information—light. Celebrities, like superhuman agents, demand our attention. In the process I argue that modern celebrities are the new superhuman agents, and that the cult of celebrity provides new myths, narratives, songs, and jokes for modern religion. We behave the way we do these days partly because we want to be like the fictional characters we see on screens.

According to Hans Penner's definition of religion, which I have modified slightly to include the concept of institutions, religion is a communally instituted system of propositional attitudes and practices related to

superhuman agents. These attitudes and practices are transmitted through myths and rituals. Myths are orally transmitted stories about the deeds of superhuman agents (Penner 2002, 169). Such stories go very far back, and if theories from previous chapters are right, the narrative structures of such stories may have provided the scaffolding for the development of uniquely human cognition. In those chapters I argued that some form of narrative provided the ground for human metacognition to emerge.¹ Such narratives were likely musical in nature. I gave an account of how this emergence happens with respect to semantics and enactive cognition.

Humans have never stopped creating narratives; rather, they seem to have become even more abundant in recent years. The earliest narrative songs people performed were about the world around them. Of particular importance for nomadic hunter-gatherers was keeping track of time and space (Gill 1998). Before humans settled down and became more sedentary, erecting enduring physical structures such as temples, stone henges, or towers like the one Hillalum was helping to build and biblical authors polemicized against (see the introduction), they had to rely entirely on mental media and what I have been calling natural information in order to triangulate in space and time. Aside from geographic information, the constellations would have been one of the best ways to do such tracking. In order to retain knowledge about such constellations and their causal powers, humans told stories about them. The characters in these stories were some of the very first superhuman agents (Williamson 1987; Rogers 1998)—for example, the anthropomorphic bear shape in Ursa Major and Minor seen by many cultures throughout the world (Frank 2015).

Hollywood's Stars

Today we don't look to the night sky in order to find our way, but to new constellations of light on manufactured screens, which are increasingly held in our hands. An early and exemplary mark of this change was Hollywood's so-called Golden Age. Renato Casaro's *Invitation* (figure 5.1) is the type of print that one would find decorating the walls of an ice cream parlor in Amsterdam or a pizza shop in Berlin. It is kitsch, but I also think it says something interesting about modern myths. Modeled on Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, it replaces Jesus and his disciples with classic powerhouse Hollywood celebrities. Marilyn Monroe is Jesus, and male celebrities of the 1950s



Figure 5.1
Renato Casaro's *Invitation*.

and 1960s surround her. Instead of bread and wine, they feast on burgers, hard alcohol, and ice cream. Not only does Casaro's painting embody the commoditization of celebrity with Monroe as sacrificial victim, but it also represents the replacing of traditional religion with the cult of celebrity. Just as Christian stories absorbed Roman, Greek, and gnostic belief systems after the advent of literacy technologies—in particular the book (MacMullen 1984; Gaur 2000)—so perhaps modern celebrity is replacing religions of the book through new forms of media technology such as television, film, and Internet. This trend is accelerating further with new screen technologies in the form of mobile phones and tablets.

Serious students in the study of religion lately balk at the tendency to blur the line between religious phenomena, like what goes on in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, and “pseudoreligious” phenomena, like what goes on in classrooms, sports stadiums, and department stores. This impulse should be protected by teachers in the study of religion. For example, one could argue that ancient religions were quite serious and were shaped by the best minds in history, so nothing in pop culture is comparable. At the same time, this impulse should not be pushed too far. For example, many of the brightest minds in the last one hundred years have gone into entertainment and marketing industries, into pop culture.

One of the reasons we always wind up with a mess around the borders of what constitutes religion is because no one can agree on a definition. We know religion involves gods (or some similar type of superhuman agent), rituals, and myths. But those terms themselves have also been subject to decades, if not centuries, of debate. I think a useful way out of this is to say that we can have both wide and narrow definitions of religion. The narrow definitions, like Hans Penner's, require us to strictly police the border between what is and what is not religion. The wide definitions, like that of Durkheim (and those inspired by him), require us to loosen up our ideas about gods, rituals, and myths.

Pete Ward considers modern celebrity culture to be a religion-like phenomenon, or what he calls "para-religion" in order to distinguish it from religion proper (Ward 2011, chapter 3). As we have seen, this distinction has never been that easy to draw, but I think the term is useful for those who balk at direct comparison between religion and other forms of popular culture. Modern parareligion around images shares a cognitive foundation with early religions, but a lot has changed. A dominant characteristic of human cognition is its plasticity, the ability to adapt to new circumstances and new environments (Bjorklund and Rosenberg 2005). There is a feedback between biology, cognition, and parareligious imagination. For example, the rise in diabetes in late-modern societies is very much a product of couch potato religiosity, where our dominant forms of awareness and imagination are dictated by television and computer screen. Thus, we can imagine Marilyn Monroe in *Invitation* praying over her ice cream sundae, her body and her blood infused with the sugary products of the modern food-industrial complex.

It has been argued that the evolutionary origins of religion go back to ancient caves where people painted images of various animal agents around them (figure 5.2).² Wiebe (2009), following Lewis-Williams and Pearce, finds that human beings tripped out on the rock art they created, possibly augmented with the use of psychedelic drugs, or what Smail calls "psychotropic mechanisms," a category which also includes alcohol and even literacy (Smail 2007). These scholars think that changes in symbolic technology precede cognitive and economic changes such as consciousness and agriculture, and likely provide the basis for them, not the reverse. Media technologies, in other words, have a feedback effect on cognition and consciousness, pointing in unpredictable and dynamic directions when such technologies interact with human cognition. In the language of my previous chapters,

the argument is that information has a life of its own and that fictive media are part of human consciousness from the beginning.

