From Humanized Divinity To CGI: The Legacy Of Anthropomorphism In Film And Theatre

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of anthropomorphism in antiquity and its significant influence on contemporary films and special effects. Anthropomorphism, the attribution of human traits to non-human entities, was central to ancient Greek religion and theatre, shaping the portrayal of gods and other supernatural beings. This work analyzes these early anthropomorphic representations and their impact on modern special effects, providing a historical overview of special effects in film and establishing a connection between ancient theatrical practices and contemporary cinematic techniques. The qualitative critical discussion analysis method was adopted to study the explored concepts. The study demonstrates that contemporary films and special effects owe much to the anthropomorphic spectacles of antiquity, which paved the way for the visual wonders we see in today's films.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Antiquity, Special Effects, Theatre, Film, Contemporary Cinema, Greek Mythology, Computer-Generated Images.

Introduction

Anthropomorphism as an English word emanated from the marriage of two Greek words namely 'anthropos' (human being) and 'Morphe' which means shape or form (Mota-Rojas et al. 2). In defining Anthropomorphism, Beegle says it "is the attribution of human form or qualities to that which is not human" (18). Anthropomorphism can also be defined as the attribution of uniquely human characteristics to non-human creatures and beings, natural and supernatural phenomena, material states and objects or abstract concepts (Anthrop). From the above definition, it can be deduced that anthropomorphism is all about representing as humans, God, gods, animals and other non-humans. Again, it can also be deduced from the above that anthropomorphism has points of convergence with the literary term or figure of speech, personification. That is to say that both terms can be interchanged in some contexts. However, it is important to note that there is point of divergence between the two terms since the former (anthropomorphism) has a broader definition and coverage.

In most religions, anthropomorphism is applied to aid the understanding of the nature and concept of the Almighty God and the different gods or divinities known to different people. Beegle explains this when he says that; "it is impossible to think of God without attributing to him some human traits" (19). This was the same understanding other religions had which perhaps made them engage in anthropomorphism. It was the anthropomorphic presentations of divinities in ancient Greek religions and mythology that influenced the anthropomorphic representations of divinities in ancient Greek plays.

This paper explores the origins and significance of anthropomorphism in antiquity and examines its profound influence on contemporary films and special effects. Through the analysis of historical and modern examples, this study brings the enduring impact of anthropomorphism on visual storytelling to the fore.

Anthropomorphism in Ancient Greek Theatre

In ancient Greek theatre, gods and mythical beings were often portrayed with human characteristics to make them more accessible and relatable to audiences. The anthropomorphic depiction of these divine entities served both religious and narrative purposes, helping to bridge the gap between the mortal and the divine. According to Burkert, the defining characteristic of Greek anthropomorphism is that "the Greek gods are persons, not abstractions, ideas or concepts" (182). Miles in trying to paint a picture of what obtained in Antiquity called it "an age in which

gods and men moved together" (38). The above quotations summarize what obtained in Greek plays during antiquity. The gods are generally depicted as human in form and character but although they look and act like men, very often their appearance and their actions are at least to some extent idealized (Anthrop). Their beauty is beyond that of ordinary mortals, their passions more grand and intense, and their sentiments more praiseworthy and touching; and they can embody and impose the loftiest moral values. Yet these same gods too can mirror the physical and spiritual weaknesses of human counterparts. The foregoing is accentuated in the works of the three tragic playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. It is also seen to some extent even in the works of the comic writer, Aristophanes. Apart from the afore-mentioned writers, other writers of the classical antiquity also had the concept reflected in their works.

Aeschylus, in his play, Prometheus Bound, presents the Titan Prometheus as a character with human emotions and motivations. Prometheus's defiance against Zeus and his subsequent punishment resonate with human themes of justice and rebellion (Bevan xxvii-xxviii). This portrayal exemplifies how anthropomorphism was used to explore complex moral and ethical issues through the lens of mythology. Euripides's The Bacchae similarly anthropomorphizes the god Dionysus, who exhibits human emotions such as anger, revenge, and compassion. The play delves into themes of identity, power, and the human condition, illustrating how anthropomorphic gods could reflect and amplify human experiences.

