

“An exploration into the nature of humour and its potential to be defined as a technology.”

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is a vehicle by which I explore territories in preparation for a doctoral research, investigating different ways in which people use, and incorporate technology into their lives. I anticipate that this research will have particular implications for the way in which technology may be conceptualised and designed. My particular expertise in technology studies resides in the field of embodied interaction and the incorporation of technology as an extension of, or embodiment of, the soma. One implication in this approach is that it becomes necessary to question distinctions we might hold of ‘the human’ and of ‘the technological’. In my research I question whether it is useful to understand humour and technology in the same moment. This coheres with my instinctive approach to my work as a designer/artist; an approach that often results in intentionally (and unintentionally) humorous outcomes. This paper sets out and explores some of my initial ideas regarding humour and technology. After a short introduction, this paper will attempt to provide a useful definition of technology, and explore some ideas of technology, and of technology studies that relate to this research. This paper will then apply a similar process to humour, attempting to provide a useful definition of humour, then exploring some ideas of humour, and of humour studies that relate to this research. Finally, this paper will explore the potential of humour to be defined as a technology, and consider some possible implications of subscribing to such a definition.

INTRODUCTION.

It is an initial premise of this research that technology may be understood as ‘a way of dealing with the world’, and that perhaps humour can similarly be understood as ‘a way of dealing with the world’. If this is the case then one can, whilst remaining aware of the specious dangers of the fallacy of the excluded middle¹, begin to explore the nature of humour and its potential to be defined as a technology.

My wish is to produce creative research, flavoured by contemporary socio-techno philosophy and technoetic thinking, examining ideas such as Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2007), but from the perspective of an interest in humour. My research will explore the role of humour in the human species, not taking a view of it as solely a phenomenon of human culture, but exploring the idea that humour may be a technological response to situations, and might be better understood in conversations of technology, e.g. investigations of Paleolithic artifacts, or contemporary cyberculture. It appears to be a necessity of studies of humour, and of studies of technology, to consider a vast array of ideas, incidents, and artifacts. I anticipate that this is due to the nature with which both humour and technology saturate human culture. In order to begin to engage with the aforementioned ‘vast array’, this research will initially seek to explore the more sweeping theories of technology and of humour. These theories, such as Deleuze’s ‘Body-without-organs’, or Clarke’s Pattern Recognition Theory of Humour, tend to be of low-resolution, speaking in general terms rather than absolutes and specifics. In anticipation that comprehensive lists of the forms, applications, and incidents of humour, and of technology, would dominate the remainder of this paper, discussion at this stage will therefore also tend to be in general terms.

DEFINING AND EXPLORING TECHNOLOGY, AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES.

As with any distributed idea, there are numerous ways of understanding technology. Kurzweil defines technology as “[the] shaping of resources for a practical purpose,” and adds, “I use the term resources rather than materials because technology extends to the shaping of nonmaterial resources such as information” (Kurzweil, 1999. pp. 20). The word ‘technology’ (in common language) is used to refer to complex devices or systems, e.g. computers, mobile telephones, the Internet. However, if any designed system, as Kurzweil implies, that we use

¹ In this case, the ‘fallacy of the excluded middle’ refers to the idea that ‘because two things share characteristics they must be the same’, e.g. Tomatoes are red, London buses are red, ergo: London buses are tomatoes.

in order to manipulate energy, matter and information is a 'technology', then these technologies exist in a diverse a range of applications, including complex, abstract forms of language, such as software programmes and algebra, tangible artifacts, such as hammers and nails, and artifacts that are notable because they combine abstract and tectonic² elements to various degrees (such as computers and books). That is not to say that the more tangible technologies do not require substantial understanding, and abstract reasoning, in order to be effectively used. With Kurzweil's definition in mind, this paper proposes that technologies are not merely electro-mechanical and/or mechanical devices (as the common usage of the word technology may suggest), and that technology is not essentially tied to materiality.