The rock images tell a story, whether verbalized or not, about the awareness our ancestors had about the agents with whom they interacted (see Murray 2015). Of course, we do not know what was going on in their heads, but perhaps that does not matter. Religion is made up of the external representation of such agents, the fact that they are imaged and thus imagined. There is something intrinsically religious or “sacred” about recording information (ספר from the previous chapter), perhaps because recording of any kind is a form of memory, of reproduction and tradition. The first scripts were deeply connected to animal shapes; in particular, animals were the basis for many of the first alphabetic signs (Schmandt-Besserat 1992). These animal forms were those of domesticated animals, animals of agriculture technology and husbandry (Abram 1996).

Biblical religions are also obsessed with images. The biblical deity makes man in his image, refuses to let his people worship any other image, and

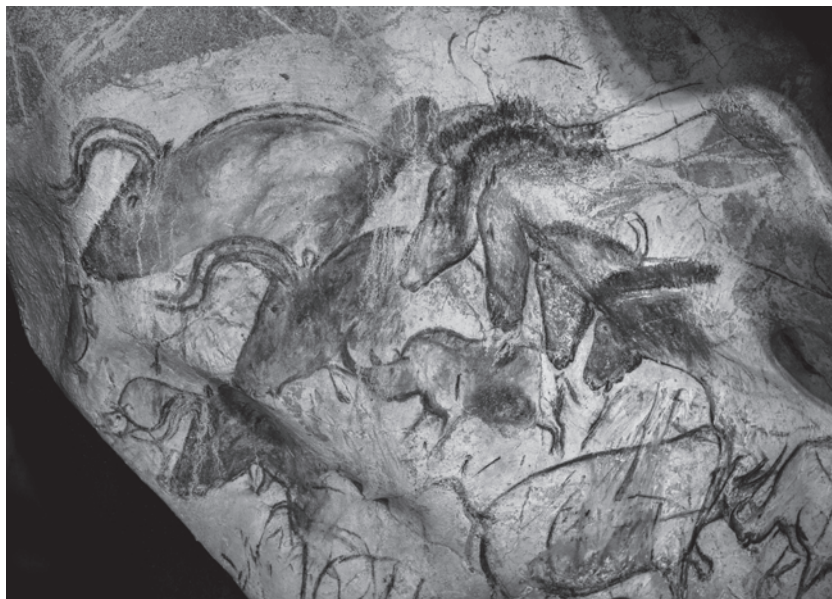


Figure 5.2

Painting in the Chauvet cave, 32,000–30,000 BC. Photo credit: by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images.

cannot in fact be represented in an imagistic form (Laderman 2009, chapter 4). Traffic in images has come to define the modern condition, but of course there is a natural history to this, laid out clearly first by Walter Benjamin and later by Benedict Anderson, who ties modern traffic in images of “print-capitalism” to the nation-state (B. Anderson 2006, 37; Benjamin 2008). For a while, in Protestant cultures, the proliferation of images largely took the form of the images of literacy—that is, words, letters, and numbers—but since the explosion of transistor and computational technologies, the bandwidth has grown to allow for a much wider distribution of images in general and especially moving images (G. Levy 2010).

The images of gods also change depending on the very same feedback with technology—that is, gods change depending on the various media in which they are represented. Our understanding of religion should not be limited just to gods, but to the host of superhuman agents that animate religious imagination. In most religious systems except the most domesticated, these superhuman agents live easily alongside the high God or gods. As Guthrie gave us some insight about in chapters 2 and 3, animals are often the superhuman agents in religious narratives. In some versions of these narratives, gods take on more human form, often as a hybrid between human and (nonhuman) animal.

Parasocial Kinship

Etymologically, the term “celebrity” derives from the Latin word for “thronged,” “honoured by a great assembly,” and “famous” (OED). Though in the fourteenth century Geoffrey Chaucer used the word in his translation of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae*, the first attestations in modern English appear in the early seventeenth century. The origin of the word is related to the verb “to celebrate.” The connection of this concept to ritual runs deep, for it involves the “due observance of rites and ceremonies.” Celebrities are the people we celebrate.³

I think celebrities belong to what Maurice Bloch (2008) calls the “transcendental social.” As an alternative to standard cognitive approaches to religion that see religious beliefs as minimally counterintuitive, Bloch argues that religion is largely a by-product of our “capacity to imagine other worlds” (2055–2056). Other primates have complex social worlds and thus share with us what he calls the “transactional social,” which is likely tied to similar

mechanisms, such as grooming, discussed by the primatologists in earlier chapters. Only humans, Bloch thinks, have essentialized roles and groups, normative roles based on status, such that we also interact with the “transcendental social.” For example, he emphasizes that in African societies that have “elders,” elders and ancestors have the same essential status despite the fact that the former are alive and the latter dead. Being dead does not deprive one of membership in the transcendental social, and people in those societies continue to interact and communicate with dead ancestors and loved ones as if they were alive.

For Bloch, cognitive approaches should focus on trying to understand human sociability and social cognition; in the process, then, we will come to explain religion (2060). This is so because “once we realize this omnipresence of the imaginary in the everyday, nothing special is left to explain concerning religion.” Similarly, in the case under examination presently, though some would not strictly characterize the modern cult of celebrity transmitted through televisual, cinematic, and social media screens as religion, I think it conforms in the sense that the characters that make up the cult are part of Bloch’s “transcendental social.”

