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THE ROYAL GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS ACADEMY FOR SWEDISH FOLK CULTURE

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Cover illustration: Women from one of the brothels of the capital are going for an outing in the woods in 1906. Actually the license to keep brothels were already abandoned in 1901 but they lived on until the general cessation of the regulation of prostitution in 1906. Painting of Aksel Jørgensen, in a private collection..

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Home and the Longing for Easy Familiarity

By Sarah Holst Kjær

Late modern, urban couple's relationships are performed at home as an act of longing for relational intimacy through things. The materiality of the home – furniture, laundry, dishes – can be defined as a cultural third through which couples relate, make sense and evaluate their mutual feelings of nearness or absence. Thus, romantic couples create and negotiate positive or negative feelings through the cultural and material order of their home.

An ethnological, qualitative research-study on the everyday life of romantic coupling is the point of departure. Between 2003 and 2005 I studied how couples performed and defined good (and bad) coupling through cultural symbols, fantasies, places and things. The field-work was done in private homes and on urban arenas of leisure. The focus of the interviews was to understand 'relationship normality' practiced by heterosexual, middle-class, well-educated, reflexive and urban couples between the age of 23 and 50 in Copenhagen, Denmark (Kjær 2009).

This article discusses one aspect of late modern coupling, namely the kind of intimacy which happens in the living room. I discuss domestic things on this arena – the sofa, newspaper, TV-set and computer games. Being present in the sometimes unpredictable course of everyday life events, things are used by the couple to interpret and evaluate the emotional intensity of their interpersonal intimacy. In many ways handling the materiality of home is not only a skill which points to materiality itself. Handling is also a practice by which one demonstrates attentive or indifferent personal attitudes or what is considered to be good or bad habits.

The interviews not only present the lazy, resting or pleasurable sofa-routines after a long day at work or on a Sunday afternoon. Domestic things and relationship interpretations activate more common ideals and anti-ideals of the male/female-relationship: Through the couples' engagement with things we also gain access to larger present cultural ideologies on individual time opposing family time, gender-role stereotypes and their choreographies, and human power-positions and strategies.

Twenty Four Pieces

Two adult grandchildren, their parents and I spend an afternoon in 2003 packing up Carlo and Gerda's home. Carlo and Gerda had lived in a terrace house in the outskirts of Copenhagen for over fifty years. The first years they lived together with their four children and later on they lived there by themselves.

On our way to the house the grandchildren told me that they had visited Carlo and Gerda almost every day when they were children. While their mother was at work they had done their homework at their kitchen-table, they were skipped off to sports at the right hour, and sometimes – in order to create small mundane celebrations – Gerda had made a dessert of ice-cream and sweet liqueur from a bottle she once had bought on a holiday in Spain – using the special occasions to speak about the world. In my field notes I wrote:

> The terrace house has been given up and Carlo and Gerda have moved to a home for the elderly. Some years ago, Gerda was the first one to move out and now it is time for Carlo. At the home, Carlo has got a room located one floor below Gerda's.

Yesterday morning the grandchildren took Carlo to the home. They sat him in a couch in the main living room and went to get Gerda.

Back at the house, glass and china are put out on the dining table. Twenty four pieces of each item are going to be divided into smaller units and the family will inherit. Cupboards and drawers are emptied and books on the shelves are ready to be put in boxes and circulated. Family pictures are lined up and bear witness of the time when Carlo and Gerda was younger. Tenerife, Mallorca and Greenland are some of the places they have had the money and time to travel to. There is also a black and white picture of Gerda with a couple of friends at the International Worker's Day.

Now Carlo and Gerda are ill and old and do not remember many things – not even their grandchildren. But they remember each other as Gerda enters the living room. The young people had counted the nineteen times – or something like that – Carlo had kissed Gerda on the cheek.

The number of kisses is the only thing told as we pack up the house. We do things in silence. Carlo and Gerda will never come back.