A commonly held belief may be that languages such as spoken English or mathematics are not acceptable under the definition of technology. This paper proposes that this is a predictable reaction to the apparent fact that spoken languages are such an inherent part of human consciousness. When people demarcate and compartmentalise perceived artifacts, this research anticipates that they tend to group the terms 'electronic' 'machine' and 'technology' together, and consider them to be 'not us'. This is important because this research is concerned with people's perception of 'us', and 'not us'. I am cautious about being drawn into a debate concerning the semantics of language, due to the fact that it may dominate the remainder of this paper. Therefore, in the context of this paper, the term 'language' is intended to refer to the systems of information storage and manipulation that are acquired, and developed, through a memetic³ process, that are comprehended (albeit in a fluctuating way) by more than one entity, and that can convey information between 'selves' through a process of discourse. Pepperell suggests language to be; *"not just what is spoken, or even written, but the whole structure of articulated meaning that pervades our culture – the general discourse of society"* (Pepperell, 1997. pp. 70). Pepperell's definition of language is important if one subscribes to the aforementioned idea that languages are technologies, because it would then imply that technologies 'pervade our culture' to the same extent as languages do (the implication being that they are one and the same). If one subscribes to this theory of language as technology, then it becomes increasingly harder to think of examples of humour that are not technologically conceived, executed and distributed.

Pepperell and Punt define technology as *"the tangible expression of desire motivating human imagination to modify reality"* (Pepperell & Punt 2000, pp. 7). They continue, suggesting that there are *"at least two, often closely connected, reasons why humans develop technology. One is to accomplish some fantasised wish such as recording sound or light. Another is to decrease the amount of time and/or effort required to achieve some desirable end."* (Pepperell & Punt 2000, pp. 7). I suspect that the concept of desire as the motivation for technology will be important to this research when considering ideas of visual, audible, and literary, art as technologies that provoke an 'emotional' response in humans.

To paraphrase Virilio: humans also utilise technology to refocus perception (Virilio, 1999). Perception, that is, beyond the resolution that Pepperell terms the *"resolution of reality"* (Pepperell 1997, pp. 29). This technologically adjusted resolution of reality enables us to perceive⁴ phenomena smaller than microscopic organelles within organic cells, and bigger than macroscopic nebulae in space, and may be detached from expected notions of time (or 'real-time'). Refocusing perception through technology enables humans to manipulate matter and energy (with other technologies) at these new resolutions, with far greater dexterity than can be achieved at our own resolution: naked eyesight.

DEFINING AND EXPLORING HUMOUR, AND HUMOUR STUDIES.

According to Clarke, and Provine, the subject of humour has often been disregarded in the past because it has not been considered to be a topic for 'serious' research (Clarke, 2008. pp.

² Tectonic, in this context, is intended to mean 'physical', 'material', 'constructed of atoms' and (for want of a better word) 'real'.

³ To define memetics by paraphrasing Blackmore (1999): Memes are the 'genes' of culture: if genes are biological replicators, then memes are cultural replicators. If genes utilise vehicles, (organisms), in order to replicate themselves, then memes utilise the process of imitation, between organisms, in order to replicate themselves.

⁴ This perception may be of an actual phenomenon (e.g. via technologies such as microscopes or telescopes), or representations of such phenomena (e.g. photographic images).

10. Provine, 2000. pp. 3). Provine draws attention to the apparently obvious paradox that although some may dismiss humour research⁵, several of the most important and influential philosophers in human history have attempted to tackle the subject with, as Provine indicates, ostensibly varying degrees of success; “*Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Freud, and Bergson*” (Provine, 2000. pp. 12). This paper draws strength from Clarke and Provine to suggest that humour is so pervasive an aspect of being human, so saturates the experience of the world, that it is implausible to disregard humour as a subject for serious study. On the subject of such study, Bergson writes: “*Can [humour] then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination? Begotten of real life and akin to art, should it not also have something of its own to tell us about art and life?*” (Bergson, 2008. pp. 1)