Ward (2011) finds that celebrities are by and large not understood by their fans as “gods” but as family members, a phenomenon he calls “parasociality.” The ironic part is that Ward thinks this should disqualify the cult of celebrity as a religion, whereas if we see kinship in light of Bloch’s understanding, the cult fits quite neatly with various forms of ancestor worship. If we understand religion to involve social practices not just to gods but also to varieties of superhuman agents who blur the line with “purely” fictional agents, understanding the cult of celebrity as religion is no longer a problem. This position on the matter is much closer to Laderman (2009), who has no problem conceptualizing modern forms of popular culture as religion, than to Ward, who I think retains some theological baggage in terms of reticence of equating celebrities with God.⁴

Personality

Modern celebrities are parareligious gods. Echoes of this argument have been made many times before, perhaps most vividly by Neil Gaiman in his *American Gods*. He does not quite argue that celebrities are gods, but rather that new technologies, personified by characters such as Technical Boy and

Media, are treated as divine because people direct the same things toward them that they do toward older gods (Gaiman 2001). I complement ideas like this with some insights gained from previous chapters concerning the *longue durée* of evolutionary history and in light of the dynamic feedback between cognition and technology.

My analysis starts with the story of James Franco, a great example of postmodern celebrity in which a celebrity is hyperaware of himself. Franco is a successful Hollywood actor who has recently had his share of controversy (Miller and Kaufman 2018). One of the more interesting roles he has played is a character named “Franco” in the soap opera *General Hospital*. The character is a serial killer who thinks he is the actor James Franco trapped in a soap opera (much like Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* [1998], but with a twist). Celebrities, like most people, are aware that they have split personae, a private persona they perform with their close friends and loved ones and a public persona they perform for a wider audience. The public persona is very much about image; it is the production of an image that in modern societies goes through the mechanical process of technological reproduction described by Benjamin and Anderson.

Sometimes the two personae get mixed up, and of course the hallmark of a good actor is the ability to create wholly new personae. Franco appears adept enough to play with the constructedness of personae. His visit to *The Colbert Report* in 2011, however, highlighted Colbert’s more virtuosic performance of persona (Colbert 2011). Stephen Colbert played his alter ego, Stephen Colbert, who was the host of the show in which he embodied the right-wing media machine of Fox News and especially host Bill O’Reilly. In their conversation, both Franco and Colbert agreed that since Colbert actually takes his act on the road, outside the confines of the studio—for example, by speaking before the US Congress as the character Stephen Colbert—his is a more virtuosic form of performance art. Another example of this type of performance art was Colbert’s successful lobbying before the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) in order to start his own “Colbert Super-PAC” as an ironic protest against campaign finance rules. What was new was not that he was performing a certain self; rather, it was the kind of hyperawareness and playfulness, the authentic faking, he exhibited in doing so (Chidester 2005). Other pertinent examples of this postmodern form of imaginal awareness are present in several of the films from 2010: *I’m Still Here*, *Somewhere*, and *Teenage Paparazzo*.

Compartmentalization

Not enough attention has been paid to the dominant celebrity-making machine: acting. I think there is little difference between acting and the more obviously religious phenomenon of possession (see Cohen 2007). In both cases a narrative character, a persona, with either a mythical apparatus behind her or a carefully constructed script, is embodied in a particular performance (Firth 1967; Easterling 2002).

This point has been alluded to in a number of studies of celebrity, such as Giles (2000), where he compares celebrity to “‘possession states’ entered into by the Kalasis of Orissa in eastern India” (102). Giles does not think modern celebrities are “conduits for the Gods” as they are in eastern India, but rather the parallel is the “discursive ascendancy,” (103) the prestige and social power celebrities achieve by embodying other characters. As should be clear by now, I think the border Giles wants to draw in this way between possession cults and modern celebrity in terms of religion is arbitrary.

Similarly, in her ethnography of possession cults in Belém, Emma Cohen reflects on the similarities between possession and acting. Human beings quite easily and intuitively understand the migration of minds and the possibility of one mind (or soul) inhabiting the body of someone else. Part of this is due to what scholars in cognitive science now call, following Bloom (2005), our “natural-born dualism.” The basic question involved in this discussion goes back to the core arguments about anomalous monism in this book, about the relations between the mental and material, between minds and bodies. The issue gets more complicated, though, because while one can make philosophical arguments about metaphysics—whether one should be a dualist or a monist, or a dual-aspect monist—another question is how human psychology develops to conceive of such distinctions.

To illustrate the similarities between possession and acting, Cohen discusses the character James Bond, who goes through various incarnations after the actor who plays him gets too old (from Sean Connery to Daniel Craig). Different actors embody the soul, or character, of James Bond. For Cohen, in both film acting and possession there is thus a transferring of agency or personhood when the performer embodies the fictional character; in other words, “as with the actor, the possessed person’s agency is replaced by, or eclipsed by, an alternative agency. In both possession and

film contexts, behaviors and statements are no longer attributable to the intentions of the actor” (Cohen 2007, 140).

But Cohen balks at making too much of the comparison: “Possession, however, is not presence. The possessed person is said actually to incorporate a new character or person, not simply to ape another person or an imaginary role” (140). So we should be wary of making too much of the similarities between the two phenomena. Cohen argues that in most cases with actors, the audience recognizes pretense operating in a different way than in possession cults. But I think we should also be careful about making too much of the difference. As Gananath Obeyesekere shows, much of our understanding of so-called primitive or indigenous religion is actually a performance for the anthropologist (Obeyesekere 1997). Not only that, but as we saw in Dan Sperber’s story of old Filate in chapter 2, it is also the case that much of our understanding of so-called primitive or indigenous religion is actually a performance *of* the anthropologist. Much of what we take to be religion is actually implicit folk theorizing about performance, and the folk are often much more aware of the blurry line between pretense and belief than scholars give credit. Furthermore, the technique of method acting blurs the line even further between possession and acting.

Cohen discusses David Fincher’s film *Fight Club* (1999), in which Brad Pitt plays the dissociated personality of the anonymous main character of the film, who is played by Edward Norton. Cohen is wrong in supposing it is difficult to understand the final twist in the film. I think filmgoers quickly grasp the idea that Brad Pitt in Brad Pitt’s body plays a dissociated persona (aka Tylor Durden) of the main character, who is played by Edward Norton. The conclusion of the film represents the battle of the two identities within one body. Cohen’s insights into dissociative identity, possession, and acting are illuminating, so I do not think her confusion about the ending of the film amounts to much, except it may throw a kink in the points she wants to make about intuitive dualism.

