

‘Battery Operated Better’?

Mediating phallogentric sexual pleasure and the constitution of the female subject in relation to third-wave vibrators

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Research Master thesis

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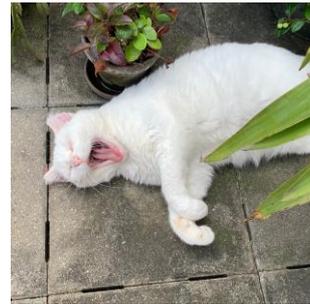
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To my mother, thank you for teaching me to celebrate life.

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Abstract

Two assumptions are recurrent in academic discourses surrounding contemporary vibrators. The first assumption is that vibrators are mere tools. They are instruments that women can use to achieve their goal of sexual pleasure. The second assumption is that third-wave vibrators have become feminist tools, which embody feminist values. In light of popular postfeminism, which assumes that feminist struggles have ended and that full equality for all women has been achieved, I will critically question the assumption that vibrators are feminist tools (Lazar 2006). I will do so by integrating the concept of mediation with feminist theory. The concept of mediation, in a postphenomenological understanding, draws attention to the way in which technologies actively *co-shape* experiences. Furthermore, such an understanding shows how subject and object are relationally constituted, rather than pre-given categories (Verbeek 2005; Ihde 2009). In order to understand the way in which the experience of sexual pleasure comes into being and the way in which the female subject is constituted in the relations, I will integrate the concept of mediation with feminist theory. I will discuss the concepts of female sexuality and the female subject through the works of Luce Irigaray, Lynne Segal, and Helene Cixous. From these works, it becomes clear that female sexuality and the female subject in our western society are known from a phallogentric, and masculine position (Cixous and Clement 1986; Irigaray 1985). In this thesis, I will analyze relations with two, third-wave vibrators, namely, We-Vibe's Nova vibrator and Picobong's Transformer vibrator. Through analyzing those case studies as embodied, mediated relations, I will question whether the experience of sexual pleasure and the constituted female subject, can indeed be understood as 'feminist.' In the case studies, I will show how phallogentric experiences of sexual pleasure are technologically mediated and how the female subject is constituted as lacking. This thesis will be a starting point to envision a true alterative feminine sexual pleasure and feminine subject.

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Introduction

“Tonight I’m gonna love myself” sings the American R&B and soul singer Macy Gray in her song “B.O.B.” (2015). Her song B.O.B., which stands for ‘Battery-Operated Better,’ can be understood as an ode or a love letter to Grays’ vibrator (Harman 2015). In this song, Gray sings about how the vibrator allows her to experience sexual pleasure without it being complicated. This idea that vibrators give women the opportunity to take pleasure into their own hands is widely circulated in popular, as well as academic, discourses. For example, in the Netflix series, *Grace and Frankie*, in their eponymous series, design a vibrator for senior women to take pleasure in their own hands, be it with or without arthritis (*Grace and Frankie* 2015). Or in one of the episodes, called “the Female Orgasm” of the documentary series “Explained,” where they discuss how women can achieve orgasm by using a vibrator (*The Female Orgasm* 2018). Furthermore, in magazines such as *Glamour* and *Elle*, vibrators are described as tools to “take your sexuality into your own hands” and as “tools” that “support the feminist agenda,” since “women as sexual beings, deserve pleasure, on their own terms” (Abbas 2020; Cockett 2020; Moss 2015). Similar ideas are used in the ways in which vibrators are presented and marketed. On websites of sex toy companies such as The Lioness, LELO, and We-Vibe, the vibrator is presented as a feminist tool; where women are encouraged “to take pleasure into their own hands” and “to experience pleasure, just the way they like” (“Nova by We-Vibe. Dual Stimulation Superstar.” n.d.; “How It Works | Smart Vibrator By Women For Women” n.d.; LELO, n.d.).

The vibrator has not always had this positive, feminist connotation. Sarah Wilner and Aimee Dinnin Huff argue in “Objects of Desire: The Role of Product Design in Revising Contested Cultural Meanings” (2017), that at the end of the twentieth century, the vibrator was a taboo object, shrouded in shame and secrecy and that vibrators were only sold in “dark ‘Adult Only’ storefronts in the sleaziest part of town” (Wilner and Huff 2017, 251). However, now, in the ‘third-wave’ of vibrator design, as Wilner and Huff establish and, as I will discuss in the first chapter, vibrators are ergonomically shaped to fit the female body, made of body-safe materials, packaged in gender-friendly packaging, and heralded as feminist tools. Also, in other academic discourses around vibrators, as I will show in the first chapter of this thesis, there are two overarching (implicit) assumptions about vibrators. The first assumption is that the vibrator is only a tool, an instrument that women can use to achieve their goal of sexual pleasure. The second assumption is that third wave vibrators have somehow become feminist tools, which embody feminist values such as independent pleasure and sexual liberation (Rome and Lambert 2020, 5). In relation to the first assumption, what we can learn from contemporary philosophy of technology, such as postphenomenology, is that technologies are not just tools, but they actively help to shape human existence and experience (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015; Verbeek 2005; Ihde 2009; 1996). In relation to the second assumption, in this thesis, I am interested in what these ‘feminist values’ are and whether we can indeed understand the vibrator as a technology that embodies feminist values. Therefore, I want to analyze whether the experience of sexual pleasure and the subject that is constituted in relation to third-wave vibrators are indeed ‘feminist.’ I will do so by combining postphenomenology with feminist theory on female sexuality and the female subject, in order to analyze

two third-wave vibrators, namely the Nova vibrator by We-Vibe and the Transformer vibrator by Pico Bong.

My main research question in this thesis will be:

In what ways do the WeVibe Nova and PicoBong Transformer vibrators mediate sexual pleasure, and how is the female subject constituted in the process?

In order to answer this research question, I will answer the following sub-questions in this thesis:

Sub-question 1: *What approaches to the analysis of vibrators are currently used in academic discourses, and which assumptions about vibrators, technology, and feminism are apparent in these approaches?*

Sub-question 2: *What does the concept of mediation mean in a postphenomenological understanding, and how can I use this concept to analyze the relations with the Nova- and Transformer vibrator?*

Sub-question 3: *In what way are female sexuality, the female subject, and the liberation of female sexuality discussed in feminist theory, and how can I use that to understand the relation with the Nova- and Transformer vibrator?*

Sub-question 4: *How can I integrate the discussed theoretical frameworks into a methodology to analyze the way in which experiences come into being and the way in which the subject and object are constituted in relation to the case studies?*

To answer the first sub-question, I will perform an 'integrative literature review' in the first chapter. An integrative literature review has the aim to “assess, critique, and synthesize the literature on a research topic in a way that enables new theoretical frameworks and perspectives to emerge” (Snyder 2019, 335). It is a way of analyzing literature on a particular topic or issue to investigate which areas need more research, and these findings can inform the theoretical framework. My goal in this literature review is to show that there are different approaches to researching vibrators, and to analyze what assumptions about technologies and vibrators are made within these approaches. In this chapter, I will discern four approaches, namely quantitative research on vibrators and vibrators use, research concerning the early history of the electromechanical vibrator, research into the way in which women give meaning to vibrators, and research that start from a design perspective. To reiterate, the first assumption that is apparent in the discourses is that the vibrator is discussed in terms of its instrumentality. As I will explain, the concept of mediation in a postphenomenological understanding does justice to the shaping role that technologies play in our everyday life; this leads me to the following chapter.

To answer the second sub-question, I will discuss the concept of mediation in a postphenomenological understanding. Engaging with the works of Martin Heidegger, Don Ihde, and Peter-Paul Verbeek, I will discuss different ways in which postphenomenology theorizes possible human/technology/world relations. I will discuss all this in order to come to an understanding of the concept of mediation through which I can analyze how a specific experience comes into being through mediated relations and in what way the subject and object are constituted in relation to each other. Finally, I will discuss the so-called political dimensions of

technological artifacts. Here I will discuss that although postphenomenology provides a starting point for analyzing technological mediation, in order to understand how and why specific experiences come into being and in order to understand how and why subject and object are constituted in specific ways, I need further contextualization of how female sexuality and the female subject are understood in our Western culture. Therefore, and in order to answer my third sub-question, I will engage with the works of Luce Irigaray, Lynne Segal, and Helene Cixous on female sexuality and the female subject.

In the third chapter, I will discuss the concept of phallocentrism. Phallocentrism can be understood as a way of reasoning and a way of producing knowledge about female sexuality or the female subject from a male perspective (Cixous and Clement 1986; Atack and Sellers 1998; Irigaray 1985). Which, according to Luce Irigaray, “underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse” (Irigaray 1985, 69). I will start this chapter with a discussion of Luce Irigaray’s critique on the theory of sexual development, as coined by Sigmund Freud. Here I will discuss how female sexuality and the female subject are conceptualized in terms of the man and how female sexuality, therefore, was made passive, and the female subject was made lacking. Then I will discuss through the work of Lynne Segal, how female sexuality was ‘liberated’ at the end of the twentieth century, but that the way in which this happened, still follows a masculine logic in Cixousian terms. Helene Cixous shows throughout her works how a masculine logic, is thinking in differentiation and hierarchy. Rosalind Gill discusses how this is now thought of as feminist, and critically questions the constitution of the woman as active and sexually liberated. This theoretical framework will help me in analyzing how we can understand the specific experience of pleasure and the constitution of the subject, in relation to the case studies, and this will help me in questioning whether we can indeed understand vibrators as tools that embody feminist values of pleasure and sexual liberation.

In the fourth chapter, I will integrate the discussed theoretical frameworks and build a methodology with which I can analyze the cases. The vibrators that I will analyze in this thesis are the Nova vibrator by We-Vibe and the Transformer vibrator by PicoBong. In this chapter, I will discuss why I chose these two cases, namely because they are seen as third-wave vibrators that have shed their phallic and masculine connotations and are now seen as feminist tools. Furthermore, in this chapter, I will discuss the concept of affordances, which will help me to establish a relation with the vibrators that I can analyze. I will also discuss how I can analyze the meaningful experience that comes into being, namely by analyzing the structure of amplification and reduction that occurs in the mediated relation. And I will discuss in what way I can analyze how subject and object are constituted in relation to each other.

My goal in this thesis is, first of all, to build a theoretical framework with which I can analyze case studies that are ‘heralded’ as feminist tools. I want to do this in light of so-called popular postfeminism, in which it is thought that women are completely equal and that feminist struggles have ended (Lazar 2006). In this thesis, I will re-activate feminist theory to question the celebration of vibrators as being ‘feminist,’ I will do this by analyzing the experience of sexual pleasure that can come into being and by analyzing in what the (female) subject is constituted, and how that relates to phallogentric or feminine ways of thinking about sexuality and the subject.

Secondly, my aim is to show, by analyzing the case studies, that a theoretical framework integrating both postphenomenology and feminist theory can be used to analyze and understand social phenomena about sexuality in relation to technologies. Thus, not only do I want to show how theory can be formed to understand phenomena but also with the case studies, I intend to show how philosophy of technology can be integrated with feminist theory (and vice versa) to understand contemporary, technological phenomena.

Chapter 1: Vibrators; our [under] researched bedfellows?

1.1 Introduction

The title of this chapter refers to the article "Sex Toys, Sex Dolls, Sex Robots: Our Under-Researched Bedfellows" (2018) by the media scholars Nicola Döring and Sandra Pöschl. In their article, Döring and Pöschl state that relatively little research is conducted on vibrators, considering the ubiquity of the technology (Döring and Pöschl 2018). In this chapter, I will question this statement by giving an overview of existing literature on vibrators while critically engaging with the most prominent research methods and their inherent assumptions considering the relationship between humans, technology, and sexuality. I will conduct a so-called "integrative literature review" (Snyder 2019) to investigate the different approaches and research methods that exist in academic discourse about vibrators.¹ An integrative literature review has the aim to "assess, critique, and synthesize the literature on a research topic in a way that enables new theoretical frameworks and perspectives to emerge" (Snyder 2019, 335). It is a way of analyzing and synthesizing the literature on a particular topic or issue to investigate which areas need more research. These findings can inform the theoretical framework. The purpose of this literature review is not to be exhaustive, meaning that I will not discuss all the research that has been conducted on vibrators or all the literature in which vibrators occur.² My goal in this literature review is to show that there are different approaches to researching vibrators and that each of these approaches is based on particular assumptions concerning the relationship between humans, technology, and sexuality. These assumptions will inform my own approach and are the starting point for the construction of my theoretical framework.

I will divide the literature review into four categories. I will first discuss quantitative research on vibrators and vibrator use (Döring and Pöschl 2018; Herbenick et al. 2015; 2010). Second, I will discuss research concerning the early

¹ Hannah Snyder, assistant professor at the Norwegian Business School, outlines in "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An overview and Guidelines" (2019), three different ways to conduct a literature review: systematic, semi-systematic, and integrative. Which one is performed depends on the purpose of the literature review. A systematic literature review is a quantitative form, which usually aims "to identify all empirical evidence that fits the pre-specified inclusion criteria to answer a particular research question or hypothesis" (Snyder 2019, 334). This type of literature review is often used in the medical sciences. A semi-systematic literature review "often looks at how research within a selected field has progressed over time or how a topic has developed across research traditions" (335). This type of literature review is usually carried out within business research.

² I have obtained this literature by applying the so-called snowball-method (Fokken n.d.; Jonkers n.d.). In several key documents, such as "Lieberman's Selling Sex Toys: Marketing and the Meaning of Vibrators in Early Twentieth-Century America," (2016) "Intimate Transactions: Sex Toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism," (2017) and Wilner and Huffs' "Objects of desire: the Role of Product Design in Revising Contested Cultural Meanings" (2017) I consulted the bibliography to find other articles on vibrators.

history of the electromechanical vibrator (Maines 1999; King 2011; Lieberman 2016; Lieberman and Schatzberg 2018). Third, I will discuss research into the way in which women give meaning to vibrators (Lieberman 2017a; Fahs and Swank 2013; Waskul and Anklan 2019). The final category of research that I will engage with all start from a design perspective (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011; Eaglin and Bardzell 2011; Wilner and Huff 2017). These categories are not necessarily demarcated. For example, sex and gender historian Hallie Lieberman provides us with a historiography of the vibrator in the USA and the way in which women gave meaning to vibrators “at the height of second-wave feminism” in her article "Intimate Transactions: Sex toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism" (Lieberman 2017a, 96). The actual analysis in this article focuses on how women gave meaning to the vibrator. Therefore, I will discuss this article in the subchapter of how women give meaning to vibrators.

In this literature review, I will discuss some inherent assumptions occurring in research about vibrators. The first assumption is an oftentimes instrumentalist understanding of technologies, which implies that human subjects use technological objects to achieve their goals. As a result, an instrumentalist understanding of technology does not do justice to the 'intentionality' of technologies, according to a general consensus in contemporary philosophy of technology and, more specifically, the field of postphenomenology. Such an instrumentalism forgoes all ways in which technologies actively play a role in the formation of everyday life (Verbeek 2006, 365). The concepts and theories that I mention here, such as postphenomenology and the intentionality of technologies, will be further discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. Second, I will discuss the apparently prominent idea that the vibrator is nowadays a feminist tool that has shed its masculine and phallic connotations and that women can experience sexual pleasure 'on their own' terms (or take sexual pleasure into their own hands) with vibrators. I will question this assumption in light of 'popular postfeminism,' which refers to the idea that feminist struggles have ended "that full equality for all women has been achieved, and that women of today can 'have it all'" (Lazar 2006, 505). By highlighting the use (or appropriation) of feminist themes and terminology in the design process and advertising of vibrators, I aim to argue against the idea that vibrators somehow have become more feminist.