That afternoon, the sense of loss defined the course of the events. The objects of the home were attached with both new and old meaning. While the younger generation reminded themselves of the old couple, the afternoon had a dense atmosphere which defined the family's performance. Carlo and Gerda's home had changed in the modus of the situation. A long life had materialised itself and the things had become objects of inspection. Now an old collection of objects could be split into new collections. Things could be distributed and they could rephrase the large family into smaller, nuclear families of the grandchildren. Things could transfer old emotional meaning into the lives of the next generation. They were the memories of long lasting love.

Home and Feelings

Certain feelings are supposed to be felt at certain places, as the English sociologist Mike Featherstone (1994:62) writes. He continues: Still, home is not a place where only certain feelings are accepted. On the contrary the cultural logic of home is based on the idea of "the private" where feelings and their many dimensions are accepted between people who know each other: Cruel, unpleasant, boring, safe, secure, loving, joyful or happy feelings are associated to home. At the same time, Featherstone explains, home is also a place involved in cultural fantasies of the unbroken kinship, the continuation of social bonds and long-lasting emotions. In order to accept the idea that the private contains both pleasant and unpleasant feelings, a certain level of self-control, discipline and instruction by others are culturally acknowledged social performances of home.

"Home" can furthermore be defined as a place of a local modus where people who are significant to one another engage in particular social situations. Cultural rules for emotional commitment and conduct, like Featherstone describes it, are more or less recognized by the people involved. But the local modus of home narrows the private even further down by pointing to a specific knowledge about *this* place and *these* people. Social situations at home can remind the individual of how one is supposed – or not supposed - to act exactly here. This local type of social performance indicates a specific and precise way of knowing each other by being part of a common life world and its experiences (Gullestad 1989:14, 23).

As part of people's identity, home can additionally be understood as a tool for association. Through both the cultural and local meanings of home one can explore how a group of people in a certain era, geographical setting and particular context organises their everyday life and create meaning out of their experiences, thoughts and feelings (Londos 1993: 44-45). Thus home presents both cultural ideologies of the private and local and social agreements between people who share a common life world.

Beginnings

Some of the couples in my research project had lived together for a few years when the interviews took place. Their great interest was to create an everyday life practice that would uphold the cultural ideal of the long-lasting, romantic relationship where the couple will progress into becoming a family. Progress was understood in natural, logical and hence positive terms. This meant negotiating the 'correct' relational ways of balancing individual work hours and leisure time spend in public with the project of becoming a family. Both man and woman regarded self-realisation and social time as equally important.

The couples charged their home and its materiality with specific emotional meanings. In general they understood their home along the line of the cultural male/female-dichotomy where public space corresponds with the male and private space with the female. Thus there was a presupposition that home was the woman's ambition and engagement which at the same time produced a presupposition that home was not the male's ambition. This presupposition was, by the woman, expressed as a fear of being too much, too active and too controlling. By the man it was expressed as a fear of being too less, too passive and too controlled. This male/female-dichotomy was considered negative and reminded the couple's on how a male/female-relationship was not supposed to be. Thus the dichotomy referred to how one should correct ones gender-identity and gender-performance in order to live up to the cultural fantasies of being an ideal man or woman with more flattering gender-attributes such as the male being strong and leading and the woman being delicate and following (Kjær 2009). It is important to note that this is a common cultural fantasy – and hence also the couples' – which stimulates a self-disciplining ambition of wanting to improve man and woman in order to correct a relationship-balance into something more suitable and acceptable.

But the cultural male/female-dichotomy did not refer to the couples' everyday life practice: Both the man and the woman had full time jobs and individual leisure activities. They had no difficulties in equally sharing and dividing the domestic responsibility in the sense that the person – male or female – with less work-related stress took the largest duty at home. Accordingly, when using this fantastic male/female-dichotomy it was a way of culturally and rhetorically pointing to an emotional problem in the relationship. It was a way to appeal for things to be different and a way to express feelings of distance, absence and longing.

Anne, a woman around thirty, explained how she perceived home and living together with her husband Søren:

Anne: The home is a material frame-work around a relationship. It is a project for many – including me. Søren said it very clearly when we moved in together: This would be our first great project! And he would be a man around the house. He would do all the practical things and this would be a wonderful thing we'd have. I have asked him what it means symbolically in our relationship that he has never done any work at the apartment. But he doesn't think I can put it like that. The apartment isn't finished and hasn't been for three years.

