

Spooked by gadgets: Postmodern animism

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

Recently a friend forwarded me a cautionary e-mail. It reported that a couple in Canada had parked for an errand, and as they walked away from their car, the driver used the remote on his key fob to lock the doors. When the Canadians returned to their car five minutes later, it had been stripped of a laptop and a cell phone. The police were summoned. After finding no signs of breaking and entering, they informed the unlucky pair that brainy car jackers are now able to pick up the signal transmitted from a key fob and duplicate it to gain entry.

The e-mail urged new habits: manually lock all doors before leaving your car, and never again use that handy key fob locker-upper. The e-mail was bolstered by a note that several police departments had confirmed this newfangled criminal activity. And so had Snopes.com, the Web site devoted to debunking urban legends.

Before I disposed of my beepy little talisman, I double checked Snopes.com. Snopes noted that the key fob story was widespread, but said that whoever had cited Snopes to confirm the warning had not read Snopes's article very closely. Automated key fobs indeed transmit signals—but since the mid-1990s car manufacturers have rigged them to send “rolling random codes” instead of the same signal. This means that even car thieves possessing sophisticated technology and specialized knowledge would require hours—not minutes—to decode and duplicate key fob signals. It turns out that we can still safely use the remote locking device while popping in and out of the post office or the drugstore.

Hardly a month goes by without my receiving this kind of warning about technology. There are the old worries about microwaves and inadvertent sterilization. There is the warning that hotel key cards contain your credit card information. Cell phones seem especially prominent in urban legendary anxieties. Can a cell phone signal ignite gasoline fumes and immolate you at the pump? And once and for all, does cell phone use cause brain tumors?

We love our gadgets, but they also spook us. Think of it as postmodern animism. Premodern animists pictured spirits enlivening trees, rocks, animals, wind and sea. These spirits were powerful and often unpredictable, always best placated by ritual and magic.

Postmodern animists, on the other hand, don't believe that spirits infuse nature. We believe that capricious spirits infuse our machines. And hey, better superstitiously safe than realistically sorry. So cut up that key card, retire that key fob, keep your land line. And a virtual incantation or two, conveniently dispersed to loved ones via e-mail, can't hurt.

Hollywood has magnified and exploited these anxieties. There are technophobic movies, from *2001: A Space Odyssey* to *The Terminator* to the upcoming adaptation of Stephen King's novel *Cell*, about violent zombies created by a pulse sent over mobile phones. But what's more striking is how ordinary and pervasive is our uneasiness about the gizmos that fill our days and nights.

Technology is complex enough that it might as well be magic, most of the time to most of us. (On this front sociologist Richard Stivers's *Technology as Magic*, published in 1999, is still worth revisiting.) I have some rough idea of how television works. I know that computers are based on binary code, and I realize that cell phones involve nothing more magical than the miniaturization of precedent technology. But still I must turn to high priests and shamans (sometimes known as the IT department) when my laptop balks or my cell phone won't sync with my Bluetooth. (A grammatical query: If you own more than one Bluetooth, do you have Bluteeths?)

And sometimes even the shamans are baffled. They speak their indecipherable language and rattle their tools and shrug their shoulders and send me—alone with my spooky gadgets—back into the high-tech jungle.

In our hypertechnologized culture, the line between rational prudence and magical animism is razor thin. We want to believe our promethean powers of mechanical invention can bring paradise on earth. And yet our machinery, in such homely, intimate guises as the cell phone, carries with it mystification and even menace—right into our pockets and even our ear canals. In the face of postmodern animism, the secularization thesis—about the death of religions and disenchantment of the world—suffers its most ignominious defeat yet.