1.2 Vibrators and numbers

The first field of research concerning vibrators and vibrator use consists mostly of quantitative sociological studies that aim to map people's behavior with and attitudes towards vibrators. A primary example of such a study is the article on the sale of sex technologies by Döring and Pöschl, mentioned at the start of this chapter. In their study, they first conduct a quantitative analysis of the range of sexual products available online. They do so in order to answer their first research question: “what types of sexual product (sex toys, sex doll, and sex robots) are available today?” (Döring and Pöschl 2018, e52). Second, they gather data on their users and use to answer their second research question: "who buys them and how do they use them" (Döring and Pöschl 2018, e52). In relation to their first question, they come to the conclusion that there is a wide range of sex toys available online and that most of them are supposed to be used on the genital and anal area (Döring and Pöschl 2018, e52). In relation to their second question surrounding users and uses of sex toys, they discuss that a majority of the “German Internet population,” namely 65% of the

women and 63% of the men, have used a sex toy and that these findings are similar to previous studies in the United States (Döring and Pöschl 2018, e52). Furthermore, they find that “greater sexual pleasure, sexual satisfaction, and safer sex” are all positive effects of sex toy use (Döring and Pöschl 2018, e53). The study about sex toy use in the United States they refer to is “Women's Vibrator Use in Sexual Partnerships: Results From a Nationally Representative Survey in the United States” (2010) by Debbie Herbenick et al., professor at the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University. The latter analyzed how many women use vibrators in the United States. The data they gathered consisted of surveys, which they contributed via “an existing research panel from Knowledge Networks” (Herbenick et al. 2010, 51). Their data shows that one-fifth of the 2056 women they interviewed had masturbated once per week during the previous four weeks and that 61.1% of these women had used a vibrator (Herbenick et al. 2010, 55) In another article, namely “Vibrators and Other Sex Toys are Commonly Recommended to Patients, But Does Size Matter? Dimensions of Commonly Sold Products” (2015), Herbenick et al. conduct research into the dimensions of vibrators offered for sale online. They do so since clinicians often times recommend vibrators to patients to “enhance sexual desire and facilitate orgasm, or as part of a larger treatment plan for certain types of vulvar pain” (Herbenick et al. 2015, 642). Herbenick et al. want to offer information about what is actually for sale in order to inform clinicians (Herbenick et al. 2015). Their study shows the mean length and mean circumference of vibrators on eight websites.

This kind of quantitative research into vibrators provides insight into how many people use vibrators and what kind of vibrators exist. But besides the fact that many questions can be asked about the discussed research, ranging from the categories used (e.g., men/women, hetero-/homosexual) to the 'effects' of sex toy use, such research does not provide any insight into the role that vibrators play or can play in everyday life. In this kind of research, vibrators are understood as objects that people can or cannot use (amongst other things to 'facilitate orgasm' (Herbenick et al. 2015, 642). However, such an instrumentalist understanding of technology does not do justice to the mediating role that technology plays (Verbeek 2008, 19; 2005, 136). Moreover, in such research, an inherent split is made between human subjects and technological objects, a position that I will question in this thesis. Before I continue on how I will do so, I will first continue with another approach to the analysis of vibrators, namely, with a discussion on the research that has been conducted on the early history of the vibrator.

1.3 Early history of the vibrator

There is one often-repeated story, now considered a myth, about the history of the vibrator that is often-times repeated in research into vibrators; it is the story of the history of the vibrator, as discussed by Rachel P. Maines in “Technology of Orgasm: 'Hysteria,' the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction” (1999) (see, for example, Bardzell and Bardzell 2011; Eaglin and Bardzell 2011; McCaughey and French 2001; Glover 2010; Morales et al. 2018; Wilner and Huff 2017).³ The core argument in this book is that the electromechanical vibrator was invented and used in the late 19th

³ Also in popular articles (see, for example, Lioness 2019; “The Buzz: How the Vibrator Came to Be” 2012; “Did You Know The First Vibrator Was As Big As A Dining Room Table?” 2016; “The History of the Vibrator” n.d.) and a feature-length film; *Hysteria* (Wexler 2011).

and early 20th Century to treat women with, what was believed to be, hysteria (Maines 1999, 11). Maines claims in this book that hysteria in women was one of the most frequently diagnosed diseases in history and that doctors treated women by massaging their clitorises to orgasm. She claims that this treatment was not thought of as sexual since no penetration was involved. She wrote: "[s]ince no penetration was involved, believers in the hypothesis that only penetration was sexually gratifying to women could argue that nothing sexual could be occurring when their patients experienced the hysterical paroxysm during treatment" (Maines 1999, 10).⁴ This treatment of women by massaging their clitorises was, according to Maines, a tiring and time-consuming procedure. The electromechanical vibrator, invented in the 1880s by the British physician Joseph Mortimer Granville, represented, according to Maines, a long-awaited solution to "a problem that had plagued medical practitioners since antiquity: effective therapeutic massage that neither fatigued the therapist nor demanded skills that were difficult and time-consuming to acquire" (Maines 1999, 11). Although this is a compelling story and although this history is often repeated in studies to this day, most of the claims made by Maines are questioned by various historians. I will first discuss the criticism on the claim that massaging the vulva was a standard treatment since antiquity. Secondly, I will discuss the criticism of the claim that the electromechanical vibrator was invented for massaging the vulva as a treatment for hysteria.

Helen King, Professor of Classical Studies at the Open University in the UK, assesses in "Galen and the Widow: Towards a History of Therapeutic Masturbation in Ancient Gynaecology" (2011) the claims and classical sources that have to do with the place of desire, orgasm and masturbation in the Greco-Roman world, the Middle Ages and Renaissance (King 2011, 205). The first critique is that Maines refers to translations, which have been altered (as King calls it) in translation (King 2011, 210–12). Most of these used translations are problematic according to King, but Maines does not discuss the state of the translations. For example, Maines refers to texts by Hippocrates that are translated by Emile Littré. However, as King explains: "Littré added his own section headings which selected some passages as making sense in the context of ideas of hysteria current in his own day, labeling the passages 'Hysterie', and thus establishing what Andrew Scull has called the 'modern fable' of hysteria in the Hippocratic corpus" (King 2011, 210). Some sources that Maines thus uses are translations that consist of altered texts by Hippocrates, and the alterations were made to fit in the then-current discourse of hysteria. Maines used these translations without paying attention to the discourses in which they were written. Or, how King states it: "much of Maines' analysis is now simply dated" (King 2011, 210). The second critique that King discusses is that although Maines claims that she has a reading knowledge of Latin and Greek, a series of questions can be raised by her use of primary sources:

First, in Diseases of Women 1.35, a description of retention of menstrual blood or of the lochia, the writer states that the doctor should prescribe 'rubbing her head with

⁴ Paroxysm here refers to the reaction of women during the alleged treatment. The word paroxysm means, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary; "a sudden violent emotion or action: outburst" (Merriam Webster). Since Maines is here talking about the stimulation of the clitoris, this would be probably nowadays be called an orgasm. However this treatment was, according to Maines, thought of as non-sexual and thus it is called a paroxysm.

oil of lilies,' and she should anoint her womb generously with oil, as should always be done before the patient is given a vapour bath (πῶριη). Not only is there is no 'hysteria' here: there is no womb movement either. The only 'massage' taking place is of the head. The verb used for the application of oil to the head is 'to anoint' (ἀπαινεῖν); while 'rub with oil' is another way of expressing this, I suspect that Hanson's perfectly valid translation as 'rubbing' has led Maines to read more into this passage than is valid (King 2011, 211).

King thus also criticizes Maines' use of primary sources, where she claims that Maines reads more into certain texts than is valid. The discussed two examples are part of a long list of wrongly cited translations and classical texts.⁵

While King is concerned with the ancient historical sources, Hallie Lieberman, a sex and gender historian who teaches at Georgia Institute of Technology, and Eric Schatzberg, a professor in the department of the history of science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, criticize the sources that Maines uses in support of her claims about the late 19th and early 20th Century. In "A Failure of Academic Quality Control: The Technology of Orgasm" (2018), Lieberman and Schatzberg break down the main argument of Maines in "Technology of Orgasm" into three key claims: the first claim is that clitoral massage was not perceived of as sexual since no penetration was involved. The second claim is that vibrators were widely used to treat hysteria. The third claim is that clitoral massage was a standard medical practice, and this practice persisted into the early 20th Century with vibrators instead of manual massages (Lieberman and Schatzberg 2018, 27). Lieberman and Schatzberg discuss that they found no evidence to support any of these claims. They discuss that Maines provided little citation in support of the main claims and that Maines blurs this shortcoming by "padding with a mass of tangential citations that obscure the lack of support for the core argument" (Lieberman and Schatzberg 2018, 27). Furthermore, "none of the sources she cites even suggest what she is arguing" since most of the sources cited in support of her arguments about clitoral massage refer to treatment of non-genital areas (Lieberman and Schatzberg 2018, 27-30).

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate the sources Maines uses since most of the sources that she is referring to are only available on paper in the United States (Lieberman and Schatzberg 2018; King 2011). However, what Maines also discusses is how various doctors thought about female sexuality in the second half of the 19th century (Maines 1999, 50–59). These ways of thinking ranged from the idea that women could not have sexual feelings and desire to the idea that masturbation in women would lead to 'marital aversion' because they would not need a man: "mechanical and iniquitous excitations affords more thorough satisfaction than the mutual legitimate ones do" (Maines 1999, 55). What these discussions at least show is that female sexuality in the 19th century was only thought of from a male perspective. These ways of thinking about female sexuality continued at least far into the 20th century, as I will discuss, amongst others, through the work of Luce Irigaray in chapter 3.

⁵ Lieberman also discusses that Iwan Rhys Morus, a professor of history at Aberystwyth University in Wales, stated: "I can safely say that I have come across nothing in my research on late nineteenth-century electricity and the body that lends any support at all to Maines's argument" (Lieberman 2018, 38). The source that Lieberman uses for this quote is a journalistic source, an article in the Nation, and in this article there is no reference to where and in what context Morus would have said this (see for the article Wypijewski 2012).

What Maines, Lieberman, and other historians, do agree on is that the British physician Joseph Mortimer Granville was one of the first to invent the electromechanical vibrator in the 1880s (Maines 1999; Lieberman 2017b; 2016). In the first years, the vibrator was branded and used by some physicians as a device for medical therapy for a range of diseases (Lieberman 2016, 401; Maines 1999). Granville himself believed that "the body's nerves had natural, healthy levels of vibration, and that when these levels got out of balance, disease resulted. Therefore, he created a device to cure off-key vibrations and restore the normal harmony of rhythm of the body's nerves" (Lieberman 2016, 401). At the same time, the vibrator as a medical tool received a "lukewarm reception" by some in the medical community (Lieberman 2016, 401; Morus 2006). One physician, for example, wrote a letter to the editor of *Medical News* that "[a]fter many years of vibratory therapy I am now convinced that its value is greatly exaggerated, and depends more on the creation of suggestion than anything else" (Lieberman 2016, 401). A few years later also the American Medical Association stated that "the vibrator business is a delusion and a snare. If it has any effect, it is psychology" (Lieberman 2016, 401). Lieberman discusses in "Selling Sex Toys: Marketing and the Meaning of Vibrators in Early Twentieth-Century America" (2016) that after the vibrator was widely dismissed in the medical world, it was started to be marketed towards consumers.

In "Selling Sex Toys" (2016), Lieberman discusses an alternative history of the vibrator against Maines's alleged history of the vibrator by analyzing the way in which the vibrator was marketed in the early 20th Century. In the early twentieth century, the vibrator was marketed as a "labor-saving household appliance and an electrotherapeutic device" (Lieberman 2016, 395). According to Lieberman, it was already known at the time that the vibrator could be used for sexual purposes, but that the vibrator was advertised as a non-sexual tool to circumvent obscenity laws. As Lieberman states: "[b]y advertising the vibrator as a labor-saving household appliance [...] companies could slip vibrator ads past the censors while supplying user manuals that clued consumers into specific sexual uses" (Lieberman 2016, 395). The vibrator, according to Lieberman, could embody multiple meanings, sexual and non-sexual, because of the way in which they were marketed: "vibrators were not fully camouflaged in the late 1800s and early 1900s as nonsexual devices, nor did they emerge in the 1960s as fully sexual devices. They always contained both sexual and nonsexual meanings" (Lieberman 2016, 396). However, in the 1960s and 1970s, the vibrator was positioned and marketed as a 'political liberating tool' by feminists. Lieberman discusses this in an article in which she investigates how women around the 60's gave meaning to the vibrator. This thus leads me to the third subchapter.

1.4 Giving meaning to vibrators

Lieberman analyzes in "Intimate Transactions: Sex Toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism" (2017) the way in which "ordinary women" gave meaning to sex toys between 1974-1989, the "height of second-wave feminism" (Lieberman 2017a, 96). She analyzes this and the way in which women combined sex toys with new and changing ideas of sexuality (inspired by feminist movements) through an analysis of customer correspondence with *Eve's Garden*. Dell Williams founded *Eve's Garden* in 1974, and with it, Williams was challenging the system of sex-toy distribution by "offering an alternative model informed by second-wave feminism" (Lieberman 2017a, 104). In addition to analyzing how women gave meaning to the

vibrator, Lieberman discusses how Williams rebranded the vibrator as a political liberating tool.

Williams was inspired to start Eve's Garden by a workshop that she attended from Betty Dodson. In the second wave of feminism (or the Liberation Movement, as I will discuss in the third chapter), various women started workshops and talking groups, to discuss issues of female sexuality.⁶ This particular workshop by Dodson was a pro-masturbation workshop, based on the idea that "women's liberation was impossible without sexual freedom, and sexual freedom was impossible without masturbation" (Lieberman 2017a, 102).⁷ In this workshop, Dodson taught women to "bring themselves pleasure by both touching their genitals and by using vibrators" (Lieberman 2017 a, 103). After this workshop, Williams went on a mission to find a vibrator (Williams and Vannucci 2005, 140–45). However, this was easier said than done, since at the time, vibrators were "marginally legal" (Lieberman 2017 a, 103).⁸ Stores that did sell vibrators were "located in dangerous areas [and] were not hospitable places for women. They were morasses of unchecked male id, filled with porn magazines displaying gynecological close-ups of vulvas. Their sex-toy selection was also slim: usually just a few hard plastic dildos and phallic vibrators" (Lieberman 2017 a, 103). The main public of these kinds of places was mostly "white, middle-aged, middle class, married male" (Lieberman 2017 a, 103). Williams, therefore, started Eve's Garden and offered an alternative model for sex-toy distribution informed by second-wave feminism. "Williams developed a feminist sex-toy store whose purpose was allowing women to become emotionally and sexually liberated" (Lieberman 2017 a, 104).⁹ From there on, Williams rebranded the vibrator as a tool for the women's movement, as "political, liberating tools," to reclaim their sexual rights. Since according to Williams, women's sexual rights were taken away by men to keep women down (Lieberman 2017a, 105).

Lieberman continues this article by analyzing 60 letters sent to Eve's Garden that mentioned dildos or vibrators between 1974 and 1989. Through coding the letters, Lieberman came up with 15 themes which she classified in three main categories, namely (1) "Feminist skepticism of sex toys," (2) "Women's ambivalence towards using machines for sexual pleasure," and (3) "Sex toys effect on relationships" (Lieberman 2017a, 106). Lieberman discusses in relation to the first theme that reactions from feminists were "mostly good," but that some women were unsure of how to reconcile their feminist beliefs with sexual practices (106). This uncertainty was partly due to the fact that vibrators, at the time, were seen as too male-identified and because vibrators "were sold alongside pornography in sleazy adult stores that catered to men" (Lieberman 2017a, 107). Lieberman discusses how some customers insisted that Williams would prove her "feminist bona fides" before

⁶ When I use the word 'wave', for example when I talk about second-wave feminism, it seems to imply that every feminist in that time period would agree on everything or would think the same way. I am aware that that is not the case. However, since Lieberman discusses it in this way I will use the same terminology.

⁷ Maines discusses in *The Technology of Orgasm* (1999) that some physicians in the 19th century, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, regarded women's sexuality, or the "permission" (!) of it, as a threat to social stability (Maines 1999, 55). So at least they apparently agreed that something would change if women themselves had something to say about their sexuality.

⁸ They still are in some states in the United States of America, such as Alabama, under the Anti-Obscenity Enforcement Act, which criminalizes the sale of sex toys (see, for example, Hooi 2008; Glover 2010).

