NETWORKS OF ORDINARY LIFE

WE USE THE MATERIAL TO
NAVIGATE   THE   VIRTUAL

1

New technology is not usually met with a new language of expression. Instead, the artists and makers of new technology often adopt old forms when creating artefacts in new mediums. This practice of using existing material metaphors even when faced with a new technology is known as skeuomorphic.

Skeuomorphs pervade the history of architecture and the applied arts. The dentils and triglyphs of the classical order derived from existing forms of timber temple construction but were executed in the new material of stone. So too, our computational methods are rich with analogies based in non-computational domains. From the trash can on your desktop to the analogue watch face mapped onto a smart watch, The language of expression of a new technology relies on existing cultural forms. (1)

These examples of material metaphors help us find familiarity in an unfamiliar territory. In effect, skeuomorphs are attributes of artifacts which help us map the new onto existing cognitive structures.
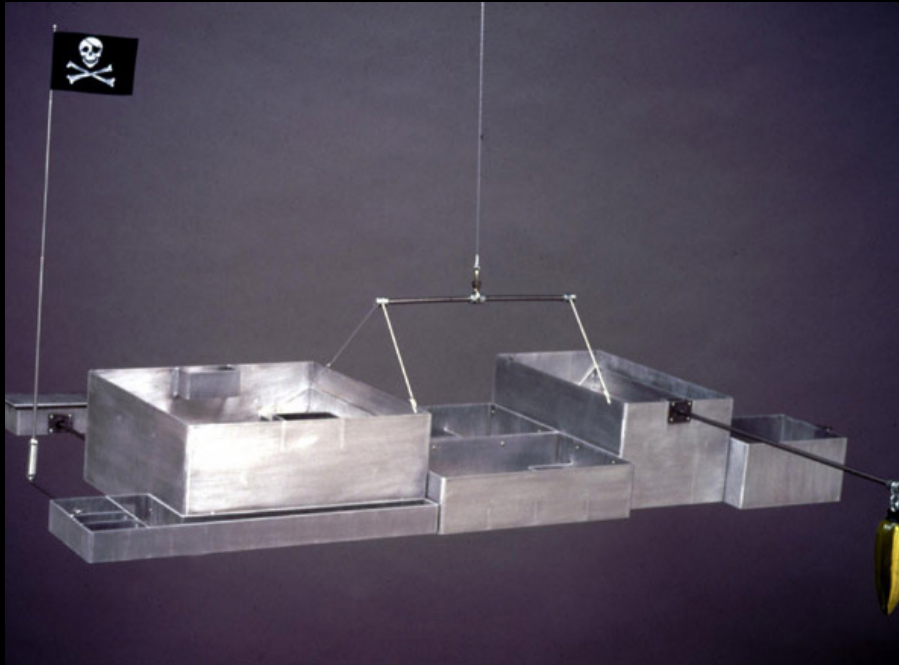
**SKEUOMORPHS OF THE
SOCIAL WEB**

2

The WWW today is dominated by participatory and so-called social platforms. Such user-generated networks pervade our ordinary life. Much like pre-modern forms of a new technology, many of these platforms have been modelled off existing cultural forms.[1] Cultural artefacts such as the scrapbook (pinterest), funniest home videos (tiktok), newspaper classifieds (gumtree), and talk back radio (Clubhouse) could be considered as skeuomorphs of the social web. But often the intended use of a certain platform evolves to resemble little of its intial pitch. In the case of pinterest for example, the idea of digitising a wedding scrapbook for brides to be, evolves to resemble little of its early form. Often these platforms take on a life of their own.
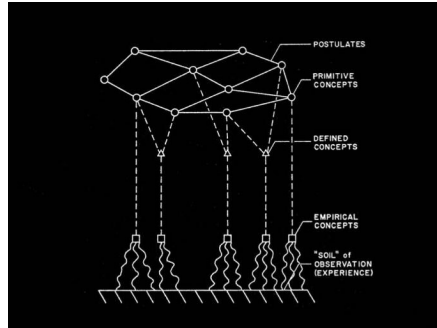
We are interested in what these platforms have evolved to become - how much of their original metaphor have they retained, and what this might mean for the material world.

