

Best Wives Are Artefacts? Popular Cybernetics and Robot Women in the 1970s

Susanna Paasonen, University of Turku

suspaa@utu.fi

Popular cybernetics, as discursive field, refers to basic principles of cybernetics, the science of communications and automatic control in both machines and organic systems, as defined by Norbert Wiener (in his 1948 *Cybernetics, or, the control in human and machine*, and the 1950 *Human Use of Human Beings*). Cybernetic research feeds into "popular cybernetics" as terminology, experiments and analogies (perhaps most common are analogies between brains and computers as information-processing systems, the body as cybernetic system of feedback loops and autonomous responses). Nevertheless, popular cybernetics is also a field of representations concerning boundaries and the nature of the human that builds and feeds upon itself: literary, televisual and cinematic fictions both draw from, and add to popular cybernetics as sets of concepts, figures and analogies.

In the 1970s, fictions concerning androids and cyborgs (inspired by NASA-funded cyborg research) became perhaps the most visible forum of popular cybernetics, of depicting and imagining the relations and connections between humans and machines, animals and things – and, centrally, women and men. The 1970s saw many cinematic and televisual representations of cybernetic, reconstructed bodies, as in *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* series, *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Westworld* (1973) and *Futureworld* (1976). In different ways, these fictions address the perfection of the body through technology. Doing this, they are concerned with the borderline between the (normal) human and the (abnormal) monstrous, but also the continuing fascination with sexualised machine women and automatic love dolls, some previous models of which include Pygmalion & Galatea, Villier de l'Isle Adam's novel *Tomorrow's Eve*, and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. These are literal connections between technology and sex; technological objects as objects of desire.

In *The Stepford Wives* (USA 1975), based on Ira Levin's 1972 novel, these themes are met with feminist intertexts concerning technology, gender and power. The main protagonist, Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross), moves from Manhattan to Stepford, Connecticut, with her husband Walter (Peter Masterson), a lawyer, two children and a family dog. There is something wrong in Stepford from the start, and Joanna is not happy in her new home town, where all the women seem ideal feminine homemakers and men gather nightly at the men's association, when not working at the local computer and bio technology corporations. As Walter explains, all "the important guys" of Stepford are members of the club "the TV executives, the shrinks, the police chief, the fire chief, the head of the hospital, the guy who runs the telephone company". The association is chaired by Dale Coba (Patrick O'Neal), nicknamed "Diz", since he used to work for Disney.

Together with Bobby Marcowe (Paula Prentiss), her new best friend, Joanna wonders what *is* going on in Stepford, where all the women seem obsessed with housework, submit to their husbands will and have no aspirations outside their homes. Bobby and Joanna seem to be the only ones with disorderly kitchens in the whole town, yet they find out that Stepford used to be "the most liberal town" in the area, with a women's club meetings attended by 50 women. Only some years later, the same women are interested only in housework and pleasing their husbands. Bobby and Joanna suspect that something is wrong with the local water that makes women act compulsively domestic, but nothing unusual can be found. Joanna and Bobby realise that the only alternative left is to move from Stepford. Yet before Bobby

finds a new house, also she is turned into another homemaker. Joanna meets the new Bobby, changed, in a white lacy blouse, long blue skirt and an apron, with a feminine hairdo and make up, in her sparkling-clean kitchen, arguing she wants to "look like a woman and keep my house looking decent too".

Joanna realises that in no time also she is to be replaced by someone who looks like her but will not be her, but "like one of those robots in Disneyland". As the story unravels, Joanna uncovers that the women in Stepford have been killed and replaced with robots, perfect machine replicas designed to please their husbands. The men's association is a conspiracy and since all the "important guys" are members, they are able to cover up their traces. The automata wives shop for groceries, cook, clean, mind the children, are sexually accessible to their husbands and praise their sexual skills, appearance or demeanour, never arguing and expressing their sentiments mainly by quoting commercials.

Nuclear families made strange

The robot wives are frightening in their retro-Victorian hair and dress styles, aprons, completely realistic looks, vacant gestures, submissive performances of conventional femininity and obsession with cleaning and appearances. Picture-perfect and consumerist, the wives are emotionally void – the terror of the thriller lays both in that the wives *look* human, yet are not, as much as in does in that the husbands have killed their wives and replaced them with more convenient machines. Robot wives are monstrous as non-organic constructions of human, but the husbands are equally boundary figures as emotionally void, and thus "not-quite-human" men – given that interiority, emotions and empathy are conventionally posed as markers of the human (vs. the machine). (Cf. Turkle 1991; Williams 1991.)

