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Doing Embodiment and Incorporation, Living with Spinal Cord Stimulation

Seen as contributing to human enhancement, implanted technologies have recently been receiving a lot of attention. Reflections on these technologies have however taken the shape of rather speculative ethical judgments on 'hyped' technological devices (such as brain-computer interfaces and deep brain stimulation), thereby neglecting more mundane implanted technologies.

In this presentation, while relying upon the fieldwork I undertook with spinal cord stimulation, I will attend to the ways in which this neuromodulation technology not only transform bodies and experiences of the world, but also how it brings forth the material and relational dimensions of one's existence and is dependent on norms about what and who counts as human. I will do so by focussing on the processes of embodiment and incorporation.

To live with spinal cord stimulation, a learning – groping – process is necessary. The body is here mobilized so that the technology can be embodied, that is, experienced transparently at the sensory-kinetic level. If embodiment is a necessary process, it is not sufficient for spinal cord stimulation to be lived satisfactorily. For this, one needs to (successfully) identify with one's technologically modified body. In this incorporation process that is visual as well as tactile and emotional, the bodies of others – close or further ones, loved or unknown ones – is central. Social norms are also critical: injunctions related to femininity, masculinity, able-bodiedness and youthfulness are as many elements that matter for one's ability to incorporate and live satisfactorily with spinal cord stimulation.