Sarah: Why does it need to be done?

Anne: It would bring energy to other things. Everything is blocked. Time, energy and money. It feels like a story of eternity, when it should have been a lift-off story. And *then* we could get the baby and the car!

Anne and Søren seemed to have agreed about their building project when moving in three years ago. Something was unfinished, although Søren disagreed with Anne's interpretation.

In Anne's story there is an association between the evolvement of the relationship from couple to family and the material order of the home. The home presented materiality; the practical things Anne and Søren had planned to do. Thus home presented gendered relationship fantasies, changing the couple into a family by Søren keeping his promise of being a handy-man around the house. This male figure was not only pointing to a cultural ideal of masculinity. It also worked as Anne's rhetorical gender-trope by which she appealed for things to be different.

The materiality of home became a symbol – as Anne said – of two people's different expectations to and different understandings of their relationship. There were fantastic and ideal goals and actual facts of homemaking. The American sociologist Keri Brandt (2006:143) defines "the symbolic" as a rule-based type of association. This way of thinking follows fixed rules by which a bond between an image and a cultural convention is established: When one sees an image, one is culturally trained to pre-understand (a single or many of) its narrative conventions. At least to Anne the order of home referred – in an analogue way – to the relationship's emotional order. The unfinished home became a symbol of the unfinished cultural convention that she and Søren were supposed to be headed in the direction of the family.

Anne presented metaphors of stagnation. Energy and time had been blocked and the building project had become a story of eternity. By these metaphors Anne suggested that she was waiting for an absent, future storyline of their relationship.

Domestic Things

Waiting points to the different social processes and practices of maintaining an intimate relationship. Practices of relationship-maintenance can be performed through available and close to hand domestic things. As the English anthropologist Daniel Miller (1998:18) explains in his article Making Love in Supermarkets – a study on English housewives – shopping for groceries is "primarily an act of love that in its daily conscientiousness becomes one of the primary means by which relationships of love and care are constituted by practice".

Similarly in order to sustain family-relationships, this interpersonal feeling of waiting is often about handling the materiality of home, writes the Norwegian anthropologist Jorun Solheim (2001:36-43).

In her study on late-modern fishing families in the Western coastal landscape of Norway, the men of the families are away from two weeks up to six months at the time. The women in their turn stay indoors except when they engage in religious work or social activities with the children. Otherwise they are at home. They are waiting, as Solheim writes. The women keep an eye on the weather and investigate if the ocean is still or stormy. They make preparations around the house and count the days for the return of their husbands. Their waiting is closely connected to the dangers of the sea and to feelings of uncertainty and hope. Although the women master domestic routines and are able to maintain the house completely, they nevertheless pick out small tasks in the home for their husbands to repair when they return. Domestic things become part of a romantic ritual that bears witness not of the lack of the women's skills, but to the missing husband who is awaited and who is remembered despite his absence. When he comes back, the to-do-list of things is a token of affection that confirms that he is wanted and belongs to this particular household.

Absence

Home as a place for feelings is sometimes embodied by the waiting woman and the absent man. Studying the paintings of the 16th century artist Pieter de Hooch (1629–1689) the Dutch art historian Heidi de Mare (1999:21, 28, 30) investigates how male and female are portrayed in de Hooch's paintings. She comes to the conclusion that every male figure is located at door entrances – just about to leave or enter the house. Every female figure is on the contrary portrayed in a chair, occupied with a piece of needlework or one or two children in her lap. Sometimes she looks out the window.

This symbolism does not expose an ideal family-constellation of the 16th century Holland. Neither does it expose a nuclear family form which did not exist in an era with no efficient birth-control. According to de Mare the paintings are rather an exercise in style and technique by which the three dimensional space of home is explored. Furthermore the paintings are a study of facial expressions: The figures gaze at each other, maybe or maybe not longing for each other. Al though the association between home and (family) feelings of intimacy is said to have arisen only in the 18th century, there is still, as de Mare discusses, a certain relationship between the male and female in the paintings: The woman is portrayed as the embodied embrace of the home – a place for the man to leave from and return to.

