

DVD review: The Net

Mix Ted Kaczynski with LSD; do you get The Unabomber?

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reviewed in this article

The Net: The Unabomber, LSD, and the Internet by Lutz Dammbeck

Other Cinema, San Francisco, 2003

www.othercinemadvd.com/net.html

“Facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.”

–Werner Herzog, filmmaker.

“Truth is the invention of a liar.”

–Heinz von Foerster, cybernetician.

German director Lutz Dammbeck's documentary, *The Net*, is a penetrating look at technological mediation that finds unexpected connections between philosophy, technology, drugs, and government experimentation.

While this sounds like the recipe for conspiracy theory, Dammbeck delivers something of a higher order. He uses a simple, cinema-verite style to examine his own relationship with digital technology; we see Dammbeck using his laptop to assemble the film on airplanes, in rental cars, and internet cafes. During interviews, the camera pans to reveal a second camera, or the director's computer as it captures images. In Dammbeck's vision of the American landscape, the video screens of Times Square loom overhead, and surveillance cameras stare from every corner.

The structure of the film unfolds in the form of a flowchart, one you see Dammbeck working on in downtime between interviews. This flowchart begins with Ted Kaczynski, who was known as the Unabomber for his multi-year bombing campaign against pro-technology targets.

A quick recap will be helpful: A gifted student of mathematics, Kaczynski entered Harvard University when he was 16 years old (Kaczynski has stated that it was while at Harvard that he began to develop his deep mistrust of the technological utopia). He went on to become a professor at Berkeley, teaching there at the height of the counterculture moment of the late 1960s.

Kaczynski then dropped out of society altogether, purchasing a small tract of land in Montana, where he developed his anti-technological philosophy and lived as simply as he could. In the early 1980s, Kaczynski undertook his famous series of mail bombings, targeting those he felt were close to the symbolic heart of the industrial-technological complex. Kaczynski speaks for himself in *The Net*—he exchanged a series of letters with Dammbeck—and uses a sharp rhetorical style to make his points while keeping his personal history and feelings obscure.

Retracing Kaczynski's steps, Dammbeck jumps back in time to map the development of the information technologies which were particularly irksome to Kaczynski, and which have so drastically changed the world. In the

hopes of developing better weapons guidance systems (and other goodies to win the Cold War and the Space Race), the US government funded extensive research into applications of cybernetics, a school of information theory.

The philosophical core of cybernetics is the idea that consciousness imperfectly approximates reality, always refining its awareness through complex systems of feedback. Using this model of consciousness, cybernetics helped to develop first the computer, and then the internet.

Between 1946 and 1953, the leading cybernetics researchers participated in a series of government-sponsored think-tank sessions known as the Macy Conferences, which drew participants from the top ranks not only of the “hard” sciences, but also social scientists such as Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, with the goal of applying cybernetics to “biological and social systems.”

Break Down Traditional Modes of Life

According to Dammebeck, the ultimate goal of these conferences was nothing less than an attempt to engineer a global utopia, one that could avert further world wars by routing out the cultural underpinnings of totalitarianism, and by weakening ethnic and national allegiances. The idea was to break down all traditional modes of life, rendering culture fluid so that it could be reorganized on a global scale.

During the rise of the counterculture of the 1960s, many Macy conference participants were busy disseminating a philosophy based on cybernetic principles. These ideas were expounded by such countercultural luminaries as Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller and John Cage, and began to reach the trend-setting world of the avant-garde arts (Fluxus, “happenings,” the emerging multimedia scene). These cybernetic artists were among the early adopters of LSD, a drug that many thought would usher in the kind of global utopia envisioned by the Macy Conferences.

The US government had begun exploring uses of LSD in the early 1960s. While it was perhaps hoped to be a mind control agent, experimenters found the drug more useful in breaking down and analyzing the personality of subjects.

Tests along these lines were carried out at Harvard University under the auspices of Henry A. Murray, professor of Social Relations, who had formulated psychological assessment tests used by the OSS—the precursor of the CIA. One of Murray’s subjects in LSD experiments was Harvard mathematics student Theodore Kaczynski.

This piece of information is the hinge on which this film turns, but how are we meant to understand this? Is Dammebeck playing psychologist, asserting that Kaczynski’s refusal of the technological utopia was simply a reaction to his experiences as a test subject?

1960s a cybernetic experiment?

Is he suggesting that Kaczynski was somehow programmed to carry out his bombing campaign? Even more troubling, is he asserting that the entire countercultural movement of the 1960s was just a cybernetic experiment?

In a manner that’s bound to frustrate some viewers, Dammebeck doesn’t wrap up this story in a neat package. The film portrays Kaczynski as neither hero nor villain, but as the living convergence of important historical and philosophical currents.

The Net is a study in how utopias are made real, and how they become monstrous. Even with the best of intentions—the eradication of fascism—the Macy Conference project may have succeeded in reorganizing the world to closely resemble a cybernetic system.

Just think of the ubiquity of the inter-net in our lives, the rapid growth in “social networking” that represents the conquest of virtual networks over lived reality. In this global feedback system, everything is connected, everything is subject to measurement and surveillance.

Critics of technology can learn a great deal from the genealogy of this technological system.

Along with books like Manuel DeLanda’s *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, Lutz Dammebeck’s *The Net* is a major step towards understanding this utopia that has been forced on us.

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