

Songs about technology – as sung before and now

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Situating and introduction

In this lecture I will first situate myself in relation to the theoretical universe within which I work. I will do this through an introduction of myself and the way in which I use my observations. I will give a short introduction to the post-structural method as seen by Dorte Marie Søndergaard and Hanne Haaving. The theory is feminist, rooted around Judith Butler 's thinking influenced by Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse and power.

To get closer to the real errand of the lecture: textile technology and design, I have chosen to put the concepts in a cultural frame. I want to understand, what we are talking about when we try to use the words textile technology and design and their meanings. If we are to position the words and their meanings in an institutional educational frame, the discursive understanding of the words must be in order. To shed light on the discursive understanding of the words and the meaning they carry, I have chosen to put them in a cultural context. The object of study is popular lyrics written over a period of 75 years. My claim is, that we, in order to think new thoughts, must pull the old ones apart and that can be done by deconstructing the meaning given of a particular concept. I will look at what lies under the common perception and understanding in the culture and how we talk about a concept. It is especially lyrics I will focus on in the songs. The songs are printed last in the article. I could have chosen to look at the latest new developments within textile technology and design; I deliberately do not choose the material understanding and will concentrate on meaning within a cultural frame of interpretation.

My background is the study of culture with a sexual angle. Sex should be understood here as gender/ the social sex and it should be understood as the exemplary category in a discursive understanding of sexual works of the hands and ways of approach. In this example I point at understanding of gender in the western culture. I will elaborate on this: it means that sex is a something that is hard to get hold of and define clearly, while at the same time the meaning of gender in our culture is of major importance, because from birth we are marked by our biological sex, for thereafter to be socialized according to the sexual mark we carry. With a sex which we

already receive, we receive at the same time a whole world of understanding of possibilities, which do not just lie open. They lie layered in the culture with possibilities and limits.

To give a better insight into Søndergaard's understanding of sex as a phenomenon, it is necessary to present Foucault's thoughts on culture and the understanding of culture. He says that the basis of culture consists of discursive understandings. Sex is one of them.. With that he means that the movement of culture decidedly happens by way of the opinions, institutions – judicial or economic, which are prevalent at a given time. One of his major works is about the history of sexuality, in which he describes how the perception of sexuality changes over time and how these perceptions are cemented by the ruling power. According to Foucault power is not to be understood as someone who rules powerfully alone, but he sees power as the power of the many, and the power is limited to discursive elements according to subject.

As an example of a discourse that changes over time, he looks at sexuality and through a nearly archaeological study, he describes how the cultural history of the western world has always known homosexuality. He shows how culture in the middle and at the end of the 19th century limited sexuality and excluded the persons who were of another observance than the heterosexual. In that way the heterosexual restraint was created that we live with today. Sexuality must be directed toward the opposite sex; if not, the individual breaks the norm .

At that historical point in time the culture needed to protect the nuclear family and use its structure to support the building up of the industrial society. That, again, meant that understanding of gender as we know it today relates to family and to work. And the traditional family patterns are strongly bound to the man earning money and to the woman, giving birth to children and raising them. Part of our vocations as nurses, teachers, and handcraft teachers related also this understanding of the family and the function of gender within it.

Foucault uncovers history and shows how human beings in a culture become women and men both for themselves and for each other – and in which ways and for which purposes this is made relevant in their lives.

When we look at sex in the study of culture as an exemplary category, we do it because from such a study we can see that systems of meaning tied to sex connect, bind and set up hierarchies among people and within each person. These systems of meaning must not be take for granted – they must be uncovered.

One way to do this is the post-structural interpretive method. There are no exact instructions from this kind of category of knowledge and no truths. The post-structural challenges lie in the

interpretation of habits and conventions, to find the new analytical tools through these. A good example of this is found in Søndergaard`s dissertation “The sign on the body” (“Tegnet på kroppen”) Søndergaard 1996.

In “Gender and interpreting method” (“Kjønn og fortolkende metode”) edited by Hanne Haavind 2000, we see the method exemplified through the analyses of different researchers. They base their choices in the methodic work from idea to result and presentation. The interpretive method is described as a creative process, where standardized models are neither possible nor desirable.

