

Mai von Foerster and Herbert Brün: together and apart: an Addendum to Heinz von Foerster's Obituary.

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Gary Boyd pointed out to me that in my obituary article on Heinz von Foerster, I had neglected to mention the close working relationship between von Foerster and the composer Herbert Brün which was particularly important in the development of Second Order Cybernetics. He was correct, so I asked the editors if I might write a brief note adding to my von Foerster obituary. Meanwhile, von Foerster's widow, Mai, also died on June 22nd. Brün had died 2 years earlier. Therefore, I write here not only to add to the picture I gave of von Foerster's life and work, but also to celebrate the lives of both Mai von Foerster and Herbert Brün, who made special contributions to Cybernetics.

Mai von Foerster

According to Mai von Foerster, it was the dancing that did it. When she met Heinz von Foerster, the young actress Mai (Mathilde) Stürmer (born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1914, died 2003), who was making a name for herself on the Viennese stage, was engaged to marry someone else. At a New Year's party, the dapper von Foerster entered walking on his hands. Mai was not impressed, but his request for a dance led to a whirlwind romance. By the end of the week, she was engaged to Heinz. They married that same year, 1939.

Who knows what Mai von Foerster might have achieved had she not made the decision to spend her life sustaining the light that was Heinz von Foerster. She had a clear path to success as an actress had she preferred to follow it. But she chose to be a wife and mother, and to find her fulfillment in sustaining her family and Heinz's remarkable career. In later years she was encouraged to write, but it seems her heart was not in it. Perhaps the painful attack of Lyme's Disease fuelled this—she told me on many occasions “Ranulph, do not believe what people say. Old age is dreadful.” She seemed to prefer to flit in and out of Heinz's busy social life and to tend to her extraordinary collection of succulents, to writing.

I scarcely knew them before Mai and Heinz retired and moved to California. I visited them once in Champaign/Urbana, and know stories they told me personally and others which appear in the von Foerster/Poerksen book,¹ but it was by the Pacific Ocean that I really got to know them. To see the two of them together at this stage in their lives was to understand deep love and the true commitment Mai and Heinz had to each other. I think of her insistence that there had “Never been a single day that has not been better for being with Heinz.” I conceive this statement as crucially telling of who she was and of her values. She was a woman of independence of mind, of wisdom and serenity, of a quiet and great calming warmth, and of an unobtrusive intelligence and perception. I never caught her acting.

If Mai von Foerster gave up an independent career, she did not, I believe, see this as a deprivation. Unfashionable as the view may now be, she saw Heinz's work as hers, and they lived and worked as a team. Although the name Mai von Foerster does not appear on the credits, her presence shines through in all Heinz's work, and in how he could talk to us. Their sons confirm this.

After their deaths, their sons Thomas and Andreas mixed Mai Stürmer's ashes with Heinz von

¹ The more recent book von Foerster wrote with Monika Broecker has a lot of detail of their lives. But it is not yet available in English.

Foerster's, disposing of them. In death as in life they became inseparable.

Herbert Brün

The composer Herbert Brün (1918 to 2000), was born in Berlin and moved via Palestine and Europe to the United States, where he eventually (1963) joined the staff of the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana—the University that had made a home for von Foerster more than a decade earlier. He was an extraordinarily questioning musician who explored many new and emerging musical possibilities. He was amongst the first to consider and use the computer in musical composition, and also developed early computer graphics some of which were shown at Jascia Reichardt's seminal 1968 "Cybernetic Serendipity" exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, where Gordon Pask also exhibited his "Colloquy of Mobiles."

As well as his considerable musical talents, Brün had an acute and analytic mind well versed in European logic and philosophy. A friend I met in the mid 1960s who had studied music in Champaign/Urbana told me then, long before I had any interest in Cybernetics, of Brün as both musician and intellect. When von Foerster began developing his elective course that eventually led to the publication of the "Cybernetics of Cybernetics" book, Brün joined in the exploration. It was not the first time they had worked together: in 1966 Brün contributed to a conference that was later published as the book "Music by Computers" which von Foerster (whose family had sponsored experimental music in Vienna) edited with James Beauchamp; one of the first and most influential books exploring the relationship between computers and music. And they ran a course on "Heuristics" directly before what became the Cybernetics of Cybernetics elective.

Looking through von Foerster's "Cybernetics of Cybernetics" book, Brün's influence is rarely far away, even when it remains implicit and hidden. But often he appears explicitly as commentator, author or artist. Brün's interest in Cybernetics and specially Second Order Cybernetics was not a passing interest. He was a regular at meetings of the American Society for Cybernetics, of which he was a Trustee. He was awarded their Norbert Wiener medal in 1993. Often he brought with him the performance group "The Performers' Workshop Ensemble" which provided the conferences both a wonderful breath of fresh air and, on occasion, exemplification of and commentary on many of the concerns being discussed. He was an independent spirit who had very powerful intellectual equipment. He was a fearless (and, sometimes, terrifying) critic. And he was a man for whom aesthetics and the consideration of aesthetics was integral to living, as a result of which he broadened the scope of many discussions in Cybernetics.

In later years Brün and von Foerster grew apart. Von Foerster told me he did not approve of the path Brün chose to follow with the Performers' Workshop Ensemble, their project, "School for Designing a Society." They continued to phone each other, but when Brün died, the separation was final and complete.

References

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