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Prelude

Ranulph Glanville

When a book moves across disciplines, it can seem not to be for anyone. Cybernetics is a subject that is both a subject in its own right, and transcends other subjects. The contributors thought it might help the potential reader to tell you some of those we had in mind when creating this book, and to tell you what we think it is. Although some of our phrases may appear light-hearted, each is meant quite seriously.

Who is this book for?

- The playful
- The curious
- The open minded
- Those who want to learn, and their teachers
- Those who wondered, what is cybernetics?
- Those searching for a pattern that connects
- The epistemologically inclined
- Those interested in thinking about thinking
- Those interested in problems with problems
- Those who like to think differently
- Those who like to act differently
- Trans-Meta-Inter-Postdisciplinary thinkers

What is it?

- An exploration using cybernetic thinking
- A bizarre collection
- A sampler of possibilities
- A collection of attempts to understand how we make sense of the world
- A collection of attempts to understand the world from different perspectives
- An outcome of poking around in the fog
- A network of relationships and conversations
- Reflections on the regularities and coherences of our living
- A network of discussions about understanding understanding
- Fun

Foreword

I

This book is the strange child of a group of people who, having attended a conference centred around cybernetics, agreed to stay on for a post-conference workshop in which they explored what they had learnt in that conference.

Cybernetics is a subject that has appeared and disappeared several times over the past two and a half millennia. I do not want to write a history of the subject, here. We who arranged the conference were most interested in it as meta-disciplinary, concerned with circular logic and the involvement of the observer/agent, which gives rise to a powerful and radical way of thinking.

This book, an anthology or, perhaps better, a miscellany, comes out of the our post-conference workshop that concluded our conference “Cybernetics: Art, Design, Mathematics—A Multi-Disciplinary Conversation” (C:ADM). It was promoted by the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) at the Curtis R Priem Experimental Media and Performance Arts Centre (EMPAC) of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), Troy, New York, and took place between 29 July and 5 August 2010. [Glanville 2010b:107–115]

The organisers of the conference divided it into 3 parts.

First was the pre-conference, with tutorials, business meetings and so on, introducing cybernetics and the ASC to conferees.

This was followed by the main conference, an experiment in creating a meeting that reflected the common comment made about conferences, that the best part was the discussion in the coffee breaks. So we met in small discussion groups and in plenaries where we presented to each other. Our intention was to create a constant coffee break. We were not primarily interested in reports on answers to established questions, but to develop new questions. We ourselves took risks in trying to find new ways of conferring, and we learnt, as we hope all others did. Although this was not a paper conference, we did give time for paper presentations, and produced a proceedings, of papers rewritten for publication after the conference, so authors could reflect and incorporate what had been learnt in the conference. [Glanville, Sweeting 2011:945–1222]

We ended with a post-conference workshop, intended particularly to allow us to recognise and work with threads of interest we had discovered through taking part in the conference. This book is the progeny of that workshop.

The book also contains an extra section that reflects the conference in a different way. As a another child of the C:ADM conference, the ASC ran an international competition on how to do cybernetics more cybernetically. This was, in effect, what we were trying to do in the conference: to hold a meeting on cybernetics

in a somewhat more cybernetic manner than usual. The competition's winning entry, together with an account of the competition and its rules, is included as the book's last section.

This book is the particular outcome of a particular event created by particular people, and I thank all those who have taken part in providing material and in forming it into the book it is,¹ as well as our wonderful publishers, WISDOM/echoraum, in Vienna, and Armin Reautschnig, our graphic designer.

There is also a remarkable, and very different, record of the conference made by Thomas Fischer, in the form of a web site that records the processes and events of the conference from the very beginning to the details for publishing the proceedings after the conference. You can find it at www.asc-cybernetics.org/2010.

II

So much for the background. Now for the book.

At the post-conference workshop, we chose to divide into self-forming, self-organising groups. These groups independently reflected on the conference and found an area of interest they wanted to follow. We decided to make a book, which would reflect the interests, questioning, and the style of behaviour of the different groups. You will find all this expressed here. We have 4 sections reflecting the 4 groups. In addition, a small group of those interested in video (Judy Lombardi and Lev Ledit) determined to edit the video material recorded during the conference, producing a 30 minute video in a couple of days.² You can find that video on the web at: <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2010/?p=2942>. Sadly, this conference was also the last time Ernst von Glasersfeld appeared in public. He died on November 12, 2010. You can hear his after dinner speech at <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2010/?p=2700>, his last ever public address.³ At the end of the workshop, members of the groups took on the task of collecting and assembling material for this book. Each did it in their own manner: the book is thus a portrait of several cyberneticians at work, each working in their own way.

We start with a short Fanfare by Albert Mueller, in which he positions cybernetics as a discipline within the world of the multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary. This is, in effect a positioning of all the work you can find here, and among the papers that form the more conventional conference proceedings. [Glanville, Sweeting 2011:945–1222]

1 The individual authors are named in their texts.

2 There are a couple of edits that need correction, but in spite of our best intentions, I'm not sure we'll ever get round to that!

3 You can read a transcription at Glasersfeld, E. [2010:105–106]

The first section “Pipedreams” (assembled and edited by Thomas Fischer and Christiane M Herr) approaches a standard problem: some believe cybernetic is a technology, and thus belongs to the real world, while others see it as philosophical, and very abstract. A way of bringing the two together is explored, through reference to designing. Designing was a constant thread in the conference: For some time, I have argued that cybernetics and design are complements. [Glanville 2009b:175–186] This section provides another such argument.

