

## **Foreword: Listening**

### **Proceedings of ASC Conference 2011**

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The main section of this issue of *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* presents papers from the American Society for Cybernetics' (ASC) conference on the theme of "Listening" held in Richmond, Indiana, August 9 to 15, 2011.

This part of the issue has been edited by Delfina Fantini van Ditmar, who won the Heinz von Foerster prize at our 2011 conference,<sup>3</sup> and Ranulph Glanville, president of the ASC. This collaboration in itself shows something of the spirit of the ASC and of our conference: the young and the old working together, learning to listen together, in order to pass on the knowledge and the skills of cybernetics. Also at the conference we heard a presentation by the winner of the previous Heinz von Foerster prize, Robert Helland, who won our award for the best entry by a young person to the "Cybernetics of Cybernetics" competition the ASC held in 2010-2011.<sup>4</sup>

The overall winner of the competition, Mick Ashby, was unfortunately unable to travel due to an injury. The Cybernetics of Cybernetics competition was based on the request Margaret Mead made in her 1967 keynote address to the ASC (Mead, 1968), that it might operate in a manner that reflected the understandings of cybernetics, rather than in the manner of a traditional academic society. This request is often seen as the origin of second order cybernetics, the cybernetics of this journal and the cybernetics of which the ASC feels it stands as a guardian. We are honored to reprint Mick Ashby's contribution here, following the Proceedings proper.

The current executive board of the ASC has taken Mead's call to heart, developing reflective and reflexive means through which the society can examine both cybernetics and its own relationships with cybernetics. In the academic world, paper publication can be seen as many things, but the process of its production always provides potential as a source of reflection on work done. The way the papers for this issue have been generated and refereed is part of the ASC's process of becoming more

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3. The Heinz von Foerster award is intended to encourage younger people interested in cybernetics and is awarded by the ASC for the best conference contribution by a participant aged under 35. Foerster was an outstanding figure in cybernetics, having joined the Macy Conferences, editing the proceedings, and having lead the field both as a "ring master" and as a major contributor. Those who met him will remember his enthusiasm, culture and acuteness of mind, enquiry and smiling and elegant charm. Foerster identified and named second order cybernetics and founded the ASC. The award has been given since 2004, shortly after Foerster's death. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinz\\_von\\_Foerster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinz_von_Foerster) and <http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/HvF.htm>

4. The Cybernetics of Cybernetics competition was a one off, public competition launched by the ASC in 2010. We invited suggestions for how better to run a cybernetic society (e.g., the ASC) in a cybernetic manner, a task close to the hearts of current ASC executive board members. Full details of the competition and entries can be found at <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/CofC/>

explicitly reflective in learning not just to talk about, but to listen to and enact, cybernetic ways of being, and we are happy that we are again allowed to publish our selection of papers from this conference in this journal with which we have long and close ties. A selection of our 2009 conference papers was published in Volume 17, nos. 1-2, 2010, and the ASC column published in CHK also exemplifies the close relationship between our society and the journal.

The ASC has a tradition of openness to and respect for a wide range of views of what cybernetics is and how it might be. It also has a long connection with the arts, design and performance. If the ASC, as a society, cannot or will not define cybernetics, it is because we understand that any subject based on the presence of the individual observer will, in the end, have as many definitions as members. We have been extraordinarily lucky in the range of highly distinguished people from within and without cybernetics who have wanted to join us as we explore our visions of cybernetics. Recently, we have been experimenting with more open conferences that have taken to heart the notion that conferences are not just places for the presentation of results but may be thought of as places for improving these results, benefitting from critique—perhaps the key form in which academics converse about their work—and as places where new questions are raised. In fact, we have been keen to develop the idea of conference as conversation, rather than conference as formal and final presentation. (For an account of our 2010 conference see this journal’s ASC column “Doing the Cybernetics of Cybernetics” [Glanville, 2010]. The web sites are also still available online.<sup>5</sup>)

There might seem to be something a little contradictory in holding a conference made up of conversations on the topic of Listening. Yet, what makes talking significant (to stick with the aural metaphor) is exactly that listening. Without listening, there is no communication, as the great German artist, Joseph Beuys is reported to have held. “Beuys’ primary requirement for true communication was the existence of a reciprocal relationship between individuals. ‘For communication it’s necessary that there be someone who listens ... There’s no sense in a transmitter if there’s no one who receives’”(www.asc-cybernetics.org/2011/wp.../Ranulph\_Glanville\_on\_Listening.pdf).