⁹ The idea that sexual liberation was fundamental to the liberation of women is something that I will also come back to in my theoretical framework.

they would agree on buying vibrators from her (Lieberman 2017a, 107). Williams took these kinds of challenges head-on, as quoted by Lieberman: "What a feminist is doing in the vibrator business, is creating space for women to touch base with their potential power which lies in the release of orgasm.. the ability to sense more pleasure and change the world from the standpoint of pleasure-based power rather than hostile/anger based power" (Lieberman 2017a, 107). Lieberman discusses in relation to the second theme that there was some ambivalence felt towards vibrators since they were part of, as some women called it; "the horrible age of machines" (Lieberman 2017a, 109). The idea that the natural was always better than the technological was something that was widely held, according to Lieberman, in the 1970s-era counterculture. In relation to the third theme, Lieberman describes that there were a number of women who began to question their heterosexual relationships, as many were not satisfied sexually (Lieberman 2017a, 111-14).¹⁰ Although Lieberman argues that sex toys changed a lot for women, she also adds a note that it was not only sex toys in themselves that, for example, changed gender relations. She discusses that the 1970s and 1980s was a time of major social change for women, including the legalization of birth control and the decriminalization of abortion. Nevertheless, Eve's Garden, as a commercial feminist space, played an integral part in the spreading of second-wave feminist consciousness, and Eve's Garden mail-order business helped spread radical feminist masturbation theory through the United States, according to Lieberman (Lieberman 2017a, 117).

Others who have researched the ways in which women give meaning to sex toys nowadays are Breanne Fahs, Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Arizona State University, and Eric Swank, Associate Professor of Practice in Social and Cultural Analysis at Arizona State University. In "Adventures with the 'Plastic Man': Sex Toys, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the Politics of Women's Sexual Pleasure" (2013) Fahs and Swank discuss that nowadays little research is done to assess the way in which women give meaning to sex toys (Fahs and Swank 2013, 666). In their research, they conduct interviews with twenty women to analyze women's own narratives about their sex toy usage. They conduct interviews with women "across sexual identity boundaries," meaning that they conduct interviews with women who identify themselves as heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual (Fahs and Swank 2013, 667). Six themes emerged from these interviews, namely: "(1) emphasis on non-penetrative use of phallic sex toys; (2) embarrassment about disclosing sex toy usage to partner(s); (3) personifying vibrators and dildos; (4) coercion and lack of power, (5) embracing sex toys as campy, fun, and subversive; and (6) resistance to sex toys as impersonal or artificial" (Fahs and Swank 2013, 674). The first four themes were mainly discussed by women who identified themselves as heterosexual, and the fifth theme was mainly discussed by women who identified themselves as lesbian or bisexual.

Fahs and Swank discuss in relation to the first theme, that some women use phallic sex toys as non-penetrating and that those women considered this use to be 'abnormal' (Fahs and Swank 2013, 679). Fahs and Swank argue that this would imply that penetration within masturbation is considered to be normal (Fahs and Swank 2013, 675). In relation to the second theme, Fahs and Swank found that heterosexual women are concerned about men finding their "secret sex toys" and that the

¹⁰ And so, in a way, the fear Maines discussed that because of the "mechanical and iniquitous excitations" women would leave their husbands, in a sense, came true (Maines 1999, 55).

heterosexual women in their study did not discuss sex toys with other women (Fahs and Swank 2013, 676). Furthermore, in relation to the third theme, they found that heterosexual women impersonalize sex toys as masculine, referring to their sex toys with masculine pronouns. "The vibrator, it seems, is gendered male in heterosexual sex" (Fahs and Swank 2013, 677). Fourth, while only a few women discuss negative experiences with sex toys, some women discuss that "their male partners either forced them to use sex toys to accommodate pornographic fantasies, or that sex toys symbolized their relative lack of power during sex" (Fahs and Swank 2013, 677). Fahs and Swank discuss that for some women, sex toys functioned as extensions of (misogynistic) power. While heterosexual women more often discussed sex toys and power-imbalances in a more serious tone, lesbian and bisexual women more often discussed sex toys to be fun or campy. "In these examples, women embraced sex toys without as much shame and expressed more openness about enjoying them with partners" (Fahs and Swank 2013, 677). Lastly, some women saw no positive aspects of sex toys and discussed them as impersonal and artificial. This was often combined with a "conscious rebellion against technological and corporate means to women's sexual pleasure" (Fahs and Swank 2013, 678). Fahs and Swank conclude their study with a discussion that there is an imbalance in the way in which heterosexual and bisexual and lesbian women deal with masturbation. They found, for example, that masturbation amongst heterosexual women is less often discussed than amongst lesbian women. They conclude that "women's narrative of shame and masturbation and sex toys could change if women more often questioned the (phallic, patriarchal) implications of sex toys" (Fahs and Swank 2013, 681). Fahs and Swank thus conclude their paper with the statement that women should question the phallic and patriarchal implications of sex toys. It is this line of thought that I intend to follow by analyzing the relations with vibrators through the concept of mediation and combining that with a theoretical framework on phallogocentric normativity regarding female sexual pleasure. Before I elaborate on what I mean with this, I will discuss the last approach to analyzing vibrators (at least of the ones that I will discuss), namely research into the design of vibrators.

1.5 Design of vibrators

Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell, both professors of informatics at Indiana University, analyze the design process of contemporary vibrators from a Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) perspective. In "Pleasure is Your Birthright: Digitally-Enabled Designer Sex Toys as a Case of Third-Wave HCI" (2011) they analyze the design process of contemporary vibrators as a case study to theorize how subjective qualities, such as experience, embodiment, and pleasure, can play a role in the design process of 'third wave HCI' (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011, 257). They do so since "analytically understanding and designing for such qualities has been a challenge in the field of HCI" (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011, 257). They carry out their research by interviewing "some of the most privileged voices in the community," who according to them are the "designer-inventors," sexual health experts and feminist, sex-positive activists, who have "collectively initiated [a] new wave of high-quality vibrators" (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011, 258-259).

One of their study results is that there is a lot of contact between the designers, sexual health experts, and consumers in the design process of these vibrators. They also discuss that third-wave designers get unintentional and

intentional inspiration from a critical engagement with existing toys. All the designers that they have interviewed (from JimmyJane, LELO, and We-Vibe) distance themselves from traditional sex toy manufactures, which are commonly associated with the adult- or porn industry. They also distance themselves from the design qualities of this industry in terms of materials used, packaging, and marketing. One of the designers asks:

Why is nobody caring about high-quality sex toys that come in nice packaging, with a nice design, not one with a naked woman..? The products were scary looking, very unapproachable, often looked like severed anatomy or you know, were animals and very figurative.. They were noisy, they were smelly, and a whole host of material.. I could tell.. if something is off gassing, if you can smell it, you know that some chemical is being released, [...] these products were made out of toxic material (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011, 260-61).

The designers within this 'new' wave of vibrators thus notice all kinds of problems with traditional sex toys and want to go from 'sex toys' to 'design products' that are characterized by qualities such as body safety, non-intimidating, non-smelling, non-pornographic, gender-friendly packaging and so on. Besides this move towards 'design technologies,' Bardzell and Bardzell notice that social activism through design is taking place in this new wave of designer technologies. Besides the fact that this new generation of sex toys are "extremely effective in advancing good sexual interaction design," they also believe that by working together with feminist retailer, feminist principles are incorporated into the design of vibrators (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011, 264). This new-wave vibrators are, according to Bardzell and Bardzell, designed and marketed towards the female consumer, with feminist principles.

In another study, Anna Eaglin and Shaowen Bardzell address similar points. In "Sex Toys and Designing for Sexual Wellness" (2011), they discuss that the ideas of designing for sexuality and wellness are of growing interest in HCI. They conduct interviews with a sex therapist who is also a founder of an online sex toy company and with a 'research scientist' at the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University. They analyze which shortcomings exist with available vibrators, and from these interviews, they abstract four design principles to point to a path for sexual wellness design in HCI. The issues that still play a role with available vibrators, according to their research, and that should be improved are "social taboo surrounding sex toys," "material," "price," and the way in which vibrators are manufactured (Eaglin and Bardzell 2011, 1840). In relation to the first issue, they discuss that overcoming social taboo surrounding sex toys is the first step towards sexual wellness. Separating sex toys from graphic sexuality would make vibrators more approachable, and according to Eaglin and Bardzell, aligning them with sexual wellness will lower the barrier to entry for people who want to consume them (Eaglin and Bardzell 2011, 1840-41). Furthermore, they discuss that the material that is used has to be improved, the price should be lower, and in relation to manufactures, they state that more people with an understanding of human sexuality should be involved in the design process. This research was conducted in 2011 and in 2017, Sarah Wilner and Aimee Dinnin Huff, discuss how these elements are indeed incorporated in the design of, what they call, third-wave vibrators.

Sarah Wilner, associate professor in marketing at Wilfrid Laurier University, and Aimee Dinnin Huff, assistant professor of marketing at Oregon State University,

discuss in “Objects of Desire: The Role of Product Design in Revising Contested Cultural Meanings” (2017) three ‘waves’ of vibrator design.¹¹ They have differentiated these periods based on an analysis of the vibrators’ designs, the way in which the vibrator is framed by advertisers, and in the way in which the vibrator is represented in media, in the period from 1989 to 2014. The first wave, which they set from 1989 to 1997, was a period where the vibrator was considered to be a taboo object. In this period, the availability of vibrators was constrained to mail-order catalogs and “dark ‘Adult Only’ storefronts in the sleaziest part[s] of town” (Wilner and Huff 2017, 251). The vibrators were usually designed in either one of two ways; in the form of a phallus, or, according to Wilner and Huff, they were designed to be a vibrator in disguise, for example, neck massage devices. Wilner and Huff set the second period from 1998 to 2007. They discuss that, amongst others, a series of sex toy producers from both Europe and the United States tried to release the negative taboo surrounding sexual self-stimulation and sex toys. The design of the vibrators in this period reflected this idea of releasing the negative taboo surrounding sex toys, and the designs reflected something more playful and gimmicky (Wilner and Huff 2017, 256). In this period, vibrators were also shaped like a phallus, but the designs were colorful and “playful” (Wilner and Huff 2017, 252).¹² The third period is set from 2008 onwards, in this period, a new genre of vibrators emerges; that of the aesthetically designed, functional vibrator. The design of vibrators in this period is discussed to be “elite, minimalistic, modern, and non-phallic” (Wilner and Huff 2017, 252–58). So while in the discussed first two periods vibrators used to be shaped in the form of a phallus (due to the fact that the sex toy industry used to be male-dominated: “it’s been men designing products for women, so it tended to be very male anatomy centric” (Wilner and Huff 2017, 260)) in the third period the focus lies on ergonomics, to fit the female anatomy and marketed towards the female consumer (Wilner and Huff 2017, 258).

1.6 Conclusion

In this literature review, I have discussed four different approaches to the investigation of vibrators. In quantitative studies and research on the way in which women give meaning to vibrators, I have discussed the implicit and inherent separation between human subjects and technological objects. Where, for example, the amount of people (subjects) is counted that use vibrators (objects), or analyzing the way in which human subject give meaning to technological objects. In design studies, vibrators are oftentimes literally discussed in terms of their instrumentality, as ‘tools’ that work well or badly, that are made of good or bad materials and so on.

¹¹ Here again the same note on the term ‘wave’ could be made. Not every vibrator in this particular time frame meets the same criteria or has the same design. This wave of vibrators, which Wilner and Huff notice, exists next to other vibrator designs.

¹² I would question some of the assumptions they make in relation to the first two waves that they discern. For example, they state that in the first wave, vibrators were designed to be vibrators in disguise. Here, they assume that the vibrator is only for ‘sexual use.’ However, it is also possible that the vibrator had both asexual and sexual meanings (as discussed by Lieberman) and were thus not necessarily vibrators “in disguise” (see Lieberman 2016). Furthermore, they state that in the second wave of vibrator design, European and American designers wanted to get rid of the negative connotations and therefore designed vibrators with for example bunnies and in bright colors. However, some others have argued that these colors and shapes were used to avoid obscenity laws in Japan and China where most vibrators were designed because the production cost was cheaper (Mayr 2020, 12).

These assumptions that there is an inherent split between subject and object, and that technological artifacts are merely tools or instruments that people can use to achieve their goals do not do justice to the intentionality of technology, or the active shaping role that technological artifacts have in our everyday lives. Postphenomenology wants to overcome those assumptions about technology, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Furthermore, in the discussed studies, the idea emerges that third-wave vibrators have somehow become more feminist because they incorporate safer materials, gender-friendly packaging, ergonomic shapes to fit the female body, and because there are feminists involved in the design process. Nowadays, the vibrator is 'heralded as the material object embodying feminist values of independent pleasure and sexual liberation' (Rome and Lambert 2020, 5). However, this idea, that the vibrator is nowadays a 'feminist tool' is something that I will question in this thesis. I will do so by integrating the concept of mediation with feminist theory, as I will discuss in chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Mediation; understanding human, technology, world relations

2.1 Introduction

As I have discussed in the literature review, in the academic discourses surrounding vibrators, there is mostly an (inherent) instrumental understanding of technology. However, what we can learn from contemporary philosophy of technology, such as postphenomenology, is that technologies are not just tools that we can use, but that technologies play a role in the way in which the world can present itself to us, technologies *coshape* how the world is present to us. When I say the way in which the world can present itself to us, this does not refer to 'the world' as something objective, being out there, but, as stemming from a phenomenological understanding, it refers to the world *for* us. This idea is discussed by Edmund Husserl, as the consciousness being interwoven with the world, a "consciousness of .." (Husserl 2012, 73). Don Ihde, the founder of postphenomenology, has shown that technologies (especially in mediated relations), rather than following after the 'consciousness of ..', can actually partake in the 'of' in this sentence. In other words, technologies help to shape the way in which we can perceive and experience the world, and technologies help to shape the way in which the world can be present for us (Ihde 2009; 1996). This is what is meant by the concept of technological mediation in a postphenomenological understanding. Technological mediation is not something that takes place between 'human subject' and 'technological object,' but technological mediation takes place *before* the relationship, together with technology we can experience and from this 'interrelational ontology,' a subject and object emerge.

The concept of mediation is understood in various discourses in various ways. For example, in some discourses, the concept of mediation is something that plays out between "mediata" or actors (Van Den Eede 2011). This is not how I will understand the concept of mediation; I will follow the understanding of the concept as Peter-Paul Verbeek, distinguished professor of Philosophy of Technology at the University of Twente, explains it; as the "ontological conditions of all things" (Verbeek 2012, 392). To reiterate, mediation does not play itself out in-between human beings and their world, but rather: "the in-between can only come about *after*

the mediation, rather than the place where mediation plays itself out. Human being and their world are the products of mediation, not its starting point” (Verbeek 2012, 392–93). I will use this chapter to explain the concept of mediation as I intend to use it in this thesis. I will do so because the concept of mediation in a postphenomenological understanding will play a key role in my analysis of third-wave vibrators. I will first discuss the roots of this concept of mediation, which lie in the work of Martin Heidegger.¹³ Here I will first discuss Heidegger’s understanding of technology in his later work, or his “second philosophy of technology” (Verbeek 2005, 76). In this subchapter, I will also discuss the critique that his work is ‘monolithic and abstract’ and ‘nostalgic.’ Secondly, I will discuss Heidegger’s earlier philosophy of technology because it is this “implicit first philosophy of technology” where Verbeek finds the starting point for the concept of mediation (Verbeek 2005, 76). Third, I will discuss the work of Don Ihde, who has elaborated on the various ways in which relations between human beings, technological artifacts, and the world can take place (Ihde 1996; 2015). In the fourth subchapter, I will discuss how these different types of relationships can be used as analytical tools to analyze how meaningful experiences come into being. Fifth, I will discuss how subject and object are relationally constituted in human/technology/world relations. Last, I will elaborate on the so-called political dimension of technological artifacts.

