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Changing relations in the making: Human face masks

This paper explores how the way in which things are made (the means of production) might change our relation to them. It begins by looking at the emphasis that might be put on human-material relations rather than human-technology relations. This focus, it is argued, is more appropriate in the current context of dwindling resources and the fact that all technology depends upon them. The paper then considers the different ways in which things are made, from the individual maker to specialists and production systems reliant completely on machines. In doing so it explores issues of agency and power whilst drawing on theoretical frameworks to make sense of how we experience our technological world. A product made at home, for example, will involve action by the individual whereas something mass produced elsewhere, requires very little action apart from the exercise of choice in a culture of passive consumption.

The Covid-19 pandemic has, in small ways, placed many people in the position of maker rather than consumer. In the UK the production of home-made face masks provided an appropriate phenomenon to explore. Individuals not only had opportunities to make their own products but have been actively encouraged to do so in order that commercially available masks may be prioritised for hospitals. Exploring this experience of individuals raises several issues. The paper discusses these and asks how the experience of making anything ourselves, impacts on our view of human-technology, or human-material, relations?