



Dr. Frederik Vejlin, Aarhus University,  
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## Robotics as Culture: An Anthropological Perspective

This talk has two parts. The first is a primer on anthropology, covering its ethnographic methods, its epistemological commitments (a concern with how knowledge is made, by whom, and under what assumptions), and its potential for dialogue with robotics. The primer serves two purposes: as an introduction to my own research background and as a brief orientation to the discipline for those less familiar with it. The second part is more argumentative. I examine how culture is understood, operationalised, and deployed in research in and on robotics, drawing heavily on examples from Japan, a context where culture is persistently invoked to explain robot design choices, experimental findings, and public attitudes. First, I review how robotics researchers have mobilised culture to develop robot systems and survey attitudes toward them. Second, I examine how scholars in the humanities and social sciences have drawn on cultural analysis to critique the design, development, and envisioned social implementation of robots. Both literatures, I argue, share a tendency to treat culture as more stable, bounded, and internally coherent than it actually is, and this is where anthropology has distinct and productive perspectives to offer. For decades, anthropologists have wrestled with culture as simultaneously an indispensable analytic tool and a source of reification that threatens to flatten the messy, contested, and historically situated realities of human life into fixed and essentialised characteristics. These debates have direct implications for how culture is invoked in robotics, where the same reifying moves risk reproducing the very essentialism that careful cultural analysis is supposed to challenge. In conclusion, I offer suggestions for how robotics researchers might borrow anthropological sensibilities, particularly an attentiveness to context, practice, and the situated nature of knowledge, when working at the intersection of culture and technology. The argument runs in both directions, however. Anthropology has much to gain from a sustained engagement with robotics research, not only as an object of critique, but as an intellectual challenge to its own assumptions about agency, sociality, and what it means to be human.

Frederik Vejlin is a postdoctoral researcher in the STS Centre and the Centre for Digital Creativity at the Department of Digital Design and Information Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. He works at the intersections of sociocultural anthropology and STS (science and technology studies), with a regional focus on Japan. His research examines the development and practice of social robotics and AI through sustained ethnographic attention to sociotechnical infrastructures, experimental cultures, and more-than-human relations. He earned his PhD in Anthropology from Aarhus University in 2023, based on the dissertation *Artificial Sociality: Experimenting with Social Robots in Japanese Laboratories and Anthropological Analysis*.



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16:00-17:00

Hybrid: UT Hongo Campus  
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