She writes,

Likewise, the twist at the end of *Fight Club*, in which we are forced not only to reflect on the dual personalities of a person suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder, but also to accept that they coexisted simultaneously; yet autonomously both mentally and physically, is more than our mental tools can cope with. Workable concepts of people are constrained by implicit ontological assumptions that intuitively tell us that people are indivisible, individual, nonreplicable, and continuous. (140)

As I see it, Cohen seems to misread the character of Tylor Durden, who is a mental projection of the anonymous main character played by Norton. The final scene should be seen as a metaphoric struggle between the main characters' two personae. So, in fact, Durden is not physically autonomous at all. Perhaps Cohen's points go to the fact that it is very difficult for us to represent such a struggle without resorting to the use of two actors who are physically autonomous. As far as the film, though, the twist resolves rather than overloads our "mental tools." In other research, Cohen and Barrett (2008) have argued that the default position for mind migration is that two minds cannot occupy the same body simultaneously, so this is probably the point she is trying to make, but I do not think *Fight Club* is problematic for our "mental tools" in this regard.

One method by which the embodiment of outside agencies takes place in both acting and ritual theatre, of which I think possession cults are one variety, is through the manipulation of image through costuming and, in traditional societies, often through the use of masks (Cohen 2007, 153). Deeley (2004), following Sperber and Hirschfeld (2004), characterizes ritual devices such as masks, which exaggerate "salient features of facial expressions," as "superstimuli" (257). Superstimuli are the "primary reinforcers" that enhance attention, arousal, and emotion in many forms of ritual. Besides masks, other examples of such stimuli are "motion, colour, luminosity . . . accentuated sexual characteristics (cosmetics, oils), sudden loud noises (e.g. fireworks, bells), prosodic accentuations of language (singing, chanting), pain (flagellation, circumcision), temperature (baptism by immersion), smells (incense, perfumes), taste (ritual foods), and multisensory repetitious stimuli which activate arousal systems" (Deeley 2004, 257; see also Rolls 1999). Films such as *Fight Club* utilize a number of these primary reinforcers, such as motion, luminosity, and noise, and in this case achieve the effect of masks simply by using another actor to play an alternative personality (Pitt).

In cognitive research, facial expression is notoriously tied to our very basic emotions, control over which is often understood to be beyond the reach of the conscious mind (Ekman 1993; Ekman and Friesen 1971, 2003). Good acting, like masking, is a technology to control facial expression and thus to manipulate our emotions. This cognition has a history. For example, masks were an important mode of image manipulation in the earliest moments of theater in ancient Greece. Theater was inextricably bound up with religion in the sense that theatrical celebrations were usually tied to

the religious calendar and location, to orientation in time and space. The earliest performances were almost certainly tied to movement in the heavenly constellations. In addition, the performances were usually based on mythological themes in which the actors embodied the gods.

In religions with ritual performances of possession, human beings embody gods or other superhuman agents; the actors are possessed by the gods—that is, they “act” like gods (J. H. Turner et al. 2018, 208–212). Greek theater has its origins in this form of religion (Gaster 1950; Csapo and Miller 2007). To the extent that the cult of celebrity is built around actors, especially Hollywood actors, it is a kind of possession cult. Unlike most possession cults, however, the cult is communally instituted around the images of the actors that appear on screens rather than the characters they embody in their roles.

The ancient plays *Philoctetes*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Oedipus Colonus* by Sophocles, play around with similar interest in celebrity, which indicates that some ancient Greeks had a profound understanding of the concept. In general, celebrity was a primary goal of the hero. Unlike the gods, who did not die, the only way for the mortal hero to live beyond death was through his name. Celebrity, then, is implicitly tied to the fact that we die. Though it only happens in rare cases, the goal of the hero, in effect, is to be deified. The gods, by contrast, are famous by default. Celebrity is thus something inherent in the notion of a god. As we saw in the introduction, this desire to make a name for themselves was one of the main problems Yahweh had with builders of the Tower of Babel, according to Genesis.

Stars as Natural Information

Returning to Colbert’s conversation with Franco, another interesting aspect of modern celebrity emerges. Colbert and Franco agree that Franco’s critics see stardom as the pinnacle of achievement in American society, so a star should not complain and should not want more. Franco clearly did want more, for at the time of the broadcast he was pursuing a PhD at Yale. Instead, what most cult members want to see is the meteoric rise of a star and an equally dramatic fall. In essence we want to see rising and dying stars.⁵

A basic characteristic of plant and animal life on this planet is that light is a source of natural information that attracts attention. Sometimes the force of attraction can be so strong that it becomes dangerous, like the proverbial “deer in headlights.” Fire was not only the original source for converting

raw food into cooked food, but it was also the first source of “artificial” and transportable light (Wrangham 2009). Power came in its centrality in the home and village, as a source of warmth and a gathering place to tell stories. At night, especially, other sources of light stood out as beacons of attention, as guides in ancient wanderings, as signs of things to come. Early temple structures and sacred centers derive from a much more ancient village structure with a fire at the center and may have been as much about protecting the communal flame as any other sacred premise (Stausberg 2018).

Mythmaking began with initial reflections around these sources of light, these sources of energy, language, and fertility. Indeed, almost all of the energy stored and consumed on the earth came here from the sun, most of it stored in long-dead plants that have become coal and petroleum. This connection between luminosity and religion goes as far back as our language system, for “while the Indo-European languages had no common word for religion, they concurred on the meaning of God as ‘luminous’” (Benveniste 1973; Friedland 2002, 414).⁶ Presumably we call Hollywood stars “stars” because they burn so bright.

