

# “The bike is perfectly safe”

## Interview met Trevor Pinch



DOOR HEMMO SMIT EN STEFAN VERHAEGH

**M**isschien was je aanwezig bij zijn lezing over de Moog synthesizer of heb je al kennis gemaakt met het SCOT (Social Construction Of Technology) model in blok 2.3. Als dat het geval is dan ken je ongetwijfeld de naam Trevor Pinch, de professor van Cornell University in New York, die afgelopen jaar de CWS faculteit bezocht. De ID zou de ID niet zijn als we deze man niet even zouden lastig komen vallen.

What did you study yourself?

I'm an undergraduate Physics, but then I did a masters in something called the Structure and Organisation of Science and Technology at Manchester University. And I did a PhD in Sociology. So I switched from the queen of the sciences, physics, to low down sociology. The first question my old professor asked me was: "Trevor, how could you do it?". But I think one of the excitements of science studies is that this lousy subject sociology can study this big prestigious subject physics. The big challenge for Sociology is to convince people in these powerful areas that you have something to say. What are you doing here in Maastricht?

I've always wanted to spend some time in Maastricht, because it's one of the biggest and most interesting science studies groups in The Netherlands. But the particular reason why I'm in Maastricht is Wiebe Bijker, who I've

known for a long time as a colleague and a friend. We're reviewing the Social Construction of Technology after all these years: SCOT revisited. But I'm going to publish an article with Karin Bijsterveld on music and noise as well. I've also given some lectures and workshops here and I've been to various little conferences. I'm just hanging out.

What exactly is SCOT revisited?

The SCOT-approach was first developed by Wiebe Bijker and myself around 1983. Over the years this SCOT-model has become very successful; it's been highly influential and controversial of course. We thought that after all these years it was time to step back and look at how the model had been used. It turns out it has been used all over the place. We're working together with two students in this department, Ragna and Bastien.

You have to be reflexive about the application of your own model. The message we get from science studies, is as knowledge travels, it gets transformed or translated to a new context. And that's simply what's happened to SCOT. So we're actually studying the social construction of SCOT. We haven't written this article yet, but that's the direction we're going now. Do you always use the SCOT approach?

I think all my work is informed by the SCOT approach, but I don't think SCOT is meant to be a formula. Some people have used it that way, but the result was seldom enlightening. SCOT obviously has some stable ideas, but most people in the field, including myself, always try to do it a different way. I also use other approaches like rhetorical analyses, and I'm interested in gender and technologies: things that weren't so well developed in the original SCOT, but are not necessarily inconsistent with it. The only approach I don't work with is the actor-network theory from Bruno Latour. I've known Bruno for years and I completely respect what he's doing, but you give up too much of sociology to level the

plain field and to treat non-human entities the same as human entities. What do you think of the Dutch students?

I don't have a lot of contact with them, but I think Dutch students are more balanced than the American students. They like nice cafes, they like to drink -who doesn't?- but they seem very balanced. They're very mature in a way. The American students are workaholics. Maybe they present themselves in a more professionalised and very formal way. For instance, they all wear suits and ties. The only person I've ever seen wearing a suit in your department is the dean, Wiebe Bijker.

I think in America there's also a bit more reverence for the professor. You have a more egalitarian, democratic society. Our undergraduates wouldn't be interviewing me like this. They'd be too intimidated and they'd worry I would blood their careers or something. And they would certainly be calling me 'Professor Pinch'.

By the way, my impression is that the teaching in Maastricht is superb. Students get better teaching here than we give in the States. We're lecturing to big classes and we don't have a lot of contact with our students. I get the sense that the professors here put a lot of time in working with their students. You are very lucky to have small groups, that's a very good way of teaching.

During your lecture on the synthesizer you told the audience about your little bicycle accident. Do you still think this bike is a safety bike?

The bike is perfectly safe. The thing that isn't safe is mopeds that are sooped up and which are allowed to be ridden the bicycle lanes by alienated youth. The guy who ran me over was dressed all in black and he had a cigarette in his mouth, so he was riding with one hand. He came like a bat out of hell. It probably was my fault as well, I should be doing more of these signals and stuff like that. I still have a slight knee injury, so that's why I learned to say "Ik ben Engels en mijn knie is kapot". You



have this image of biking nicely through the countryside. Here's my taste of reality of riding bikes in The Netherlands. You see all these cyclists and they look so confident. But when you get on a bike you can't do it the same way as the Dutch. Karin Bijsterveld passed me once as I was going to school and she didn't say "Hi, Trevor", because I looked so concentrated she thought if she said hi I'd fall off.

Why do you work with WP 5.1?

Well that's simply because I have a notebook computer and WP 5.1 takes up less space on the notebook than a big program like Windows. And it does anything I need to do, so why change to something more? Old technology is also very useful to avoid getting viruses. I always love it when you see viruses are affecting Microsoft Word attachments, because I know my computer is too old fashioned to be virused. I don't use this fancy EndNote program as many people do and I don't do Powerpoint presentations.

But there's a good reason behind that, which is if you put all your eggs in the basket of Powerpoint and something goes wrong, you've lost the whole talk. With me all that can go wrong is that someone drops a slide. Once, when I was giving my lecture on the synthesiser at Harvard, I dropped my whole talk right at the beginning. The pages weren't numbered, but I just picked it up and I realised it didn't make any dif-

ference. If I found a page I hadn't done I could somehow weave it in. When you have everything neatly packaged in a digital machine, it becomes uninteresting. Creativity in arts and in science as well often comes from things that don't quite work. I see my own process of creativity a bit like that. It's got to have a messy, almost chaotic element in it.

It's that why you don't keep an agenda? I arrived here and the secretary gave me this huge black agenda. And I thought: "This is really nice of them, they give me such a big book, I must be an important person with lots of appointments". What she didn't say was that they had to keep it and I thought it was my own personal one. So I filled it in with lots of personal information and wrote down names and stuff like that. Then after three days the secretary came to me and she said: "Where's your agenda?". Then I realised it was a big mistake and so she got another one. But ever since then I haven't worked that system, I just keep my own. It is a bit chaotic, yeah. Will you be remembered in a hundred years?

No, I hope people will rediscover my work in a century's time. That somebody delving in the library finds this weird Social Construction of Technology stuff. When you think about this century the only person in academia who has a chance of being remembered is Bruno Latour. Foucault

also has a chance, maybe Habermas, I doubt if Giddens will be. I think Karl Popper will get a footnote. Kuhn will certainly have more than a footnote, he'll have an entry. When you study pop culture you realise academics are not that important in society. A successful book in academia will sell six hundred copies and a very successful one will sell in the thousand. But when you sell a few thousand records in the pop business that's a failure. We think we're terribly important, but it's always interesting to realise we're not actually reaching that many people.

You said about the 60's: Those that were there, don't remember and those that remember, weren't there. What about you: do you remember or were you there?

I was there and I remember parts of it. I wish I remembered it better so I'm doing this project to help me remember. I just echo that it was a time of exploration, a fun time, an interesting time and all the things that my respondents tell me. And of course like Bill Clinton, I never inhaled.