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Resonance to archetypes in media: There's some accounting for taste

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ABSTRACT

Modern mass media typically employ archetypes—prototypical characters—in their narratives. This research proposes that people's affective reactions to and preferences for these characters in rich cultural media—their "resonance" to archetypes—may be an indicator of their own personality and life themes. In the first of two studies, a Rich Culture Archetype Scale (RCAS) was constructed based on media examples from popular music, movies, and classic art representing certain archetypes. In the second study, the RCAS was compared with other scales of personality and of archetypes. Results indicated that there exist five clusters of archetypes to which people resonate, and that people's resonance predicts their personal life themes and media preferences.

1. Introduction

People have been cultivating and refining mass communication for centuries (Dominick, 2002). We have long communicated to one another through etching, sculpture and painting, and music. In our contemporary information age, much of our life is dominated by such mass commercial media as movies, television, and the Internet (Bogart, 1991). The stories and characters that appear in these mass media are essential means of sharing human experience with one another. Some people discuss, converse, and analogize about television. Others infuse movie plot analogies and metaphors into their professional presentations in order to communicate a sense of tangible, shared understanding (Downing, 1991). Social institutions such as book clubs and Internet chat rooms often are organized around their respective media (Dominick, 2002). These phenomena suggest that there exist internal, psychological forces that allow us to respond in common ways to stories and story characters.

One part of personality proposed to explain our captivation with cultural phenomena is the archetype. An archetype is an internal mental model of a typical, generic story character to which an observer might resonate emotionally (Jung, 1961–1963/1983). Examples of archetypes include the Hero, the Jester, and the Sage, and they have been proposed as key elements in a common language involving the stories that people tell one another (e.g., Campbell, 1949; Downing, 1991; Mark & Pearson, 2001). Archetypal characters help promote actions in stories by embodying characteristic motives and other qualities that everyone can recognize (e.g., for the Hero, growth, courage, and triumph over adversity). People who hear such stories may respond quite differently to a figure such as the Hero, and those patterns of different responding may represent important personality qualities.

A number of studies have traced proposed archetypes through the stories of various cultures (e.g., Jadot, 1975). Such research, however, typically employs bibliographic, cultural approaches. Using literary approaches, for example, several theories have attempted to organize various specific archetypes into groups. A few studies investigate the connotations of archetypal symbols; several others use self-report scales to infer an individual's identification with an archetype such as the Explorer (e.g., how strongly a test-taker agrees with the statement "I feel restless"; Pearson & Marr, 2002b). But to what degree do individual judges recognize archetypes? Can they identify archetypes in media, and do they respond to them emotionally?

We first discuss the origin of the archetype concept and update the theory, introducing a "neo-archetypal" approach. Study 1 presents a new psychometric procedure for testing the existence of classes of archetypes (see Goldberg, 1992; Saucier & Goldberg, 2002). Study 2 examines individual differences in people's emotional responsiveness to such archetypes, linking those differences to personal preferences in mass culture and establishing connections between tastes in media and personality.

2. What is an archetype?

The concept of the archetype may provide important explanations of how people respond to other people, story characters, and media. Archetype theory began with the work of Carl Jung (1875–1961). The portion of Jung's theory of particular interest

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here is that archetypes represent personifications of behaviors—characters who embody behavior patterns (Jung, 1964, 1968). Jung first proposed the concept of an archetype in the context of his clinical observations and discussion of the collective unconscious. He contended that people employed unconscious or implicit mental models of other people in the world based on a network of "primordial...mythological images" and ancient beliefs that were ancestrally common to all humans and provided the "true basis of the individual psyche" (Jung, 1961–1963/1983, pp. 16, 67; see also C. S. Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 120). Any real person, situation, or event could conjure up these powerful and ancient images from the collective unconscious, eliciting a powerful and otherwise inexplicable emotional reaction (Shelburne, 1988, p. 57).

Jung described only a few archetypes systematically, regarding them as "fundamentally unobservable" (Jung, 1961–1963/1983, p. 26; Shelburne, 1988, pp. 56, 63). Later, Joseph Campbell (1949/2004) codified many archetypal images, and contemporary theorists regularly discuss about 12 or 13 archetypes. Many of these, such as the Innocent, have evolved in concept; others, such as the Lover, the Hero and the Magician, have been relatively stable.[1]

Examples of these are illustrated in Table 1. Several organizational schemes for archetypes also have been proposed, dividing them into groups; for example, oriented by agency and/or communion (McAdams, 1993, pp. 127–131), or oriented by Maslowian needs such as stability, belonging, mastery, or fulfillment (Mark & Pearson, 2001, p. 16).

