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EXPANDING THE TECHNOLOGY DEBATE THROUGH THE INVESTIGATION OF HUMOR IN RECENT ART: 1950s to 1990s:

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE HUMANITIES FACULTY OF

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE,

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

MARGARET MATHIAS

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

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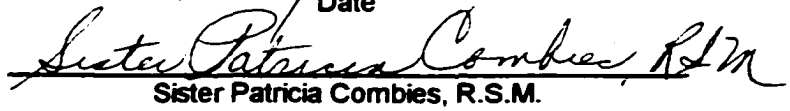

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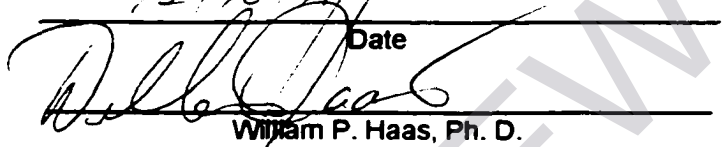

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the humor-technology relationship expressed in certain recent twentieth-century art, thus contributing to an understanding about living in an age of advanced technology. Humor scholarship, a growing discipline within the humanities, contributes philosophical, psychological, social, and scientific insights about human nature and social interaction. Technology, defined in the broadest sense, includes artifacts, technique, organized knowledge, systems, and methods. The thesis argues that the analysis of humor directed at technology increases knowledge about technological concerns despite the fact that earlier humor studies have, for the most part, neglected this source of learning.

Although technology has been the object of broad inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural scrutiny, little in the literature relates the study of technology to humor generally or humorous art particularly. How humor exposes technology's pretense through wit or ridicule, therefore, is a valid subject of inquiry. As topics of academic examination, humor, technology, and art, may also be investigated through other subjects such as human intelligence, aesthetics, ethics, celebration, and play, therefore, an analysis of their relationship provides additional avenues of research.

Employing the Aristotelian dialectic and abductive, or hypothetical reasoning, this study probes classical and contemporary theories of human nature, humor, and technology to reveal their interconnectedness, similarities, and differences. This method validates humor as a source of knowledge that

clarifies, to some degree, the impact of technology on social development. An analysis of several artists and their works further demonstrate the value of humor as a means of evaluating technology.

Since the 1960s contemporary art has exhibited distinguishing characteristics that include the intentional use of humor, social commentary, and the use of various technologies, such as computer, laser, and video. The critique of these artists and their works provides a focal point for this systematic inquiry. In addition, the interdisciplinary approach combines the views and works of artists who use a wide range of humor, irony, satire, and even slapstick in critiquing technology. The amusing, funny, and thought-provoking works of these concerned artists lend additional perspectives to the theories of major scholars in the field of technology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my thanks and gratitude to the Salve Regina faculty for the innovative program investigating technology's impact on humanity. A special thanks to Dr. William Haas for his guidance in philosophy and art.

Appreciation is extended to the larger community of scholars who study humor, technology, and art and who shared their theories and insights. They offered references and various materials enriching this effort to understand technology's influence on contemporary life.

I also extend gratitude to my classmates who offered advice and suggestions on how to cope with difficulties associated with the search for new knowledge. I recognize the value of their discoveries that mark the path of the journey we all agreed to pursue.

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

Man is homo risens, the zoion gelastikon-the animal that laughs.
C. S. Lewis

This dissertation explores the relationship between humor and technology by investigating certain works of art that respond to technology's impact on contemporary society. Laughter, amusement, curiosity, and the recognition of paradox are unique qualities of human intelligence that enable individuals and groups to make sense of a world that is at times awe-inspiringly beautiful and at other times frustratingly bewildering. Humor manifests itself in the body positively through smiles, giggles, laughter, and riotous hilarity, as well as negatively, through melancholy, subversion, and rage[1]. A provocative source of this wide range of reactions is international art, including sculpture, paintings, installations, multi media, and various other happenings. These imaginative twentieth-century works not only influence changing definitions of art, aesthetics, and beauty; they wittily objectify society's problems and, in some cases, offer solutions. The thought-provoking commentary of these artists as it relates to the works examined here, and that of their critics, add an additional, ongoing, and lively perspective to the debate about technology's meaning and value.