With de Mares art historian study one can define "absence" as a hetero-emotion: Man and woman are absent from each other because they are culturally expected to embody different arenas – him by the door and her by the window. They are unsynchronised in time and space but maintain their relationship through practices of dreaming, longing and waiting.

Returning to the couples in my study it thus became a performance of the cultural hetero-emotion to engage in this conventional absence between man and woman. Absence – wanting it, necessitating it, claiming it, ignoring it, or opposing it – was, to the couples, a self-evident way by which two people created their social unit

and showed that they cared. In other words they made use of cultural symbolism in order to perform their significant feelings.

Longing

Examples of late modern longing was given by the interviewed couples. Most of their feeling-descriptions on absence evolved around the time spend outside the home and away from their partner. In order to pursue their career and their individual leisure activities, engaging in the routines of the home, sharing meals or spending time together was contested.

The couples shared public space in equal ways and in this sense they were urban career people who had changing but identical responsibilities at home while the other was away. Still, the couples borrowed from the hetero-emotion of absence. They were occupied with the cultural fantasy that a woman is closely connected to home and hence to the responsibility of engaging her husband in relationship-intimacy. This was a responsibility that both man and women identified as the woman's activity. Public engagements – especially work – activated cultural feelings of the woman longing for more and the man's bad conscience of delivering less. This asymmetry contained fears of detachment and divorce. In this sense the implicit meaning of absence in the hetero-emotion motivated them to 'work on' their relationship. Divorce was not agreeable either to them or to the cultural ideal of a life-long romance.

Torben and Benedikte, a couple in their forties, explained longing for shared time between them:

> Torben: I like my work and feel that it is very stimulating. But I am often tired when I come home. The time I spend around the house is generally spent on practical things and on time together with Benedikte. I think she understands it the way that I don't priorities our personal life together because I work a lot. But I don't work a lot more than average hours.
>
> Benedikte: It is not a surprise that it is me who feels dissatisfied. During the years I have been begging and nagging for us to do something together. I have suggested that we take up courses in car-repairing, needle work – anything. Just as long as Torben decides! Otherwise I will be pleading all the time.

Torben and Benedikte came to embody the cultural expectations to public and private arenas as gendered. Their situation of longing and the creation of mutual feelings were formed along the lines of the cultural expectations to an unsatisfied woman and to the man unable to satisfy because of his analogue relationship to public space. The couple performed recognisable hetero-emotions of absence in order to express importance of intimacy. But they also demonstrated a cultural fantasy of the 'correct' asymmetrical male/female-relationship since the actual time spend apart not was extensive, but only a little extra than average hours, as Torben explained. Debating work hours became an agreed-upon opportunity to perform feelings of mutuality.

The Sofa

Interpersonal feelings of absence or nearness could also be performed in the sofa at home. A domestic object could strengthen or ease feelings of longing. The couples described this particular piece of furniture and its body-object practices as ways to evaluate the presence of intimacy in the

relationship. Drifting into mutual feelings, the sofa became a situating practice where two bodies, synchronised in time and space, could finally meet and engage. The piece of furniture offered techniques of intimacy to the late-modern couple.

Olav, who lived together with Maria – both in their late twenties, explained how intimacy was practiced in their sofa:

> Olav: The sofa is about closeness and the intimacy of being silent together. It is almost spelled out. We feel very secure by having each other. This is how I feel about it. It is very nice just to sit next to each other in the same sofa, but we do not have to do the same things. I can watch TV while Maria is reading the newspaper.

What did Olav mean by the phrase that silence is "almost spelled out"? Could this piece of furniture carry any particular connotations of relaxation, intimacy and closeness?

Most people today would probably approve of these connotations but studying the cultural history of the sofa it is clear that the techniques of intimacy had to be taught. How should one lead a gentle conversation, how should one participate in resting, how should two people make themselves comfortable in this peculiar piece of furniture that was not a bed neither a chair? The new European sofa-users needed instruction and guidance. Ethnologists and art historians set out to describe the sofa's implicit meanings.

