

Author(s):

Philip Baron (Department of Electrical Engineering Technology, University of Johannesburg, Doornfontein, South Africa.)

Ranulph Glanville (Innovation Design Engineering, Royal College of Art, London, UK AND CyberEthics Research, Southsea, UK.)

David Griffiths (School of Education and Psychology, The University of Bolton, Bolton, United Kingdom.)

Ben Sweeting (Architecture, University of Brighton, Brighton, United Kingdom.)

Citation:

[Philip Baron](#), [Ranulph Glanville](#), [David Griffiths](#), [Ben Sweeting](#), (2015) "Living in Cybernetics: Papers from the 50th Anniversary Conference of the American Society for Cybernetics", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 44 Iss: 8/9

DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/K-09-2015-0222>

Downloads:

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 7 times since 2015

Publisher:

Emerald Group Publishing Limited

Living in Cybernetics. Papers from the 50th Anniversary Conference of the American Society for Cybernetics

Article Type: Guest editorial From: *Kybernetes*, Volume 44, Issue 8/9.

On the 3rd of August 2014, the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) celebrated their 50th anniversary at their annual conference, which that year was held in Washington, DC, hosted by George Washington University. The choice of venue reflected the fact that the first conference of the ASC was held in the same city in 1964. The proceedings from this celebratory conference are presented in this special issue of *Kybernetes*. The last three conference proceedings have been published in this ISI rated journal, showing the commitment from both sides to advance the field through the dissemination of cybernetics research. The conference took place from the 3rd to the 9th of August 2014, with the theme of Living in Cybernetics.

The conference was composed of three parts. Following an introductory workshop on the first day, two days of parallel paper sessions featured submissions covering the wide variety of Cybernetics in the Present. Articles developed from these papers are collected here. The conference concluded with a two-day workshop on Cybernetics in the Future, facilitated by David Griffiths and Robert Martin, which developed material with a view to the future development of the subject and its ideas, especially amongst younger generations. Sandwiched between these two sections, and one of the highlights of the conference, was a day entitled Cybernetics in the Past, bringing together the still living former presidents of the ASC, who each addressed the conference, and participated in a panel responding to questions from the audience. The ASC President at the time, Ranulph Glanville, was unable to be

present in person and attended the conference via Skype. Mary Catherine Bateson gave the conference dinner speech[1], in which she asked if cybernetics should be “a fancy, post-graduate activity”, or if we should rather treat it as an invitation to revise our ideas of common sense. Throughout these various activities, the conference reflected on past and present in order to move forward with new actions.

As well as looking back at 50 years of the ASC, this was the last of a series of conferences organised under Ranulph Glanville's two full terms as president of the society. These started in Troy in 2010 with *Cybernetics: Art, Design and Mathematics – A Meta-disciplinary Conversation* (Glanville, 2012; Glanville and Sweeting, 2011), and were followed by conferences in Richmond, Indiana in 2011 (van Ditmar and Glanville, 2013), Asilomar, California in 2012 (Glanville and Griffiths, 2013), held jointly with the Bateson Ideas Group, and Bolton, UK (Glanville *et al.*, 2014). As a series these have been notable for their discursive, conversational formats and group work, and for their inclusion of artistic and musical activities and performances. This tradition was continued at the 2014 conference in the Cybernetics in the Future workshop, the *Museum of Cybernetic Objects*, which contained a wide range of objects brought to the conference by attendees, as well as in the improvisational arts performance organised by Sylvia Skok and the screening by Judy Lombardi of her film *Gentrification (k)NOT*.

During the conference Ranulph Glanville and his wife Aartje Hulstein, were each presented with a Special Award from the ASC in appreciation of their support of each other as well as their support of the ASC. The awards were accompanied by two sculptures which join together to form a jade ring[2], a design that reflects the mutually completing nature of the relationship between the two awardees. Ranulph Glanville sadly passed away on the 20th of December 2014, during the preparation of these proceedings. As editors, we have worked extensively with Ranulph on the organisation of ASC conferences and the publication of their proceedings. In the course of these collaborations we have benefited enormously from Ranulph's insight, and from his unswerving commitment to acting in accordance with his cybernetic understanding of his life and work. There will be events and publications which celebrate Ranulph's many contributions to cybernetics, but here we would like to express our personal gratitude for the opportunity which we have had to work with him, and our sense of loss at his death.

The ASC also awarded Louis Kauffman the Wiener Gold Medal for his outstanding and profound lifelong contributions to the nurturing of cybernetics, while Allenna Leonard, Paul Pangaro, Randall Whitaker, and Jennifer Wilby each received the Warren McCulloch Award for their work. Stuart Umpleby and Roger C. Conant were made honorary life fellows of the society and Ben Sweeting received the Heinz von Foerster Award, which the ASC grants to a young person for their notable contribution to the conference.