2.2 Technology as revealing and the greatest danger

Martin Heidegger was one of the first philosophers who showed that technologies are not mere means to human ends. Heidegger has made an essential contribution to phenomenology with his reflections and analyses on technologies and is seen by contemporary philosophers of technology as one of the most influential thinkers in the philosophy of technology (see, for example, Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015; Ihde 2015; Verbeek 2005). Very briefly put, phenomenology reacted to, and moved away from the idea that scientific knowledge is objective, that words are a representation of the world, and it questions the idea of an inherent split between subject and object. In phenomenology, the experience (of the world) is placed in the central role for analysis (Ihde 2009, 9). Heidegger explains in his “Question Concerning Technology” (original 1954, English translation 1977) that technology should not be seen as mere instruments, nor are they just tools to create or produce. Even more so, such a conception of technology would be dangerous according to Heidegger: “But we are delivered over to [technology] in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology” (Heidegger 1977, 4). Technology, according to Heidegger, should be understood as a way of *revealing*.

Verbeek explains in the second chapter, “The Thing About Technology,” in his book *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design* (2005), what Heidegger means with revealing by looking at the ontology in Heidegger’s work. Heidegger has shown throughout his work that what we call ‘reality’ is not the same for different times, cultures, and different people. “Reality’ is not something that human beings can ever know once and for all; it is relative in

¹³ I am aware that Martin Heidegger is controversial because of his ties to Nazism. To go into the question whether and how this influenced Heidegger’s philosophy would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Since Heidegger has made an important contribution to the philosophy of technology, I will discuss his work on technology. See for a discussion about Heidegger and the influence his ties to Nazism had on his work, amongst others (Wolin and Rockmore 1992).

the most literal sense of the word- it exists only in relations” (Verbeek 2005, 50). What he means with the idea that reality only exists in relations is the idea that as soon as we perceive or try to understand ‘reality’ that it stops being “reality in itself” and it becomes “reality for us” (Verbeek 2005, 76). The concept of intentionality is used in phenomenology to indicate this. Intentionality is a concept to understand the relation between human beings and their world. Or as Verbeek explains it:

Rather than separating humans and the world, the concept of intentionality makes visible the inextricable connections between them. Because of the intentional structure of human experience, human beings can never be understood in isolation from the reality in which they live (Verbeek 2008, 388).

The process of perceiving, perceiving something, is the moment that something emerges out of *concealment* into *unconcealment* (Heidegger 1977, 5). This process, which is referred to as *bringing-forth*, rests upon "what we call revealing" (Heidegger 1977, 5). Verbeek explains that "revealing therefore means the entering into a particular relation with reality in which reality manifests itself in a specific way" (Verbeek 2005, 50). This revealing cannot happen in arbitrary ways, Heidegger shows that the way of *unconcealing* can only happen in the way in which there is an idea of what that way of *unconcealment* means in a given time. Or, as Verbeek puts it: "in revealing, reality comes to be, and that presupposes an understanding of what 'being' means" (Verbeek 2005, 50). When Heidegger says that technology is a way of revealing, he means that technologies are capable of bringing forth that which is concealed into unconcealment. However, this can only happen according to the idea of what being means at a certain time.

When Heidegger says that technology is a way of revealing, he means that technologies are capable of bringing forth that which is concealed into unconcealment. But this can only happen in the way of the idea of being that prevails at a certain time. According to Heidegger, our idea of what being means has deteriorated since the ancient Greeks (Verbeek 2005, 51). Where before, according to Heidegger, being still meant “emerging out of concealment into unconcealment,” in our present, technological age, being means a challenging one. Or, in Heidegger’s words: “[t]he revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging (German: *Herausfordern*), which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (Heidegger 1977, 6). According to Heidegger, nature has become a "standing reserve" (Heidegger 1977, 8). Because technologies can reveal a reality, and because this is no longer a bringing-forth, but a challenging and ordering, and this reality can now only be known as a standing-reserve, Heidegger says that this is no longer just "human doing" (Heidegger 1977, 9; Verbeek 2005, 54). Therefore, technologies should not be conceived of as mere means to human ends.

In addition, in the “Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger argues that technologies are the greatest danger to human beings.¹⁴ Because when nature is seen as a standing reserve, eventually human beings themselves will become a "standing-reserve." Secondly, when this way of thinking remains, "it banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out

¹⁴ Heidegger is talking here about *das Man*, or men, but I am taking the liberty here to use the words human beings.

every other possibility of revealing" (Heidegger 1977, 27). This understanding of revealing that holds sway, will then drive out every other possibility of revealing, for example, as previously understood as a bringing-forth. "Thus, where enframing reigns, there is danger in the highest sense." Fortunately, there is also a way out of this greatest danger, according to Heidegger. For when people see and think the danger, they thereby at the same time open for themselves the possibility for a way out. This is what Heidegger calls the "saving power"; when people do not see technology as a mere human activity and as a means to an end, then people can get to know being, as it was known before, again (Heidegger 1977, 28-9).

Critique on Heidegger's second philosophy of technology

Although Heidegger has convincingly argued that we should not understand technologies as mere means to human ends and herewith has made an important contribution to contemporary philosophy of technology, his work is also severely criticized by contemporary philosophers of technology (Achterhuis 2001; Feenberg 2012; Ihde 2010; Verbeek 2005). His work is criticized for its nostalgic character (the constant longing back to old Greece) and for its abstract and monolithic character. For example, Andrew Feenberg, a philosopher of technology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, discusses in his book *Questioning Technology* (1999) that he agrees with Heidegger in the idea that technologies are not neutral means. However, because of the high level of abstraction in Heidegger's work, Heidegger can, according to Feenberg, make no difference between "electricity and atom bombs, agricultural techniques and the Holocaust" (Feenberg 2012, 187). All of them, in a Heideggerian sense, would be the same will to power. Moreover, Heidegger's work cannot inform a "better technological future" because of its abstractness (Feenberg 2012, 187). Here, I will not discuss all the criticisms that Heidegger's work has received; I will only discuss the ones that I think are important for this thesis. That is the criticism that Heidegger cannot develop a thorough hermeneutical perspective on the role of technology, since he reduces technologies to its conditions of possibility and thereby fails to connect with specific technologies. And my goal, in this thesis, is to develop an understanding of the role that specific technologies can play in our everyday life.

Peter-Paul Verbeek shares Feenberg's criticism that if we were to think about technology in a Heideggerian way, we could only wait for the next way of thinking about being and disclosing reality before there could be another technological practice or future. However, Verbeek states that this criticism of Feenberg is not sufficient in itself to be an adequate critique. Since according to Verbeek, a "true critique cannot be based on the consequences of an approach," as Feenberg does, "but must rather be directed at the approach itself" (Verbeek 2005, 61). This is, therefore, what Verbeek does, and in his criticism of Heidegger, he looks at the way the latter talks about technologies. According to Verbeek, Heidegger does not talk about technology in terms of concrete technological artifacts (ontically) but in terms of a world disclosure (ontologically). "And the manner in which these technologies disclose reality, according to Heidegger, is not determined by these technologies themselves, but rather by 'being.' The 'revealing' of technology always already receives its form from the ruling way of the 'unconcealment' of the Gestell" (Verbeek 2005, 60-1). What is meant here is that technologies (in the ontic sense) according to Heidegger do thus not themselves create a specific form of world-disclosure, but are

rather the manifestation of one (Verbeek 2005, 62): “Technologies are only manifestations or expressions of a form of disclosing reality, instead of its source” (Verbeek 2005, 62). Verbeek emphasizes that technologies also reconfirm that ‘form of disclosing reality.’ However, in order to analyze what specific technologies *do*, in order to analyze what role they play in the shaping of our everyday lives, we also need a philosophy of technology that thinks ‘forwards’ rather than just backwards. As Heidegger starts the analysis of technologies with the assumption that they are just expressions of a way of thinking, only this same way of thinking and this way of revealing, can come forward in the analysis. Thus, when Heidegger looks at technologies in the ontic sense, the outcome of that analysis is that they are a way of challenging forth since these technologies in the ontic sense stem from the way in which reality can be disclosed in our technological age. Verbeek criticizes this; “when specific technologies are seen as nothing more than the material realization of the ruling way in which reality is disclosed, depending on a prior conception of being, then these technologies only seem to allow this specific way of disclosing reality” (Verbeek 2005, 65). Verbeek explains that in order to understand the role that specific technologies play in our daily lives, we need an approach that does more justice to the actual role of technology in our culture and everyday lives (Verbeek 2005, 66). According to Verbeek, technologies make it possible to have a relationship with reality that is richer than “those they have with a manipulable stock of raw materials” (Verbeek 2005, 66). Here, I follow Verbeek's view that technologies do not merely give an impoverished idea of reality and that we should rather look at *how* technologies, in their functioning, give access to our world or reality (Verbeek 2005, 67).

2.3 Heidegger's early work as a starting point for the concept of mediation

In his book *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design* (2005), Verbeek develops a perspective on technology with which hermeneutical issues can be addressed, in a way that is not 'backwards.' Backwards in the sense that, like Verbeek has shown, technologies in the ontic sense emerge from the "ruling interpretation of the meaning of being" that lies behind technology (Verbeek 2005, 76). Interestingly enough, for Verbeek, the starting point for such an approach to technology also lies in the work of Heidegger, but in his earlier work. The perspective on technology, as I discussed above, comes, as Verbeek shows, from Heidegger's "second philosophy of technology" (Verbeek 2005, 76). Verbeek discusses that there are two philosophies of technology that can be found in Heidegger's work. The second philosophy of technology can be found in the work of Heidegger after his so-called *Kehre*. This *Kehre* refers to a different kind of thinking in the philosophy of Heidegger, while before this *Kehre* Heidegger thought about *Dasein* (human being) and after the *Kehre* he started to think about being itself. The “Question Concerning Technology,” which I discussed in the previous subchapter, was written after the *Kehre*. In Heidegger's *Being and Time* (originally published in German in 1927, translation 1985), an implicit philosophy of technology can be found, which is the starting point for Verbeek his philosophy of technological artifacts and the concept of mediation. I will briefly discuss Verbeek's discussion of Heidegger's earlier philosophy of technology. I will do so because this is the starting point for the concept of mediation as I intend to use it in this thesis.

Verbeek discusses the implicit philosophy of technology in Heidegger's work with Heidegger's tool analysis of the hammer. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses being-in-the world, which has to do with the way in which people act and experience their dealings within their world. Heidegger discusses the relationship between people and the world not as intentionality, like Husserl, but as "being-in-the-world" (Verbeek 2005, 78). And in his analysis of 'being-in-the-world,' 'things' play an important role, "they make it possible that relations between humans and the world come about" (Verbeek 2005, 78). Heidegger discusses an example of a hammer: someone who hammers a nail into the wall is not focusing his attention on the hammer as such but is rather absorbed in a practice within which hammer, nail, and wall each play a role.

Verbeek derives two things from Heidegger's tool analysis that are important for the starting point of his philosophy of technology. The first is that in the experience with a hammer, the hammer itself disappears from the attention. (Or how Ihde discusses it, it becomes quasi-transparent, it withdraws (Ihde 2009, 33)). Together with the hammer, the world is experienced (Verbeek 2005, 78). Heidegger uses the concept of *zuhandenheit* for this (this concept is translated in English to 'handiness' in the newer translation, and it is translated to 'readiness-to-hand' in the older translation. In this thesis, I will use the older translation of readiness-to-hand.). When a tool is ready-to-hand, the focus is not on the tool itself, on the hammer itself, but in this case, on the work that needs to be done. This leads to the second point, namely that the hammer is not simply an object in itself with certain qualities, but that what the tool 'is' is dependent on a context (Ihde 2009, 33; Heidegger 1985, 97; Verbeek 2005, 69). When somebody uses a tool or piece of equipment, a referential structure comes into being where the tool or object, the user, and the environment, all come into being in their relation to each other. This referential structure only becomes visible, according to Heidegger, when the thing breaks down. In the experience itself, there is no distinction to be made between object, human, and environment, because they all come into being in relation to each other. The object as an object only becomes visible when it becomes *vorhanden* ('objectively present' in the newer translation, 'present-at-hand' in the older).

This short discussion shows that tools can play a role in the way in which an experience comes into being. The tool, the human being, and the experience, all come into being in relation to each other. Verbeek discusses that this is the starting point of his philosophy of technology; that the thing is in a position to let a world come into being, and indeed in a specific way (Verbeek 2005, 89). Or, as Don Ihde, distinguished professor of philosophy of Stony Brook University and founder of postphenomenology, puts it: technology can be part of the 'of' in 'consciousness of...'. Ihde elaborates on this idea in his book *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (1990). This is one of the first works in which Ihde explores how human-technology relations can take shape by exploring the ways in which we can be bodily engaged with technologies (Ihde 1996, 72). Ihde later developed this into *postphenomenology*, a philosophy of technology that is a "hybrid and modified phenomenology [to] analyze the role of technologies in social, personal, and cultural life" (Ihde 2009, 23). In *Technology and the Lifeworld*, Ihde distinguishes four ways in which humans and technologies can be related in their experience of their world. I will discuss these four relations since they are important to the concept of mediation as I intend to use it in this thesis.

2.4 Human/technology/world relations

In the tool analysis that I discussed, the human being is not directly in bodily-sensory experience, present to the world, but through the technological artifact. In order to understand the relation between human beings and technological artifact, Ihde works out the way in which technologies play a role in the way in which the world can be perceived, is experienced, through, and with artifacts. Ihde discusses, through an analysis of various examples of mediated perception, that there are two basic sets of relations with artifacts in which they *mediate* (transform) the relation that human beings can have with their world.

The first mediated relation is the embodiment relation, and the second mediated relation is the hermeneutic relation. The embodiment relations are “relations that incorporate material technologies or artifacts that we experience as taken into our very bodily experience” (Ihde 2009, 42). This relation is always active, meaning that our sense of body is directed outward, the technology is “taken into” the bodily experience and directed towards the world (Ihde 2009, 42). Ihde discusses as an example glasses, “I see – through the optical artifact (or technology) – the world” (Ihde 1996, 72). Ihde formalizes this relation as follows:

Embodiment relation: (human – technology) -> environment

In the second mediated relation, the hermeneutic relation, the technology refers to something in the world and the human looks, or acts, actively towards this technology that refers to the world. This relation is thus also active in the sense that we relate to the technology (Ihde 2009, 43). The example Ihde gives is a thermometer, the thermometer refers to the weather outside, and what is immediately perceived by the human is the instrument panel itself (Ihde 1996, 86). This relation is formalized as follows:

Hermeneutic relation: human -> (technology – world)

The technical mediation of perception, whether embodied or hermeneutic, has consequences for the way in which human beings can experience their world. In other words, as Verbeek formulates it: “artifacts transform experience” (source!). I will come back later in this chapter to how this happens, namely through a structure of amplification and reduction and what the hermeneutical implications of these mediations are. But I will first discuss the other two relations that Ihde distinguishes.

In the alterity relation, someone relates (actively) to an artifact or technology. These technologies might - but not necessarily have to - refer to something other than itself. (In the first, it would then also revert to a hermeneutic function.) Here the technology becomes the ‘quasi-other’ (Verbeek 2005, 125). In this relation, one would thus actively relate to a technology whilst the world or the environment stays in the background (Ihde 2009, 43). This relation is formalized as follows:

Alterity relation: human -> technology (world)

Ihde discusses that alterity relation already shows that an “unattended-to background” exists. As we go about our lives, we relate to our immediate environment, and ‘the rest’ of the environment is untouched or not actively noticed.

This background includes a lot of technologies to which we do not always attend (Ihde 2009, 43–44). This relationship is formalized as follows:

Background relation: human (- technology - world)

I have already discussed how the 'world' in these relations refers to the world for us. The technology in these relations should also not be considered to be stable, delineated things with essential properties since this would risk falling back into old subject-object dichotomies and perhaps an instrumentalist view of technology. The technologies in these relations are multistable, as Ihde calls it. This concept refers to the idea that all technological artifacts are relative to a context, “there are not objects-in-themselves” (Ihde 1996, 32). However, technologies can receive an identity in concrete contexts of use or analysis, and “this identity is determined not only by the technology in question but also by the way in which it becomes interpreted” (Ihde 2009, 117). In analyses, the researcher can ascribe a stability that can be analyzed. I will explain in the methodology section how I will do this, however, here, I would already like to mention that I will consider the relations with the case studies to be mediated, embodied relations. This allows me to analyze in what way an experience can come into being, and to be able to theorize in what way subject and object are co-constituted.