This research will consider that the ideas within Clarke’s ‘Pattern Recognition Theory of Humour’ (Clarke, 2008) may be useful when analysing notions of technology. When stating the eleven major premises and principles of the theory, Clarke insists, “*that humour can exist in any situation, and no stipulations of content can be made. Global interpretations based on content have long failed to achieve cogency*” (Clarke, 2008. pp. 16). Because Pattern Recognition Theory is not content dependent, Clarke makes the substantial claim that it is “*the first analytically justifiable explanation of any instance of humour*” (Clarke, 2008). I have been interested in some aspects of being human that might appear to be entirely contingent effects of social construction. This paper suggests that one good example of such an aspect is humour. Clarke states, “*the existence of a social aspect to humour, and even the potential for laughter to be contagious, does not necessarily imply, as has been presumed by many theorists, that humour’s principal function is social*” (Clarke, 2008. pp. 64). He claims “*humour is an internal process, not primarily intended for communication, but for cognitive development*” (Clarke, 2008. pp. 64). This paper suggests that Clarke’s statement appears to support the idea that humans are generally born with the mechanism of/for humour, or at least the potential for such a mechanism, and that this mechanism is then informed through social experiences, i.e. culture dictates what is ‘funny’, and what is ‘not funny’; humour develops as these diktat are negotiated.

One of the most succinct definitions of humour that I have encountered thus far is that “*humour is surprise without threat or promise*” (Walton, 2003). Walton explains that that which exists within one’s ‘fields of ignorance’ cannot be surprising, “*What surprises you depends on your experience and knowledge [...] in a field of ignorance, you expect anything, and therefore are not surprised when anything happens*” (Walton, 2003)⁶. To paraphrase Walton in his explanation of the meaning of promise in this context: promise refers to the promise of some material or immaterial gain. Walton is forthcoming in that he is continuing to test this definition, stating that it has thus far endured scrutiny.

It would be remiss to deliberate humour without mentioning that it has a concomitant physical manifestation: the smile, and that the smile has a raucous and exaggerated relative: laughter. Although smiling and laughing will not be explored in detail in this particular paper, I expect that they will be important to this research because they appear to both be somatic enactments of humour, and embodiments to the world that (to paraphrase Clarke, 2008) an ‘internal’, and therefore ‘hidden’ cognitive mechanism of humour has deemed something to be humorous.

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF HUMOUR TO BE DEFINED AS A TECHNOLOGY.

Some recent research has suggested that a useful understanding of technology is to consider it to be incorporated into an extensive human soma (Thompson, 2008). This argument claims technology as a coextensive, and somatic, facet of the human. One might recognise in humour some striking similarities with the incorporation of technology made in such arguments. If that were the case, then some human facets that appear to be essentially innate (such as humour) might be better considered in the same conversation as technology: as a component of a ‘technic species’. In my wish to explore the idea that humour may be a technological response to situations, as well as a socially constructed, and mediated,

⁵ On the grounds that, “*in the world of serious science, laughter is seen as a lightweight topic – an area lacking in clout or prestige*” (Provine, 2000. pp. 3).

⁶ For suggested examples of this idea (usually by way of thought experiments) see Walton’s website (cited in the bibliography).

response, then theories of holsomatism⁷ would suggest that I might need to examine the role of humour as a component of the soma; perhaps considering the body as a technology of living.

In theses of the organic and inorganic soma, terms such as 'technology' are sometimes considered to be no longer useful. Recognising the intellectual potential of this is likely to be important to this research because, at this stage, I intend it to take humour (an idea that many would see as a social characteristic component of human consciousness) and claim that it can be considered in the same conversation as technology. Where others may have taken 'technologies' and claimed them as the 'soma', I will take an aspect of the 'soma' and claim it as 'technology'. This is difficult to say, of course, because ideas of 'technology' and 'not technology' are rooted in our language – clearly this will be a problem.