Ancient humans recognized the stability and structure of the heavens, admiring “the untarnished stability of the stars” (Brown 2015, 2). Mircea Eliade even argued that the cyclical patterns of the heavens were a fundamental underpinning of consciousness (Eliade 1954, 6ff.). Today we are less focused on sources of natural illumination, but we are no less dependent on sources of light as reflective embodiments of consciousness.

A good way to think about the relation between cognition and the bright organized information around us is the concept of “extended cognition” (A. Clark and Chalmers 1998), which is aptly summarized by the motto “The world is its own best model” (Brooks 1990, 5, 13). This is the idea that cognition will almost always rely on heuristics already available in the world as platforms for further thinking, rather than going through the costly process of building new models. If the models provided by the world already work, it is inefficient for the mind to build intermediate representations. This makes sense of the fact that the stability and structure of the heavens is embodied in human institutions. In this way our minds extend into the universe. The position I have defended in this book modifies this point to say that the universe also extends into our minds.

Stars as luminous bodies are both absent and present. They are distant yet corporeal. As Lynne Joyrich writes, “The same structure of knowledge

and belief that defines the cinematic apparatus also defines the general paradox of the star phenomenon. . . . Stars seem close yet distant, both present and absent to us" (Joyrich 1993, 77). In such a way, the phenomenon of stardom reorients the traditional private/public opposition. The intimate details of stars' private lives are publicly relevant. We gossip about them, a practice that we saw traces back to grooming behavior in humans and other animals. The star is everyone's sister, friend, and lover. We know her on a first-name basis. She is part of our family. In contrast to distant high gods we travel to worship, the star comes to us in our homes, at our domestic altar. Television screening is a ritual affair, where the television functions similarly to the altar (Goethals 1981). It often holds central place in the "family" room, is elevated so everyone can see it, and regenerates the religious logic of fame. Pop stars are part of our family. We talk dirt about them as if we know them; we live vicariously through them. With new types of handheld screens, rituals change and we all become celebrities.

"Do You See the Light?"

For a few million years hominids roamed the earth entirely dependent on the sun, moon, and stars for sources of light. Primate vision, and vision itself for that matter, is dependent on the reflection and refraction of light off objects that in turn activate neurons in our visual cortex. On a cloudy night, when moon and stars were not visible, our ancestors would have been easy prey for better-seeing species. We developed as a species to prefer light to dark and to connect light, relevance, and attention at a very deep level. There is a great deal of evidence from cognitive and brain studies that the brain processes objects that emit light differently from those that do not (Leonards et al. 2005; Correani, Scott-Samuel, and Leonards 2006).⁷ Postanalytic philosophers have also claimed that vision and cognition are two sides of the same coin (Sellars, Rorty, and Brandom 1997). The connection between the two is captured in the everyday phrase "Seeing is believing"—that is, when we see something, we have a very strong inclination to believe it. In this sense, without vision, primate thought would not be possible.⁸ It was not until the use and capture of fire some one to two million years ago that our genus was able to master light to some degree in the form of torches and campfires, though the technologies continued to evolve, first with oil lamps and eventually with the invention of the light bulb.

Aside from the cognitive changes associated with cooking food (Wrangham 2009), the control of sources of light must have had decisive cognitive effects. The control of light and vision took a quantum leap with the invention of televisual technology toward the close of the 1800s. A campfire and a television can have similar brightness (depending on the stage of the fire), but it is only with the television that the brightness is under precise control by a producer. While the performers of ancient myths told stories around the light of the campfire, modern mythmakers and admen are able to manipulate the light itself. Such forms of luminous control lead Don DeLillo, in the epilogue entitled “Das Kapital” to his opus *Underworld*, to characterize television as an “epidemic of seeing” (DeLillo 1997, 812). More recent screen behavior appears to be an even more radical epidemic of seeing. Celebrity culture has probably existed since those early forms of mythology; however, it took a decisive turn with modern methods to control visual activity.

Manipulating Light, or the History of Religious Media Technology

The technologies for manipulating light have evolved over time. In *Underworld*, we zoom in on some conversations going on in an advertising agency in 1961:

They’re doing research, Dwayne, on what they call retinal discharge. They secretly photograph women in supermarkets. They have sensitive cameras hidden on the shelves that record excitations of the inner eye, motions of the eye far more subtle and telling than a simple blink, and it seems that women go completely crazy eyeballwise when they see certain colors, packages and designs. These are orgasms, basically, of the eye, the brain and the nervous system. How do we use this research? Simple. We correlate high discharge events with the particular items that caused them and then we design our products and packaging accordingly. Once we get the consumer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process. (DeLillo 1997, 531)

The idea that admen are the modern-day mythmakers, the scribes of modern consumption and commodity fetishism—which in many ways provides the *raison d’être* for the cult of celebrity and vice versa—is not far from James B. Twitchell’s argument in *Adcult USA* (Twitchell 1996). Mythmakers have gone from singing collectively authored ancient narratives about the deeds of celestial animals, women, and men (audience staring at the sky) to crafting narratives about the deeds of celebrity animals, women, and men (audience staring at screens). Within the past ten years, a newer

form of advertising has become popular, called *neuromarketing*. This school of thought uses behavioral psychology and neuroscience to craft the most-effective marketing tools.⁹

The origins of the modern American incarnation of this phenomenon were largely brought on by a mass of European immigrants to the US who tried not just to establish a life for themselves but literally to create the American dream (Gabler 1989). The new form of religious worship parallels a general turning inward and privatization of religion (Schmidt 1997). We share televisual culture, but we experience it in the solitary comfort of our living rooms. The movement to portable, personal computing amplifies this process even more. This is not to deny that there are collective moments of televisual religion, when bros watch sports or a family sits down in front of the television together. Mobile phone technology may even be reconfiguring collective religious life by allowing it to be more generally distributed in space (Ling 2008). The privatizing movement of televisual religion therefore probably belongs to the twentieth century, and we are now moving to a new dawn of technological religion.