Greek theatre employed various techniques to enhance the anthropomorphic portrayal of gods and mythical beings. The use of masks, costumes, and mechanical devices such as the 'mechane' (a crane used to lift actors) allowed for the physical embodiment of these characters on stage. The 'deus ex machine', a theatrical device in which a god would appear to resolve the plot, further emphasized the anthropomorphic presence of the divine in human affairs (Taplin 78). The masks used in Greek theatre were particularly significant in conveying the human-like features of gods. These masks, often exaggerated to display distinct emotions, helped actors convey the complex psychological states of their characters. This practice not only made the gods more relatable but also allowed for a more immersive theatrical experience (Wiles 102).

The anthropomorphic depiction of gods in Greek theatre was deeply rooted in the religious and cultural context of the time. The Greeks believed that their gods had human-like forms and personalities, which were reflected in their myths, rituals, and artistic representations. This belief in anthropomorphic deities was

not only a way to understand the divine but also a means to explore human nature and society. Walter Burkert, in his study of Greek religion, explains how the anthropomorphic portrayal of gods allowed the Greeks to personify natural forces and abstract concepts, making them more comprehensible and relatable. By attributing human traits to the divine, the Greeks could engage with their gods on a personal level, fostering a sense of familiarity and intimacy (Burkert 156). Augustine of Hippo, in his work The City of God, provided a theological justification for anthropomorphism. He argued that the gods themselves commanded their human-like representations, making it a divinely sanctioned practice. Augustine's defense highlights the role of anthropomorphism in fostering a deeper connection between worshippers and the divine, suggesting that human traits in gods make them more accessible and relatable (Augustine IV, 31).

The anthropomorphic portrayal of gods had a profound psychological and emotional impact on ancient audiences. By attributing human emotions and motivations to divine beings, artists and writers created characters that resonated with the human experience. This emotional connection deepened the audience's engagement with religious and theatrical narratives. Anthropomorphism enabled audiences to empathize with gods and mythical characters, making their stories more relatable. By depicting gods with human emotions such as love, anger, and jealousy, playwrights created a sense of familiarity and connection. This emotional engagement was crucial in fostering a deeper understanding of religious and moral themes, as audiences could see reflections of their own lives and struggles in the divine narratives (Konstan 73). The anthropomorphic portrayal of gods also served as a vehicle for conveying moral and ethical lessons. The idea of humanizing the divine became a strategy for playwrights to explore complex themes such as justice, loyalty, and vengeance in a way that resonated with audiences. The actions and decisions of anthropomorphic gods provided examples of both virtuous and flawed behavior, offering valuable insights into human nature and ethical conduct (Parker 218). Anthropomorphism played a significant role in religious rituals and worship. The human-like depiction of gods made them more approachable and accessible to worshippers, facilitating a personal connection with the divine. This relational aspect of anthropomorphism was essential in fostering a sense of community and belonging among worshippers, as they could relate to the gods on a personal level (Vernant 41).

Criticism and Defense of Anthropomorphism

The concept and application of anthropomorphism by writers of ancient Greece generated views from both philosophers and other

writers of literature. The radical philosopher Xenophanes was the first to condemn anthropomorphism saying that in doing so the gods were presented as shameful and disgraceful among men (Greek Mythology). Now concentrating on people whose views matter so much to this work, a name like Plato takes the lead. Plato in his work, The Republic criticized anthropomorphic representation of gods. He says he finds a most serious fault in the works of the poets or playwrights, and that this fault is committed, "whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes – as when a painter paints a portrait not having the shadow of a likeness to the original" (14).

Plato therefore, sees anthropomorphism as giving the gods an erroneous representation since the nature of gods (divine nature) is different from the nature of men. In other words, the gods resemble men neither in form nor in mind. For Horace, "a god must not be introduced unless a difficulty occurs worthy of such a deliverer" (71-72). From his point of view, anthropomorphism should only be adopted when it is overwhelmingly necessary to do so.