2.5 Mediated meaning: perception and experience

The concept of technological mediation allows the researcher to analyze in what way the world can be and is present for human beings. Since technologies are able to co-shape perception, experiences come into being, and the world can become meaningful. But how exactly does this happen? According to Verbeek, the transformation of perception in a mediated relation has to do with a structure of amplification and reduction. In this structure of amplification and reduction, certain aspects of the reality perceived are strengthened, and other aspects of the perceived reality are weakened (Verbeek 2005, 122). Note that in a postphenomenological understanding, this does not lead to a reduced picture of ‘unmediated’ reality as classical phenomenology might suggest. This is one of the things where postphenomenology distinguishes itself from classical philosophy of technology and phenomenology, where technology is seen as giving a ‘reduced’ picture of reality. Postphenomenology understands technology to be providing specific forms of access to reality. This structure of amplification and reduction on a microperceptual level is in comparison to what Ihde calls “naked” perception. Here it should be noted that when Ihde talks about ‘unmediated’ or ‘naked’ experience, Ihde means ‘unmediated by specific technological artifacts.’ As Verbeek explains:

all perception are in a certain sense mediated, because human beings have access to the world only via interpretation. Ihde is not concerned here with mediation of this type; when he speaks of ‘naked perception,’ he means not some preinterpretive access to reality but a perception that takes place without the intervention of an artifact on the microperceptual level (Verbeek 2005, 125).

The idea of naked perception as Ihde thus means it refers to a relation between human beings and their world that is not explicitly mediated by concrete technological artifacts. The ‘naked’ perception, as Ihde means it, and the mediated

perception are never completely identical, and here one can analyze how the world becomes present in a specific way in the relation between technological artifacts and human beings.

Furthermore, the technological mediation of perception on a microperceptual level has consequences for the way in which human beings can interpret their world. "Artifacts transform experience" and for the way in which human beings can give meaning to their experience (Verbeek 2005, 126). The way in which perception is shaped on a microperceptual level helps to determine the possible ways in which it can be interpreted (Verbeek 2005, 128–29). Here it should be made clear that this is not in a technologically determining way. When technological mediation is understood as giving a certain access to reality, it should be understood that this is one of the ways in which an artifact constitutes a world in the process of perception. In this thesis, I will analyze how the transformation of sensory perception on a microperceptual level takes place in relation to the vibrators and what that implies for how sexual pleasure can be experienced and known in relation to the vibrators.

2.6 Mutual constitution of subject and object

Although it is in the tradition of phenomenology to question the inherent distinction between subject and object and to analyze how subject and object are constituted in relation to each other, Ihde, in his discussion of technological mediation, seems to occasionally fall back into the same subject-object scheme (Verbeek 2005, 128). In the relations discussed above (I-technology-world), Ihde appears to oppose subject and object again instead of starting from the idea that they are mutually constituted. "His analysis appears to suggest that he takes as a point of departure humans already given as such and a world already given as such, in between which one can find artifacts" (Verbeek 2005, 129). With the concept of technological mediation as I will use it in this thesis, it is important to keep in mind that mediation consists in a mutual constitution of subject and object; "mediation shapes the mutual relation in which both subject and object are concretely constituted" (Verbeek 2005, 130). Verbeek explains this using the seemingly simple example of glasses: "When I wear glasses, or some equivalent like contacts, I am in the world differently than without them. Without glasses I cannot play the piano or drive a car, and I write rather poorly. My world and the way I am present in it is profoundly shaped by my glasses" (Verbeek 2005, 130). Although this is a simple example, it clearly indicates that the concept of mediation is not about given subjects and objects in between, for example, technologies, but that what humans are and what their world is for them, receives their form by artifactual mediation.

I have explained that in mediated relations, subject and object are constituted in relation to each other and that a specific experience can come into being in the relation. The relations that can be established and the stabilities that technological artifacts can receive, take place within cultural contexts, they can be informed by cultural contexts, and in turn, can contribute to shaping that cultural context (Verbeek 2005, 138). However, not every human being can enter into mediated relations with specific technologies. Some people are excluded *a priori* from entering into mediated relations with certain technologies. This is what D.E. Wittkower, associate professor of philosophy of technology at Old Dominion University, calls the discriminatory dimension of technologies. In what follows, I will further elaborate on this discriminatory and normative dimension.

2.7 Discriminatory dimension of technologies, or, artifacts do have politics

Langdon Winner, Professor of Science and Technology Studies at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, was one of the first philosophers of technology to pay close attention to the active political role artifacts can play (Verbeek 2005, 116). Winner discusses in “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” (1980) that artifacts can have social and political consequences; he calls this the ‘politics of artifacts’ (Winner 1980).¹⁵ He discusses the politics of artifacts through the example of the bridges over the parkways on Long Island, New York, designed by Robert Moses and built in New York from 1924 onwards. Winner discusses that “[e]ven those who happened to notice this structural peculiarity would not be inclined to attach any special meaning to it, in our accustomed way of looking at things like roads and bridges we see the details of forms as innocuous, and seldom give them a second thought” (Winner 1980, 123). Nevertheless, as Winner explains, the two hundred or so low-hanging overpasses on Long Island were deliberately designed to prevent buses from passing underneath. The bridges were designed and built “to achieve a particular social effect” (Winner 1980, 123) as it was mainly black people who used public transport such as buses. Consequently, these people could not get to Jones Beach, “Moses’s widely acclaimed public park” (Winner 1980, 123). According to Winner, this was what Moses wanted to achieve with his bridges; that black people were excluded from the park. Winner uses this example of the bridges to show that technological artifacts “can contain political properties” (Winner 1980, 123).

This story and the idea that technological artifacts can have political properties and effects has been quoted, expanded, but also criticized by many.¹⁶ In this thesis, I will not further elaborate on the discussions that have resulted from this work since this could be a thesis in itself, but I would like to criticize Winner's idea about the political properties of artifacts. Namely, he dedicated the political properties to the intentions of the creator of the technology, or in this case, the intentions of the architect of the bridges. As far as the political, normative dimension of technological artifacts is concerned, the intentions of designers can be relevant to analyze. However, following a postphenomenological perspective, by analyzing the intentions of a designer, or an architect, no attention is paid to the intentionality that technological artifacts themselves have. The intentionality of technology refers to the idea that technologies can have intentions; they are not neutral instruments but play an active role in the relations between human beings and their world. This technological intentionality can be unrelated to a designer's intentions with a technology (Verbeek 2006, 365). D.E. Wittkower, gives the first starting points of how we can analyze normativity from a postphenomenological understanding of technologies.

D.E. Wittkower discusses in his chapter “Discrimination” in the book *Spaces for the Future: A Companion to Philosophy and Technology* (2018) how postphenomenological theory provides some starting points to investigate normativity in relation to technologies. To reiterate, in embodiment relations, the discriminatory dimension of technologies has to do with the ability of technologies to withdraw in the user’s experience of self. In the experience of the world in

¹⁵ Hence the title of this subchapter.

¹⁶ For example, Bernward Joerges argues in “Do Politics Have Artefacts?” (1999) that it was not Moses' intention at to keep black people off the beaches. Joerges criticizes, amongst other things, Winner's use of sources (Joerges 1999). However, as I will explain, I am not interested in the intentions of the designers, but what a technology does in a relation, in a certain cultural context.

embodiment relations, there is no distinction between human beings and the technological artifact. “A good pair of prescription glasses should reveal the world while disappearing themselves from our experience” (Wittkower 2018, 19). In such a relation, the technology is thus ready-to-hand. Or, as Verbeek explains it “someone who is hammering is not concerned with the hammer but rather what is being done, or made, with the hammer” (Verbeek 2005, 124). It is when this technological artifacts breaks down or does not work, that it becomes apparent in its present-at-handness, that its “thingness” becomes present to human beings. Wittkower uses these concepts to analyze the discriminatory dimension of technology in an embodied relation. He discusses that we can begin to understand the exclusionary and discriminatory dimension of technologies when a technology that is 'meant' to be ready-to-hand but is present-at-hand to someone. Wittkower discusses examples such as the adhesive bandage that is meant to withdraw or become quasitransparent on some people’s skin but fails to withdraw with darker-skinned people. And the Google Photo’s image recognition software that automatically tagged black people as gorillas (Wittkower 2018). Wittkower shows through these examples that technologies are able to construct in these cases black persons as “non-persons,” since the technology fails to even notice the existence of some persons on the basis of skin color (Wittkower 2018, 21).

Wittkower's work provides a starting point for analyzing who or what is excluded by analyzing for whom vibrators are present-at-hand, while intended to be ready-to-hand. However, in this thesis, I am not only interested who or what is excluded in relation to the vibrators that I will analyze. I am also interested in the experience of sexual pleasure that comes into being and in what way the subject is constituted in relation to the cases. In order to analyze this, I need a theoretical and conceptual understanding of the cultural context in which these technologies play a role. In other words, in order to understand the relation than can be formed with the vibrators, I need contextualization of how female sexuality is understood in our Western context. This will help me in analyzing how and why specific forms of sexual pleasure come into being and how and why the subject is constituted in certain ways. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will discuss how Luce Irigaray, Lynne Segal, and Helene Cixous, discuss phallogentrism and masculine logic regarding female sexuality and the female subject.

Chapter 3: Phallogentrism; understanding female sexuality and the constitution of the female subject

3.1 Introduction

In *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985), Luce Irigaray, a feminist philosopher and theorist, criticizes Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory about the alleged development of sexuality (Irigaray 1985). The title of the book refers to her overarching criticism that femininity, and female sexuality, is conceptualized in terms of the man. Therefore, femininity and the sexuality of a woman can be nothing in itself since it is always the negative to the positive, the not-A to A. Irigaray discusses Freud because she considers his way of thinking as exemplary for Western thinking: "the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse" (Irigaray 1985, 69). Irigaray (and Helene Cixous) call this phallogentrism, and this is what they radically criticize throughout their works

(Davidson and Wagner-Martin 1995, 330). Phallocentrism can be understood as a way of reasoning and a way of producing knowledge about female sexuality or the female subject from a male perspective.

I will begin this chapter with a brief account of Irigaray's discussion of Freud's theory on the sexual development of women. I will discuss how Freud conceptualized female sexuality in a phallogentric way as passive and as revolving around procreation. Secondly, I will discuss through the work of Lynne Segal, how the Liberation movement wanted to break through these myths of passivity and procreation. Thirdly, I will discuss how the attempted liberation of female sexuality in the 1970s still followed a masculine logic in Cixousian terms. Fourthly, I will discuss how the woman is now presented as a sexually active subject, but that this does not necessarily follow a more feminine idea of sexuality or the subject.

3.2 Since Freud: Penis envy and passivity

Irigaray starts her book *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985) with a discussion of Freud's theory of sexual development. Freud theorized that in the younger years of children, the penis and the clitoris are, in fact, the same; this "single identical genital apparatus - the male organ - is fundamental in order to account for the infantile sexual organization of both sexes" (Irigaray 1985, 35). This "identical genital apparatus" is said to develop into the "valued genital organ" in boys (Irigaray 1985, 37). However, this 'identical genital apparatus' with girls is not further developed; it is castrated and becomes the clitoris. In this process, in order for femininity to develop, the activity (which all children have because the sexual organ is said to be the same in the beginning) must be repressed and become more passive "the difference between the sexes ultimately cuts back through early childhood, dividing up functions and sexual roles, maleness combines the factors of subject, activity, and possession of the penis; femaleness takes over those of object and passivity and the castrated genital organ" (Irigaray 1985, 36).

According to Freud, when children get older, boys will develop castration anxiety (shortly explain; fear of losing their valued organ). And the girl, who thought she was blessed with having a penis, a "significant phallic organ," finds out that it has been taken away from her (Irigaray 1985, 38). According to Freud, the further development of her sexuality is characterized by penis envy. First, her sexual development is thus characterized by jealousy; she will find her own clitoris "unworthy" compared to the boys their sex organ (Irigaray 1985, 39). "She finally understands the prejudice - the anatomical prejudice - that is her fate" (Irigaray 1985, 39). But in addition to this jealousy, she will also always yearn for the male organ, to recover that part of her that has been taken away from her. Therefore she will always be *lacking*, and longing for completeness, to become 'whole' as a man (I will come back to this in 3.5). Where in the younger years, the clitoris was seen as equal to the penis, she now sees that her clitoris is unworthy compared to the penis, but she will start to appreciate her vagina "now valued as the place of shelter for the penis" (Irigaray 1985, 41). So, according to Freud, her desire for the male organ should shift her focus from her clitoris to her vagina, which, according to Freud, can only be passive since it is the envelope for the male organ. This move "to change not only her sexual object but also her erogenous zone and this move towards passivity is absolutely indispensable to the advent of femininity," according to Freud (Irigaray 1985, 41).

Furthermore, the sexual function for women, according to Freud, is the function of procreation. Procreation would bring together all the instincts of the woman and "subjects them to the primacy of procreation" (Irigaray 1985, 41). This too, the woman's main desire, according to Freud, stems from penis envy. Where the girl previously longed for her father because of her penis envy, her father was replaced by the girls' longing for other men and finally by the wish for a child. Especially when her child is a boy, her desire for a penis is fulfilled. Becoming the mother of a son is the greatest happiness because all the ambitions she had to suppress in herself can be transferred to the son (Irigaray 1985, 41-2). The sexual development of girls/women as described by Freud is thus written from a male perspective, or, a phallogocentric perspective. The woman is discussed, or the woman is, in terms of what she does not have; what she is lacking (Irigaray 1985, 23). In this phallogocentric way of thinking about the female subject and female sexuality, she can, therefore, not be anything of herself. Furthermore, since girls 'do not develop further,' the rest of their sexual development will be characterized by penis envy. They will focus on the alleged "passive" vagina, they will long forever for the male organ, and all their ambitions (i.e., having a penis) come together in having a child (preferably a boy). Through this critical discussion of Freud, Irigaray shows how female sexuality (and the female subject, as I will discuss in the last subchapter of this chapter) cannot be anything of itself since it is understood, from the beginning, in terms of what she does not have:

The "feminine" is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well-known 'penis envy.' How can we accept the idea that woman's sexual development is governed by her lack of, and thus by her longing for, jealousy of, and demand for, the male organ? Does this mean that woman's sexual evolution can never be characterized with reference to the female sex itself? All Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own 'specificity' (Irigaray 1985, 69).

I am aware that this is a very concise description of Freud's work, as discussed by Luce Irigaray, and it might seem strange to go back to a theory and a discussion of a theory from 100 years ago and a critique on that theory from 45 years ago. However, as Irigaray herself answers to the question of why she discusses Freud, is that she sees the way in which Freud discusses the development of sexuality is characteristic of "logic of every discourse" (Irigaray 1985, 69). What she means by this, and what other feminists like Helene Cixous also discuss, is that discourses are organized according to masculine parameters. In Freud's discussion of his theory of sexuality, he reveals something that, according to Irigaray, has been operative all along, although it remained implicit: "the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse" (Irigaray 1985, 69). The way in which Freud defines female sexuality is never defined with respect to any sex but the masculine.

3.3 Phallogocentrism; 'equal' to men

Masculine discourses of female sexuality as passive and as revolving around procreation were, according to Lynne Segal, still dominant in the 1960s. Segal, anniversary professor of psychology and gender studies at Birkbeck College London, discusses in the opening chapters of her book *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of*

Pleasure (1994) that feminists wanted to dismantle these dominant discourses in order to break these and other myths about femininity. In the opening chapters, she investigates the "shifts and divisions in feminist thinking and practices around sexuality and desire since the 1960s" (Segal 1994, xiii).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Segal discusses that a kind of new feminist movement, the Liberation Movement, emerged that wanted to tackle the suppression of women in a different way than before. Segal discusses that in the early 1960s, the New Left was actually mainly male-dominated, that it had largely failed to publish and promote women's voices, and that the way sexuality was thought about was mainly in masculine terms (Segal 1994, 22). One of the issues that was raised was why in the New Left movement, that was supposed to be for human liberation, the position of the woman was no better than it was "outside" of the New Left (Segal 1994, 32). The three main points that Segal discussed where the Liberation Movement distinguished itself from the New Left were the following; first, there was an emphasis on small groups for "consciousness raising" where the emphasis was on understanding women's oppression by talking to each other and thinking collectively about how they could change it ("rather than following suggestions from 'leaders', seen as the practice of the 'male Left'" (Segal 1994, 32). The second change Segal notes is the questioning of "the sexual divisions of labor, both in the workplace and the home" (Segal 1994, 33). The third point, which is important for what I want to discuss in this thesis, was the focus on redefining female sexuality, which until then was thought to be controlled and defined by men.¹⁷ This redefinition of sexuality focused on women's sexual autonomy and the right to control their own bodies, which was fundamental to women's liberation:

Women's liberation thought similarly, but more specifically, that women's sexuality and desires were repressed and denied in the interests of men and of 'patriarchy': 'Women are forbidden to own and use their sexuality for themselves, as a means of personal self-expression. . . . Patriarchal society deliberately destroys women's contact with her own inner core of sexuality.' This meant that it was important for women to 'get in touch with their bodies' and rediscover their true sexuality (Segal 1994, 34).