Imagination

In chapter 2, I discussed what I see as the relation between fiction and “reality” with regard to religious agents. I argued that there is not much of a difference between fictional agents and religious ones. The difference, if any, will be developed intersubjectively in the course of triangulating over an individual’s lifetime. In this sense, in order to understand something like the cult of celebrity we must view it in developmental terms. Like gods, stars somehow skirt the line between fiction and reality, particularly for children. Stars and gods are both fictional and real. We learn about the nature of reality intersubjectively through that ambivalence. In a closely guarded set of myths, parents can police the retinue of characters who enter into their child’s imagination.

Religious characters such as gods, spirits, talking animals, and other super-human agents were the leading characters in the oral and written myths of popular culture before the invention of the secular novel and the video camera. Nowadays the relevance of these characters competes with other “memes,” largely because screens reach directly into the private sphere. As we saw in chapter 2, from an anomalous monist perspective however, we

should be careful with overly representationalist models of mental content. Rather than being analogous to genes, I prefer to see religious ideas or systems of representations as organisms that affect our behavior and ours theirs. Religious ideas are thus more like the protozoan parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. This particular organism rewires neurons and causes behavioral changes in many mammals. It can only reproduce in cat stomachs, and when it infects mice, it causes them to be more likely to approach cats because they lose their fear of cat urine. In humans, infection has been linked to risky behavior and schizophrenia (Burgdorf et al. 2019). Indeed, much of our behavior may be influenced by other minds living inside us (Sapolsky 2017).

As noted in previous chapters, scholars from the cognitive science of religion, among other fields, have developed answers to why special types of characters, whether stars or gods, are sticky in our memories, and why some of them have intense emotional salience while others do not. This is the crux of what scholars term the “Mickey Mouse problem” (Bulbulia 2004, 662ff.). Mickey Mouse is not a god, as we saw in chapter 2, because he does not activate the right emotional matrix (Pyysiäinen 1999). Perhaps Mickey is an unfortunate example, since the myths and rites around him—in Disney theme parks, for example—clearly get people’s blood moving. A more pertinent point is probably that Mickey Mouse is not a god because parents tell their children he is not one. He is not real; they do not bow down to him or pray to him (usually). However, with all that said, popular children’s figures like Mickey Mouse do in fact inspire intense emotion and connection. At Disney theme parks, at least, children definitely (and probably even some adults) request things from Mickey in their interactions with actors dressed as (possessed by?) him. So we have another blurry line between fictional characters and superhuman agents. This line also gets blurred in adults, and I think this is the basis for the cult of celebrity.

In cognitive parlance since Leslie (1987), this blurring is called “decoupling,” the ability to take a chunk of input from one cognitive “system” (vision, for example) as a representation and put it into another cognitive system (such as language). In its most recent phrasing, this is referred to as conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner [2010]; see G. Levy [2017]). To put this idea simply, in the case of fantasy, we cobble together a representation from internal or external media, thereby mixing a variety of representations, and “play” it as if it were our own cognitive representation. This is probably the basic mechanism that makes thought possible, but it

is also the mechanism that allows for hybrid minds (Sperber 2010). Part of the process of learning the so-called difference between fantasy and reality is developing judgments about the nature of such representations.

In her ethnography of childhood religion in America, *Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith*, Cindy Dell Clark notes that psychologists in the past treated imaginal beliefs, such as belief in the Tooth Fairy or Easter Bunny, as “primitive,” as a distortion of the “logical” reality (C. D. Clark 1995, 108). She criticizes the view that children have a “lack of competence in the proper evaluative procedures” when they make different reality judgments (108). She emphasizes that the construction of reality is a dynamic and ambiguous process that children learn to navigate with the help of rites of passage that mark their transition from one stage of knowing or maturity to another. For example, a new stage is reached when children begin to recognize that the Tooth Fairy is fictional—that is, “children gradually come to know that there are representations involved in such objects” (109). It is not always that the characters are regarded as unreal, but rather children have a more nuanced understanding of the representations of those characters. In other words, children become conscious of play; or more technically, they start to develop the so-called appearance-reality distinction (Flavell, Flavell, and Green 1983; Goldman 1998). Children are in the process of deciding what counts as real for themselves, in what Giddens called the development of “ontological security” (Giddens 1991, chapter 2). It is important to note that this developmental trajectory may emerge in a multitude of ways depending on cultural context, partly because what counts as ontological security will vary in different cultures.

Clark notes that adults are only slightly better at parsing real and unreal objects; they are “inextricably part of the process by which ongoing, shared cultural reality is continually co-constructed” (C. D. Clark 1998, 108). Another way to say this is that adults tend to “parse” characters they see in media as real and unreal in slightly different ways than children. Adults are more aware of the production process that goes on behind media figures. In terms of the distinction between appearance and reality, however, adults are also easily confused and manipulated. Who is more confused, the parent who pretends the Tooth Fairy exists or the child who “believes” it?

The popularity of “reality” TV, and indeed having a US president in Donald Trump who typified that genre, has tended to blur that line even more. In these shows we have characters who, like Colbert and Franco, play a

version of themselves. Politicians, similarly, play themselves on screens. Phenomena like these have sparked assertions that the simulations are in some sense more real in a postmodern world than the everyday lived reality they are supposed to represent. Both children and adults have difficulty parsing the distinction, because fictional objects are actually quite real; we are constantly attributing reality to those characters in our daily lives, whether on TV, the Internet, or “live.” Adults simply sometimes do so with more self-reflection.

