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Recollections of Heinz von Foerster, a Rhetorical Genius

Abstract
On a cold day between Christmas and New Year 1961, in search of a place to study, I met Heinz in his office at the Biological Computer Laboratory. I knew of him through a network of designers who, like me, were interested in issues that conventional curricula did not address. Heinz greeted me, a total stranger, with the enthusiasm usually reserved for an old friend. To my surprise, he knew of the place where I had came from (the Ulm School of Design, an avant-garde institution now extinct but reproduced everywhere - much as cybernetics is now), and he suggested that I come to the University of Illinois to study with W. Ross Ashby. This short encounter enrolled me into cybernetics and defined my intellectual focus for years to come.

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Recollections of Heinz von Foerster, a rhetorical genius[1]

Klaus Krippendorff[2]

On a cold day between Christmas and New Year 1961, in search of a place to study, I met Heinz in his office at the Biological Computer Laboratory. I knew of him through a network of designers who, like me, were interested in issues that conventional curricula did not address. Heinz greeted me, a total stranger, with the enthusiasm usually reserved for an old friend. To my surprise, he knew of the place where I had came from (the Ulm School of Design, an avant-garde institution now extinct but reproduced everywhere - much as cybernetics is now), and he suggested that I come to the University of Illinois to study with W. Ross Ashby. This short encounter enrolled me into cybernetics and defined my intellectual focus for years to come.

Heinz was an amazing orator. He used the language of mathematics to ingeniously demonstrate the profundity of simple ideas. In 1974, now a professor of communication, I organized an American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) conference on cybernetics in society at the University of Pennsylvania. He had just finished teaching his famous course on the cybernetics of cybernetics and brought a carload of students from Urbana to Philadelphia. He was the key note speaker, of course. I can still see him addressing the audience with his usual Viennese charm: "Ladies and Gentlemen." Calling our attention to the axiomatic phrase "Anything said is said by an observer," he named it Humberto Maturana's Theorem Number One, and suggested a "modest" extension: "Heinz von Foerster's Corollary Number One: 'Anything said is said to an observer'." In a stroke of genius, by changing only one two-letter word, he shifted our epistemologic attention from Maturana's acts of observation to acts of communication and proceeded to show that such acts entail responsibilities that we must not transfer to others.

Heinz accomplished rhetorical feasts like that often and with the ease of a magician: asking questions that others had not thought of; turning conventional beliefs into puzzling opposites; leading his audiences to consider alternative ways of thinking - always moving recursive constructions of human activity into the center of the conversations. Heinz' greatest strength undoubtedly was his ability to encourage others to be audacious as well, to have the courage to ponder radical questions. Doing this was his cybernetics and it has now become ours.

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We stayed in touch by phone, exchanged papers, and met at many conferences and on his beloved Rattlesnake Hill. For the last couple of years, he was not well, he told me. But as a second-order cybernetician, this did not prevent him from applying his own principles to himself and carrying on against all medical predictions, always positive, curious, interpersonally engaged, fascinated by new ideas, and excited about even the smallest accomplishments. The last time I saw Heinz was in June 2002, with a friend. He greeted us with his characteristically animated, "Hello," inquired about our plans for the forthcoming cybernetics conference in Santa Cruz, asked about the people in our lives, wanted to know of any breakthroughs, and showed us the latest books about him. He was full of live and present against all odds.

Reading interviews of him or transcripts of his talks, those who knew him cannot but help hearing his exuberance, sensing his energy, and enjoying his playful juggling of ideas— even through translations. We will miss him, but his voice will continue to be heard.

10th Macy-Conference on Cybernetics, Princeton, 1953. Heinz von Foerster sitting far side, second from the right (photographer unknown)

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