The sofa was designed in the Orient and with this geographical origin it soon became a piece of furniture that represented (Western) conceptions of the East: The exotic, mystic, and sensuous. In the 1950s the Danish ethnologist Tage Heft (1953:76, my translation) made a pictorial description of how the sofa arrived to Europe:

> The Oriental *suffah*, which means a blanket-covered podium placed along the walls of the living room, came to Europe already in the 16th century. In France it was developed into a sitting-bench for at least six people, with armrests but backless. Later it was also seen without armrests and had the oriental names; the *ottoman* and *devan*. This honored piece of furniture came into discredit in Southern Europe when Crébillon in 1742 wrote a pornographic novel by the name: *Le sopha*. It got so far that no clergyman dared to own a piece of furniture under that name. But when the sofa came to Denmark and replaced the old wall-bench it was acknowledged as the most treasured piece of furniture of the living room.

On its way through France to Scandinavia the connotations of the sofa changed – according to Heft – from something exotic to something erotic and even pornographic. This can be interpreted as a dramatisation by the ethnologist himself, though. According to the German art historian Andreas Mayer's (2006) study, the novel *Le sopha* started a scandal partly because of the lightly dressed women depicted in the book. But the main discredit was more about the sofa resembling a bed and in this sense it would be inappropriate at the living room's official arena to sleep or relax where you were expected to stay awake, socialise and entertain your quests.

The sofa was, nonetheless, met by adoration in a sofa-manual written by the Austrian art historian Jakob von Falke in the year of 1880. Most new sofa-users in Europe, he meant, could learn to master its exotic relaxation- and pleasure techniques. In the manual von Falke recommends all Europeans to surrender to its soft, tender and indefinable curves which, in his words, had "the advantage of tenderness sliding into human relationships and opening the doors of the mind". In the late 18th century the sofa made it possible

for oneself to be transported to something different. Now the social exchange of day-dreaming, fantasising and imagining became the highest form of lifestyle-fashion (after Wittmann 2006:84).

Meanwhile, and at least around the year 2000, the sofa became a place for self-contemplation (Andersdotter 2001: 1). The furniture was also turned into an instrument of self-presentation: According to a study on young urban couples moving in together, the Danish anthropologist Trine Wulf-Andersen (2000) has suggested that the sofa is much more than mere comfort, relaxation or aesthetics. Instead, she found, that the piece of furniture accentuated and reminded the owner of his or hers life-history. When moving in together, the choice of sofa – his or hers – became a question of identity. The living room could be decorated with grandmother's antique sofa but also with the 'victory couch' – a magic sofa from which important soccer-matches had been watched and won. To the couples, selecting the sofa became a question of which one of the parties that could compose a personal background more significant than the other's.

When a market-survey by the Swedish furniture chain IKEA declared the sofa the most popular piece of furniture amongst Scandinavian adult males from the age of thirty to forty-four, at the same time as Scandinavian women of the same age used the sofa significantly less frequent, the sofa had become an item of age- and gender statistics.[1] At this point it was possible to imagine all sorts of domestic scenarios. If the sofa previously had offered connotations of sensuous intimacy it now was an IKEA-packaging of possible emotional distance and gender-drama between man and woman.

Everyday Meditation

As active career-people the interviewed couples were to a large extend influenced by late-modern imperatives of self-realisation and work-ethics (to work (on), improve and achieve). These ideals were not only active on the public arena but also understood as relevant in the couple's interpersonal relationship.

Sprawling on the sofa with the everyday-meditation of watching TV, playing computer games or watching DVD as Sunday morning entertainment should be balanced with more challenging occupations such as newspaper-reading, conversation or planning the future, the couples explained. The sofa thus referred to a negotiation between couple-time and individual time which again pointed to feelings of nearness and absence. In other words, the sofa's early-modern romantic exchange of tenderness, imagining and fantasising was still in fashion but now competed with late-modern styles of self-contemplation and media-consumption.

I asked Anne what a disagreement between herself and Søren would look like. She explained:

Anne: We are usually very friendly to each other and kiss and hug. But something is lurking. Every three or four months I explode. I rage and mix everything together into one big truth about Søren. It is like an outburst of a slogan!

Sarah: What kind of truth?