The liberation of female sexuality was thus also important for the further, political, liberation of women. The way to do so, Segal discusses, was by exposing and rejecting 'myths' that surrounded female sexuality such as dependency and passivity. One way to do that was by asserting the essential similarity between male and female desire in a 'no-nonsense, neutral, and 'scientific' way. As quoted in Segal:

Now, after the toing and froing of the last 50 years, we can safely say that there is no biological difference between the sexuality of the human female and the human male. The clitoris and the penis respectively are the 'seat' of genital release, the orgasm. This release can be brought about by masturbation with or without mechanical stimulators; sexual intercourse of many kinds with one or more partners (sic) of either or the same sex; by sexual fantasy, or imagery, and by dreams..." (Segal 1994, 36)

¹⁷ This corresponds to the opening letter of *Eve's Garden* by Dell Williams, in which she states that "[a]ll the problems of the world were created because it's been run by men only and the way they kept women down was to take away our sexual rights" (Lieberman 2017, 105)

The purpose of this equalization of sexual pleasure, the equalization of the body, was to show that it was only myths that women were the passive sex and that female sexuality should revolve around procreation. However, the way in which Segal discusses this equalization, making the female body and female sexuality equal to the male body and male sexuality, shows that female sexuality could not be thought of in itself. Female sexuality, again, was defined in terms of the man (as Irigaray showed in Freud's theory). Furthermore, as Segal discusses, although women's and men's sexuality were now thought to be the same, "both feminists and sexologists were nevertheless only too aware that it was women who were not getting their fair share of satisfaction" (Segal 1994, 37). Collective self-help groups were formed so that women could learn "to love their own bodies and discover how to give pleasure to themselves" (Segal 1994, 37).¹⁸ It was around this time that the vibrator was sampled, rebranded, and marketed by women such as Williams as a liberating political tool (Segal 1994, 37; Mayr 2020, 8). Within the self-help groups, with the vibrator as a political tool, women were instructed "on the importance of taking charge of their sexuality and learning how to obtain orgasmic satisfaction" (Segal 1994, 37). The way in which this happened can however, be seen to follow a masculine logic still, as I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

3.4 Reversal of oppositions: masculine logic of female sexuality

The Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s wanted to tackle women's repression by, amongst others, tackle the myths of passivity and dependency surrounding female sexuality. The way in which this happened was amongst others by asserting the similarity between male and female desire, e.g., by making the clitoris equal to the penis in the sense that it was the 'seat' of genital release, of orgasm. Female sexuality was active and independent in the sense that she could take orgasm into her own hand, with or without the vibrator. The myth of dependency and passivity was herewith overturned. However, "the 'feminist approach to female orgasm' might itself be said to express certain familiar, male-centered notions of sexuality. It rejected and condemned sexual 'passivity' or 'receptivity' as demeaning" (Segal 1994, 41). Now, things such as passivity and receptivity in sexual pleasure were condemned. Segal, for example, discusses that in one of the sex workshops at the first Women's Liberation Conference in the USA in 1968, that some women "felt the need to apologize after having been 'exposed' as claiming to have vaginal orgasms" (Segal, 35) To apologize for claiming to have a 'passive' orgasm which would reaffirm phallogocentric normativity about female sexuality. This move can be understood as a reversal of oppositions. The opposition of, for example, activity and passivity in relation to sexuality are not questioned, but simply reversed. The question that could be asked, and that I will ask is whether phallogocentric normativity can be subverted and transgressed with just a reversal of oppositions. This way of thinking is still stuck within a 'masculine logic' in Cixousian terms.

Helene Cixous, a professor of writing and philosophy, shows throughout her philosophical works that within our Western way of thinking, the masculine and that which is culturally associated with men is systematically privileged (in philosophy, in

¹⁸ Note that it was in a similar self-help group where Dell Williams was inspired to start her company Eve's Garden, as discussed in the literature review. Furthermore, note again that not all women, or feminists, participated in such groups.

language, in discourses) over that which is culturally associated with women.¹⁹ In “The Newly Born Woman” (French: *La Jeune Née*, translated by Betsy Wing in 1986, original 1975) Cixous explores a few of those differentiations and the way in which the masculine is privileged:

Where is she?
Activity/passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Palpable
Logos/Pathos.
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
Matter, concave, ground—where steps are taken, holding- and dumping ground.
Man
Woman
Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its
figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same
thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy,
criticism, centuries of representation and reflection (Cixous and Clement 1986, 63).

It is not only the above-mentioned oppositions that are repressive for women but this way of thinking in "dual, hierarchical oppositions" that Cixous calls a "masculine" way of thinking, or a masculine logic (Bray 2004, 7). This masculine way of thinking is "passed off as eternal, natural" and is used to maintain phallogentrism (Bray 2004, 7). The way in which the liberalization of female sexuality happened, therefore, still follows a masculine logic. Not only had the female body be made 'equal' to the man and is the male body, therefore privileged above the woman's body (phallogentrism). But also is 'activity' in relation to sexuality still privileged above 'passivity.' The 'oppositions' still remain, are not questioned, and the woman has to become like a man. Making the female body equal to the male body and valuing activity in sexuality over passivity, therefore, does not necessarily lead to the overcoming of phallogentrism.

Alterative feminine sexuality

What would a feminine approach and a feminine way of thinking about sexuality be like without falling back into the dichotomy of masculine (man)/ feminine (woman)? First, when Cixous talks about a masculine or feminine way of thinking, she does not mean anything by masculine and feminine that is tied to biologically sexed bodies. Cixous is accused by some of essentialism since she uses the same words; masculine and feminine logic, ways of thinking, and writing (see for an overview of these critiques Bray). However, Cixous explicitly warns for falling back, "to lapse smugly or blindly into an essentialist ideological interpretation" (Cixous and Clement 1986, 81). Abigail Bray explains in "Helene Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference" (2004) that

¹⁹ I explicitly state here that it is in her philosophical works that she explores the questions of subjectivity. Cixous herself explains in a preface to "The Helene Cixous Reader" (1998), edited by Margaret Attack and Susan Sellers, that in her fictional texts she works in poetic forms and in "philosophical contents on the mysteries of subjectivity" (Attack and Sellers xvi).

we need to understand this writing in the same words as a strategic essentialism. Since sexual difference is an “infinitely complex matter,” in order to argue against the injustices committed against women (or other Others), it is, according to Cixous, necessary to limit this complexity (Bray 2004, 48–49). Or as Cixous states; “as women we are at the obligatory mercy of simplification. In order to defend women we are obliged to speak in the feminist terms of ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Bray 2004, 49). Cixous, therefore, uses the words of masculine and feminine logic, in order to question precisely those terms that are all too commonly used, that work restrictive and violent, those oppositions of masculinity and femininity (Bray 2004, 49)). In order to question the limits of phallogentrism and the restriction of meaning, Cixous thinks through sexual difference, to 'rewrite' those terms and their meanings. When Cixous talks about a feminine way of thinking, of writing, then she means by this a way of thinking in differentiation without hierarchy, without privileging one over the other, and by that keeping the other alive and different

This leads me to the second point that in regard to Irigaray's question why the feminine sex cannot be discussed or understood in reference to itself, instead of to something else: “[a]ll Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own 'specificity’” (Irigaray 1985, 69). Here, she does not talk about feminine sexuality as being bound to an 'essentialist biological female body.' For this would fall back into the thinking of oppositions, and that's exactly what has to be questioned. I think it is not her (and Cixous') intention to 'capture' or 'bound' sexual pleasure to or as something, also when she states the following:

Her sexuality, always at least double, even further: it is plural. [...] Indeed, woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity for example. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman's pleasure. Among other caresses [...] woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined-in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness (Irigaray 1985, 28).

In the search for an alterative feminine sexuality, it is not something that needs to be bound or linked to a dualistic idea of a body, but a feminine way of thinking about sexuality and pleasure offers the possibility of setting up “your own erotic universe” (Atack and Sellers 1998, 41).

3.5 Technological imaginary and the active lacking female subject

In the previous subchapters, I discussed phallogentrism, which involves reasoning and producing knowledge from the man, the male body. Furthermore, I discussed a masculine logic, a way of thinking in differentiation and hierarchy, and how that logic maintains phallogentric normativity. I also discussed how the liberation of female sexuality, and with it, the woman, was thought to take place by making her body equal to the male body and by reversing the oppositional values, rather than question them (active instead of passive, and pleasure instead of procreation). I have discussed how this still follows a masculine logic and that this does not necessarily lead to a more feminine way of thinking about sexuality. What I will discuss in this subchapter is the constitution of the 'female subject.' With the current popular

postfeminism it is assumed that feminist struggles have ended, that full equality has been achieved, (because she is active, independent and so on), and that we therefore no longer need feminist theories. However, Rosalind Gill shows that despite the fact that the female subject is now, for example in advertising, constituted as a sexually active subject, that this does not mean that it is suddenly a feminist way of advertising, or that it is a feminist understanding of the female subject that is constituted.

Rosalind Gill, professor of social and cultural analysis at the University of London, discusses in "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising" (2008) that the way women were represented in advertising around the 1980s changed from women as passive objects for the male gaze, to women as sexually active subjects (Gill 2008, 38). What should be noticed here is the reversal of oppositions. Gill discusses how advertisers became aware that women could also be targets for advertising, which required a reconsideration of earlier modes of representation: "showing a woman draped over a car – that Gills takes as an emblematic image of sexism from the 1970s - may not be the best strategy if the aim is to sell that car to women" (Gill 2008, 39). Gill discusses a shift in the representation of women in advertising.²⁰ One of the modes of response was to incorporate and recuperate feminist ideas, "which could be (re)packaged and rendered safe an unthreatening," to represent women as sexually active subjects (Gill 2008, 39). Although the shift in which women are no longer represented as objects for the male gaze can in itself be seen as a positive thing, Gill warns against a too quick, and in her words "naïve" celebration of the idea that because feminist ideas and themes are now being used in advertising, that advertising in itself has suddenly "become feminist" (Gill 2008, 40). Gill criticizes this idea by analyzing the way in which sexual agency is being packaged in advertising and how new constructions of gendered subjectivity emerge (Gill 2008, 40). Gill shows through her analysis how new heteronormative, highly sexualized, norms are now emerging, that work as a 'feminine bodily discipline' where the move from external male judging gaze has turned into a 'self-policing narcissistic one' (Gill 2008, 40). To these critiques that Gill discusses, I would like to add another criticism. Namely, the way in which the female subject is constituted as lacking and the way it is nowadays, through the use of feminist themes and language, wrapped in a language of "personal choice, freedom, and independence" (McRobbie 2008, 538).

In 3.2, I discussed how female sexuality is thought of in terms of the man. How, according to Freud, the woman will always be longing for 'the male organ, to recover that part of her that has been taken away from her,' and how this, according to Freud, is characteristic for the development of her sexuality. I have discussed this theory to show how female sexuality is thought about, but Irigaray also discusses how this is characteristic for the logic of every discourse; phallogentrism not only permeates discourses on female sexuality but also about the female subject, producing and reifying the idea that she is not complete (because -A), that she is lacking. Within advertising, as I have just discussed, femininity is constructed with "The constant focus on femininity as requiring the regular consumption of products

²⁰ Again, the same remark can be made that I made about waves. Gill herself states; "of course, this is not a matter of a clear rupture, and adverts depicting women as (sometimes voracious) sexual subjects did exist in the past just as traditional 'objectifying' representation continue to exist today. Nevertheless, a clear pattern or trend can be discerned" (Gill 38).

for fear of repudiation by others, the production of the normative unquestioning and quiescent female subject by means of the commodity form" (McRobbie 2008, 535). The female subject is thus presented as being able to become complete, through constant consumption.²¹

The desire to become complete and an idea of what that 'completeness' means is referred to in psychoanalytic theory as the concept *imaginaire*. It refers to "a realm of images, representations, ideas and intuitions of fulfillment, of wholeness and completeness that human beings, in their fragmented and incomplete selves desire to become" (Lister et al. 2010, 67). So there is an idea of what it means to be a whole subject, and this is projected on products or, and this is what I am interested in, technologies, with the promise to bring that completeness. Within media theory, the concept of *technological imaginary* is used to refer to this. The term technological imaginary, then, "draws attention to the way that (frequently gendered) dissatisfactions with social reality and desires for a better society are projected onto technologies as capable of delivering a potential realm of completeness" (Lister et al. 2010, 67). This concept of technological imaginary can draw attention to what hopes and dreams are projected onto technologies, what that realm of completeness might be, and what that says about the, in this case, (female) subject.

Chapter 4: Relations with the Nova- and Transformer vibrator

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyze two cases, namely, We-Vibe's Nova vibrator (see Image 1: We-Vibe's Nova vibrator) and PicoBong's Transformer vibrator (see Image 2: PicoBong's Transformer vibrator). PicoBong is a subsidiary of the sex toy company LELO, and both We-Vibe and LELO are discussed in research on the design of vibrators as third-wave vibrator designers (see Bardzell and Bardzell 2011; Wilner and Huff 2017). In this literature, both companies are assumed to make more 'feminist' devices; e.g., vibrators that are designed for 'aesthetic consumption,' vibrators that are ergonomically designed rather than phallically shaped, vibrators that are presented in "more gender-friendly packaging," and vibrators whose design is informed by feminists and sexual health experts (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011; Wilner and Huff 2017; Fahs and Swank 2013). I chose these two cases because they are assumed to make more 'feminist' devices. I want to question that idea by analyzing what kind of experience of sexual pleasure can come into being in relation to these cases and what kind of subject is constituted in relation to these two cases. This chapter is structured as follows. First, I will discuss the methodology with which I will analyze the cases. Here I will discuss, among other things, the concept of affordance and the way in which a meaningful experience is created in the embodied, mediated relations that people can engage in with vibrators. Finally, I will analyze the Nova vibrator and the PicoBong transformer.

²¹ It might be relevant to criticize the capitalistic structures in which this takes place and that this 'need' is actually constantly created and circulated, to maintain capitalism. However, in this thesis I want to specifically focus on human/technology relations and I will come back to this in the conclusion.



Image 1: We-Vibe's Nova vibrator²²



Image 2: PicoBong's Transformer vibrator²³

4.2 Methodology

Embodied mediated relation

I will analyze the cases as embodied mediated relations. In chapter 2, I have discussed the various human/technology/world relations as discerned by Ihde. These various relations can be used as analytical tools to analyze and understand in which different ways technologies mediate our world and our experiences. To reiterate, mediation, in a postphenomenological understanding, is the ontological condition of all things. In embodied mediated relations, technologies play a shaping role in the experience of their world (intentionality of technologies) and in the constitution of the subject and the object. In this thesis, I am interested in how a specific experience of sexual pleasure is coming into being and how we can know sexual pleasure with and through the cases. Therefore I will analyze the cases as embodied mediated relations. (For example, it would be a different analysis if I would understand the relation as a 'background relation,' where the cases would be present but not attended to.)

