The Archaeology of Captivating Technology: Making, Wonder, and Power in Material Perspective

Archaeologists have long recognized that technological systems and production processes are socially and politically embedded, possessing a powerful ability to inspire awe (e.g., Carter 2007; Warnier 2007; Swenson and Warner 2012). Existing scholarship likewise elaborates ways in which technological systems, from the bureaucratic apparatus of the state to monumental feats involved in large-scale architectural construction, arise from and work to materialize power relations (Cavanagh and Mee 1999; Thomason 2004; Smith 2015). Building on these insights, this symposium seeks to wed investigations of the performative sequence of the production process to the technological dimensions of power, what Ruha Benjamin, in her monograph, *Capitivating Technology*, calls the "underside of technoscience." (Benjamin 2019, 9).

Here we take 'captivating technology' in the ambivalent sense conveyed by Benjamin: a technology can enrapture people with its novelty—its ability to open up new possibilities for ways of being and interacting with the world—while simultaneously taking us captive, restricting or limiting us to certain ways of thinking, or trapping us within the hegemonic systems that created it. It is enough to evoke the now-banal image of fellow humans wandering like zombies lost in their smartphones through the busy streets of a city, or the tantrum of a child being deprived of its beloved tablet while going through airport security, to appreciate this doubly operative captivation of modern technology. Beyond the mundane incarceration of human attention and ingenuity within electronic devices, there are deeply sinister ways in which technology may oppress. Technology and design are not merely neutral innovations: they have a perspective and can encode existing biases and inequalities as much as they seem to genuinely spring from our positively valued human tendency to embrace novelty and progress.

In this conference, we draw from Benjamin's proposal and consider how thinking about discriminatory design may lead us to new insights into relationships among production processes, technological innovation, and sociopolitical forces of captivation in archaeological perspective. We seek to ask new questions of the archaeological record along these lines: Does technoscience necessarily reflect and reproduce inequities or hierarchies as far as we can discern from archaeological contexts? Can technology undermine or disrupt such structures instead? How do technologies amaze and inspire wonder, and how does this effect of enchantment interact with power structures? What can an archaeological perspective bring to a modern appreciation of the long human history of coercive, dominating, or discriminatory technologies?

This event could complicate archaeology's generally positive perspective on technological innovation and creativity by inviting scholars to consider technology's contribution to forces of segregation, oppression, and discrimination. Therefore, the symposium will encourage the development of an anthropologically sophisticated engagement with the power dynamics of ancient technologies. Topics might include: archaeological or ethnographic case studies that locate spectacular or extraordinary labour in their social, ritual, or political context; the contextual history of bureaucratic technologies for surveillance or incarceration; technologies of pacification or distraction; infrastructural power and technologies of place-making; the sociopolitical forces behind incentives for innovation or conservatism.

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