This image of the wife-as-servant-robot bears close resemblance to the ideals discussed by Betty Friedan in her influential 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, where she analysed the frustration of American middle-class housewives and homemakers ("the problem that has no name"). According to Friedan, during the post second world war era, the feminine mystique – a set of beliefs according to which true feminine fulfilment was to be found from marriage, motherhood and domestic chores – was created in the media, especially women's magazines, popular psychology, different kinds of expert literature and the education system. Friedan quotes a representation of ideal femininity from a 1960 *Ladies' Home Journal*:

"[she] 'sits on a pale aqua satin sofa gazing out her picture window at the street. Even at this hour of the morning (it is barely nine o'clock), she is wearing rouge, powder and lipstick, and her cotton dress is immaculately fresh.' She says proudly: 'By 8:30 A.M., when my youngest goes to school, my whole house is clean and neat and I am dressed for the day.'" (Friedan 1983, p.63.)

The representation is near-identical to Ira Levin's description of the "new Bobbie":

"Bobbie, in her immaculate living-room – cushions all fluffed, woodwork gleaming, magazines fanned on the polished table behind the sofa – smiled at Joanna [--] She looked the ways he had on Sunday – beautiful, her hair done, her face made up" (Levin 1973, p.129).

This representation of "smiling empty passivity" (Friedan 1983, p.64) is of a woman who dedicates her life to her home, children and husband and sees to her attractive feminine appearances. She is the ideal subject of contemporaneous women's magazines that defined woman through their exclusive interests in romance, nursing, home furnishing, clothes and (early and lasting) marriage. Cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores became, according to Friedan, the occupation of a housewife,

but also a religion of sorts, since they we seen as fulfilment of women's natural roles and inner drives, as defined by their biological capacity of reproduction. Yet another important component of the feminine mystique is consumerism: the ideal housewife is an ardent consumer who buys endlessly new things for the home, and gains satisfaction from doing so (Friedan 1983, p.206–208; Bowlby 2001, p.199–200). In *The Stepford Wives*, women shop systematically and neatly, discuss and consume products with devouring interest and gratification.

In her article on technology and representations of the feminine, Mary Ann Doane (2000, p.114–115) argues that *The Stepford Wives* suggests feminism to be necessary only within "the science-fiction nightmare in which husbands turn wives into robots" and sees its depiction of the machine-woman as banal. For Doane, films that do go beyond the banal and approach the machine-woman theme in more interesting ways, are those that focus on the maternal and technology. I find this reading simplifying, for representations of the maternal in *The Stepford Wives* can also be read as evasive, cynical, or both: most of the women replaced by robots are mothers, yet the reactions of their children to these transformations are simply not an issue. The implication is that the mother is primarily instrumental not only for her husband but also her children – as if echoing the comment made by one of Friedan's (1983, p.74) interviewees. "[m]y mother doesn't serve any other purpose except cleaning the house". Furthermore, the children are not depicted as agents of any kind, but seen running on the lawn, riding on the school bus, or being groomed by their parents. Children, any more than women in the film, are not quite fully human. Ira Levin's book makes apparent that children appreciate the new version of their mothers as neat domestic machines. Bobby's son Jonny expresses his satisfaction to Joanna: "She doesn't shout any more, she makes hot breakfasts...[--] I hope it lasts" (Levin 1973, p.141–142).

The film can also be read as depiction of an experimental cocoon of a upper middle-class society where both feminist and "feminine mystique" understandings of the gendered labour and power relations within the family coexist. The latter ones, as practised by the men's association, see women ideally as obedient passive servants with a passion for home making and no interests beyond. As the wives are unwilling to comply to these ideals, the men's association solves the problem with the aid of high technology. In *The Stepford Wives*, men are the ones to make decisions and the (robot) wives are the ones to comply. As in Friedan's study, the kitchen is the centre of women's lives and the women do not leave their homes "except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands" (Friedan 1983, p.17). The robot wives are embodiments of the Friedan's feminine mystique, since, as machines, they do not reflect on the lack of content, excitement and challenge in their lives; they do not complain of not feeling alive, feeling incomplete, lacking personality or a sense of the self; they do not compensate by using tranquillisers, sleeping pills, by drinking or eating, or develop psychotic states, unlike the flesh-and blood housewives interviewed by Friedan (1983, p.20–22, 234–235, 251–252; also discussed in Bowlby 2000, p.200–202). When the chair of the men's association explains to Joanna that the solution is "just perfect. Perfect for us and perfect for you", this may not read only as a "science-fiction nightmare", but an ironic cinematic solution to "the problem that has no name".