Anne: That he is lazy and sits in the sofa playing games all the time. *Xbox*, *Playstation* and other computer games. He says it's to relax and have entertainment. I think it is all right but sometimes it's too much.

Sarah: And then you explode?

Anne: Yes. I just think it's getting out of hand. It becomes some sort of a non-existence. I think it is okay but he can easily spend a whole weekend playing. If he has a week off from work he will play.

Sarah: How to you solve your disagreement?

Anne: Then he looses his temper and starts crying and the conversation starts from there. At this point, I think we have some really good conversations. We unravel a lot and cut through what ever is on TV and what ever misunderstanding of who said what and how everything was meant and interpreted and why things were said the way they were. It all makes sense.

Sarah: Does he feel that way too?

Anne: He says he does. He also thinks it's hard. He says something in him wants to avoid it. He believes it's a male-thing, that men don't like a negotiation-conflict. Men want it to be easy and there is not supposed to be any trouble.

Sarah: Do you not feel the same? Even though you are not a man?

Anne: Yes. But it is characteristics he attributes men.

In Anne's narrative Søren had explained that "something in him" – as in other men – wanted to avoid confrontation, and by this strategy of gender-essentialism and gender-generalisation and he inscribed himself in a general cultural fantasy of a male order.

According to the Australian historian Robert Connell (1996) a "male order" has the purpose of including and excluding people on grounds of their sex – an attribute as difficult to change as e.g. ethnicity. Still, the intention is to separate males from females and prefer men over women. This is a structural feature in most Western societies, Connell explains, and a female order is in consequence considered inferior. The male will distinguish himself by creating distance to females and female orders. He, other men and even women will consider a male to be less a man if he is a part of a female order. Thus by engaging in the superior male order, a man receives a set of attractive and culturally 'correct' masculinity rules, norms and ideals. In return, he has to uphold the order by living up to, performing and promoting its expectations, for instance by practically and rhetorically including males and excluding females. In this perspective, the man will find it less desirable to engage with the woman. Instead he will prefer the male order and will regard its cultural ideals and fantasies – male absence, male things and male feelings – as more valuable.

Because domestic conflict (with a woman) – according to Søren – was not for men, he could rhetorically separate himself from negative feelings and uncomfortable negotiation. The "male-thing" disconnected male and female and thus Anne and Søren were detached. Nevertheless this gender-fantasy was also an appeal for harmony and easy familiarity.

The American litterateur James B. Twitchell (2006:10, 147-149) has studied the combination of male-absence and the male-wish for harmony. In his book *Where Men Hide* he discusses how men perform the masculinity-practice of retreating and reducing oneself. Though huts, shacks and basements are some of the detached places which first come into mind, the most intelligent hiding place and the very fine art of disappearing is, according to Twitchell, so obvious that one tends to forget it. Of course it is right in the

middle of the living room in front of the TV-set and "in the eye of the hurricane" as he calls it. Twitchell probably refers to home as the woman's domain, but he also – by this natural metaphor – uses a widespread dramatisation of the woman who is attributed with nature's body and hence spontaneous, wild and even child-like feelings (Kjær 2007). Comfortable and relaxed the man has "withdrawn himself" and "cut down on life" in the sofa, as Twitchell writes.

"Withdrawal" means withdrawal from something or someone. The performance of male-reduction can hardly be played out without the presence of a woman and her culturally given responsibility of home and husband. If this fantasy did not exist, there would be nothing and no one to withdraw from. This obvious hiding place within reach of the woman – her appeals, attention and possible services – presents the hetero- emotion of male absence, but since the living room is his favourite hiding place, everyone around him will have to show consideration. If his hiding place is discovered or contested, he is willing to fight for easy familiarity, Twitchell claim. In this sense the male's hetero-emotion of absence also include strong feelings of belonging.

