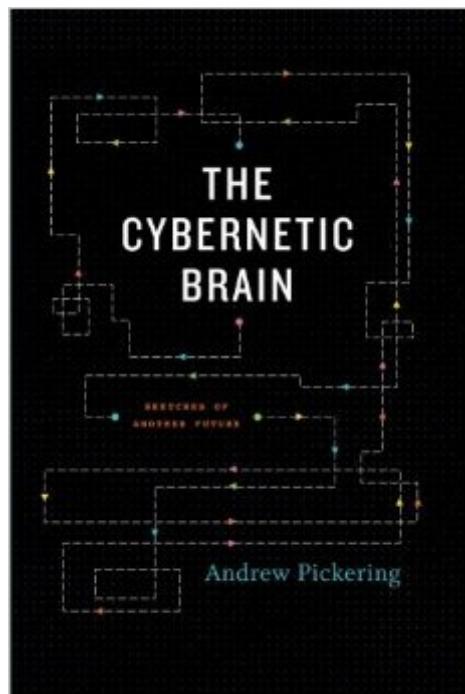


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The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches Of Another Future



Synopsis

Cybernetics is often thought of as a grim military or industrial science of control. But as Andrew Pickering reveals in this beguiling book, a much more lively and experimental strain of cybernetics can be traced from the 1940s to the present. The Cybernetic Brain explores a largely forgotten group of British thinkers, including Grey Walter, Ross Ashby, Gregory Bateson, R. D. Laing, Stafford Beer, and Gordon Pask, and their singular work in a dazzling array of fields. Psychiatry, engineering, management, politics, music, architecture, education, tantric yoga, the Beats, and the sixties counterculture all come into play as Pickering follows the history of cybernetics' impact on the world, from contemporary robotics and complexity theory to the Chilean economy under Salvador Allende. What underpins this fascinating history, Pickering contends, is a shared but unconventional vision of the world as ultimately unknowable, a place where genuine novelty is always emerging. And thus, Pickering avers, the history of cybernetics provides us with an imaginative model of open-ended experimentation in stark opposition to the modern urge to achieve domination over nature and each other.

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Customer Reviews

Andrew Pickering seeks to rescue cybernetics from the margins and to make it more widely available. Writing from outside the cybernetic camp, he is able to approach the subject matter in an impartial way. Counting myself as a member of the cybernetic community, I believe he has met his aim with great success. He makes a convincing case for a cybernetic worldview that is quite distinct

from the traditional worldview of physics. Pickering argues that the latter rests on the assumption that everything is in principle knowable, and that if we know enough about things in themselves, it increases our control over them. Distinct from this, he describes cybernetics as having emerged with what he calls a 'performative' worldview. This is complementary to the approach of physics, with a focus upon human interaction with the phenomenal world, rather than striving to understand it 'out there' without reference to the observer of it. In this performative worldview, the basic assumption is the essential unknowability of things. Human knowledge is then seen as a 'process of becoming' which arises through the cycle of doing followed by reflection on the effects of our doing. Such a cycle entails a view of human knowledge as a capacity to understand a dynamic and changing reality through our engagement with it over time - hence 'performative'. There is no rejection of a physics-orientated view (after all, the background of the author is physics). But, during and immediately after the Second World War, in response to the huge challenges posed by increasing rates of change and complexity, certain individuals developed an approach intended to more effectively tackle indeterminate and massively complex dynamic systems.

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