Narrative theory takes the ‘story’ or ‘narrative’ to be the basic unit of meaning for understanding and explaining human action. Philosophers such as Arthur Danto (1968), Alasdair MacIntyre (1982) and Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1986, 1988) claim that narratives capture the temporal, historical and contextual character of human experience better than shorter linguistic units of meaning, like the ‘utterance’ or the ‘sentence’. A narrative creates the most comprehensive interpretation possible by synthesizing diverse plot elements into a meaningful story. Both non-fictional and fictional stories relate episodes of human experience, the former as they actually happened, the latter as if they happened. Yet traditional narrative theories are prejudiced in favour of persons over things. They treat people as if only they deserve to have their stories told; non-humans, natural events and things are props or circumstances to be dealt with but never themselves the subject of their own stories. Mere things get explanations; persons get stories. As a result, the ‘narrative turn’ has had far less of an effect on the philosophy of technology as elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences. Philosophical frameworks prejudiced against things are not particularly helpful when it comes to understanding the philosophical dimensions of technologies.

Yet in spite of deeply entrenched Kantian prejudices, we tell stories about things all the time. Everything has a story: everything comes from somewhere, has a history, and has relations to other things. So long as the genesis and evolution of something can be recounted, it can be explained in terms of a narrative and read like a text. Stories of technology are not difficult to find in popular books, scholarly articles and television documentaries – typically about history-changing industrial technologies or war machinery. But even ordinary technologies can be made the subject of a narrative. The task here will be to examine what happens to our philosophical understanding of technology when we model the interpretation of technical things after telling and reading stories. This step from text to technology is quite short. Several philosophers of technology have taken a near-narrative turn (perhaps, a ‘narrative veer’) away from overarching, transcendental theories.
towards more contextual interpretations of human–technology relationships. One task here will be to show that the presuppositions and methods of narrative theory apply to the interpretation of technology. Another task will be to argue that there is a meaningful difference between a critical reading and a conventional reading of technology. The key to the distinction hinges on the relationship between the universal and particular, acontextual and contextual in narrative theory and critical theory.

4.1 How to read technology

One of the most vexing questions for philosophers of technology over the last 25 years has been to make sense of how technologies can be seen as both technical and social, and what that might mean for actual design, use and practice. Any technology has a social meaning relative to its use and context, as well as technical properties that are non-contingent and acontextual. An automobile, to take a mundane example, can be both status symbol (in one social context) and a mechanical device (in any social context). Changes in the design of an automobile should be understood as reflecting both social imperatives (such as cost, safety and marketing) and technical imperatives (such as available materials, causal interactions and physical limitations). Some philosophers frame the issue in terms of the way that technologies simultaneously embody two conceptualizations of the world: one physical, one intentional. A technology has both physical properties that interact causally with other physical things in the natural world, and intentional properties that relate to the beliefs, desires and purposes of human designers and users. Physical structure and human design are integrated into what are often called ‘functional’ or ‘technical’ artefacts (see Kroes and Meijers, 2002).

In some sense, technical artefacts belong to two ontological and methodological universes, while in another sense they belong to one. Precisely how we should understand the dual character of things is open to debate.

There are a number of ways to characterize the relationship between the social and technical. The influential recent philosophers of technology all grapple with the question and frame it somewhat differently:

- Albert Borgmann (1984) characterizes the relationship in terms of *engagement*, analysing the different ways that ‘things’ with ‘devices’ shape human involvements in the world.
- Don Ihde (1990) characterizes the relationship in terms of *mediation*, conducting phenomenological variations of our experience of technology to uncover patterns of the mediation of human life by technical artefacts.
- Bruno Latour (1999) characterizes the relationship in terms of *socio-technical collectives*, calling attention to the various ways that humans and technologies are never independent but always embroiled with one another.