As mentioned earlier, Saint Augustine justifies anthropomorphic representation of gods. Regarding the practice among the Romans he says "that those same entertainments, in which the fictions of poets are the main attraction, were not introduced in the festivals of the gods by the ignorant devotion of the Romans, but that the gods themselves gave the most urgent commands to this effect..." (94). It can be deduced from the above that Saint Augustine speaking from a religious point of view believes that the anthropomorphic representations must have been influenced by the gods themselves. On the side of the Greeks, while commenting on why anthropomorphism and the presentation of vices were encouraged in Ancient Greek theatre, Saint Augustine says:

> The Greeks, therefore, seeing the character of the gods they served, thought that the poets should certainly not refrain from showing up human vices on the stage either because they desired to be like their gods in this, or because they were afraid that, if they required for themselves a more unblemished reputation than they asserted for the gods, they might provoke them to anger (96).

Although he speaks from the point of view of a Christian, his argument holds water because the presentations on stage were based on the understanding of the people about the gods they were presenting or representing.

There may be other views on anthropomorphism in antiquity but this work has explored the most relevant. One important thing to

note is that despite criticism, anthropomorphism played a crucial role in helping people understand the divine. It bridged the gap between human experience and the metaphysical, making the supernatural more relatable and comprehensible.

Historical Journey of Cinematic Special Effects

The history of cinematic special effects predates the invention of the camera itself. Special effects in cinema trace their roots back to the techniques used by magicians in the 1700s. During the 1700s, magicians utilized many techniques to perform optical illusions and astound their audience. These techniques according to Carrera, "formed the foundations of special effects." (4). One of the most used effects in magic shows during this period was summoning of the dead, that is, spiritism (Carrera 4). A small box with a light source and a semi-transparent slide was used to project images of historical figures onto columns of smoke or billowing cloth. This gave a ghostly motion to the image frightening audiences to the point that several magicians were jailed for their 'satanic work' (Carrera 5). One of the early techniques that has contributed to the growth of special effects use was the use of glass sheets as two-way mirrors in an illusion that came to be known as 'Pepper's Ghost', after John Henry Pepper, a member of the audience was turned into a skeleton and later turned back. This was achieved by placing a large glass sheet at a 45 degree angle between the stage and the audience, and adjusting the lighting so that the audience would either see through the glass to the person, or the reflection in the glass of a skeleton of stage. The lighting was faded in and out to make the transformation. This technique was adopted later in early films, and a good number of "ghost" movies were created using two-way mirror techniques (Carrera 6).

Some of the early pioneers for special effects, or "tricks" as they were originally called, were magicians, machinists, inventors, and prop builders. Names like George Mellies, Thomas Edison and Robert W. Paul are also mentioned when discussing the history of special effects in film. George Méliès, Thomas Edison, and Robert W. Paul were instrumental in developing these effects, utilizing methods such as double exposure, miniatures, and stop-motion photography. The first among them, George Méliès, is a French filmmaker and illusionist. He is often regarded as the father of special effects. His pioneering work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries laid the groundwork for modern visual effects (Ezra 53). Méliès used techniques such as double exposure, multiple exposures, and time-lapse photography to create highly fanciful scenes and characters. His film A Trip to the Moon (1902) features a host of special effects, including the famous image of a spaceship landing in the eye of the moon. His innovative use of special effects brought the magic of the theatre to the silver screen, captivating

audiences and setting the stage for future advancements in cinema (Ezra 54).

Thomas Edison is the next big name in the history of cinematic special effects. In the United States, Thomas Edison's film studio produced early special effects films such as The Execution of Mary Stuart (1895), which used stop-motion photography to depict the beheading of the titular character. Meanwhile, British filmmaker Robert W. Paul experimented with double exposure and miniatures in films like The Motorist (1906), where a car drives up a wall and into space. These early innovators demonstrated the potential of special effects to create illusions and tell stories

that transcended the limitations of the physical world (Simon 38). The Stop-motion photography practiced by the likes of Edison broadened to stop-motion animation. Stop-motion animation emerged as a significant special effects technique in the early 20th century. Filmmakers like Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen used stop-motion to bring mythical creatures and fantastical worlds to life. O'Brien's work on The Lost World (1925) and King Kong (1933) showcased the power of stop-motion to create realistic and dynamic characters (Tucker). Harryhausen continued this tradition with films like Jason and the Argonauts (1963) and Clash of the Titans (1981), where his meticulous animation of creatures such as skeleton warriors and Medusa captivated audiences and influenced generations of filmmakers (Solomon 74).

