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About Gordon Pask

Section:

Gordon Pask Plates 1 and 2 was born in Derby on 28 June 1928, the son of Percy (who imported and exported fruits) and his wife Mary. Shortly after, the family took up residence on the Isle of Man. Gordon had two elder brothers, Alfred (a Methodist minister) and Edgar (a Professor of Anaesthetics who, often using himself as subject and thereby sacrificing his own health, studied hypothermia in pilots surviving crashes into the sea; the RAF has a research prize named in his honour).



Plate 1 Gordon Pask (Copyright of Professor John Frazer and used with his permission)



Reproduced from the best available original photograph *Plate 2*. Gordon Pask (Used with the permission of Dr Paul Pangaro)

Gordon was educated at Rydal School in North Wales, and then obtained Diplomas in Geology and Mining Engineering from Bangor and Liverpool Technical Colleges. In 1952 he gained his BA from Downing College Cambridge, with his MA following in 1954. He has a PhD from University College, University of London (in Psychology), and was awarded the first DSc, in Cybernetics, by the Open University in 1974 and a ScD from Cambridge University in 1995.

He married Elizabeth Poole in 1956 and they have two daughters: Amanda, born 1961, and Hermione, born 1967.

The mainstay of Gordon Pask's working life was the research organisation; System Research Ltd (SR) founded in 1953 by Gordon and Elizabeth Pask and Robin and Sheila McKinnon-Wood. SR became a non-profit organisation in 1961, and involved, in its various forms, a wide range of scholars and others as partners, directors, employees and employers (several of whom contribute to this volume). SR won many research and implementation contracts and consultancies over the years (from, for instance, the US Army, Navy and Air Forces, the British Ministry of Defence, Home Office, Road Research Laboratory, Department of Employment and the Social Science Research Council) and developed and implemented many ideas that are now common such as the self-adaptive machine, Self Adaptive Keyboard Instructor (SAKI), originally a training system for Hollerith card punch operators but now appearing, in pale imitation, world-wide in typing trainers such as Mavis Beacon. Gordon also developed over a number of years, several computers that seem, nowadays, highly original and unusual. Other notable products have included Course Assembly System and Tutorial Environment (CASTE), later generalised as THOUGHTSTICKER (a suite of programs developed around and through conversation theory that allow the creation of areas of study as environments and sensitively interacting individual study within these environments).

Gordon was integrally associated with a number of other companies, notably Cybernetic Developments Ltd, G Speedie-Pask and Associates and Consumer Dynamics. Work done by these companies, whether as consultancy or as research and implementation, has had a profound effect in several areas, including adaptive teaching systems and learning theory (in education, industry and the military),

knowledge elicitation and representation, conversation and interaction, theoretical and practical foundational developments in computation and self-organisation (especially evolutionary, chemical and biological systems) studies of individual differences in styles and strategies of learning, consciousness, and creativity.

Gordon Pask is rightly considered as one of the fathers of both first order and second order cybernetics. The latter refers to the novel epistemological paradigm where the observer, rather than be a purely external observer to the systems he studies, is invited to acknowledge that he, too, is a system, an observing system. Conversation Theory, with its accounts of observers in conversation and interaction, is a major contribution to this emerging paradigm.

At the time of his death, Gordon held two professorial chairs: at Brunel University, where he was professor of Cybernetics and had many successful doctoral students, and at the Centre for Innovation and Co-operative Technology (CICT) of the University of Amsterdam, where he was Professor of General Androgology. He was visiting professor at many institutions, including the Biological Computer Laboratory of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the Department of Information and Computing Science at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Department of Information Engineering at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, the Centre for the Study of Complex Systems at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, Institute for Educational Technology at Concordia University, Montreal, Institute of Educational Technology, the Open University, Milton Keynes, the Architecture Machine Group (now the Media Lab) of MIT in Cambridge, MA, and at UNAM, the University of Mexico, Mexico City. He was special tutor at the Architectural Association School, and had been a Fellow in Residence at The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study.

Amongst his many awards, two held his special affection. The first award of the "*Ehrenmitglied*" of the Österreichische Studiengesellschaft für Kybernetik (the Austrian Society for Cybernetic Studies), and the American Society for Cybernetics' Wiener Gold Medal.

Gordon Pask was a member of many learned societies, including the Austrian Society for Cybernetic Studies, the American Society for Cybernetics, the Society for Instructional Technology, the Society of Applied Psychology, the International Association of Cybernetics, the British Computer Society, and the Club of Rome (British Chapter). He was a Fellow of the UK Cybernetics Society, the British Psychological Society, the Royal Statistical Society, and the New York Academy of Sciences.

He was past President of the Cybernetics Society and of the International Society for General Systems and sat on several editorial and advisory boards (several at international government level). He was a member of the Architectural Association, the Athenaeum and the Chelsea Arts Club in London.

Although Gordon Pask did not like the notion of "hobbies", he had several: on occasion he wrote books and lyrics, drew pictures and made pieces of cybernetic art. He liked to return to the theatre (especially cabaret and music hall, where he had been a professional).

A list of Gordon's many publications can be found at the end of Part II of this collection.

Ranulph Glanville**Bernard Scott** *Guest Editors*