Now that there are generations who have never known a world without computing, is the metaphor of the skeuomorph still relevant? Or does the material world start to reveal itself as a skeuomorph of the digital,

ie. that the digital is used as an analogy to understand the material world, instead of the one reversed process.

If we reverse engineer these once skeuomorphic forms back into the material world will an entirely new language of cultural forms be revealed?

1. A rare example which seems to have avoided the skeuomorph is the hyperlink, considered to be a new design language that was not based on existing forms. When Tim Bereners-Lee created the WWW he didn't put buttons for links, instead he made the text underlined. There were no existing semantics that indicated that the underlined text was meant to be clicked on, people had to learn it.

Mike Kelley, *Repressed Spatial Relationships Rendered as Fluid #3: Reconfiguration of Wayne High School into the Ritual Presentation Arena of the Educational*

Andrew Power Kate Finning   5

Herbet Feigl, *The Orthodox View of Theories,*
1970

I Knowing the First Principles

Reasoning from first principles is a way of understanding something complex by breaking it down into smaller, simpler parts which can be more easily understood.

The apps we use and the sites we visit are immensely complex phenomena but in fact they are made of simple parts. At a fundamental level they are simply libraries of information that are recalled in different combinations. However the specific ways the information is recalled leads to differing outcomes and differing psychological effects.

We will explore our favourite apps and sites from a first principles approach. Breaking them down into their constituent parts and document what exactly is taking place, both the system itself and its effect on us. By sketching the relationships we make them somewhat spatial. Like in an architectural plan, we want to know where everything goes. We will prepare a series of drawings, diagrams, motif sketches that explain how each site or app operates from a fundamental structural level.

Charles and Ray Eames, *THINK*, a multi
screen exhibition commissioned by IBM, 1964
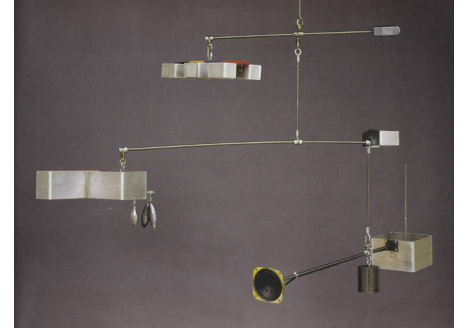
Mike Kelley, *Repressed Spatial Relationships
Rendered as Fluid #2: School System Work
Net (with Flashback)*, 2002

II Thinking in Pictures

Reasoning by analogy is a way of
understanding something new by
using the things we already know.
Pinterest is like a scrapbook for the
internet. Few people understand
how Pinterest's database links
information together but almost
everyone knows how a scrapbook
works. If you want to explain
something, explaining it by analogy
is effective.

However analogies don't always explain
the whole picture, they can mislead
and obscure our understanding. Many
Apps and websites were conceived of
analogously or at least pitched that way.

However their intentions have not
always reflected their effects. Is
it still true that Pinterest is like a
scrapbook? If instagram started out
as a way to make pictures look retro
what is it now?

By translating our first principles
understanding into visual analogies,
thinking through associations we are able
to make explicit what is often hidden.

Our task, at this stage, is to try and
represent our subject, our network
like instagram, through recognisable
visual analogies. This will take the
form of a narrated digital slide show,
similar to this.

III An Analogue Artefact

After a process of understanding
and critique through reasoning
from principles and analogy we will
develop an artefact, either physically
or digitally.

The artefact will not represent the
subject of study directly. It will not be
a depiction of a website or app. It will
be a proposal for a future network.
One that is fictional yet strangely
familiar. An episode of Black Mirror
may depict a fantasy world but it
resonates because it is grounded in
a critique of our contemporary lives.
In this manner, our artefacts will help
us understand the present.

		Seminar	Milestone
Mon	5 July	Principles of Networks	
Tue	6		
Wed	7		Task I Due
Thu	8	Analogies of Networks	
Fri	9	**Mid Review**	
Sat	10		
Sun	11		Task II Due
Mon	12	Analogue Analogies	
Tue	13		
Wed	14		
Thu	15		
Fri	16	**Final Review**	Task III Due