The novel and the film alike may be superficial in their ways of addressing "the gender question". After all, as Rachel Bowlby (2000, p.201) points out, *The Stepford Wives* gives little motivation for the male desire to murder and rebuild their wives, implying that men are as if by "nature" anti-feminist and misogynist: "In *The Stepford Wives*, the women who conform to the [feminine] stereotype are man-made, but the men acting out the equivalent stereotypes of maleness are real". Yet I am not willing, like Doane, to bypass the fiction as banal. Depicting the ideal housewives as abnormal and non-human, and their patronising husbands as quite literally monstrous in their lack of affection and willingness to reduce their spouses into robot

servants, *The Stepford Wives* takes the model of gendered division of labour into its extremes and works an alienating effect. In both the film and the novel, Joanne is the protagonist from whose point of view events unfold and whose reactions the readers and viewers witness. The motivations or "inner life" of her husband are not discussed, and thus he remains a hostile alien other, depriving the nuclear family unit of its give normalcy and turning it into a site of work, abuse and, indeed, compulsive repetition.

Unlike the film, Levin's novel uses of *The Feminine Mystique* as explicit inter-text: Both Joanne and Bobby are members of NOW, National Organization for Women, of which Friedan was a long-term president. Friedan is also mentioned as guest lecturer of the Women's Club some years back, whose then eager audience is now passionately occupied with housework and serving their husbands. According to an article in the local newspaper, "Over fifty women applauded Mrs. Friedan as she cited the inequities and frustrations besetting the modern-day housewife". (Levin 1973, p.37, 62–63, 90.) In addition to references to Friedan, the novel, as Rachel Bowlby (2000, p.199) has it, "is studded with references to prominent feminists" such as de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and Gloria Steinem. Yet it is Friedan's version of feminism that the novel promotes by depicting the key protagonists as combining creative careers with motherhood and being "naturally feminist" until replaced by robot dolls that embody the feminine mystique. Furthermore, according to Bowlby, many of Friedan's themes – such as the history of women's movement, critique of psychoanalysis and mutation of sex into somewhat perverted "pseudo-sex", represented in the novel by masturbation and rubber fetishes – reappear in the novel, often in hyperbole". (Bowlby 2000, p.199–200.)

Technology as male terrain

The Stepford Wives draws from cybernetic research and experiments in human-like robots and self-regulating machines (represented as robot wives), as well as other contemporaneous visualisations and depictions of popular cybernetics. Furthermore, the film also reads as a commentary of a social situation where the ideology of women as domestic creatures, reinforced by cybernetic-influenced social sciences and their various popularisations in the 1950s and 1960s (such as functionalism), are confronted by the women's liberation movement and its alternative conceptions of what counts as satisfactory family life. Ultimately, the film turns into a dystopian control fantasy with women as automated puppets whose controls are held and operated by men. While representations of the feminine mystique in *The Stepford Wives* draw from Friedan's liberal feminist study, the cinematic themes of power, technology, gender and sexuality, are more closely connected to radical feminist ideas that emphasise "private areas" of sexuality and family as arenas of power and struggle fought over women's bodies.

In *The Stepford Wives*, high tech is literally a male terrain: the husbands all work at technological research institutes ("electronics, computers, aerospace junk", Levin 1973, p.89) while their wives stay at home and mind the children after having been uprooted from their previous homes due to their husbands' occupations. The men are away at work or at the men's association, where one of the rules of membership includes exchanging their wives for androids. When Joanna asks Dale Coba for explanation for replacing the women of Stepford with automata, he shrugs and says "because we can. We found a way of doing it and it's just perfect. Perfect for us and perfect for you". Thus the threat of technology in the novel and film alike lays less in the machines, the androids themselves, than it does in their designers, developers, and the aggressive male homosocial networks behind them. High tech is literally tool for backlash, for "restoring" the ideal power relations of the 19th century bourgeois family with the addition of heightened female sexual accessibility and (male) gratification. As the wives, interested in the women's liberation movement are turned into house pride "angels of the house", the threat posed by feminism on the level of per-

sonal politics is solved for good. Organised into a conspiring association, the men are able to use their skills collectively: one sketches the faces of the women for resemblance, another stores their voices and pronunciation by making the women record excessive lists of words, while others produce the actual life-like machine replicas. The men running the hospital, the police station and the telephone company help in covering up the traces so that no outsiders realise the death of their wives. Thus women's liberation that questions uneven power relations within the family can, be fought and won in the entire town.