The 20th century saw a revolution in special effects with the advent of computers. Computer-generated Images (CGI) enabled filmmakers to create previously unimaginable scenes and characters. This technological advancement made it easier to anthropomorphize gods, divine beings, and other non-human forms, seamlessly integrating them into cinematic narratives. The development of CGI in the late 20th century marked a significant leap forward in special effects. Films like Tron (1982) and The Last Starfighter (1984) were among the first to use computer-generated imagery to create visual effects. These early experiments demonstrated the potential of CGI to create complex and detailed environments, paving the way for more advanced applications (Manovich 202).

The 1990s saw a series of groundbreaking films that showcased the power of CGI. Jurassic Park (1993), directed by Steven Spielberg, used CGI to create lifelike dinosaurs that interacted seamlessly with live-action footage. The film's success demonstrated the potential of CGI to bring fantastical creatures to life, captivating audiences and revolutionizing the film industry (Buckland 63). The Matrix, a 1999 film directed by the Wachowskis is another film that pushed the boundaries of CGI with its innovative visual effects and

use of bullet-time photography. The film's depiction of a simulated reality, complete with anthropomorphic agents and digital avatars, showcased the versatility of CGI in creating immersive and visually stunning worlds (Parker 82). James Cameron's highly celebrated 2009 film; Avatar set a new standard for CGI with its creation of the alien world of Pandora. The film's use of 'motion capture' technology and advanced rendering techniques enabled the creation of photorealistic characters and environments. The anthropomorphic Na'vi, with their human-like emotions and behaviors, exemplified the potential of CGI to create compelling and believable non-human characters.

The Influence of Ancient Anthropomorphism on Contemporary Special Effects: From Theatre Arts to Film Science

The anthropomorphism practiced in antiquity significantly influenced contemporary special effects. The anthropomorphic representation of gods and other non-human entities in ancient Greek theatre laid the groundwork for the portrayal of such characters in modern cinema. The use of masks and mechanical devices in Greek theatre to depict gods and mythical beings has parallels in modern special effects techniques. The masks used to convey human emotions and traits in ancient plays can be seen as a precursor to the motion capture technology used in films like Avatar, where actors' performances are translated into digital characters. This continuity shows the lasting impact of ancient theatrical practices on contemporary visual storytelling (Easterling 162).

Before the emergence of film and cinema, the practice of anthropomorphism seen in the ancient Greek Theatre influenced the theatre of subsequent theatrical eras. In the middle ages, anthropomorphism continued to thrive in the form of morality plays and religious dramas. Allegorical figures representing virtues and vices, such as Everyman, Death, and Good Deeds, were given human traits to convey moral lessons. These personifications helped audiences understand and internalize the abstract concepts of good and evil, life and death, and salvation. Medieval playwrights, through the humanizing of these allegories, made their spiritual and ethical messages more accessible to the public. In the same vein, the Renaissance period saw a resurgence of classical themes and an expansion of anthropomorphic characters. William Shakespeare frequently employed anthropomorphism, especially in his comedies and tragedies. Characters like Ariel in The Tempest and Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream are embodiments of natural elements and forces, given human form and personality. These characters bridge the gap between the natural and supernatural, allowing for explorations of magic, transformation, and the human condition.

The Enlightenment and Romantic periods brought a shift towards more symbolic and nuanced uses of anthropomorphism. In the 18th and 19th centuries, playwrights like Goethe and Ibsen used anthropomorphism to delve into the psyche and societal roles. For example, Goethe's Faust features anthropomorphized abstract concepts such as Mephistopheles, representing a complex blend of human villainy and existential dread. This era saw a deepening of psychological and philosophical themes, with anthropomorphic characters serving as vehicles for exploring inner human conflicts and societal critiques. The 20th century marked a period of experimentation and innovation in theatre, with anthropomorphism taking on new forms and meanings. Playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett used anthropomorphic techniques to challenge audiences' perceptions of reality and human nature. In Brecht's The Caucasian Chalk Circle, objects and concepts are often personified to emphasize social and political critiques. Beckett's Waiting for Godot features characters that can be seen as anthropomorphized embodiments of existential themes, such as waiting, uncertainty, and the search for meaning.