As Ranulph Glanville outlined in his introduction to the Troy proceedings (Glanville, 2011), the intention behind the conversational elements of recent ASC conferences was a reflection on the idea presented by Margaret Mead (1968) to the inaugural ASC conference, that cybernetics be practiced according to its own principles. Thus these conferences have used conversational, and cybernetic formats in exploring cybernetics itself, understanding the cybernetics of cybernetics (second order cybernetics) as something to be enacted. This has increasingly become the subject, as well as the methodology, of these conferences. These have moved from the exploration, in Troy, of how cybernetics can inform other practices which, in turn, can inform it, to focusing on central aspects of cybernetic actions, such as listening (in Richmond) and the circularity of acting, learning and understanding (in Bolton) and, finally to the 2014 theme of Living in Cybernetics. Some of the papers collected here explore human living from a cybernetic perspective, for example Baron, Fischer, Glanville, Hohl, Martin, and Sweeting. Others investigate the way in which cybernetics can be brought

to bear to illuminate the experience of individuals or societies, including Eser, Kannangara, and MacGill. The papers of Cariani and Nizami take differing approaches to understanding of how the role of the brain in human living can be understood from a cybernetic perspective. Taken as a whole, the papers demonstrate the varied cross section of contemporary cybernetic research practice, submitted under nine diverse cybernetic traditions (developed from Umpleby and Dent, 1999): computer science; control systems, automation, systems engineering; experimental epistemology, constructivism, philosophy of science; management; education and conversation; family therapy; art, design, music, literature; neurobiology, consciousness studies; and the social sciences.

In keeping with the publication tradition of the ASC, conferees were invited to submit extended abstracts, which were double blind peer reviewed. Prior to the conference, the accepted abstracts were then made available in the conference booklet as well as on the conference website where others could comment. As a form of open peer review this serves both to improve the quality of the proposals and also to introduce participants to each other. After presentation and discussion in the paper sessions, authors have reworked their papers to reflect what they learnt at the conference. It has become accepted practice at ASC conferences to create a conversational environment in paper sessions by giving equal speaking time to the presenter and to the audience. These spontaneous conversations often give rise to new ideas and questions, which the author can then respond to in their final paper. Final paper drafts are submitted through a rigorous double blind peer review process. The authors receive at least two reviews and the guest editors' reconciliation, which assists the author in responding to the peer reviews where these are divergent. Revised papers are then returned to the reviewers a second time. The design of these extended interactions embodies principles of the ASC, which sees cybernetics as not only a way of thinking, but also a way of doing.

The layout of the material in this volume follows an alphabetical order. The abstracts have been presented first so that the reader can decide which papers to read and in which order. The exception is Ranulph Galanville's paper, which is presented first as an extended introduction to the theme.

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank Stuart Umpleby and all the staff at the George Washington University, especially Mary Chang, Maggie Leak, and Sergio d'Onofrio, for hosting the conference as well as all the ASC members who organised the event and designed the programme. The editors thank the guest speakers who threw invaluable light on the past and future of cybernetics, to the contributors to the artistic programme, and to the attendees whose enthusiasm and commitment made the conference such a success. The editors gratefully acknowledge the invaluable support received from the staff at Emerald, who publish *Kybernetes*, and from the editors of *Kybernetes* lead by Magnus Ramage. But most of all the editors thank the authors and particularly the reviewers of the material in this volume. It is easy to forget just how much work they put in, and how much all academic publications depend on the voluntary work of reviewers (without which there would be no publications). Thank you. The editors hope that readers will find the material interesting and valuable.

Philip Baron - *Department of Electrical Engineering Technology, University of Johannesburg, Doornfontein, South Africa*

Professor Ranulph Glanville† - *Innovation Design Engineering, Royal College of Art, London, UK and CybernEthics Research, Southsea, UK*

Professor David Griffiths - *School of Education and Psychology, The University of Bolton, Bolton, UK*

Dr Ben Sweeting - *Architecture, University of Brighton, Brighton, UK*

Notes

A recording is available at: http://asc-cybernetics.org/2014/?page_id=121

A photograph of the award is available at: www.asc-cybernetics.org/organization/awards/AH_RG_sculptures.jpg

References

Glanville, R. (2011), "Introduction: a conference doing the cybernetics of cybernetics", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 40 Nos 7/8, pp. 952-963. doi: 10.1108/03684921111160197

Glanville, R. (Ed.) (2012), *Trojan Horses: A Rattle Bag from the "Cybernetics: Art, Design, Mathematics – A Meta-Disciplinary Conversation" Post-Conference Workshop*, Edition echoraum, Vienna

Glanville, R. and Griffiths, D. (Eds) (2013), "An ecology of ideas", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 42 Nos 9/10, available at: www.emeraldinsight.com/toc/k/42/9%2F10 (accessed 29 July 2015)

Glanville, R. and Sweeting, B. (Eds) (2011), "Cybernetics: art, design, mathematics – a meta-disciplinary conversation: papers from the 2010 conference of the American Society for Cybernetics", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 40 Nos 7/8, available at: www.emeraldinsight.com/toc/k/40/7%2F8 (accessed 3 June 2015)

Glanville, R., Griffiths, D. and Baron, P. (Eds) (2014), "A circularity in learning", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 43 Nos 9/10, available at: www.emeraldinsight.com/toc/k/43/9%2F10 (accessed 3 June 2015)

Mead, M. (1968), "The cybernetics of cybernetics", in von Foerster, H., White, J.D., Peterson, L.J. and Russell, J.K. (Eds), *Purposive Systems*, Spartan Books, New York, NY, pp. 1-11

Umpleby, S. and Dent, E. (1999), "The origins and purposes of several traditions in systems theory and cybernetics", *Cybernetics and Systems: An International Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 79-103. doi: 10.1080/019697299125299, available at: www.gwu.edu/~umpleby/recent_papers/1998_origins_purposes_several_traditions_systems_theory_cybernetic_1.htm (accessed 31 July 2015)

van Ditmar, D.F. and Glanville, R. (Eds) (2013), "Listening: proceedings of ASC conference 2011", Vol. 20 Nos 1/2, available at: www.chkjournal.org/index.php/component/webjournal/?view=issue&cid=232