Outrageous humor

An example of outrageous humor is Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York, Self-Constructing Self-Destructing 1960*. A mixed media construction made of machinery parts and cast off material, *Homage,* mocks in the dadaist tradition, machine power and man's fascination with technology[2]. Swiss sculptor Tinguely put the work in motion on March 17, 1960, in the sculpture garden at the New York Museum of Modern Art. That day the audience anticipated the outcome with amusement; however, as if to make sport of society's confidence in machines, *Homage* would not self-destruct, so the audience watched amazed as Tinguely intervened to put the work in motion (Stokstad 1995, 1125-1126). Tinguely's fascination with "humorous and outlandish" machines, concretizes social ambivalence about the value of tools and automated systems. The ironic turn of events made human adoration of machines the butt of a joke and the unpredictable outcome increased the emotional response to technology's omnipresence in modern society. In laughing at such works, one joins in an aesthetic and thoughtful experience. By probing what the laughter points to, one learns more about self and about life in the age of technology.

Artists communicate with humor

By using examples of humorous art as the focal point to explore the role of humor more fully, this study examines the works of over forty artists from

Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, Russia and the United States. These artists, concretize an aspect of technology or some human interaction with it. Their works communicate one or more of society's concerns about bewildering bureaucracies, alienation, and fear of science out-of-control. Artists who find humor effective use it with empathy, pathos, and sometimes rebellion, sharing their thoughts and fears through the common bond of laughter. According to Irving Sandler, much of today's art is "extreme and eccentric", and sends messages with satire, sarcasm, and even perversion (1996, 17).

A deeper exploration of the humor in these robust and rowdy artistic responses uncovers more than problems of man and machines. Humor in art gives credence to risibility: the human intelligence that informs laughter and confronts the paradoxes inherent in life. Humor expressed through art and directed at all forms of technology deserves the attention of humor scholars who understand the theories that explain why people laugh. These experts, from many fields within the humanities and the sciences, have the expertise that enables them to analyze the art's witty content, thereby, illuminating, for instance, the merits and perils of machines that mimic rational thought and extend and enhance human abilities such as sight, hearing, and touch. Most people agree that technology's power to probe outer space or to peer into DNA, for example, creates feelings that are both exhilarating and frightening. These emotional consequences of technical power pale along side the long range social outcomes. Humor responds to both intellectual and emotional concerns.

According to humor expert William Fry, humor acts as "a repeatedly administered antidote to the horrors of the chaos all about us, as a mental balm to relieve the agony and anxiety of the unresolvable" (1992, 231). The study of laughter and humor identify the objects, varieties, and purposes of humor. The three main theories--superiority, incongruity, and tension relieving-- are evident in the analysis of Tinguely's humorous *Homage*. Some laugh derisively that this disaster is happening to someone else, others laugh at the surprising contradiction in expectations, and, finally, still others laugh in relief that the anxiety they feel may appropriately be discharged in the company of others who share their thoughts and feelings. Regardless of what the artist may have meant by his work, or even what audiences may experience from it, the laughter signals a complex web of meaning and feeling.

Laughter

Humans are capable of responding with laughter to emotions such as joy, fear, sorrow, anger, or to physical stimuli, such as tickling. Humor scholars explain the phenomenon of laughter philosophically and scientifically. The sound of laughter is heard in the vocalization of donkeys, hyenas, monkeys, and other creatures. Human laughter is unique. It is one of the defining characteristics of human nature. It is not surprising then, that laughter and humor are favorite topics of philosophic pondering, enjoying the attention of philosophers and scientists as distinct as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Bergson, and

Freud. Within the last few decades, humor studies have increased significantly, probing such diverse areas as biology, computer science, education, family science, linguistics, mathematics, and medicine.

Theories of laughter and humor are numerous. *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (Grieg 1923) reports on hundreds of theories that account for why persons laugh, smile, and become amused. Seven decades after Grieg's analysis of humor, Nilsen's treatment reports on the expansion of humor inquiry, including the probe of the superiority, incongruity, and anxiety relieving theories, cited earlier. These models are explored more fully in Chapter 3. The derisive or superiority theory points to an attitude of arrogance that others are the object of laughter. The incongruity theory holds that two or more contradictory ideas are expressed in a single thought. The third major way of explaining laughter, anxiety or stress relief, asserts that emotional energy accumulates because of repressed anti-social thoughts and feelings. The further inquiry into varieties and forms of humor, such as jokes, wordplay, satire, and the like, also found in Chapter 3, explain this topic in greater detail. Various humor experts cited in this study, e.g., John Morreall, Charles Gruner, Mahadev Apte, William Fry and C. G. Prado, argue that the study of humor effectively illuminates human concerns and informs what we know and how we know it.