Another foreseeable threat to this research is the possibility that it may collapse into tautology, with a thesis arguing that technology is soma and ergo that soma is technology: locked in a repetitive exchange that shifts uncertain ideas of technology back and forth between the soma and that which is not, whilst managing the idea that the apparent boundary between technology and the soma is a negotiable construction.

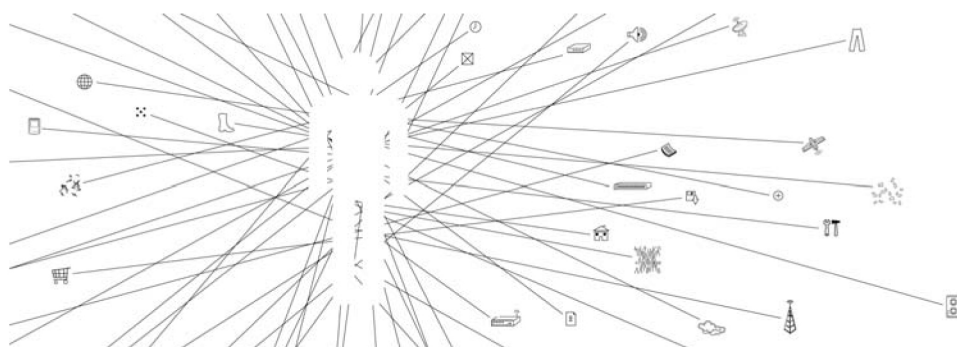


Fig. 1. A thesis that claims technologies into the soma. The soma is identified (made visible) through this process of assimilation (author's own image, 2009).

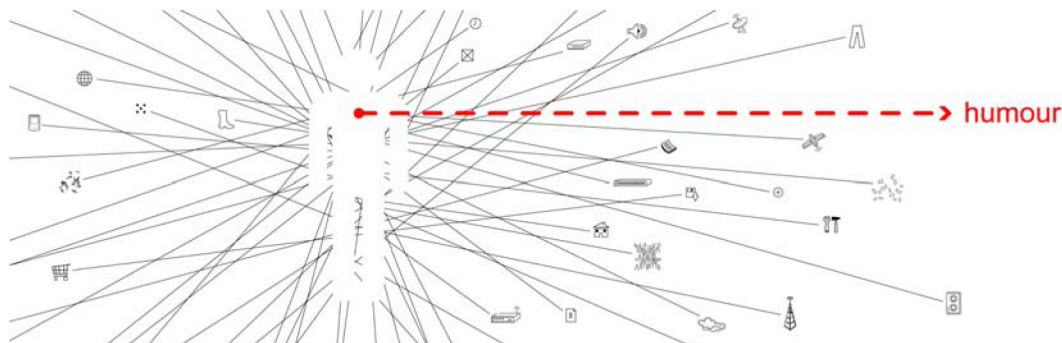


Fig. 2. This research will consider a characteristic component of human consciousness (humour) to be a technology (author's own image, 2009).

This research will also consider the idea that there may be possible comparison between the vernacular nature of the development of both technology and of humour. Models such as Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1999) may be useful for identifying the way in which technologies and (collective and individual) 'senses of humour' appear to develop as they are created and modified by swarms of interacting, self-agent, actors.

An implication of subscribing to the view that humour is a technology may be that one is compelled to consider what other facets of human consciousness, previously assumed to be philosophically contingent, may in fact be considered to be technologies. Love? Hate? Hunger? Thirst? Spirituality? If one were to be convinced of a theory that humour was a technology, but considered technology to be 'inhuman' (in a 'Lyotardian' sense (Lyotard 1991)), then one would be forced to consider that humour had in some way been annexed from the domain of the human, and instead belonged to technology. Following this 'loss' of

⁷ Holsomatism refers to Thompson's notion of the 'extensive human soma' (Thompson, 2008)

humour, what would remain of one's concept of the human? Moreover, if this process were to be applied to some of the other aforementioned facets of human consciousness: love, hate, hunger, thirst, spirituality (or any others), and these ideas were too somehow 'claimed' into the realm of inhuman technology – what would remain as one's concept of the human? Certain neuroscientific research may have 'dehumanised' (and therefore trivialised) human emotions through medical theories that reduce emotional phenomena to a process of shifting ions, hormonal imbalances, pulsing axons and flaring dendrites. Such theories appear to have permeated the public consciousness, resulting in apparently humorous artifacts such as this cartoon by Dagsson:

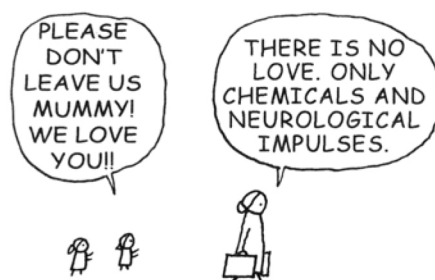


Fig. 3. Dagsson, 2007.

The aforementioned reductionist neuroscientific theories often rely on data that is acquired from medical technologies such as MRI or GSR⁸. Neuroscientists such as Ramachandran have interpreted such data to show, for example, experiences of faith 'happening' in the brain⁹ as if they were no more divine than any other electrochemical phenomenon, and suggests that such 'happenings' could be considered as forms of abnormal seizure. Kurzweil refers to a similar instance, one that featured a female medical patient who, upon having her exposed brain stimulated with an electrode, began laughing (she was conscious during the procedure). When asked why she was laughing, she replied, "*You guys are just so funny – standing around*" (Browne, 1998).

Technological interventions need not be as invasive as physically prodding the brain with an electrified tool. There are a plethora of substances (alcoholic drinks may be a good example) that, once ingested, may affect the somatic processes that concern humour. These substances are sourced, synthesised, and designed by technological means, and may be considered technologies in themselves. Such technologies are generally used with the intention that they will have a recreational or medicinal effect on the emotional state of their user. These technologies may be important to this research because they appear to be a plausible example of an instance in which technologies are incorporated into an extensive human soma. They may provide a 'middle ground', with the taking of such imbibed technologies as drugs situated between the acts prodding the exposed brain of a conscious medical patient, and broadcasting a comic programme to a television audience, in either case a humorous response appears to be provoked through the incorporation of technology into one's holsomatic experience.

This research will consider the impacts of accepting ideas of an emotional experience, such as the pleasure derived from humour¹⁰, being a 'mechanism'. These ideas may be presented from a neuroscientific perspective, (i.e. humour as a chemical mechanism), or possibly a psychoanalytical, Freudian one (i.e. humour as a form of cathartic coping mechanism). This research will contemplate the idea that considering humour as a mechanism, as mechanical, may be a valuable strategy to implement in a thesis that makes the case for humour as technology, because ideas of mechanics and of technology appear to be more closely associated than ideas of humour and of technology.

This paper may appear to be curiously nostalgic for a time, perhaps, when the soma was

⁸ Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is a 'non-invasive' technology used to illustrate the interior of the body. Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) detects emotional reactions by measuring the electrical resistance of the skin.

⁹ In a proposed 'God module' within the temporal lobes of the brain (Blakeslee and Ramachandran, 1999, pp. 184 - 188).

¹⁰ Clarke asserts, "*humour is not an emotion, although it does produce an emotional response*" (2008, pp. 72).

thought of in mechanical terms; when the human body may have been thought of as merely a locomotive system for a prosaic, mechanistic, human mind. This semblance was not intentional, and only became apparent toward the end of the writing; however it may serve to identify territory for further study.

I can foresee probable counter arguments to the claims of this paper; arguments which insist that technology and humour should remain exclusive from one another, and/or that humour should be considered to be exclusively a facet of the human, and/or that technology should be considered exclusively inhuman. I anticipate that the process of identifying and negotiating these counter arguments will form an important characteristic of this research.

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LIST OF FIGURES.

Figs. 1 and 2. Author's own images, 2009.

Fig. 3. Dagsson, H., 2007. *'Is This Supposed to be Funny?'* London, UK. Michael Joseph. pp. ~16 (pages unnumbered).

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