In the analysis of the vibrators as embodied, I will first determine one of the stabilities that I will analyze. In a postphenomenological understanding of technological artifacts, technologies are multistable; they can become stable in the relation that human beings have to them (Verbeek 2005, 117). Such an understanding of technologies means that what a technology is for someone, how it is interpreted, and how from the relation between human beings and technological artifacts an experience comes into being can vary for human beings in various contexts. However, that “the things themselves’ are accessible only in mediated ways does not interfere with our ability to say something about the roles they play” (Verbeek 2005, 113). We can analyze and interpret some of the stabilities that are

²² Image retrieved from; <https://www.we-vibe.com/nova> (August, 2020).

²³ Image retrieved from; <https://lelo.com/transformer> (August,2020).

possible with technological artifacts, and I will do so by analyzing the affordances of the Nova vibrator and the Transformer vibrator, which as I will discuss, include the materiality and the way in which the vibrators are marketed and represented by their designers. The concept of affordances has been used and interpreted in many ways; therefore, I will first discuss how I will understand and use the concept of affordances.

Affordances to determine stability

The concept of affordances was initially coined by the ecologist James Gibson to refer to the action possibilities in an environment in relation to the animals that live there. In the chapter “The Theory of Affordances” in his book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979), Gibson explains the concept as follows:

the affordance of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment (Gibson 1979, 127).

Although the concept is oftentimes understood and used to refer to properties of an environment or a technology, for example in design studies,²⁴ Gibson emphasizes that affordances should be understood as a relational property, which means that it should be understood as something in the relation between a perceiver (in Gibson’s case an animal) and a perceived (in Gibson’s case the environment). This concept includes the materiality of both the environment and the perceiver, in relation to each other. As Gibson explains:

If a terrestrial surface is nearly horizontal (instead of slanted), nearly flat (instead of convex or concave), and sufficiently extended (relative to the size of the animal) and if its substance is rigid (relative to the weight of the animal), then the surface affords support. It is a surface of support, and we call it a substratum, ground, or floor. It is stand-on-able, permitting an upright posture for quadrupeds and bipeds. It is therefor walk-on-able and run-over-able. It is not sink-into-able like a surface of water or swamp, that is, not for heavy terrestrial animals. Support for water bugs is different. Note that the four properties listed—horizontal, flat, extended, and rigid—would be physical properties of a surface if they were measured with the scaled and standard units used in physics. As an affordance of support for a species of animal, however, they have to be measured relative to the animal. They are unique for that animal (Gibson 1979, 127).

This discussion shows that what the affordances are, is relative to the way in which they are measured or in relation to a certain animal. This means that the physical properties become horizontal, flat, extended, and rigid when measured with the standard physical measuring instruments, and the environment becomes “walk-on-able” or “sink-in-able” relative to the animal.

The concept of affordances and the relational understanding of the concept is discussed by Ian Hutchby, professor of sociology at the University of New York, specifically in relation to technologies. In his article “Technologies, Texts, and

²⁴ For example in design studies (Norman 1988).

Affordances” (2001), Hutchby discusses that affordances of technologies are both relational and functional; they frame while not determine the possibilities for action in relation to an object (Hutchby 2001, 444). With this understanding of affordances, he wants to move beyond a technological determinist understanding of technologies and a strict social constructivist understanding of technology. Technologies are both functional in the sense that they are enabling as well as constraining and relational in the sense that they draw attention to the way in which the affordances may be different for one person than for another.

What the affordances of technologies then are, is different in the relationship with different people, different within cultures et cetera. Still, this concept makes it possible to establish a stability of a human technology relation that can be analyzed. This stability will be informed by the affordances (the materiality in relation to people) and will be informed by the way the vibrators are presented on the website (<https://we-vibe.com/Nova> and <https://www.lelo.com/transformer>). Here I would like to emphasize once again that the latter (the way in which the vibrators are presented on the website) is not determining the way in which a technology will actually be used or is not determining what kind of relation is entered into with vibrators. Human beings are not “necessarily caused to react in given ways to technological forms” in the way ‘intended’ by makers (Hutchby 2001, 450). But the way in which the vibrators are presented also plays a role in the way we can understand such technologies, and it can play a role in a stability that a technology can have.

Mediated meaning and constitution subject and object

In what follows, I will analyze how the experience of sexual pleasure can come into being in the relation as I will determine in the affordance analysis. Here, I will start by analyzing, through the concepts of ready-to-handness and present-at-handness, who or what is excluded in the relations. Thereafter, I will focus on the hermeneutical dimension of mediated relations, which can be analyzed through the structure of amplification and reduction that occurs in the relation. This amplification-reduction structure is a way of making reality, of making an experience (Kiran 2015, 130). As I discussed in the second chapter, in the embodied mediated relationship on a microperceptual level, certain aspects of the relationship are amplified, and others are reduced. I will analyze which aspects these are and how we can understand them in terms of phallogentric, and masculine or feminine ways of thinking about sexual pleasure, as I have discussed in the third chapter.

In addition, I will analyze how subject and object are constituted in this embodied mediated relation. I will do this by analyzing what 'hopes and dreams' are projected onto the technology. This means that I will use the concept of the technological imaginary to see what promises are being projected onto the technology and what that at the same time says about the subject being represented. Furthermore, I will analyze how in the embodied mediated relationship with the technologies, the subject and object are relationally constituted. I will also discuss this in relation to phallogentric ways of thinking about the subject, as discussed in the third chapter.

Structure of the case studies

Both case studies will follow a similar structure, where I will first show how an instrumentalist understanding of the vibrators is apparent through the way in which

the vibrators are presented on the websites. This is one of the things that I will question in this thesis, and I will do so by analyzing relations with the vibrators as embodied and mediated. I will therefore secondly analyze the affordances of the cases to determine a stability of a relation that can be entered into. Third, I will discuss who is excluded from entering into a relation by employing the concepts ready-to-hand and present-at hand. Consequently, I will be able to assess how “woman” is conceived of in this relation. Fourth, through the structure of amplification and reduction, I will analyze what kind of experience of sexual pleasure can come into being and what kind of logic it follows/ to what logic of sexual pleasure it speaks. Lastly, I will discuss how the subject and object are relationally constituted in this relationship.

4.3 We-vibe Nova: technologically mediated penis-envy

In 2003, Bruce and Melody Murison founded the Canadian sex toy company We-Vibe. Their first undertaking was designing “the first couple’s vibrator,” which led to We-Vibe becoming the largest sex toy manufacturer in Canada (“What’s All the Buzz About?” n.d.). The inspiration to start their business comes, as discussed in the design literature, from a critical engagement with products that were available. As a married couple, Melody and Bruce Murison, wanted to make a vibrator that could be used during heterosexual intercourse. However, as is stated on the website, “the more he [Bruce Murison] researched, the more he found an industry full of products that intimidating, poorly designed and cheaply made of potentially toxic materials” (“About We-Vibe” n.d.). These are the characteristics of previous waves of vibrator design, which third-wave designers explicitly oppose. On the “about us” page of their website, they explicitly state that they want to make designer products that are body-safe; “we use state-of-the-art techniques and tools to make sure our products set new industry standards for ergonomic design and high performance” while they remain “body-safe.” In addition, they discuss facets of the design process that have been discussed in the design literature, with which they want to distinguish themselves from the previous vibrator manufactures (see Bardzell and Bardzell 2011; Eaglin and Bardzell 2011; Wilner and Huff 2017). “Our world-class engineers and industrial designers work closely with sexual wellness experts, doctors, and consumers to design and develop intimate products that work in sync with the human body” (“About We-Vibe” n.d.). Where previously vibrators had mainly phallic shapes (see, for example, Image 3: a classic rabbit vibrator, where the tip of the vibrator is shaped after the glans of a man), with harmful substances, they make designer products and work together with sexual-wellness experts.



Image 3: A classic rabbit vibrator²⁵

One of their products/designs is the Nova vibrator. The Nova vibrator is a so-called 'rabbit vibrator,' it consists of a long shaft, with attached a shorter, and in this case flexible, shaft, which is referred to as a clitoral stimulator. It is called the rabbit vibrator since the clitoral stimulator used to have, especially in earlier discussed 'waves' (and still does in some designs) the shape of a rabbit (see Image 3: a classic rabbit vibrator). The same name is still given to vibrators that allow dual stimulation of the vagina and clitoris, while the rabbit has disappeared in most third-wave 'designer vibrators' (Wilner and Huff 2017). The length of the vibrator is 21,5 cm, the circumference of the long shaft is 12,6 cm, and the circumference of the clitoral stimulator is 11 cm. On the handle of the Nova vibrator, this is the white part of the vibrator; there are five buttons placed (see Image 4: buttons on the Nova vibrator). With the middle, white, round button, the vibrator can be turned on and off. With the two arrow buttons, which are placed on the left and right side of the on/off button, the vibration patterns can be changed. With the plus and minus buttons, the intensity of the vibration can be increased or decreased. (I will come back to the vibration patterns and intensities in the affordance analysis.) The plus and minus buttons are positioned in a way that when the vibrator is inserted vaginally, the plus button for the user is at the top and the minus button at the bottom.

²⁵ Image retrieved from: <https://www.adameve.com/adult-sex-toys/vibrators/rabbit-vibrators/sp-eyes-first-thruster-100622.aspx> (August, 2020).



Image 4: Buttons on the Nova-vibrator²⁶

The Nova vibrator is explicitly marketed towards women and is presented as the "new dual stimulation superstar" with the goal to "intensify your orgasm" ("Nova by We-Vibe. Dual Stimulation Superstar." n.d.). According to the website, how women can achieve this goal is entirely in their own hands; with "the easy-to-use controls" you, as a subject, can switch between different vibration patterns and intensities and this will "let you get the feeling just right" and thus you are able "to get it just the way you like" ("Nova by We-Vibe. Dual Stimulation Superstar." n.d.). The way in which this vibrator is presented is that you are the active subject that can use the Nova-vibrator as an object to achieve your goals of orgasm. Furthermore, you are addressed on your activity, "find your vibe" and "tease and pleasure with custom vibes you create" ("Nova by We-Vibe. Dual Stimulation Superstar." n.d.). You as a subject are able to take pleasure, which you deserve, into your own hands, and you can decide the way in which you want 'it,' with this vibrator. The way the Nova-vibrator is presented thus shows an instrumentalist understanding of the vibrator.

Stability of the Nova-vibrator

The Nova vibrator is a so-called 'rabbit vibrator' that, in relation to 'women' affords dual stimulation of the clitoris and allegedly the G-spot (I will come back to this). The vibrator affords penetration and stimulation of the alleged G-spot (see Image 5: Nova vibrator for "G-spot and clitoral stimulation"). The shorter shaft is flexible and contains a motor that affords clitoral stimulation. The flexibility of the clitoral stimulator is with the promise that it will "will fit any female body and that it will stay in place while thrusting" (see Image 5: Nova vibrators for "G-spot and clitoral stimulation"). The shafts are encased with "body-safe" silicone, which is a non-porous material, "free from phthalates, latex and BPA," and which feels soft in relation to the skin ("Nova by We-Vibe. Dual Stimulation Superstar." n.d.).²⁷ This explicit statement that the material is free of phthalates, latex, and BPA, is one of the most important elements that distinguishes 'third-wave' vibrators from previous

²⁶ Image retrieved from; <https://www.we-vibe.com/nova> (August, 2020).

²⁷ Phthalates and BPA (Bisphenol A) are plasticizers which are harmful to the human body.

vibrators. For the materials used in vibrators, there is no regulation, and in earlier 'waves' of vibrators were often cheaper materials used, materials such as plastic to which phthalates were added to make it flexible and which are harmful to the body. Moreover, silicone has the property that it is non-porous. This means that no bacteria remain attached to the surface (see, for example, Biesanz 2007). On the handle of the vibrator, there are four buttons that afford to switch between different vibration patterns (including a constant vibration, a pulse pattern which means short shocks of intense vibrations, wave-like motions, and so on) and they afford the intensity of the vibration to increase or decrease. This function is presented, as I discussed, with the promise that you can get it just the way you like. The design, the materials that are used and the way in which the vibrator is presented on the website, informs the stability of the vibrator that I will analyze, namely, a relation where the vibrator is used for penetration and clitoral stimulation.



Image 5: Nova-vibrator for "G-spot and clitoral stimulation."²⁸

In chapter 2, I discussed how we could begin to understand the exclusionary and discriminatory dimension of embodied mediated relations through the concepts of ready-to-handness and present-at-handness. The Nova vibrator withdraws into the experience of sexual pleasure and becomes quasi-transparent for people who have bodies with a vagina and a clitoris. For these people, the vibrator is ready-to-hand in the experience of one's own body and sexual pleasure. For people with bodies without a vagina and / or a clitoris, the vibrator is present-at-hand. The vibrator cannot be included in the experience because it does not fit on the body. There is a 'mismatch' between the person and the Nova-vibrator. Since the Nova-vibrator is literally 'for women,' those people for whom the vibrator is present-at-hand, are in this relation made to be non-women (for example, trans-people or hermaphrodites).

²⁸ Image retrieved from; <https://www.we-vibe.com/nova> (August, 2020).

Furthermore, for all bodies that do have a vagina but for some reason cannot or do not want to experience penetration, the technology is present-at-hand (for example, people suffering from vaginismus, or other conditions that prevent them from being able to be penetrated or wanting to be penetrated). This means that what a woman is, in this relation, is determined by a biological essentialist idea of what women are. Namely those people who have a vagina and a clitoris, and those people who can and want to be penetrated. All other bodies are made non-woman on the basis of biological essentialism and based on whether she wants to and can be penetrated.

Sexual pleasure according to a masculine logic

In the discussed stability in the embodied mediated relation and for the women for whom the Nova vibrator can be ready-to-hand, a specific experience of sexual pleasure comes into being, through a structure of amplification and reduction. Or, in other words, together with the vibrator, as 'one,' an experience of sexual pleasure comes into being. On a microperceptual level, the nerves of and around the clitoris and vagina are stimulated by the vibrator. The stimulation of these areas, the experience of these areas are amplified in the experience, while the experience of other areas of the body, or the rest of the body, are reduced. In the experience of sexual pleasure that comes into being, the focus thus lies on the stimulation of these specific areas of the body. However, as Irigaray discusses, this does not do justice to the plurality of sexual pleasure that can be experienced:

Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural. [...] Indeed, woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity for example. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman's pleasure (Irigaray 1985, 28).

Irigaray discusses choosing between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, which stem from Freud's idea that the girl in order to become a woman had to shift her attention from clitoral activity (the same organ as the boy) to the passive vagina (the envelope for the valued organ). In the relation with the Nova-vibrator, both the clitoris and the vagina are stimulated on a microperceptual level; there is no choice here between clitoral or vaginal stimulation. However, the 'plurality of pleasure' as described by Irigaray goes beyond just the clitoris and the vagina: "woman has sex organs everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. [...] Her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle" (Irigaray 1985, 28). Sexual pleasure can go much further than 'the imaginary that is too focused on sameness'. Not only is the rest of the body reduced, but also this preference for stimulation of just these two areas follows a masculine logic in Cixousian terms since a hierarchy is made in the experience. Where, in this specific experience of sexual pleasure, the stimulation of the clitoris and penetration is valued above other experiences of the body. The possibility of setting up your 'own erotic universe' in the words of Cixous, is therefore excluded in advance.

Moreover, in this relation with the Nova vibrator, the focus lies on achieving orgasm, which becomes apparent from the website where the first thing to read is; "intensify your orgasm." This turns sexual pleasure into a kind of goal-oriented activity, in which the experience of orgasm is placed above other experiences. Reaching orgasm is presented according to a mechanical concept of sexual pleasure; push the right buttons for the most intense result. One of those buttons is, according

to we-vibe, the G-spot. The G-spot, which was allegedly found by Dr. Grafenburger, and later popularized by Betty Whipple, "refers to a small but allegedly highly sensitive area on the anterior wall of the human vagina, about a third of the way up from the vaginal opening. Stimulation of this spot is said to result in high levels of sexual arousal and powerful orgasm" (Hines 2001, 359). However, not only has its existence never been proven, but it is hyped in the marketing of vibrators as something to actively look for, which can only be 'found' with this technology.²⁹ By this, I don't mean that 'because its existence hasn't been proven', it does not exist. My point here is that the focus here is on one 'magic button,' which should 'work,' the same, for every woman. This magic button can be found through using the vibrator, to experience the most intense orgasm, which leads me to the following point: the hopes and dreams projected onto the vibrator.