Humor references

Humor scholarship is an important discipline within the humanities. Reports and findings about humor are found in journals that investigate philosophy, communication, anthropology, cultural studies, drama, and aesthetics. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research,* the official publication for the International Society of Humor Studies, provides a variety of peer reviewed international and interdisciplinary research papers[3]. Humor investigation draws on a wide range of academic disciplines, including anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, physiology, psychology, and sociology. As a result the study of humor frequently leads to understandings, basic concepts, and methods that can benefit other disciplines. As implied, the Editorial Board and the Board of Consulting Editors of *HUMOR* are prominent humor researchers who specialize in the academic fields listed previously. Nevertheless, none of these scholars has published on the special focus of this study: humorous art directed at technological issues.

Technology-humor connections

Technology, too, enjoys the attention of philosophers and scientists from many fields of study. Some of these thinkers investigate human nature and define essential characteristics that elevate human intelligence above plant, animal or machine intelligence[4]. For instance, Larry Azar's *Man: Computer,*

Ape, or Angel?, concludes that human intelligence consists of a number of "higher powers" including such things as scientific thinking, tool making, and laughter. His theory connects technology and humor through intelligence. Two others who identify qualities of human nature that encourage the further development of technology are Lewis Mumford and Jacob Bronowski. They investigate the historical and social evolution of society and identify two attributes, playful exploring and adaptability, as crucial to the progress of technology. These men join technology and humor through aspects of human behavior because humor as well as technical progress benefits from curiosity and mental flexibility. Finally, Ian Barbour's 1989-1991 Gifford Lectures, and his subsequent publications, *Religion in an Age of Science* and *Ethics in an Age of Technology,* conclude that technology can be a liberator, a threat or a tool for re-direction. Here one finds that human intention places technology and humor in similar categories because humor, too, depending on how it is used, may be liberating, threatening or facilitating. As one looks for ways to link humor and technology, the focal point seems to be human nature and all of its complexities. Persons are capable of expressing and appreciating humor and of creating and using technology in limitless ways. Creativity, intention, desire, and play are unique human characteristics linking technology and humor. Further discussions about human ingenuity and its application to technology are found in a later section of this chapter. Humor theory, as stated earlier, is the subject of Chapter 3.

Technology-humor gap

Technology is a popular concern and receives the attention of scholars. Jacques Ellul, Neil Postman, Leo Marx, and Langdon Winner expose the threatening sides of science and technology. Sherry Turkle and Marvin Minsky highlight the positive aspects of it, stating that technology is an opportunity for humankind to learn about life's possibilities. Turkle refused to be categorized as an optimist or pessimist about the effects of the computer on the human psyche when questioned by an interviewer. She remarked instead, "I think that computers offer dramatic new possibilities for personal growth" (Brody 1996, 42). While such diverse reactions to technology prompt more questions about its value, they also reveal a gap in the investigation of technology itself.

Even with this multifaceted inquiry about technology, the need remains to study what laughing at it means. Laughter at jokes and cartoons provides two avenues of exploration, however these sources are not as content-rich and multi-layered as recent humorous art is. Many of today's artists are social commentators, infusing their diverse works with caricatures, jokes, ridicule, slapstick, wit, and wordplay. They incorporate distortion, exaggeration, incongruity, and even nonsense in their works, which becomes amusing, entertaining, and informing. With this thoughtful body of evidence, artists stimulate people to expand their self knowledge and understanding of the world. They support the thesis that laughing at technology merits serious attention.

Humorous art illuminates society's concerns

Humor in art is nothing new. Artists have used visual humor in their paintings and sculptures throughout history, often awakening one's risible sense. What is new, according to art critic Peter Schjeldahl, is the intentional use of humor. He believes that recent developments in art, and especially in sculpture, convey society's consternation. As examples he refers to Brancusi's "arch" humor, alluding perhaps to the artist's ability to convey layers of meaning from works of conceptual simplicity (1997,24). As to his example of Duchamp's "sardonic" productions, he may mean the artist's perverse delight in shocking the art elite (Ibid.). A third artist, Ira Sherman, might also be included as proof that recent art portrays society's agitation. Sherman's kinetic sculptures are shocking, irreverent, disturbing, and also playful and comic. *Pavlovian Trainer*, one of Sherman's mechanical sculptures, looks like a curious sweep of precious metal when situated on its stand in the gallery hall. When worn, this art object reminds one of a helmet or piece of "space gear". Sherman engages his viewers in an interactive experience as he slips the *Trainer* over his head and begins to talk. Talking too much causes *Trainer* to take action. It responds to senseless verbalizing by locking a mouth plate over the offender, ringing bells and gripping the head of the wearer with talon-like pinchers. Sherman is commenting on the barrage of messages that flow from ubiquitious sources: advertising, television, and politics. He warns that technology infiltrates every facet of life. His works draws the audience into a comic/tragic drama of sorts, that enables them to