Jung and others often used archetypes as an explanation for responses to literature and other cultural stimuli—an approach that earned them many admirers in the humanities. As intriguing as many of Jung's concepts were, however, they were discrepant with mainstream American psychological thinking (and remain as incongruent today as they were in the early 1920s). For example, Jung promulgated a view of archetypes as based on biologically-transmitted primal ideas. More problematically, these archetypes were viewed by Jung as part of people's collective or racial unconscious, dating back to a prehistoric state and varying somewhat according to the ethnic group concerned (C. S. Hall & Lindzey, 1978; Jung, 1961–1963/1983). So as to distinguish between these earlier views of archetypes—to which many have objected (e.g., McGowan, 1994; Neher, 1996; Pietikainen, 1998)—and our own characterization, the next section introduces "neo-archetypal theory," which preserves the more useful aspects of archetypal theory while integrating it within contemporary psychological understanding.

3. Neo-archetypal theory

The neo-archetypal theory we develop in this section retains key aspects of Jung's theory while leaving out its less substantiated parts. We have drawn on the work of several contemporary theorists in the area (e.g., Mark & Pearson, 2001; McAdams, 1993; McGowan, 1994; Pietikainen, 1998), as well as many researchers in related areas. In neo-archetypal theory, archetypes possess five key characteristics. Specifically, archetypes: (a) are story characters, (b) are represented psychologically as mental models like self- and other-schemas and prototypes, and (c) often elicit intense emotional responses when encountered. Also, such archetypes (d) operate at an automatic or unconscious level, and (e) are culturally enduring so as to be easily learned and widely recognizable. We will elaborate briefly upon each of these ideas in turn.

First and foremost, in neo-archetypal theory (as in the original Jungian concept), archetypes are generic story characters. For most people, they represent key figures in story narratives and possess familiar and consistent constellations of traits. Commonly, archetypes are represented directly as recognizable generic characters such as "a mother," "a criminal," or "a healer" acting in a given story plot. However, archetypes also can be manifested thematically rather than as discrete story characters. For example, archetypal characters can be depicted in representational or allegorical paintings and/or sculptures; additionally, they can be represented even more abstractly, such as a theme, mood, or motif in a piece of music. The function of the archetype is the same in each medium: to serve to convey meaning or tell a story.

Second, in neo-archetypal theory, archetypes are viewed as standard mental models. Much of contemporary personality and social psychology describe the operation of a person's mental models of themselves and others (Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, & Heier, 1996; Higgins, 1987; Mayer, 2005; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). For example, Markus and Nurius's (1986) *possible selves* are a class of mental models of peoples' actual, ideal, feared, and desired selves. Closer still to archetypes, people often represent others as personality types—as extraverts or introverts, for example—and are able to learn and categorize such prototypes very quickly (Andersen & Cole, 1990; Cantor & Mischel, 1977; Glassman & Andersen, 1999; Mayer & Bower, 1986).

Third, in neo-archetypal theory, archetypes are mental constructions that, when triggered, tend to elicit powerful emotional responses in those who are exposed to them. The archetype concept is predicated on a person's previous emotional encounters and interactions with similar characters or ideas (C. S. Hall & Lindzey, 1978; Jung, 1961–1963/1983; Katz, 1984; Stewart, 1987). The emotional component of mental models can endure across experiences (Scherer, 1992) and even can extend to unfamiliar situations. For example, affective responses to novel consumer products, social groups, and even politicians can be more or less automatically triggered by previous experience (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Similarly, Andersen and Berk (1998) have examined significant-other prototypes—prototypes of other people that incorporate the key characteristics of those one has known closely in early life—and have found that representations from people's personal past can elicit stronger emotional reactions than those of non-significant others. Personality prototypes and our emotional responses to them thus are inextricably linked, even to the point where the emotional reaction itself may be considered prototypical (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987).

The fourth feature of neo-archetypal theory refers to the archetypes' frequently automatic operation. The processing of some mental models is often viewed as automatic or implicit (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), and their non-conscious nature may contribute to how people construct and maintain models about themselves and others (Bargh & Tota, 1988; Epstein, 1998). Additionally, the automaticity of some mental models is thought to affect a number of different mental processes and outcomes, including, how people form attitudes and judgements, how they interpret their moods and emotions, and how they behave under various conditions (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Bowers, 1984; Carver, Ganellen,

[1] As an example of an archetype that has evolved in concept, the Innocent has gone by several names in the archetypal literature. Jung (1968) himself cited a Child God archetype (which some later termed the Elf) but also used the flowery terminology of Puer Æternis to describe what is almost certainly the same character: the embodiment of renewal, hope, and youth. McAdams did not have an imago exactly like this; his Ritualist, however, was a simple, unambitious character who above all else "longed to return to paradise" (McAdams, 1993, p. 158). This satisfaction with tranquility is borne out in Mark and Pearson's (2001) Innocent archetype: a simple, pure, and naïve character who holds traditional values and generally exudes innate goodness (Pearson & Marr, 2002a). Many other current archetypes have gone through similar processes of evolution, such as the Creator, the Ruler, and the Jester (see Table 1).