The Power of Definition

In 2005 a media-debate rose on the question of "gender-power". In the newspaper *Dagbladet* the Norwegian anthropologist Runar Døving stated that the woman was "the master of the house" – she had the authority. "Power" manifested itself as the woman being in command of everyday life. She decided the clothing and food of the family. She was the "hostess" as Døving uttered. Both male and female abused their gender-power: Women would use their tears while men would use violence. This created a general sympathy for the woman but not for the man. Again the woman was the domineering part, Døving suggested.[2]

Considering the cultural and historical values of public and private space there is not much power attached to being the hostess at home or choose clothes or food. But 'power and dominance' is nonetheless a strong theme when discussing the male/female-relationship in the context of home. Although Døving only considers the cultural fantasy of the dominant woman of the home, and in this sense avoids discussing larger issues on societal power structures, the question is still what "power" has to be made of in order to be defined as interpersonal dominance.

Defined by interpersonal, unpleasant feelings, and returning to the narrative of Anne and Søren's sofa-conflict, Anne had, on the one hand, made Søren cry: She had exploded, said hurtful things and demanded at change. Was this an act of power, powerlessness or something else? On the other hand, Søren had lost his temper: He had not wanted to take part of the conflict and thought it was commonplace that men preferred comfort, cosiness and easy familiarity. Was this an act of power, a defence or something else? At least, ease and unease was negotiated.

The British sociologist Beverly Skeggs (1997) has discussed "power" in relation to the otherwise pleasant phenomenon "ease". One could be let to believe that a free expression of negative and positive feelings at home is allowed and accepted.

Still, as Skeggs argues, one risks breaking the contract of a relationship if one challenges the consensus-rule that ease will maintain a social relationship. Those, who do not agree that ease is comforting will either, have to become accustomed to harmony, or risk breaking the social contract.

In addition, the Norwegian social psychologist Hanne Haavind (2000:200, 215) has explained that "power" needs to specified into a "power of definition" concept. The person who decides the outcome of a situation i.e. whether the circumstance is comfortable or uncomfortable is, at the same time, the superior part, because this person defines the emotional imperatives. Thus when interpersonal feelings are defined as appropriate, inappropriate, comfortable or uncomfortable the decision-making person also has the power of definition.

Since ease is the ideal social convention and consensus of home, it is culturally inappropriate and wrong to prefer the uneasy. Even the person advocating for unpleasantness would understand the possible consequences of breaking the social contract. In contrast, a person who understands how to fit his or her own perception of relationship-ease to the cultural ideals of home-consensus will in consequence become the person in power to define how things should – or should not – be. Power is thus possessed by the person who masters the conventions of a cultural power structure. This structure will, in return, underline the individual's power to define.

Although Anne, as a woman was culturally expected to be the master of the house and one could even claim that she had a dominating attitude, she was still breaking the home's social conventions of easy familiarity – a convention she herself as a cultural individual approved of. In this sense she 'knew' she could risk the social contract of the relationship. On the other hand Søren extended his body and being into the cultural order of home as ease, he fought for it and mastered it. In this sense he united himself with larger agreed-upon comfort-ideals, which Anne departed from, and this gave him the power to decide what kind of feelings that were appropriate, and, how and what to discuss. The power of definition was furthermore underlined by a male order rhetoric which meant that not only Søren but all men would feel and think the exact same way as he did.

Activity or Rest

Social consensus is not only a question of ease and unease. Interviewing the couples we discussed how the ideals of coupling were influenced by the imperatives of self-realisation and work-ethics which had entered into the private arena of late modernity.

If one person had surrendered to sofa-meditations – like Anne had portrayed Søren's habits – this would, in this perspective, go against late-modern ideals of the individual's activity and achievement. In many ways the couples' relationships were based on two people who actively practised some kind of self-realisation in order to avoid being un-inspirational or even a boring company to the other.

The sofa staged feelings that the couples either idealised or feared. In the interview with Kristoffer and Louise, a couple in their late twenties, they ex-

plained which sofa habits were acceptable in their relationship:

Kristoffer: If Louise always was lying on the sofa...

Louise: Then I know what would happen! Kristoffer would break up with me. That's for sure.

Sarah: Why is that?

Louise: He would not have anything to look up to. There wouldn't be any challenges.

Kristoffer: No. That is right.

Louise: I would not get any input and then I would be boring.

Kristoffer: It is vital to a relationship that you have common grounds and follow each other. You have to be able to level with one another. Because you were once in love doesn't mean that you will be forty years after. You need to work on it.