For example, often-noted media figures in the past such as Elvis and June Cleaver blurred lines in the adult imaginary. Clark relays the story of Robert Young, who played a physician on TV yet received some five thousand letters a week for medical advice (Gitlin 1987). These figures often serve as “mentors and role models and thereby have effects on actual social relationships” (C. D. Clark 1998, 108). She argues that such fictional figures are closely related to Donald Winnicott’s notion of childhood “transitional objects,” such as security blankets and teddy bear-type imaginary friends, as a way for the inner life of the child (and adult) to achieve some immediacy in the public life of the group. These objects occupy an intermediate space that gives “pleasurable ‘relief’ from the strain of relating inner (personal) and outer (shared) experience” (110).

An immense body of research has been conducted on children as media consumers and in particular on reality versus fantasy judgments about television (Noble 1975; Morison, McCarthy, and Gardner 1979; H. Kelly 1981; Chandler 1997; Brunick et al. 2016; Dill-Shackelford 2016; Desmond 2017; Richert and Schlesinger 2017). The basic consensus is that the gap between fantasy and reality in children’s programs actually helps them build up their capacity to discriminate between the two. Young children appear to prefer a very wide gap, as represented in many cartoon shows. As time goes on the gap tends to grow smaller, but it is always nonetheless present (see figure 5.3).

Though from a certain perspective child fancy grows smaller as we age, we could also say that reality, in fact, is what grows smaller, since the “space of reasons” by which we operate on a day-to-day basis becomes more and more confined (see figure 5.4).

Scholars argue further that the frightening status of many cartoon characters helps children learn about “constructedness” and to “distance themselves from emotional responses and disturbing scenes” (Chandler 1997, 66). When we fail to gain this distance, either as children or adults, I think

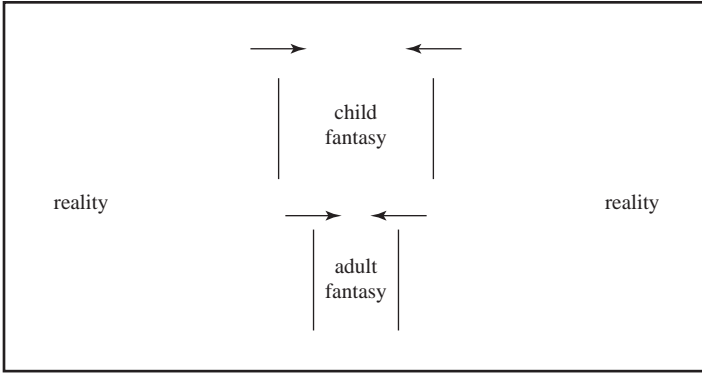


Figure 5.3
Relationship between fantasy and reality.

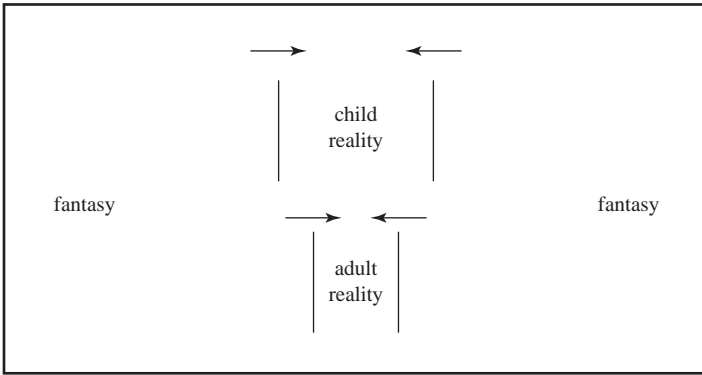


Figure 5.4
Relationship between reality and fantasy.

“truly” religious characters emerge, whether in religion proper or in the cult of celebrity.

To be more precise, researchers have for a long time argued that there is not one version of reality but multiple reality “dimensions” or channels. In 1977 Hawkins discerned several subdivisions in children’s perceived reality; he thus found that child development “may take place along some dimensions but not others, or changes may occur at different rates or times on different dimensions” (Hawkins 1977, 305–306; cited in Chandler 1997, 66). In other words, we have a developmental trajectory with various interacting

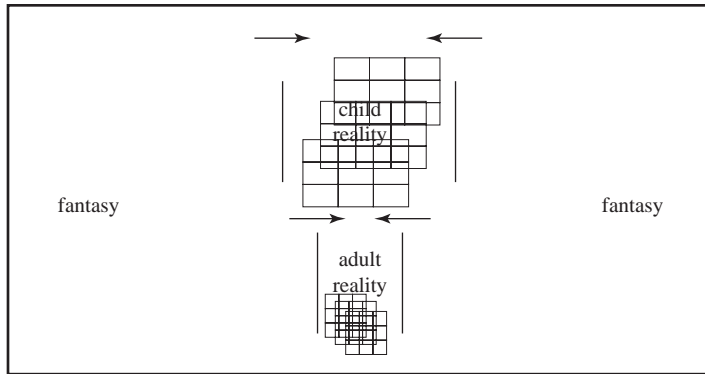


Figure 5.5
Relationship with dimensionality included.

modalities concerning fantasy, or inner worlds, and outer realities, or public worlds (see figure 5.5.).

Possession cults occupy a similar ambiguous ground for the people that participate in them (Cohen 2007). Possession involves a willful blurring of the line between “fiction” and “reality.” If we ask the participants, they literally believe that a god, spirit, or the like has entered the body of the performer. I am not arguing it is their belief that needs to be reconsidered, but our perspective on it that implies a certain presumption about what it means to be a person and an agent. In other words, gods and other super-human agents *are* fictional characters, full stop. And fictional characters play an immense role in human social life and psychology. Getting in contact with these characters is one of the most basic features of religion.