There is a tremendous imbalance in our consideration of communication, for we have concentrated on the uttering, and not on the listening. How often do we hear politicians, for instance, claim “I have made it perfectly clear” when it is perfectly clear both that they have not (hence the need for repetition) and that they cannot (for the art of understanding lies with the listener)? Heinz von Foerster puts this pithily, as usual, in his hermeneutic principle: “The hearer, not the speaker, determines the meaning of an utterance.”

Listening is indeed, in danger of becoming the lost art, as so exquisitely examined by Michael P. Nichols (1995) in his sadly now out of print classic, *The Lost Art of Listening*: to talk about listening is to reflect on and practice listening in a profound

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5. www.asc-cybernetics.org/2010/; www.asc-cybernetics.org/2011/; http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2012/

way, indeed in a reflexive and iterative way: which is the very stuff of second-order cybernetics.

In the case of our Richmond conference on Listening, we were exceptionally fortunate that the most distinguished living American composer, Pauline Oliveros, chose to take part in the conference, and led us in several reflective sound meditations and performances that brought to our conference the acute understanding of sound and the joy of being in sound. Oliveros is the 2012 winner of the prime American prize for contemporary music, the John Cage prize, with which she celebrates her 80th birthday. Her work continues afresh, not only with her performances and compositions, but also in her workshops in “Deep Listening” and her creation of software allowing anyone to create their own sound worlds, alone or with others. We were also delighted and, sometimes, puzzled by a performance program composed and assembled by our member, educationalist and composer Robert Martin. This program included Susan Parenti giving a virtuoso world premiere of the original, one performer version of our member Mark Enslin’s remarkable “Unentitled.” Also included were performances, discussions and workshops given by Elizabeth Simpson (and other members of the School for Designing a Society), Judi Lombardi, Chris Mann, Paul Pangaro (and the alter ego of his Dark Side, Dr Wires), the Lisa Fay and Jeff Glassman Duo, Andrew Owen Brightman’s movement group and even the ASC president. There was also a number of workshops, some of them arising in the moment: we try to allow time to act responsively, to create tutorials on topics arising that may not be familiar to most, to allow for unforeseen conversations and such like. In other words, we attempt to hold conferences that are more organic than most and, thus, are cybernetic in themselves.

The conference papers went through several stages of development and refinement in what was a very thorough and creative refereeing process. Extended abstracts were accepted by the conference committee, after necessary modifications. They were posted on the web for comment by other conference attendees. Revised abstracts were then posted. Authors were offered the opportunity to present their papers formally at the conference, or not: we assume that, in attending a conference authors cannot but test their ideas, anyhow. After the conference, final papers were written and submitted for a process of double blind refereeing. References were reconciled by the editors, and, following reworking by the authors in light of the references were resubmitted to their referees for final checking. Limits were placed on word length, though when a paper clearly needed and deserved extra length the editors made exceptions. We thank our referees as well as our authors for going through this extensive process so willingly and hope the reader will find matching value in these published outcomes.

The papers that make up this volume reflect the range of possible variety in the processes of listening. Many also try to address the inaudible and the absent which we can think of as another example of Spencer Brown’s unmarked cross and the difficulties we have with limits and boundaries (Spencer Brown, 1969).

From times of storytelling to the co-creation of narratives, “Storytelling and Listening: Co-creating Understandings” by Peter Bednar and Christine Welch offers an open system approach, enabling contextually dependent understandings.

Taking as a starting point for listening the attention to what is not heard, Mark Enslin, in his paper “Listening and *Unentitled*” (referring to Susan Parenti’s performance at the conference) reflects on experimental composition which invites experiments in listening and in taking part in the conversation as well.

Exploring a closely related theme (which was a major outcome in his recently completed doctoral thesis) Ted Krueger proposes “Listening to the Inaudible,” in relation to listening and the edges of listening.

Mark Johnson proposes “Attention, Awareness and Economic Behavior” to explain a broader characterization of the difference between commodities and services, which he relates to Pauline Oliveiros’s presentation of “Deep Listening.”

“Finding No-one” from Johann van der Merwe elucidates listening as the space that “we are not” for conversations where the participant becomes “no one.”

Laurence Richards’s “Difference-making from a Cybernetic Perspective: The Role of Listening and Its Circularities” exemplifies listening as a generous act opening doors to many possible logics.

“A Conversation with my ‘Friend’ Technology” by Philip Baron questions how information and communications technology (ICT) can incorporate listening skills in order to become a cooperative member of our human conversations.

Stop talking, listen and a hierarchy will break beneath you! “The Roles of Listening and Non-Listening in the Formation of Organizational Hierarchies” by Thomas Fischer experiments with the metaphorical value of a cellular automata model inspired by the work of Ricardo Uribe in the context of organizational hierarchy formation at the human scale.