The second section, “Ways of Looking at Problems” (assembled and edited by Michael Hohl) consists of another miscellany: a collection of thoughts and explorations into method, in a manner that reflects cybernetic thinking. These explorations move from the hunches of an early sketch for a possible field of exploration to a fairly well finalised and formalised essay.

The third section, “A Dialogue in Design” (assembled and edited by myself and Louis H Kauffman) starts with actions and accidents at the conference, and follows a dialogue that took place over 2 years via email, in which the relationship of mathematics and design is explored within a cybernetic conceptual framework.

The fourth section, “The Folded Boat, and Other Stories You Can Play with” (assembled and edited by Aartje Hulstein and Claudia Westermann) consists of a collection of snippets from many authors who were at the workshop: the sort of miscellany German speakers used to keep in a Zettel Box. These have been composed together within a system that is based on a marriage of the old European children’s game “The Goose Game” and the Chinese book of divinations, the “I-Ching”. This section is different from the others in style and content, and was designed by the editors and laid out by Claudia.

As mentioned earlier, we end with a separate item, which, however, also came from the conference but not from the post-conference workshop, Mick Ashby’s (winning) entry in the Cybernetics of Cybernetics competition (assembled and edited by myself).

III

The groups were not isolated either in the workshop, or in preparing this book. Individuals visited, we met together. As conference chair, I was determined not to take the lead in this section and found excuses to fetch coffee whenever a decision had to be made and the others turned to me. I did, however, suggest a source that I have found interesting and inspirational, Alastair Brotchie and Mel Gooding’s boxed book “Surrealist Games”, [Brotchie, Gooding 1995] which seemed to me to offer a model and inspiration for the form our book might

take: as, indeed, it did. We ended up with a miscellany, a strange collection of bits put together in arbitrary association and allowed to spill out so that we can find suggested forms in what appears, which reminded me of another beautiful model and inspiration: a rattle bag.

The great poets Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes assembled an anthology of their favourite poems, organised alphabetically in order to create surprises through their sequence, a chaotic, even subversive and arbitrary collection without theme, and called it “The Rattle Bag”. [Heaney, Hughes 1982] I suppose they got this from Lady Bracknell, in Wilde’s “The Importance of being Earnest”.

According to Collins English Dictionary, a rattle bag is

- 1) a rattle made out of a bag containing small objects
- 2) an assortment, variety⁴

Like Heaney’s and Hughes’s collection of poems, this book is an assortment, made of small objects assembled together between the covers of a book, a collection that is arbitrary and surprising, reflecting the interests and personalities of those who took part in a post-conference workshop in that summer of 2010. We even hope that, like a physical rattle bag, this book will also make a noise, albeit metaphorically.

If a Rattle Bag is an assortment, why is ours filled with Trojan Horses?

One simple reason is an acknowledgement that RPI is located in the town of Troy, NY, the last major port upriver on the Hudson, before the rapids. But just as there is something surprising and chaotic in the idea of a rattle bag, there is something surprising and subversive about the Trojan Horse. We all remember the story of soldiers hiding in the large figure of a horse left outside the main gates of Troy, and the Trojans unknowingly bringing the horse into the city, together with the on-board hidden enemy. This is perhaps the first time that war was not just a matter of fighting, but of intelligence and stealth. We have learnt that cybernetics is a way of thinking—a very rich way of thinking—as Ernst von Glasersfeld reminded us. Often, it enters minds surreptitiously and then slowly offers new insights. We hope you will decide to bring our Trojan Horse into your mind, and that the ideas we present will grab your attention and perhaps change the way you think of cybernetics, but also as a result of the battery of cybernetic concepts that can become available to us, with which to understand ourselves and our worlds, you will see the—your—world differently.

⁴ <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/rattlebag>.
Visited online on September 14, 2012.

And, given that the conference was interested in the involved observer/agent, I hope that you will also hear the voices and the interest. The authors and section editors range from those who have never attended university to those who are highly regarded professors, with doctorates and international reputations. They range from artists, performers and therapists to hard-edged logicians. Their fields of interest include therapy, teaching, design, mathematics, social sciences, physical sciences, theory, practice and so on. Many authors seem to contain (and be contained by) several different and often conflicting qualities. There is a whole world in here, and we hope it will engage, entertain, infuriate, bemuse, engage ...

IV

Conference Acknowledgements

There are many people who make a conference happen. You can find a list, together with a very rich resource that reflects all parts of the conference from initial announcement to post-conference comments, reviews and even a movie of the conference on the web site www.asc-cybernetics.org/2010. I should thank Tom Fischer for the extraordinary web resource he created and maintained for us.

However, there are three people must be thanked. First, Ted Krueger, who acted as the local organiser, endlessly obliging, a smother of problems, who did much more than just this. Were it not for Ted, we would never have been able to hold our conference in such a remarkable place. Second, Johannes Goebel, Director of EMPAC, who accepted that we had an interesting project and gave us use of the building and staff—a gesture beyond price. Thanking Johannes, is also thanking his wonderful staff. And thirdly, my wife Aartje Hulstein, who has put up with a disrupted home life so that I can work with the ASC, making it a more cybernetic society, raising the bar, and, in this case, playing my part in organising this conference and co-ordinating the production of this book.

Ranulph Glanville
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September 15, 2012