

Scientists Study and Explain Why We See Faces All Around Us

VOCABULARY WORDS

1. inanimate /ɪˈnæn.ə.mət/ having none of the characteristics of life that an animal or plant has
Example: He looks at me as if I'm an inanimate object.
2. perceive /pəˈsi:v/ to think of something in a particular way:
Example: The way people perceive the real world is strongly influenced by the language they speak.
3. froth /frɔːθ/ small, white bubbles on the surface of a liquid
Example: I like the froth on the top of the coffee.
4. mundane /mʌnˈdeɪn/ very ordinary and therefore not interesting:
Example: Mundane matters such as paying bills and shopping for food do not interest her.
5. socket /ˈsɒt.ɪt/ the part of a piece of equipment, especially electrical equipment, into which another part fits
Example: Don't forget to plug it into the electrical socket in order for it to work.



If you have ever imagined a face in an **inanimate** object, your brain is going through a process called pareidolia /pa-rey-dohl-ya/. 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 imaginary 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 part of the brain 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 stays." He added: "We end up with...a parallel experience that the object is both an interesting 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."

DISCUSSION

1. What does a smiley face represent?
2. Does looking at a happy face change your mood?
3. Why do cartoons and drawings show inanimate things with happy faces?
4. What makes a happy face look happy?
5. Should people always look happy in photographs?
6. What would make you happier?