Søndergaard examines how important discursive categories such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity are constructed, and what difference it makes whether phenomena are attributed with reference to essentialism i.e. to unchangeability or changeability. Søndergaard focuses also on dichotomous, i.e. two-sided and value-charged understandings and shows how conventional thinking as the basic principle excludes and “makes otherwise”. Rhetorician Judith Baker work with gender as an exemplary category for otherness. She focuses in addition on the voice of the outsiders (*marginales*) in several works, where she especially develops the meaning of speech performance. Judith Baker expands on what Foucault did by opening our eyes for discursive power by his archaeological and genealogical study of periods of time. She expands the concepts and illustrates them through speech and through the body.

Methodically we can speak of a qualitative approach, based on the content of meaning in phenomena of experience, rather than their extent and strength. One could say that the interpretative methods are dependent on phenomenon and context. The researcher seeks inner connections more than the outward comparative connections which are characteristic of quantitative research. One looks at the connections of meaning which the actors create and use. The interpretive methods looks at what it is that happens when something happens. What is it that is being described? The answers to this are not simple or general, but appear as a series of related answers to the same question.

Back to technology

In order to look at the cultural meanings approach of the words, I have chosen to reread some popular songs to go more deeply into the songs. Maybe I will get another understanding of the words and concepts. I have chose to put the focus on technology. **The questions which I seek to clarify is then:** what does technology mean for us? My own pre-understanding of technology is that is a good thing, that progress is good, but not progress at any price. Is it thus?

How do we understand technology? According to Carolyn Merchant (The death of nature 1980) understanding must be sought in the dichotomy nature/culture, in that technology must be understood as something cultural: Before the scientific revolution the world was looked on as an organism which included both human beings and nature. It was not within the power of human beings to understand and control the meaning of life and connections. In the organic picture of the world, woman-earth-nature were bound together. When the scientific view of the world broke through with the start of the Enlightenment in 1600s the world and nature were seen as a mechanical machine, which must be understood and controlled. If the world was divided up into different parts, these parts could be studied and controlled. It was assumed that reality functioned as a machine on the basis of order and a set of rules. The human being was no longer a part of nature, but had power over it through knowledge about it.

Songs that are sung

I have chosen to read through three popular songs in order to see what story is told about technology contra the human being. Of course they are about technology in some way. They are written from 1926 to 2000.

1. "When I stand by my machine" by Kim Larsen, Danish singer (1979)
2. "Cvalda" by Icelander Björk, taken from the soundtrack of the film "Dancer in the Dark" 2000, instruction Lars von Trier.
3. "The sparrow is sitting silent behind the branch" by Jeppe Åkjær, Danish author 1926.

All the songs can be read at the end of the article.

In Aakjær 's song about the spinning wheel in the living room, a romantic story is shown about traditional sex roles between the father and the mother, illustrated by the descriptions of their work: the mother spinning at home in the living room, the father coming in tired from work outside among the animals on the farm. Industrialization has not yet taken over even though we are 75 years after the invention of the sewing machine and the breakthrough of industrialization, and we know that most of the textiles in 1920 were made by machine. The secure frame of the living room is underlined by the father not only taking charge of the farm, he also has a direct connection with God:

Father takes down a heavy book
He whispers together with God,
Fumbles with the hook on the clasp
And shuts it with a Amen!

Lul lul – the spinning wheel spins
Loneliness is singing
The darkness closes around the roof
And the snow is making drifts.

Everything is as it should be in relation to our the story in our culture about father, mother, and children. The machine (the spinning wheel) has a secure rhythm, nearly soporific, and it is nearly the only sound in the living room, except for the father whispering with God. Outside the north wind is blowing and howling. At the end of the song the author longs back to the living room, the spinning wheel, and the mother with the memory of learning to spell beside the spinning wheel.

“The sparrow sits silent behind the branch” is still one of the most popular songs among young people when they at folk schools in the winter must choose a song.

