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Why we see faces everywhere we look – 13th July, 2021

Level 4

The process of seeing faces in objects is called pareidolia. We all see "false" faces in everyday objects such as clouds or in objects as common as an electrical socket. Scientists from a university in Australia conducted a study to look at whether our brain processes false faces in the same way it does with human faces. Their research shows there are some similarities in how we recognise both human and false faces.

In the study, volunteers looked at false and human faces. They rated the strength of emotion they felt upon seeing each one. The researchers said the brain was involved in the same processes when deciding what was or wasn't a real face. A researcher said: "We know these objects are not truly faces, yet the perception of a face lingers." He said our brain sees two things at once, and that we focus more on the image of the face than the object.

Level 5

The process of imagining a face in an inanimate object is called pareidolia. This is the tendency to see patterns in something where there is nothing there. We all see "false" faces in everyday objects. Many of us see them in clouds or in an object as mundane as an electrical plug socket. Scientists from a university in Australia conducted a study to investigate whether our brain processes these false faces in the same way it does with human faces. Their research suggests there are some similarities in how we recognise both human and false faces.

In the study, 17 volunteers looked at different false and human faces. They rated the strength of emotion they felt upon seeing each one. The researchers said the same neural processing was involved in deciding what was or wasn't a real face. Researcher David Alais said: "We know these objects are not truly faces, yet the perception of a face lingers." He said our brain sees two things at once, and that we focus more on the image of a face than the object. He added: "The first impression of a face does not give way to the second perception of an object."

Level 6

If you have ever imagined a face in an inanimate object, your brain is engaged in a process called pareidolia. This is the tendency to see a pattern or meaning in something, where actually there is nothing there. Seeing faces in everyday objects is a common experience. Many of us perceive a smiley face in the clouds, in the froth of a cappuccino, or in an object as mundane as an electrical plug socket. Scientists from the University of Sydney in Australia conducted a study to investigate whether our brain processes these illusory faces in the same way it does with real human faces. Their research suggests there are some similarities in how we recognise both human and "false" faces.

In the study, 17 volunteers looked at a series of illusory and human faces. They had to rate the strength of emotional attachment they felt upon seeing each one. The researchers' conclusion was that the same neural circuitry was involved in determining what was or wasn't a real face. Psychologist David Alais said: "We know these objects are not truly faces, yet the perception of a face lingers." He added: "We end up with...a parallel experience that the object is both a compelling face and an object." Mr Alais said the brain sees two things at once, and that we focus more on the image of a face than the fact it is an object. He added: "The first impression of a face does not give way to the second perception of an object."