

Universal Language
Pattern Recognition
Data Synaesthetics

a series of exhibitions about information and transformation
curated by Adam Lowe and Simon Schaffer

Cambridge 22 Jan - 26 March 2000

Kettle's Yard
The Whipple Museum of the History of Science
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London 28 Jan - 1 May 2000

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KETTLE'S YARD

Cybernetics and the Mind of God

JOHN TRESCH

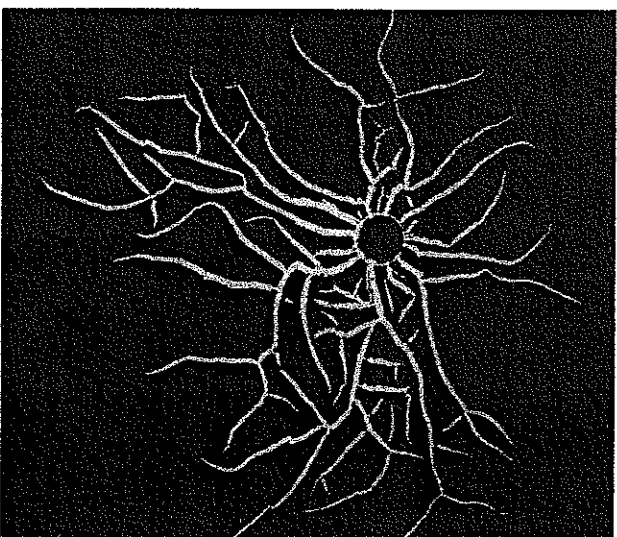
Cybernetics means control. Literally. The term was coined from the Greek word for "governor" (*kybernetes*). What did its inventors, Norbert Wiener and his pals at MIT, want to control? What didn't they want to control, more like. At the start, they would have been happy just figuring out how to keep a missile following a jet plane that was smart enough to change course. But after World War II, Wiener moved beyond trying to understand—and control—missiles: he started talking about physiology, logical processing in a mechanized brain, and finally, individuals and societies. After *Cybernetics*, he wrote a book called *The Human Use of Human Beings*. By modeling natural interactions as self-regulating machines - as systems that maintain themselves in a steady state by constantly monitoring their own inputs and outputs - cybernetics offers a peculiarly twentieth-century version of the promises of the scientific revolution: to know is to control, to attain god-like powers over nature, oneself, and other people. Norbert made himself into the prophet of the cybernetic world-view. Other prophets (and some would-be messiahs) have kept this message alive. Just after *Cybernetics* appeared, a similar book promising a new way of seeing the world was published. This book was not the work of a scientist, but of a science-fiction writer, and if we are to believe his followers (which is not necessarily a great idea), his book has vastly outsold *Cybernetics*: the author was Lafayette Ron Hubbard, and the book was *Dianetics*. Hubbard borrowed more than the technical ring of his title from Wiener: notions like the "ARC" of Affinity, Reality and Communication, are essentially cybernetic theories of interaction. The Church of Scientology has a number of, to put it lightly, "control issues". Following orders legislated by Hubbard before his quiet death as a paranoid hermit, members of the Church, dedicated to "Clearing the Planet" of humans who have not yet forked out to receive the message, keep huge files on members and non-members, suing and harassing anyone who speaks against them. Please don't quote me on this.

Not long afterwards, another book appeared that took cybernetics as the answer to everyone's problems, a book with a title that if it didn't exist would have to be invented: *Psycho-cybernetics*, by Maxwell Maltz. Dr. Maltz was a plastic surgeon who was convinced that more could be accomplished with a dose of good old fashioned all-American positive thinking than with a nip or a tuck. The key cybernetic loop was that improving your self-image would improve other people's image of you, and so on, and so on - a slightly more technical version of "you have to be a friend to make a friend", or even "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". A golden Catch-22.

The flipside of this version of "positive feedback" is the double bind, where the frame of a message contradicts the message's content, like when a parent beats a child and calls it an expression of love. Such classics of intrafamilial crazy-making were studied by Gregory Bateson, prodigal son of English genetics and William Bateson. The younger Bateson applied cybernetic concepts to psychology, looking at how presuppositions about the nature of relationships affect communication. He also brought his cybernetic perspective back to his earlier anthropological and zoological

research, eventually stepping from an Ecology of Mind to "an epistemology of the sacred" - speculation on the patterns that connect biological evolution and the development of thought. Bateson made cybernetics' curiosity about the Mind of God explicit. The current next big thing in American popular psychology, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, acknowledges its debt to Bateson. Familiar with Gestalt psychology, its founders, Grinder and Bandler, met him at the West Coast eco-new-age-retreat, Esalen. Practitioners of NLP associate a past emotion (enthusiasm, willingness to buy) to the present situation; they take the words and imagery you use and feed them back to you, using your own "modalities" to rework your assumptions. Applying principles of hypnosis, they "reprogram" the commands that have been programmed over the course of your life. American late-night television is crowded with "informercials" hustling this "new science of excellence". The current crown prince is the 6 foot plus motormouth Anthony Robbins whose best seller promises *Unlimited Power*: attendees of his expensive seminars walk across coals and say "YEAH! I can do it!" with an unstoppable gleam in their eyes. This interpersonal technology has saturated entertainment, politics, and management policy.

Most of these soft technologies are given the hard sell on the World Wide Web. Is the cybernetic age bringing us closer together, or are we simply getting fed, in a new format, the same old promise of total control?



"This...is the self registered picture of a dialectic in the process of breakdown. The mathematics of breakdown is as important as it is unfamiliar even to the average physicist. It is closely allied to the mathematics of crackle finish... The significance of the processes of breakdown is great not only in physics, but even in the study of sociological processes."
Norbert Wiener *The New Landscape in Art and Science* 1956