Faisal Kadri analyses dialogue and the dynamics of self-regulation on “Comparing Three Regulators: The Homeostat, Priming and Multiplier Feedback.” This paper is less concerned with listening than the others: the ASC tries to be liberal rather than dogmatic, in valuing off-theme papers.

Finally Sylvia Rabeler, with her “Cybernetic Scrying and Self-Reflexivity: Listening Through an Artist’s Canvas” reflects on self-reflexive listening in art and about listening to things that can’t be heard.

Subsequent to these papers that were presented at the Conference, we are honored, as mentioned above, to reprint Mick Ashby’s winning contribution to the Cybernetics of Cybernetics Competition. Following his article are the rules of that competition, as they were compiled by Ranulph Glanville and presented to entrants at that time. (Mick Ashby’s paper has previously been published in the collection *Trojan Horses* by edition echoraum, Vienna, 2013.)

## References

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## Foreword: Listening Remainder of Issue

*Phillip Guddemi<sup>6</sup> and Søren Brier<sup>7</sup>*

We are including with this Proceedings two articles which were not part of the Listening conference. The first of the two, “Occupation as a Form and the Theory of Society,” by Thomas Kurtz, discusses from a sociological (mostly Luhmannian) perspective how the concept of occupation can be understood within a theory of society.

Such an abstract disquisition would seem to be removed from the topic or practice of listening. And yet, if we look at the practice of theorizing from a cybernetic point of view, we can model three conversations which constitute it. There is the conversation between the theorist and her or his topic, the conversation between the theorist and her or his readers, and the conversation (mediated by these other conversations) between the readers and the theorist’s topic. Ultimately if the goal of the theorist is to improve the comprehension of the theorist’s topic by her or his readers, we have to see the theorist as a facilitator in a praxis which can, or at least should, be thought of as a kind of listening.

Specifically with respect to Kurtz’s article, a close reading should enable us to hear a new sociological dimension when people talk about their occupations. It should help increase our awareness of how occupation is a social form, embedded within networks of communication.

The second independently submitted article illustrates this idea even more clearly, because it asks us in a way to listen to profound changes in our society as they affect education. The article “Social Media and the Hybridization of Education” by Michael Paulsen and Jesper Taekke is a research-based theory piece that is as up to date as the smartphone. In fact, the research was on Danish upper secondary schools, and it found that the classroom is no longer the Luhmannian closed system that it once was. Because they found that it is impossible effectively to forbid modern media in the classroom, the researchers first changed their theoretical orientation—from Luhmann to Latour—and then they conducted an action research project which found new pedagogical possibilities and strategies that adapt to this change, by encouraging teachers to incorporate smartphones, twitter and so forth into the way that they taught

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specific topics. This to me is an excellent example of listening to social change, in the sense that it goes beyond evaluating that change as good or bad, or trying to prohibit change, and instead seeks out the potentialities in the new situation.

Lou Kauffman's column, "Virtual Logic – Extainers, Containers, and the Logic of DNA," takes a Spencer-Brownian approach to the topology of DNA. Looking at DNA from the point of view of knot theory and topology could be seen as a challenge to substance materialism, as is Terrence Deacon's absential account of emergence which is also reviewed in this issue.

This issue's ASC column is by Mark Johnson. Entitled "Negative Cybernetics," it goes beyond lamenting the fragmented state of the cybernetics community, by theorizing how this could have come about. Applying Bateson's concept of cybernetic explanation as negative, as opposed to positive (or positivist) causal explanation, Johnson finds an explanation for the tribalized situation within cybernetics as coming from the totalizing ambitions of theoretical perspectives, as embodied in attachments to abstractions linked to particular founders and personal histories. Johnson evokes Isaiah Berlin's famous concept of value pluralism, since Berlin himself linked this concept to sectarianism. In order to defuse their own sectarianisms, cyberneticians may have to accept the limits of the utopianism to which they are prone, by acknowledging the validity of a value pluralism within their own ranks—a value pluralism with, of course, cybernetic roots.

There are three book reviews. First, Raghav Rajagopalan atypically reviews a novel, *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. Rajagopalan is a Ph.D. student at the Centre for Systems Studies at Hull University Business School, U.K. He interweaves a sensitive review of the novel itself with related reflections citing Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson.