The practice of anthropomorphism was not just embraced by early filmmakers upon the emergence of film and cinema; they also drew upon the anthropomorphic traditions of ancient theatre in the invention of visual and special effects. Films like Clash of the Titans (1981, 2010) and Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief (2010) depict Greek gods and mythical creatures with human-like characteristics, reflecting the influence of ancient anthropomorphism on modern cinematic portrayals. The foregoing is reinforced in the contemporary film, The Odyssey, an adaptation of Homer's The Odyssey, produced by Armand Assante in 1997 where the Greek god Poseidon talks and laughs like humans. That is in addition to having a face like that of a man as reflected in the sea from which he talks. In the same film, the god of the wind is given a complete human form and in his interaction with Odyssey, he calls the god Poseidon his cousin.

In terms of special effects, when filmmakers like Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen used stop-motion to bring mythical creatures and fantastical worlds to life, they were building upon the ancient Greek theatrical traditional of using 'deus ex machine' to bring in the gods to resolve human issues with some human attributes. Confirming the link between anthropomorphism of antiquity and contemporary special effects, Pizzato says; "the only identities that count anymore are those on the TV or film screen" (35). The tradition of anthropomorphism continues to shape contemporary cinema, influencing the creation of characters and narratives that resonate with audiences. One major genre where

anthropomorphism thrives is animation. Disney's The Lion King (1994) is a prime example of this, portraying animals with human emotions and personalities. The film's success highlights the effectiveness of anthropomorphism in creating characters that resonate with audiences of all ages (Bryman 62). Another good example is Sing, a 2016 film produced by Illumination Entertainment, which showcases a variety of anthropomorphic animals participating in a singing competition. Each character has distinct human-like personalities and dreams. Zootopia (2016), The Secret Life of Pets (2016), Kung Fu Panda 3 (2016) and Isle of Dogs (2018) are other good examples. In fact, the list is endless when it comes to the animation film genre. Fantasy and science fiction films also employ anthropomorphism to depict non-human characters frequently. The Star Wars franchise features anthropomorphic droids like C-3PO and R2-D2, who exhibit human-like traits and emotions. Similarly, the Guardians of the Galaxy films include characters like Groot, a sentient tree, and Rocket, a talking raccoon, whose human-like behaviors and personalities make them understandable and endearing to viewers (Geraghty 89). Our own Nollywood movies also carry on the legacy of anthropomorphism passed down from antiquity. The Nigerian film Igodo (1999) for instance, blends traditional African mythology with modern special effects. The film's depiction of trees that bleed and interact with humans showcases the integration of ancient beliefs and contemporary cinematic techniques. This interesting blend of ancient and modern elements highlights the enduring influence of anthropomorphism in storytelling and visual effects (Haynes 44). There are also cases of anthropomorphic representations of water spirits like in Niyi Akinmolayan's My Village People (2021) and Play Network Studios' remake of Nneka the Pretty Serpent. In many Nollywood Epic genre movies there are also instances of the gods appearing in human form and engaging human characters in conversations. Most of these are special effects in themselves and in recent times, a good number of them are made possible and aesthetically appealing by CGI.

Conclusion

This study has explored the concept of anthropomorphism in antiquity and its significant influence on contemporary cinematic special effects. From the anthropomorphic gods of ancient Greek theatre to the lifelike CGI characters in modern films, the tradition of attributing human traits to non-human entities has persisted across centuries. The legacy of anthropomorphism in theatre reflects its powerful ability to humanize the non-human, making abstract ideas tangible and relatable. From ancient Greek gods to modern existential characters, anthropomorphism has allowed

playwrights to explore the depths of human experience, engage audiences on a profound level, and create timeless works that resonate across cultures and eras. As theatre continues to evolve, the anthropomorphic tradition remains a vital tool for storytelling and artistic expression.

By examining the historical evolution of special effects and their roots in ancient theatrical practices, this study highlights the enduring impact of anthropomorphism on visual storytelling. The legacy of ancient anthropomorphic spectacles continues to shape the visual wonders seen in today's cinema, showing the timeless appeal and effectiveness of this artistic tradition. Credit must therefore be given to the ancient Greek Theatre practitioners in historical accounts of visual and special effects both in the theatre and especially in films.

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