Taming Animals

Because the secluded mediator, conterminous with the wild, learns to control instinctive proclivities (fears, lust, and so on) he is in effect the very image of purity through self-mastery. Thus by pacifying animal desires and mental impurities (*kilet*) the forest monk is understood to “not only subdue but to incorporate its powers.”

—James L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*

The Syrian could live with his desert as long as he was prepared to merge into it, to adopt the total informality and lack of structure of wild life, to keep constantly on the move in search of food and water, to live off roots, to be equated with the

beasts and especially the birds—ambivalent symbols, for Late Roman men, of both the free and the demonic.

—Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity”

The psychotropic rock art Wiebe considered the origin of religion, pictorial representations of animal life, mirrored a cosmos of heavenly lights, constellations of which were, more often than not, also understood and systematized with animal and animal-human hybrid forms. These animals were the characters of our most ancient narratives. As we saw in chapter 3, animals were the primordial nonhuman persons, a natural place to look for idols of alternative agency, agencies of the type discussed by scholars of enactive cognition (Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran 2017; Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher 2018). Many cognitive scientists trace religion to our early interactions with the animal world, whether reacting obsessively to dangerous things (Boyer and Liénard 2006) or camouflaged forms of agency, as the discussion of Guthrie noted in chapter 2 (Guthrie 1995, chapters 2 and 4).

Like the more ancient cases, modern celebrity is animated by charisma. Celebrities are phenomenologically understood to tap into the animal life force. They are those performers who have *It*—that so-called indefinable “star quality.” You either have *It* or you don’t. *It* is one of those very difficult characteristics of someone that is hard to define. The celebrity perhaps most exemplary of this type of charisma was Elvis Presley, who takes the place of Saint Andrew in Casaro’s *Invitation*.

Elvis’s celebrity would not have been possible without television and screens (Doss 1999; Hecht 2004). Much of his appeal was aesthetic. Much of his appeal was that he was white (Bertrand 2000). He came on the scene as a dangerous and sexual figure. One of the most famous incidents of Elvis lore occurred when Elvis appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956. Sullivan refused to show Elvis from the waist down. His gyrations and contortions were too animal, raw, and sexual. “He tapped into what the show’s producer, Steve Binder, called ‘the darkness, the wild, untamed, animalistic things’ that were such a part of his nature,” writes Nicholas Jennings (1999, 59).

We see in other celebrity figures this dancing along the opposition of nature and culture, the blurring of lines between human and nonhuman animal. Male stars in particular such as Charlie Sheen have cultivated a so-called animal nature, often to great ruin. The spectacle of celebrities going wild is now a global pastime.

What counts as tapping into nature will vary according to cultural context. However, a necessary characteristic of the charismatic is her ability to mediate nature-culture oppositions, to constitute these oppositions with her very body. Whether holy person, intermediary, or saint, these individuals serve as liminal characters. They mark boundaries in the vertically transcendent social, not only between the human and superhuman but also between the human and the animal.

Centralization of religion tends to follow the centralization of ritual and myth. In Seneviratne's analysis of rituals of the Kandyan state, for example, the reason is clear: ritual is a microcosm of the society as a whole that is also mapped onto the bodies of believers. The structure of and movement in the temple maps the structure and movement of the collective sacred body, which may be homologous to the bodies of subjects within religion (Seneviratne 1978).

The amplification of core values and charisma to the periphery of a cultural center is a direct function of the communicative technologies at its disposal. For example, the invention of writing had a dramatic effect on the power exchange between center and periphery. The technology of written language was thus likely a necessary element in the development of the state (Gaur 2000). It allowed for more precise methods of communication over time and space. The printing press changed things yet again (Giddens 1984, 261ff.; Goody 2001).

With the modern cult of celebrity, mythmaking centers such as New York, Hollywood, and Bombay/Bollywood/Mumbai, are displaced from political centers. The systems of communicative exchange (entertainment) and commodity exchange are interwoven. Consumption is communication. What we eat, buy, and sell takes on a semiotic substance. The pattern is still consistent with the one described by Seneviratne, but in the context of new communicative technologies the "sacred" structure is distributed in time and space, first with television and then with the Internet (Z. Smith 2010).

We are idol worshipers, and the altar of this religion is our television screen. Or perhaps it is better to state that television *was* a religion in the twentieth century. As computer and Internet technology becomes more ubiquitous, a new colonization of media is already underway. But that brief moment in time when television first entered the home and we saw the birth of the modern advertising industry was a watershed for religions of personality.

Though the altar was in the private space of the home, the lights within it were minutely controlled, down to the very last detail, by outside forces.

In other words, in nonliterate and preindustrial media contexts past and present, media masters such as mythmakers, poets, and priests held sway on the bodies and minds of religious practitioners. In pre-Christian environments, children learned to venerate the various “idols” of the family and clan. Imagine the wonder of a child staring at her family altar or celestial heavens after hearing a bard weave great myths about her local protector agent. In preindustrial Europe, the life of the mind tended to be animated by the saints and royalty. As an American living in Europe, I was shocked when I first noticed the attention still paid to royal families in the media, for example, in gossip magazines. In the postmodern context, however, the television became the family altar and an entirely new dynamic was put in place. The result was the modern cult of personality around stars. With computational technologies, all of these processes are likely to change, perhaps with an even more deeply personalized version of celebrity.

In this chapter I have connected arguments from previous chapters about fictional and animal agency, information, and imagination to media technology, arguing that light as natural information is now under human control, with some radical consequences. As natural light becomes artificial, our religious impulses can be more tightly manipulated, and it is only the beginning. Technology has come to interact with information and agency in more complex ways, not just in terms of towers like Babel now, but in all aspects of our lives. The question for the next chapter is whether there is potential to recover some measure of human connection that seems to have been lost in these motions.