These pessimist views on technology as a male terrain have affinity to Mary Daly's decidedly anti-technological radical feminist views, presented in her *Gyn/Ecology* (orig. 1978). For Daly, technology is quintessentially patriarchal, a tool for male control over women and nature alike. Technology, for her, belongs to a wider range of social systems of control which, along with therapy, cloning and transsexualism aim at the effacement of female self-definition and renders women into mere reflections of male fantasy. Thus cold and mechanistic phallographic progress creates hollow people, women and men alike, but with different gendered implications. For Daly, women are transformed into "hollow holograms", "feminine nonwomen, the replacements of female". This is the state of robotitude, "life in the state of mechanical motion". (Daly 1990, p.52-53).

It is "hard to see/name the fact that phallogracy reduces women to framed pictures / holograms / robots", but this "see-ing, nam-ing of this nonbeing is essential to liv-ing" (Daly 1990, p.56). Robotitude, then, does not refer literally to replacement of women with robots, but to the technologies of femininity at large, the construction of women as objects of male desire. As "pure repetition of mechanical gestures", robotitude changes women into things, "women with anatomically female bodies but totally male-identified, male-possessed brains / spirits", which is "an imposed state of idiocy, a kind of cretinism" (Daly 1990, p.56-57). Daly uses technology – especially technologies of robotics, astronautics and holograms – as metaphors for phallographic control over women and nature, of violence and death, female self-alienation and compliance to the male ideals and norms.

For Judith Halberstam (1998, p.477), Daly's writings on robotitude and the creation of female holograms resemble those depicted in *The Stepford Wives*, and "[g]iven the history of gendering technology female in order to make it seductive, the threat of a Stepford Wives phenomenon certainly has validity". Halberstam nevertheless criticises Daly's views on gender and technology, for "[s]he reads robotitude, or automated gender, as a negative condition because she imagines that it replaces something natural and organic within 'woman'", and, furthermore, ignores the technology of gender and replicates patriarchal gendering of technology (Halberstam 1998, p.477). Although Daly does presuppose a true self and true womanhood that have been biased and hidden by patriarchy, and can be reclaimed, I do not think this fully means ignoring the technology of gender. Daly's discussion is certainly not Foucauldian in the sense that she postulates possibilities for "being outside" power and "a self" prior to power. Yet, as pointed out above, her reading of technology as a terrain of male control is about technologies of gender, power, making women and manufacturing femininity. Power is lived and internalised: "[t]he viciously exploitative technological embedding that infiltrates the modern psyche from all sides impresses the mind on levels beyond conscious awareness, profoundly affecting beliefs and behavior" (Daly 1990, p.109).

While Daly is decidedly anti-technology, she does not quite define what she means with technology. Given her general interest in – or even passion for – words, meanings and etymologies, this is somewhat surprising (cf. Daly 1994). I am inclined to think that technology is used by Daly as general reference to things *machine-like* and artificial reproduction of life. Thus her writing do not concern technology as much as patriarchal underpinnings of certain technologies. After all, spinning and weaving, central metaphors used by Daly throughout *Gyn/Ecologies* and beyond to describe

gynocentric ways of thinking, speaking and interacting, can themselves be considered technologies. For Daly, technology is pro-war and anti-women, and geared towards the destruction of life and the Goddess as its mythic origin: “[t]he creators of artificial death belong to the same funeral fraternity as the various ale supermothers – creators of artificial life and manipulators of existing life. [--] The projected manufacture by men of artificial wombs, of cyborgs which will be part flesh, part robot, of clones – all are manifestations of phallotechnic boundary violation”. (Daly 1990, p.70, 71.)

These views on technology have been commented on by Donna Haraway in her writings on cyborgs, including the famous declaration “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway 1991, p.181). Whereas for Daly technology is patriarchal and thus other to gynocentric practices, Haraway argues for a feminist incorporation and appropriation of technology and answerability for its uses. And whereas Daly sees boundary violations as illustrations of patriarchal aggression towards women, for Haraway they illustrate possibilities for change and multiplicity. Judith Halberstam (1998, p.476) reads goddesses and cyborgs as two poles in the debate on women and technology: “The ground between the goddess and the cyborg clearly stakes out the contested territory between the category ‘woman’ and the gendered ‘body’. So, if the goddess is an ideal congruence between anatomy and femininity, the cyborg instead posits a femininity as automation, as coded masquerade”. It can be argued, however, that also for writers using the figuration of the goddess, like Daly, femininity is nothing if not automation and coded masquerade. Daly does not assume a congruence between anatomy and femininity, since femininity signifies male-identified performance of womanhood, accomplished by transsexuals and holograms as well as by “women”. Being woman, not being feminine, has to do with anatomy and embodiment.