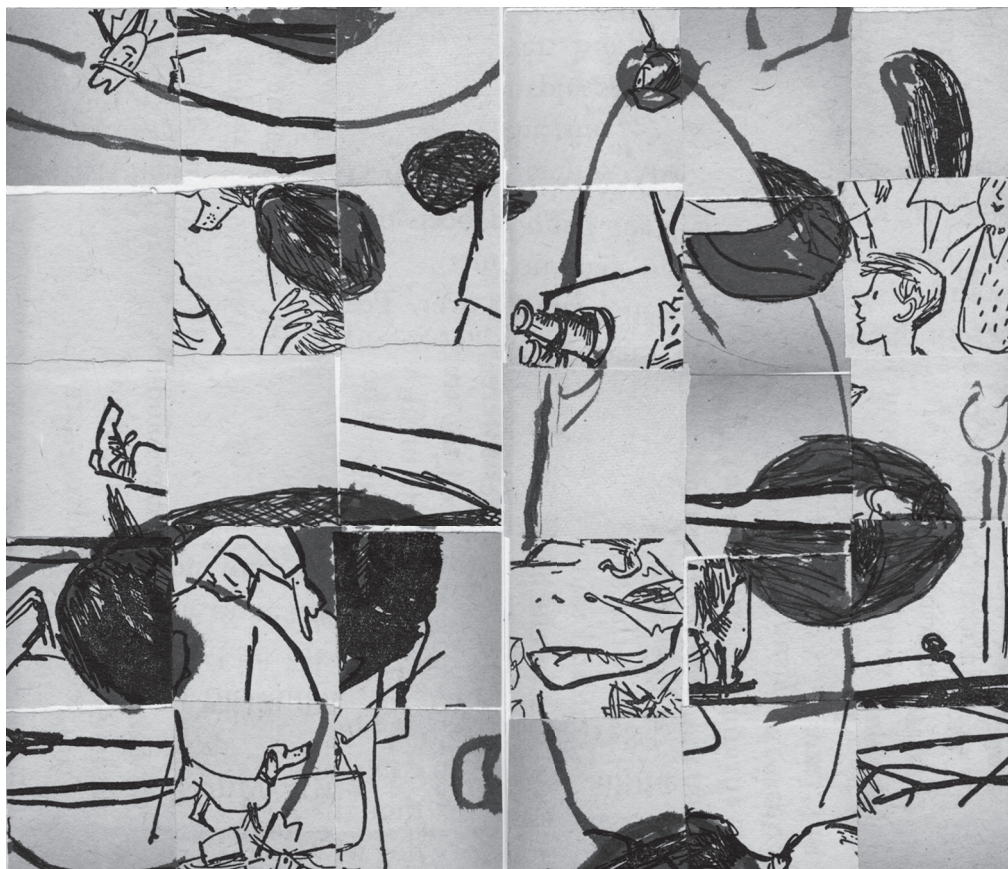
The other two book reviews are by Phillip Guddemi. The first is of Terrence Deacon's book, *Incomplete Nature*, seeing it as an ambitious and largely successful tour de force in showing how life and mind can have emerged from specific tendencies that have always been present in matter—in the form of absences.

The second of Phillip Guddemi's book reviews is of *The Whole Creature* by Wendy Wheeler, a deeply theoretically informed manifesto which invites us to go beyond late 20th Century trends of thought, such as the linguistic turn and biologicistic neoliberalism (or should I say neoliberal biology). By embracing the creative potentials in complexity/emergence theory and, especially, biosemiotics, we can achieve an understanding of others and ourselves as integrated and whole beings. We can achieve a creativity based on implicit and skilled knowledge as well as discursive reason, one which can help us encourage human flourishing, or semiotic freedom, as our aspiration.

Following the book reviews we have two informational pieces. The first is an account of Gregory Bateson's induction on March 20, 2013 as a member of the California Hall of Fame. The second is the detailed announcement about the ASC Conference "Acting – Learning – Understanding" which will be held between July 28 and August 3, 2013 at the University of Bolton, UK.

Artist for the issue is Laurie Steinhorst, a New York-based mixed-media artist and educator who uses a tactile and direct-approach process employing both imagery and abstraction to interrogate perceived reality. Steinhorst is “fascinated by innocent images and materials that can be subverted to produce opposite meaning.” Her work responds to found images and materials and “unlock the possibility of multiple truths or realities.” The inspiration for each work emerges out of the tension existing between these dueling realities. Individual pieces take the form of abstraction, recognizable imagery, or a combination of both to generate new interpretants. Steinhorst attempts to hint the original meaning of the imagery both concrete and visceral, striving to create a triadic balance that will invest the work with a broader resonance and larger voice.

Poetry in the issue has been graciously provided by Pille Bunnell.



Steinhorst, L. (2012). *New Year I*. Ink and collage on paper; 5 x 7 in.