consider more than rhetoric and to include play, imagination, and fantasy in their ponderings. By deliberately using humor in his art, Sherman contributes to the technology debate in ways that words and ideas alone can not do. *Trainer* succeeds in sending the message that contemporary technological life is confusing, frustrating, and even painful. Laughing at *Trainer* ameliorates, to a certain degree, the fear of machines out of control.

Protest and rebellion, effectively presented in kinetic sculpture and multi-media presentation, bring the audience into a space and time where they may ponder the meaning of situations and also their responses to them. Sculpture that moves and activates passive viewers is uniquely suited for sending complex and incongruent messages. Artistic responses to technology arouse thought, memory, and imagination, linking personal concerns and experiences with those of contemporary society. The artist and his viewers become co-creators, playing hide and seek, enjoying the experience, and exposing layers of veiled meaning beneath the obvious visual, tactile, and psychological experience. As a result, why one laughs and what prompts laughter have deeper implications for the scrutiny of ideas in the technological setting that is today's society.

Laughter, a mysterious source of understanding, poses problems for the researcher who finds humor in art. The enjoyment of laughter and the experience of art are subjective experiences. Deduction or induction alone fail to account for these introspective insights. There is a third method of reasoning that resists *certain* conclusions and leads to possible conclusions. This method includes such experiences as intuition, memory, and fantasy.

Method

Everything progresses from an indefinite incoherent homogeneity to a definite coherent heterogeneity

Charles Sanders Peirce

The arts reveal certain preposterous dimensions of technology. This fact warrants a particular methodology, one that provides structure but also allows latitude. The method of inquiry in this dissertation follows the Aristotelian dialectic. It is best described by W. D. Ross in *Aristotle: A Complete Exposition of His Works & Thought,* where he locates Aristotle's discussion on the dialectical syllogism in *Topics* and *Analytics.* Ross explains " the dialectical syllogism is distinguished from the scientific by the fact that its premises are not true and immediate but are merely probable" (Ross 1923, 59). This method of investigation is best suited for the initial investigation of unclear and conflicting situations. As Ross explains, what distinguishes Aristotle from other philosophers is that he attempts to aid comprehension not to win gain or glory by false appearance of wisdom. This takes place through discussions and questions in which ideas are made as clear as possible (Ibid., 61).

In other words, Aristotle's goal is to seek, but not necessarily attain, the highest truth. His dialectic starts with the familiar and probes underlying causes requiring educated detective work. Using this method one starts with a foundation of known facts and then builds the argument through other inquiries. Those found lacking are exposed and those blurred are clarified. This dialectic is different, according to Ross, from the methods of Plato, Kant, and Marx

because of the way it accepts ambiguity. Plato's dialectic found in the *Republic* studies the interconnection of Forms and Ideas so as to categorize issues with no loose ends. Kant treats the dialectic as a specious argument, using it to ridicule arguments that sought to prove the existence of God and not as a method to attain truth. Marxists distinguish 'subjective' and 'objective' dialectics, where objective dialectics hold in nature and subjective dialectics reflect in thought the objective dialectic.

The Aristotelian dialectic is more subtle than those just mentioned. As C. S. Peirce explains, Aristotle's method of reasoning suggests respect for educated opinions. Peirce argues the merit of *possible* connections instead of probable and necessary connections. By arguing a thesis Aristotle's way, one may evaluate the meaning of events and arguments as they develop. Finally, this dialectic encourages the interdisciplinary examination of diverse ideas and is ideally suited for an investigation of why it is funny when technology is used to ridicule technology.

The essence of humor, which is incongruity, is often ambiguous and paradoxical. The subject or evidence of this study is humor and what it means; therefore, the proof is itself puzzling and debatable. Further, humor's ability to objectify topics and present them for subjective analysis leaves latitude for the interpretation of what that humor signifies. It would not be possible to examine this work using inductive or deductive reasoning alone. What is better suited is Aristotle's abductive reasoning.