In Halberstam’s reading, Daly depicts the figure of a female cyborg as a threat of seducing women into automated femininity, thus distancing women from their true selves. If, however, femininity, like masculinity, is seen as something always already artificial and mechanical, and technology as something already gendered female, the question is cast in a different light (Halberstam 1998, p.478, 480), while issues of power, normativity and control remain equally central. Connections between women and technology as gendered female are hardly more obvious anywhere else than in ideas concerning perfect machine women, which can be traced back to female automata as constructed in fiction and practice alike at least since the 18th century.

Perfect workers

The Stepford Wives are both domestic workers and household machines. Robots being generic representatives of a service-class is already implied in the etymology of the term, deriving from Slavic word (“rabotnik”) for a worker or hard, even forced labour (Halberstam 1998, p.468). As Alexandra Chasin (1995) has pointed out, the gendered, classed and raced category of servants is situated on the boundary of humans and things, us and them. The instrumental function and subjected social position of servants, along with their un(der)valued arena of domestic work, has led to comparisons between servants, slaves, non-humans and robots. Chasin (1995, p.81–83) associates this drawing and crossing of boundaries with a wider cultural move of depicting technology as anthropomorphic, while human labour becomes increasingly defined in terms of machines – yet in both cases the categories of human are clearly classed and gendered. For Chasin, the central problem does not concern differences between the human and the nonhuman, given that the inclusion of women in the former category has never been a given, but rather on how the dependence of social relations “on a service being, even on a service class of being” is left intact and unquestioned (Chasin 1995, p.84–85).

When tackling with the feminine housewife mystique, Betty Friedan returned continuously to the blurred boundaries of women and things. She compared 19th cen-

ture views on women as irrational and animal-like creatures to the 1950s housewife discourse, insisting that “[w]omen are human beings, not stuffed dolls, not animals” (Friedan 1983, p.67). Friedan’s central argument for equality was based on women’s humanity, and certainly women have been one of the groups excluded from the category of human, or at least from being fully human, more liking to the material world of objects, possessions and animals (understood as “nature”) (Butler 2000, p.81–82). However, Friedan’s demands for acknowledging women as human fail to take into consideration the workings of “race”, sexuality and class, leaving the category of women to signify white middle-class and heterosexual. Similarly, as Rachel Bowlby (2000, p.202) notes, in *The Stepford Wives* only young middle-class housewives become turned into servant-machines. The danger does not include domestic servants or working women, yet deliberate emphasis is made on African American Ruth facing a faith similar to that of Joanne and Bobby.

In addition to functioning as the perfect servant/domestic worker, the robot wives (like the ideal housewives in Betty Friedan’s book), are also ever-willing sexual servants to their “masters”. Female robots as ideal love dolls are a recurring theme in cinematic and literary fictions, implying both the mechanistic nature of desirable femininity and sexual acts, and, perhaps more centrally, the desirability of man-made technological objects. In *The Stepford wives*, the figure of robot wife is literally husband’s property and modelled to please him in a vein similar to the contemporaneous “love model” robots in *Westworld* (1973) and *Futureworld* (1976), films that depict theme parks where intercourse with m/f robots (but never male on male or female on female) is one of the key attractions. As one visitor has it in *Futureworld*, “once you make it with a robot chick, that’s it, you don’t ever want nothing else” – finding later resonance in Steven Spielberg’s later film *AI* (2001). Like Hadaly, the ideal machine woman in Villier de l’Isle Adam’s novel (orig. 1880), these robot women are referred to as “better than their originals”, as embodiments of La Femme, the ideal woman and heterosexual love-object. In such fictions, desirable femininity becomes understood as programmable sets of lines, gestures and responses, produced for male pleasure. The ultimately gratifying female is in fact a robot love-doll and perfect wives have to be engineered.

I find it productive to read *The Stepford wives*, not merely as faithful illustration of Daly’s robotitude, but against an intertextual framework of debates and concerns over gender, power and technology – as an ironic metanarrative rather than a visualisation. This enables a move from the shortcomings and simplifications of the narrative to a wider discursive field concerning women, servants and things both within popular cybernetics and feminist theory. Representations of sexualised female automata are about definitions of the gendered, raced, sexualised and classed category of human and its boundaries, as defined against negation (of machines, animals, dolls and things) and through uneasy affinities (the categories of historically “less human” servants, ethnic, racial and religious others, homosexuals, women and children).

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