When we go on and look at what picture the next two songs tell, we are looking at many similarities to the first - something that is surprising, because the songs are chosen outside the genre which the first one represents. In the following reading of theory, I have “spiced” it with different sectional views of the songs to find answers to my questions.

1. sectional view: What is the conventional perception of technology? It is interesting to lay an analytical view on the coming story in all the songs: the personification of the machine/technology. The machine can talk and sing, although in a monotone singing voice. Doesn't that give a secure sound picture of something unchangeable?
2. sectional view: What consequences does the human being/machine story have for the user of technology and for her/his possibilities to take over or develop other positions in their own daily life?

Here we are looking at the present day discursive understanding of technology as it is expressed in the romantic song about the spinning wheel.

Something about the exemplary sex, the self and identity

In the post traditional society the perception of oneself or the self that includes and integrates the picture of itself in the past, present and future, has a special meaning. The self forms itself through the various possible social identities, created in dialogue with the specific culture the individual has and in which it is integrated (Søndergaard 1996). The physical staging, presentation or performance, with the self as an individualized quantity, receives a special meaning within the post-traditional society. The physical presentation of self functions as a reflection of the self 's strategies, that are turned toward the surroundings. The presentation functions as a two-sided and penetrated mirror. It mirrors both the strategies of the self in relating outwardly, so that the surroundings can read them, and at the same time mirrors the collectively created suggestions inwardly in the self. The latter occurs through the single actor 's reference to, and use of the stylized possibilities for staging, as they are offered and communicated to the actor through for example mode, art and media, and through the actors ' reading of each other. (Butler 1993, Søndergaard 1996).

There are clean categories (Søndergaard, 1996) – the pure man and the pure woman. They are the basis for orientation and identification of the actors in the society. They are pure fiction, but they create security. One can connect the pure fictional woman with the pure fictional man, but it seems uninteresting, because the stereotype representation cannot bear different forms of performance.

Suggestions for staging can be two-sided and reflect their status which is negotiable. Can one be a sexy girl at the same time that one is competent and shows mental capability? No, one must negotiate to have legitimacy. If the gender is a species, as Butler claims, the species to be recognizable must imitate itself to recognition, otherwise no one will understand the designation of the species, and exclusion is a possibility, and being outside the fellowship of the couple, the group or the society is a possibility.

Gender and culture

The maintenance of a heterosexually structured gender rests mainly on two internally connected conditions. First, they who are named she and he, must confirm the identifications with the prescribed positions, norms and behavior, thought and action, again and again. In other words, they must cite them into their staging. Second, they must fear the forbidden. The forbidden is installed through threat of punishment, which consists of exclusion from the gender 's cultural comprehensibility (Foucault 1993, 1994,1999; Butler 1999).

Social construction of others – the conceptions and expectations we create about others – are not just pictures, constructions, ideas or stories, that blow in the wind. They are pictures, ideas and stories, that become reality with time through repetitions and citation.

Questions to gender?

Are women and men exclusively bodies, or are they “stiff ideological constructions”? One must also ask why we continue to believe that humankind is divided into two genders and not into one or into ten?

If we continue to have the intention of calling qualities such as “tenderness”, “warmth”, and “loyalty” womanly, how can we drop the thought that these qualities have or ought to have special connection to the woman? If we think that such qualities are not inborn or necessary, but are just an ideological characteristic of women or of the female body, why do feminists also continue to call them womanly?

The designation in English “gender/the social sex” can refer to both the social stereotypes and the dominating sex norms. But gender can also refer to the single individual’s qualities and ways of being. When gender is perceived in so many different ways, there is a risk of reifying the concept - and for maintaining stereotypical perceptions of the two sexes.

Subject and culture

In culture there is a heterosexual dominance. Dominance is not upheld by decree or design from above, but through many processes of different origins and spread out placement (Foucault 1994).

Dominance regulates the most intimate and small elements in construction of time, place, desire and bodily expression. Human beings are divided up according to sex and this happens through designation. The heterogeneous meaning and practice appears as a collective social phenomenon.