The couples' largest fear was divorce. Lying on the sofa meant not doing one's best, working on being active and interesting. Thus Louise explained that she would break their social contract if her level of activity was lower than Kristoffer's. They both agreed that the consensus of the relationship concerned ethics of work, self-improvement and hence mutual exchanges of challenging conversation. Otherwise the relationship would be dissolved.

In the interview with Torben and Benedikte they told something similar. They too felt a relationship would be more ideal – harmonious and balanced – by a high level of activity:

Torben: I had always imagined my relationship to come second and my personal hobbies to come first. But little by little I stopped doing the things I have always done. Without replacing them with anything else – and now we just sit here.

Benedikte: And do nothing!

Sarah: In the sofa?

Torben: Yes.

Benedikte: Now we are looking for something new. A little more than just a good dinner with wine. We like that but it's not enough.

Torben: It is not enough either, to watch a movie or go out.

Sarah: Talk about the same things?

Benedikte: Yes. In the same way!

Torben: Or go up to the cabin. Although it is nice up there it too becomes a habit.

Benedikte: Yes. One has to renew oneself all the time.

The pleasurable habits of leisure expressed something good but also too well-known. While the cultural signs of the romantic couple were abundant, it still could be better and why have a good relationship, when one could achieve a sublime one?

The sofa was a piece of furniture for dreaming of how things could eventually be as soon as Torben and Benedikte had found something new and renewable to do, as Benedikte said. The sofa thus created a social room for evaluating the enjoyable things Torben and Benedikte had already achieved. In this way they demonstrated the energetic and full of life ideal a male/female-relationship of the late-modern era was expected to have. Even Torben's complaint about his own individual leisure time being slowly replaced by (the dream of) joint activities, became a consolidation of the romantic couple choosing couple time over individual time.

The sofa was suitable to transport oneself to opportunities beyond the familiar, and to something that was not fully defined (McCall & Becker 1990:10). Two

people could agree about the future. With fantasy, effort and unselfishness as driving forces one could change a good relationship into one with new and better standards.

Conclusion

Though "home" is considered a private domain which contains a cultural logic of tension between ease and unease, social and cultural rules of consensus still articulates home as a place for easy familiarity. I have discussed interpersonal acts of power and dominance as "power of definition". By this encirclement it becomes clear that a person – male or female – who is able to define good or bad habits of the home will create a stronger argument by using cultural and social consensus and its agreed-upon rhetoric and practices.

Both man and woman agreed that feelings of boredom, absence or conflict could dissolve their relationship. The interviews showed that an equally balanced and exiting relationship could be achieved by imperatives of self-realisation and work ethics. The couples felt they could make a good relationship even better if it evolved into family-life and into new and different experiences other than the well-known and all-ready tested out routines. These practices were ways to avoid separation.

In many ways the materiality of the sofa contested late-modern imperatives of activity and provoked fears of stagnation. Still, it also promoted romantic practices – doing pleasurable tings and dreaming for a better future. Through the intimate sharing of couple time, this piece of furniture showed that techniques of closeness were considered more ideal than the individual's everyday media meditation.

The couples were urban, middle-class career people. They shared public and private space in equal ways. However, they performed interpersonal feelings through gendered stereotypes and cultural fantasies on male and female. These feelings of longing and belonging mean that detachment between male and female is a central trait in the characterisation of a "hetero-emotion". The couples' feelings of intimacy, absence or nearness, and the appeal for things to be different can additionally be defined as hetero-emotions because these feelings originate from the construction of the male/female-dichotomy itself and not from everyday life reality of the couple. Thus the cultural history of the male/female-dichotomy – and its division of public and private space and its analogue subdivision of male and female – produces relationship-feelings on the basis of distance between man and woman. In late-modern coupling, practices, rhetoric and ideals are performed in order to overcome, live with or negotiate this heteroemotional relationship premise – the cultural fantasy, or anachronism, of male-female detachment.

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Notes

1 The Swedish newspaper, *Sydsvenskan*, Wed., 5th of November, 2003.
2 Sissel Fantoft: "Kvinnan er husets herre" in the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*, Sun., 5th of June, 2005, 10-11.

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