Forward: Acting cybernetically—Papers from the 2019 Conference of the American Society for Cybernetics

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This special issue of Cybernetics and Human Knowing presents a selection of papers from Acting Cybernetically, the 2019 conference of American Society for Cybernetics (ASC). The conference was hosted at the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, on the ancestral, traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam peoples, 24-26 June, 2019 (American Society for Cybernetics, 2019). Pille Bunnell, Tom Scholte, and Ben Sweeting were conference co-chairs.

The conference addressed the relationships between cybernetics and action, a theme that is of longstanding interest to the ASC and which has been prominent in several of the society's recent conferences (Baron et al., 2015; Baron et al., 2017; Glanville et al., 2014). While this topic may seem straightforward at first, it has many layers. Cybernetics' wide applicability as an explanatory framework means it is not always easy to distinguish between cybernetics' own commitments and the gamut of actions that can be described in cybernetic terms. It is clear that cybernetics is not to be understood as merely a set of theoretical ideas looking for application. Conventional linear relations between theory and practice are not appropriate if we are to take circularity seriously enough to practice cybernetics according to its own insights (Glanville, 2012, p. 175; Mead, 1968). Instead, we might see cybernetics as a distinctive "way of going on in the world" (Pickering, 2010, p. 9), as something to live rather than apply (Brier et al., 2015; Chapman, 2019, 2020; Glanville, 2015). Of course, this is much easier to say than do, a tension that is central to the whole question. Cybernetics' radical but now familiar shift from the detached observer of conventional science to involved participation in and with the world is not an end in itself. We say we include the observer—but then what?

The selections published in this issue reflect the variety of the conference, which involved a rich mixture of playshops, performances and installations alongside conventional papers. Following this editorial foreword, Tom Scholte gives a brief account of what motivated the conference and how the theme of acting was manifest within the composition of the conference as an event. There follow three double blind peer reviewed articles, developed from paper presentations at the conference, followed by an editorially reviewed report on an especially significant aspect of the programme. The issue concludes with two columns, the first of which has its origins in the conference while the second is closely related to the conference theme.

In the reflexive spirit of second-order cybernetics, Larry Richards begins by contesting the conference theme, raising concerns about the use of the adverb *cybernetically* in its title. The editors are grateful for the question mark Richards adds to the issue as well as to its title. How may we understand cyberneticians as "marching to a different tune" without this implicitly introducing a moral imperative?

Jason Young takes his point of departure from what he calls "Bateson's Gap"—the discontinuity between human thinking and the processes of becoming that characterise the more-than-human world. Young explores modalities of participation (acceptance, feeling and imagination) as ways to find resonances across this gap that avoid aligning nature to "parochial human desires". Young's article is significant in the context of this issue's theme

in that it pushes cybernetic notions of participation beyond the human-centric tendencies that may arise through recursive self-observation.

Michael Hohl and Mathilde Scholz present an inspiring case study of cybernetically informed design pedagogy. Hohl and Scholz describe their use of a formal structure that has counter-intuitively enabled student agency and provided openings to the unexpected, responding to the way that "designing implies knowing what to do when you do not know what to do". They present their approach as a participatory learning journey that is relevant beyond the immediate context of design education, including to Margaret Mead's (1968) challenge to the inaugural meeting of the ASC to apply the insights of cybernetics to its own practices.

As well as paper presentations, the conference explicitly included several lively, performative elements. We include reports on two here. First, Patrick Pennefather et al. reflect on an ambitious feature of the conference—a contemporary re-imagining of the Fun Palace, the radical project for a "university of the streets" (Littlewood, 1964, p. 432) that was developed during the 1960s by theatre director Joan Littlewood, architect Cedric Price, and cybernetician Gordon Pask. The event, which was open to the public, comprised numerous interactive installations inspired by elements of cybernetics, forming a "carnival of mixed realities" in a 10,000 square foot hanger at Vancouver's Centre for Digital Media. Second, in the ASC Pages column, Bill Torbert and Aftab Erfan report on their enactment of Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry within the conference, which they frame as the "social science research methodology that cybernetics does not know it is missing".

This issue concludes with a second contribution from Larry Richards, this time in the form of an invited column. While its contents did not emanate directly from the conference, its focus dovetails closely with the conference theme. Richards takes up Andrew Pickering's call for a return to "performative materiality" in cybernetics by excavating its traces through a personal history of the field as he has experienced it, gesturing towards current promising trends moving in a performative direction, and proposing a series of bold projects that might help focus a new series of "Macy-style meetings" around a fulsomely enactive agenda. While it is rare to have two contributions from the same author in a single journal issue, it feels appropriate to have Richards bookend our investigation of acting cybernetically by both cautioning of the risks inherent in this agenda and, also, sounding a clarion call to action in this direction. Combined, his two papers rehearse the ongoing cycle of reflection and action that is the very engine of the cybernetic enterprise.

We hope you enjoy this selection from ASC 2019. Additional papers from the conference are being published through other issues of this journal. These include further regular articles and a series of contributions to ASC Pages that have already begun with Richard Marken's (2020) article in the first issue of this volume.

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