Heterogeneity is a meaning structuring element in our culture.

Within different forms of sexuality there are subject positions, norms, thought and behavior patterns for both femininity and masculinity. And it is here the heterosexually organized practice and meaning defines which subject positions that are perceived as feminine. There is more room for variations of these subject positions within the unconventional circles of desire. (Butler 1993, 1997, 1999.)

We have learned from history that inclusion and exclusion are played out on many and shifting fronts, and all thoughts (regardless of freedom from prejudice and intentions) are unattainable for the outsiders' voices (Foucault 1994). Judith Butler says, that there is a critical resource in the excluded. As long as the excluded is interpreted as a metaphor for everything, we can **not** be as women and men, because we must be women and men, it can function as the basis for a critique of the stupidity of centering on the heterosexual. Kim Larsen's song speaks with irony of the mediocrity of the middle-aged man's viewpoint.

The masculine signs are tied to will, the ability to act, intellect and principles, while womanliness is tied to something soft, round, flexible, and giving of care. Both sexes are however equipped with the potential for the masculine as well as the womanly and these viewpoints are the conventional ones. The discursive universe in Åkjær's "The sparrow is sitting silent behind the branch" is built up on dichotomous understandings such as: mother/father, out/in, cold/warm, nature/culture.

Power

Ideas can become reality with time, if they are the ideas of the dominating groups, because the dominating groups have the power to make reality fit in with their ideas (Foucault 1993).

Foucault emphasizes in a later development of his thinking, that relations of power never are useless, but give rise to new forms of culture and subjectivity, new possibilities for changes.

Where there is power, there is also opposition. Dominating forms and institutions regularly have been shot down and reconstructed by values, styles and knowledge that have been developed. The dominating have other possibilities to construct "the others" than the dominated (Foucault 1994).

The one who has power, has through this power access in a large degree to make his/her own conceptions about the other into reality, i.e. to make the conception into the true story about the other's life. This is the general pattern between the dominating and the dominated.

If we compare Bjørk's song about Cvalda with Åkjær's song about childhood, we see that the rhythm the use of technology and the humanizing of the machine are the same. We see here that the discursive understanding of technology is expressed in the modern song just as in the nostalgic song about the spinning wheel.

Discourse, power and mastering

To achieve success as an actor in a discourse demands a strong actor with a good ability to produce.

Said in another way, the ability to succeed rests on others' willingness to read the producer who has such an ability. The discursive constructed self doesn't exist; it is lived, enjoyed, analyzed, reflected, etc. via its established status. And, for example, it is from here that the female subjective individual has the possibility to come forth and break with old discourses and structure.

Success in discourse is not just something that objectively comes out of the person herself. A way of thinking or the existence of a model for understanding depends on others seeing it, acknowledging its existence and bringing it into use. It demands control of the symbols of the culture. It demands dramaturgical and language skills to stand out as a legitimate actor. Dramaturgy is one of the many means in the struggle to determine the conditions and the criteria for legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy. Mastery is demonstrated by mastering the rituals (Butler 1999).

In the post modern society individuals master and parody the rituals. The post modern type is especially known for the use of conspicuous tricks, irony, flirt, and parody to support the established conventional rules. The mastering individual imitates and cites in order to make herself recognizable. I will give two examples. Two year old Clara imitates her surroundings, she has been told from birth that she is a girl, so she imitates the normative picture of the girl/the woman. Drag queen Thomas imitates the womanly into parody, the extreme picture of the woman. He makes sure that he does not overplay it, he must balance between the normative and the extreme.

When one looks at the picture of culture, the observer who is trained in the rituals of culture understands the messages of the pictures. When one then sees the parody, one is confused and is forced to create her own understanding of the picture. It can be happenstance, whether one see the mastery or the parody first. The process will be the same.

Something about deconstruction

In the stories about concretely lived life one can read, how the culture patterns are demonstrated among and in the concrete actors, and how these patterns are reflected in the actors' thought- and behavior forms. The method lies in a reading concrete material for information on the ways of relating and the behaviors that function to structure a particular social identity, and to analyze out the cultural codes. The cultural codes regulate or make a basis for orientation and behavior within a given field or in relation to a given theme. All this is really a matter of seeing communicative processes between individual and culture as never finished, as eternally reciprocal constructed movements (Søndergaard 1994).