The woman as lacking subject

The way in which the vibrator is presented, the woman seemed to be positioned as the active subject that can use the vibrator as an object to achieve her goal of pleasure, which is equated to orgasm in this case. Yet, an analysis of the embodied mediated relationship shows how she is actually still constituted in a phallogocentric normative way. Namely, first of all, the idea is communicated that she cannot achieve pleasure herself. The 'hopes and dreams' of experiencing pleasure and orgasm are projected onto the vibrator as the thing that can give her that. After all, as became apparent from the website, when you will use this Nova vibrator, you will be able to experience pleasure, orgasm, and "get the feeling just right" ("Nova by We-Vibe. Dual Stimulation Superstar." n.d.). The wholeness (the subject that has pleasure) can be achieved with the Nova-vibrator. The 'woman' is thus constituted, again, as lacking. This follows a phallogocentric understanding of the female subject. She does not have pleasure and she cannot achieve it herself, but she needs something else, namely this Nova vibrator, and with it, penetration. The all too familiar penis envy, the longing for the male organ, is here directed towards a technology, with which a phallogocentric normative experience of sexual pleasure can come into being, with which she will be complete.

4.4 PicoBong: setting up your 'own erotic universe'?

The second vibrator that I will analyze is the Transformer vibrator, produced by PicoBong. PicoBong is a subsidiary of LELO, a Swedish company founded by Eric Kalén, Carl Magnuson, and Filip Sedic also in 2003. The headquarter is in Stockholm, and they have offices in Melbourne, San Jose, and Shanghai. LELO is considered to be a high-end retailer that makes the "most refined, most luxurious and most iconic objects of desire" (LELO, n.d.). A prime example of a product that fits their attitude is a 24K gold-plated vibrator, the LELO Inez, which is sold for almost 12.000 euro (see Image 6: LELO Inez; a 24K gold-plated vibrator). They

²⁹ Within the medical science there is a lot of research conducted into the alleged G-spot. Many studies agree that it is not one spot in the body and question whether it exists at all (Hines 2001; Kilchevsky et al. 2012; Levin 2003; Puppo and Gruenwald 2012). In addition, several studies show that the female vaginal anatomy is different for each woman; "attempts to characterize vaginal innervation have shown some differences in nerve distribution across the vagina" (Kilchevsky et al. 2012). Also Betty Whipple, discusses in article about the G-spot, that "its exact anatomical identity remains inconclusive. All we can say with certainty is that some women report pleasurable vaginal sensitivity and that the anterior wall appears to be the most sensitive area of the vagina. A distinct area identified through the anterior vaginal wall that swells when stimulated has not been found universally by all researchers who have conducted sexological examinations" (Whipple 2012).

claim to have started their company by asking the following question; “What if our most intimate items were made as beautiful as the ones we displayed with the most pride?” (LELO, n.d.). They have a “design-led approach” with which they create “pleasure” products that are non-representational of the sexual anatomy of the human body. LELO claims on their website that with this design-led approach to pleasure products, they have reshaped the entire sex-toy industry (LELO, n.d.). They also actively oppose to previous forms of vibrator design; for example, they have a lot of contact with customers to inform their design products. This is how one of the co-founders describes in an interview with Bardzell and Bardzell; “we would get numerous e-mails regarding any feedback. Pretty much all of these e-mails are sent to the co-founders or to development people and we would take actions and do something” (Bardzell and Bardzell 2011, 264). It is aspects like these, the non-representational forms, the design-led approach, the close contact with customers, and sexual experts in their design team, that distinguish these types of companies from previous sex-toy designers and also Wilner and Huff discuss companies like these to be third-wave vibrator designers. LELO launched PicoBong in 2011, where they offer slightly cheaper products, with “LELO’s trademark quality” (LELO, n.d.).



Image 6: *LELO Inez*; a 24K gold-plated vibrator³⁰

One of PicoBong’s vibrators is the Transformer vibrator. The PicoBong Transformer consists of a flexible tube with on the two sides a thickened end (‘bullet’), which

³⁰ Image retrieved from: <https://www.bol.com/nl/p/lelo-inez-goud-vibrator/9200000031432730/> (August, 2020).

contains motors (see Image 7: PicoBong Transformer vibrator; “Bend Me, Shape Me”). The total length of the Transformer is 63,5 cm, the bullets themselves are 10 cm long, and the circumference of the bullets at the widest point is 9.5 centimeters. On one of the bullets, three buttons are placed; a plus button, a mode button (‘m’-button) and a minus button. Both plus and minus buttons need to be pushed at the same time for three seconds to turn the vibrator on (no pun intended). With the m-button, the vibration patterns of the Transformer can be changed. The motors have twelve patterns of vibrations (such as steady vibration, steady vibrations that go from one end to the other, steady vibration that go rapidly back and forth between ends, pulsing vibrations in both ends, quick pulsing vibrations, and so on). With the plus and minus buttons, the intensity of the vibrations can be increased or decreased; there are ten different intensities of vibration. The Transformer can be turned off by pushing the plus and minus buttons at the same time. The entire vibrator is covered by a "smooth medical grade silicone," since, as I discussed, this is non-porous, body-safe, and water-resistant material (LELO, n.d.).

The Transformer vibrator is presented on the website as the “absolutely-everything-in-one-vibe” to also “take pleasure in your own hands” (LELO, n.d.; n.d.). How you can achieve this pleasure is by shaping this vibrator the way you want it to be; “bends to any shape, for any purpose, anywhere at any time” and because of this possibility; “the only limit to the ways you can use it is your imagination” (LELO, n.d.). Again, an instrumentalist understanding of the vibrator is apparent; you, as a subject, can use this vibrator to reach your goal of pleasure.



Image 7: PicoBong Transformer vibrator; “Bend Me, Shape Me”³¹

Stability of the Transformer

As I discussed, the Transformer affords bending in various shapes. It is a material that feels soft and smooth against the skin. The vibrator affords stimulation of the body through vibration with various vibration patterns and intensities. A stability of

³¹ Still retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/150901603> (August, 2020).

this vibrator is less apparent than the one that I discussed with the We-Vibe Nova vibrator. The affordances of the Transformer vibrator invite the user to experiment and shape the vibrator in different ways and to relate to the body in different ways. On the website, several suggestions for 'shapes' of the vibrator that are more familiar are suggested, namely "a rabbit vibe, a clitoral massager, a cock-ring, a G-spot stimulator, a prostate massager and more" (LELO, n.d.). However, the affordances invite the user to try shapes, positions, and ways to use it, and that is, therefore the stability that I will analyze.

This leads me to the following, namely, that in the relations between human beings and the PicoBong Transformer, the Transformer can be ready-to-hand to *every* body. What I mean here is that there is no mismatch between the technology and various bodies since the vibrator affords various shapes, and the vibrator is therefore always included, quasitransparent, in the experience (unless the vibrator breaks down, then it becomes present-at-hand, and becomes apparent in its thingness). This also means that there are no necessary exclusions of certain bodies and also that there is not a normative idea, of what a woman, or a man, or else, is, based on the body (as was the case with the Nova vibrator). In other words, the vibrator does not exclude bodies in advance, and it does not determine what kind of sex or gender somebody is or should be based on the body because it can be formed to any body and to any place of the body.

Feminine approach to sexual pleasure?

The experience that can emerge in relation with the Transformer vibrator seems to be a more feminine approach, in Cixousian terms, to sexual pleasure, than the one discussed with the Nova-vibrator. What I mean here is that it is not predefined that sexual pleasure only revolves around stimulation of the clitoris and the vagina on a microperceptual level; the whole body can be stimulated by vibrations on a microperceptual level. This means that clitoral stimulation and penetration *can* be part of the experience of sexual pleasure, but they do not have to; they could be part of many other "caresses" (Irigaray 1985, 28). Within this relation, a pleasure that is more plural can come into being; she does not have to choose. This, sexual pleasure that can come into being, then follows a more feminine approach to sexual pleasure. A feminine approach in Cixousian terms does not approach sexual pleasure in terms of hierarchy; it does not decide *a priori* what counts as sexual pleasure and what does not. This is not to say that a more feminine approach to sexual pleasure should not involve clitoral stimulation or penetration. Such an understanding of a feminine approach to sexual pleasure would fall back into a restrictive masculine logic because it is based on differentiation and hierarchy. The possibility that the whole body, any body, can be stimulated in the experience of sexual pleasure, that on a microperceptual level the whole body can be stimulated and can play a role in the experience of sexual pleasure makes this a more feminine approach to sexual pleasure. The same goes for the experience of orgasm; it can be part of it, it can be part of exploring pleasure and the experience of sexual pleasure, but it does not have to be. In relation to the Transformer, it seems that you can set up your "own erotic universe" (Atack and Sellers 1998, 41).

The lacking subject and the body as object

Although the PicoBong does not exclude bodies, and it does not feature a predetermined idea of which parts of the body can play a role in pleasure, it does

produce an idea of the body as a separate thing or object in the experience of sexual pleasure. The idea emerges that you can stimulate various areas of the body on a microperceptual level, or press a number of 'buttons' on the body, by means of different vibration patterns and intensities, and that sexual pleasure will follow from that. This follows an instrumentalist understanding of the body, where the body is constituted as an object that can be used to achieve pleasure in this embodied mediated relation. Secondly, in this experience of sexual pleasure, mind and body are separated from each other. What I mean here is that in this idea of the body as an object to achieve pleasure, the cooperation, the entanglement, of mind and body is overlooked. All the splits I have discussed throughout this thesis, man/woman, active/pleasure, are made here between mind/body, in which only the body is microperceptually stimulated. Pleasure in this relationship is thus made into a very physical thing. At the same time, some studies have found that bodily arousal does not always correlate with sexual desire (Fahs and Swank 2013). Third, again the subject is constituted as lacking, you want to take pleasure in your own hands, but your own hands are not enough for that, you need something else to achieve that. That is the idea of technological imaginary, that you, as a subject, deserve pleasure but that you cannot achieve it yourself. Although the subject here is not specifically linked to a sex or gender, it is not explicitly a female lacking subject; it is a masculine logic to a subject since you need something else besides your own body/mind as a whole to achieve that sexual pleasure. In other words, you need something else next to the "vast, material, organic, sensuous universe" that you are (Cixous and Clement 1986, 83).

Conclusion

In this thesis, I wanted to question the celebration of third-wave vibrators as *feminist tools* that allow women to take pleasure into their own hands, a way of thinking about vibrators, which seems to be apparent in both popular and academic discourses.

In the first chapter, by means of an integrative literature review, I have shown that currently, four approaches to the analysis of vibrators dominate academic discussions: quantitative methods in studies on vibrators and vibrator use, historical approaches to research concerning the early history of the electromechanical vibrator, sociological approaches into the way in which women give meaning to vibrators, and, finally, research that starts from a design perspective. In these approaches, there are two recurrent assumptions. The first assumption is that vibrators are mere tools. They are instruments that women can use to achieve their goal of sexual pleasure. The second assumption is that third wave vibrators have become feminist tools, which embody feminist values. These assumptions are based on several developments in the design process of vibrators: the involvement of feminists and sexual health experts in the design process, the choice of 'ergonomic' design to fit the female body rather than merely copying male body parts, the incorporation of body-safe materials in production, and finally, because quasi-feminist terms are used in the marketing and the presentation of the sex toys. A number of such changes, such as the ergonomic design and the use of body-safe materials, are positive things in themselves. However, I take issue with the consideration of vibrators as a feminist tool, as both the notions of *tool* as well as that of *feminist* can be considered problematic in this context.

In the second chapter, I engaged with postphenomenological theory to critique the instrumental understanding of vibrators as tools. Technology does not merely passively perform a function as intended by human makers or users, but actively mediates an experience. The concept of mediation, in a postphenomenological understanding, refers to the ability of technological artifacts to co-shape the experience of the world. In mediated relations, subject and object are mutually constituted, rather than pre-given categories. This concept allows an understanding of technologies that does justice to the shaping role that technological artifacts play in our everyday life and in the shaping of our everyday experiences. Technologies in a mediated relation are taken into the very bodily experience of the world, and through a structure of amplification and reduction, a meaningful experience can come into being. Through this approach it becomes clear that vibrators are not merely instruments to achieve a pre-existing notion of sexual pleasure but co-shape what sexual pleasure is and what a female subject is. In other words, vibrators co-shape a specific experience and a specific understanding of sexual pleasure and the female subject. In this thesis, I, therefore, discuss the concepts of female sexuality and the female subject through feminist theory.

In the third chapter, I construct a critique of the notion of vibrators as *feminist*, by discussing how female sexuality and the female subject are mainly known from a phallogentric, or masculine position. Through my discussion of the work of Luce Irigaray, who criticizes the theory of sexual development by Freud, I have shown how female sexuality was made passive and as revolving around procreation. Freud theorized the development of female sexuality from his own masculine position, resulting in the impossibility of female sexuality being anything of itself. This is the idea of phallogentrism; producing knowledge and understanding and constituting the female subject, from a masculine position. This resulted in an understanding of female sexuality as passive and revolving around procreation. Feminists in The Liberation Movement attempted to overturn these myths by making the woman equal to the man and turning around the values attributed to femininity and masculinity. In other words, by showing that female sexuality is also active and also revolves around pleasure. I have discussed how this way of thinking remains stuck within a masculine logic in Cixousian terms. This is a way of thinking in terms of differentiation and hierarchy, where those values that are culturally linked to men remain valued, or privileged, over those values that are culturally linked to the woman. This way of thinking, in differentiation and hierarchy, has to be broken through before being able to arrive at a true feminine – which is not tied to biologically sexed bodies – idea of sexuality or of the feminine subject. Just because women are represented and approached as sexually active subjects who, with vibrators, can take pleasure into their own hands, does not automatically mean that this a feminine sexual pleasure, or even a feminine subject, is constituted in the process.

In the fourth chapter, I integrated the discussed theoretical frameworks into a methodology to analyze the relations with the cases. I have shown how the experience of sexual pleasure that comes into being in relation with the Nova vibrator can be understood as a phallogentric approach to sexual pleasure. In this relation, certain parts of the body and the experience of orgasm are valued over other experiences of pleasure. Where subsequently, sexual pleasure is made into a goal-oriented activity, with the experience of orgasm as a goal. At first sight, in relation to

the Transformer, a more feminine approach to sexual pleasure seems to be coming into being; since the experience of sexual pleasure does not have to revolve around clitoral and vaginal stimulation. However, an instrumentalist understanding of the body becomes apparent, where the body becomes an instrument to experience pleasure. Furthermore, in both relations, the subject is constituted as lacking, where the hopes and dreams of experiencing pleasure and of becoming a 'complete' subject are projected onto the vibrators.

With this thesis, I have made a contribution to the existing research surrounding vibrators. While most approaches to analyzing vibrators have an instrumentalist understanding of the vibrators, I have contributed with a different, ontological, way of understanding vibrators. I have contributed to existing research by showing how vibrators have an actively shaping role in the way in which experiences come into being. Furthermore, I have shown how contemporary philosophy of technology can be combined with feminist theory and vice versa. Although Wittkower provides some starting points in analyzing the discriminatory dimensions of technologies, I have provided a theoretical framework and a methodology that goes beyond Wittkowers' work. I have shown how feminist theory is relevant to provide insight into how phallogentrism works through technologies, in the constitution of sexual pleasure, and in the constitution of the feminine subject. This is certainly relevant in light of postfeminism, where the assumptions are made that we no longer need feminist theory since "feminist struggles have ended, that full equality for all women has been achieved, and that women of today can 'have it all'" (Lazar 2006, 505). I have also build a methodology that can be used to analyze other specific technologies regarding female, or feminine sexuality and the female subject.

In this thesis, I have not paid attention to the capitalist structure in which these vibrators are marketed and sold. I am aware that capitalism benefits from constituting subjects as lacking; however, in this thesis, I wanted to focus specifically on human/technology/world relations, and that is why I have not further discussed this in my thesis. I do think that it is relevant to theorize and analyze how we can think, or constitute a true alterative feminine sexuality and feminine subject within capitalist structures. To further rethink if there even is a possibility for women to 'take pleasure into their own hands' with vibrators.

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