When it is a matter of phenomena which exist completely understood by and around many of the readers for whom the description is developed, the deconstruction becomes a tool to make the known abstract. (1)

Thereby the need arises for a translation- and communication process, which translates around the understanding. A certain degree of distance to a phenomenon will always be the prerequisite for making the phenomenon an object of reflection (Søndergaard 1996).

The End

I have given a description of the theoretical universe which creates the background for a cultural understanding of the world. Gender is used as an exemplary category for this understanding.

In studies of culture the everyday is an evident subject of study. I have tried to give examples of reading of songs that are sung, to get another approach to the understanding of technology vs. the human being. What story is being told?

The conclusion is that the songs across a time period of 75 years contain the same story, whether it is about a spinning wheel or a machine. The breakthrough of industrialization is not marked by Bjørk`s song from the film *Dancer in the Dark*. Technology is written into the old story which makes the machine human and gives it a voice. Over a stretch of a century, when technology seen historically makes the biggest progress, the perception or interpretation of the machine does not change.

With the theory in mind we can see that the material part of the technological discourse changes but the meaning attribution is the same.

(1) The established understanding is turned upside down.

Litteraturliste

Artikler

Bilag

Jeppe Åkjær: "The sparrow sits silent behind the branch" from "Mothers spinning wheel" written 26. 1. 1926

The sparrow sits silent behind the branch,
It's really drifting now!
The willow in the cabbage patch whistles sadly
In the north wind's squalls.

Lul –lul! The spinning wheel spins
Steadily in mother's living room
And the more the wind hits hard
The more the fireplace blazes

Father has brought the cattle in,
Has tightened the window sills with straw,
Rubbed the pig's shiny skin,
So that it can stay warm.

Lul –lul! The spinning wheel spins.
Father heads for the living room,
Mother makes a loop on the thread,
Looks up at father and smiles.

Mother can hardly see her spinning
And hardly arrange the thread;
Look, the light is brought in
And placed in a holder.

Lul-lul! The spinning wheel spins!
The spindle 's flicking wings
Send a group of shadow rings

Over the pine rafter.

Father takes down a heavy book,
He whispers together with God,
Fumbles a little with the hook on the clasp
And shuts it with a Amen!

Lul-lul! The spinning wheel spins.
Loneliness is singing,
Darkness closes in on the roof,
And the snow is making drifts.

Here at mother 's old spinning wheel
She taught me to spell,
To sing a bout "the white flock"
And all "his gifts of grace"

Lul-lul! The spinning wheel spins.
But its humming and song
Go sadly into the heart
When the evenings get long.

Björk: "Cvalda" from "Dancer in the Dark soundtrack Lyrics"

Kim Larsen: "When I stand at my machine"

When I stand at my machine at my wonderful factory,
Then I am happy to be living, that 's clear, isn' t it?
My hands are soft as any office worker 's ,
And I have a lot of time for my crossword for kids.

Chorus:

It says blip-bot and God, it 's going well

We have what we need, both big things and small,
Ya, blip- bot and God, it 's going well
We have what we need, both big things and small.

The musak they play I think is really good,
when I stomp along with the rhythm, my shoes squeak
and down at the end of the long light room
I can see the big clock with the magic numbers.

Chorus

When the clock says twelve then I move the switch to stand-by
And go up to the canteen, it 's just like a game
I meet the others there, we say hello and hi there
And each read his newspaper just quietly alone.

Chorus

And if time drags, I think about Linda Friis
Yes, that's my girlfriend and she is as cold as ice
But her being cold is just what I like
Especially when she lets out a little bad-tempered scream.

Chorus

And when the day is over they I take home the pot
My wife has left me but I' m not an easy guy
I turn on the telly and doze just a little
And wake up suddenly when it starts humming, ya, that's how it often goes.

Chorus

