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Gregory Bateson addressing the camera in unedited footage shot for *The Nature of Play: Part 1, River Otters*, dir. Gregory Bateson and Weldon Kees, 1954. Bateson Collection at the Don D. Jackson Archive, University of Louisiana at Monroe. Reproduced with permission of the Bateson Idea Group.

# Editor's Introduction: What Bound the Double Bind?

**BERNARD DIONYSIUS GEOGHEGAN**

In 1952 the anthropologist Gregory Bateson successfully applied to the Rockefeller Foundation for a two-year, \$30,000 grant to convene a team at the Palo Alto Veterans Administration Hospital for the study of “problems on the borderline between anthropology, psychiatry and cybernetics.”<sup>1</sup> The project members formed the core of what became known as the Palo Alto Group, best known for founding an approach to psychotherapy based on the identification and treatment of “double binds.” They defined double binds as logical paradoxes in patterns of family communication that compelled a single family member—the person labeled mentally ill—to devise aberrant modes of interaction that bridged seemingly irreconcilable injunctions from the family.<sup>2</sup> For example, they argued that conflation of literal and metaphorical language by schizophrenic patients embodied the case of an individual resolving logical contradictions between the messages communicated by the words and the actions of family members. Adapting Bertrand Russell’s theory of logical types, which treated the problem of discontinuity between a class and its members, Bateson and his colleagues termed schizophrenics’ characteristic mixing of discursive levels “type confusion.” Psychotherapists, the hypothesis suggested, could enter into this communication network to help unbind these pathological patterns of interaction. Although the group’s hypothesis appeared in print in the 1956 article “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” exactly what led to the double-bind hypothesis has never quite been clear.<sup>3</sup> The dossier presented in this issue of *Grey Room* offers an answer: Media made the double bind.

The dossier includes previously unpublished texts that Bateson cited as the source of the double-bind hypothesis.<sup>4</sup> The first item is a transcript of the voiceover to *The Nature of Play: Part 1, River Otters*, an educational film Bateson and artist Weldon Kees coproduced in 1954. Bateson traced the origins of the film to a trip he and Kees took to the Fleishhacker Zoo in San Francisco in 1952. Observing two monkeys engaged in playful mock combat, Bateson concluded that “this phenomenon, play, could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of metacommunication, i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message ‘this is play.’”<sup>5</sup>

Based on this observation, Bateson concluded that even elementary communication may operate on multiple levels that qualify one another and that a certain amount of coordination between levels is required to enable orderly and meaningful communication. This conclusion oriented the Palo Alto Group's later efforts to consider the confusion of literal and metaphorical discourse by schizophrenic patients as an effort to resolve binds between communicative and metacommunicative levels.

In *The Nature of Play: Part 1, River Otters*, shot in 1952 and 1953, then edited and distributed in 1954, Bateson and Kees sought to document empirically these multiple levels of communication and thereby contribute both to theories of psychotherapy and to a general theory of communication that encompassed human and nonhuman systems.<sup>6</sup> As I indicate in "The Family as Machine" (in this issue), the film served a trinity of museological, pedagogical, and analytical purposes: it constituted part of the Palo Alto Group's burgeoning media archive documenting pathological communication; it provided illustrations for instructional purposes; and it functioned as an instrument of observation for identifying binding actions too fleeting for observation by the naked eye. Some time after observing the monkeys at play, Bateson and Kees returned to the zoo with motion picture cameras and selected for detailed study two normally playful animals, river otters, that had slipped into behavioral patterns resembling depression. The animals' enclosure inside a concrete cage provided an implicit parallel for both the constraints of the family and the asylum that fixed mental patients within a closed system of communications. In the film, Bateson and Kees played the role of animal psychotherapists by tossing items into the enclosure in order to disrupt the pathologically stable ennui prevailing among the otters.

In 1953 and 1954 Bateson and his colleagues exhibited uncut versions of the film to multiple audiences, including officers at the Rockefeller Foundation and attendees of the 1954 conference of the American Psychiatric Association in Mexico City.<sup>7</sup> Despite the citation of this work in "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia" and plans to produce sequels, the film never circulated widely, and the sequels never appeared. A rough cut of the film held in the Gregory Bateson Collection of the Don D. Jackson Archive at the University of Louisiana at Monroe, and copies of the film in the Gregory Bateson Papers at the University of California (UC), Santa Cruz, are the only copies known to exist in public collections. The transcript published here is taken from the video copy held in the UC Santa Cruz archives. The images come from the digital copies held at the Jackson Archive and include stills from rough cuts of *The Nature of Play: Part 2*, a filmic study of the training of seeing-eye dogs. Bateson characterized the

second film as “an attempt to study the nature of non-play,” which he hoped would lead to new insights into communication, perhaps through an eventual “study of the psychopathology of those dogs which flunked the training course.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1954, around the time that *The Nature of Play: Part 1, River Otters* was completed, Bateson sought to convey his emerging research on type confusion in a letter to mathematician Norbert Wiener—the founder of cybernetics whom Bateson counted as a colleague, interlocutor, and friend. This letter composed and sent to Wiener in 1954, a follow-up letter by Bateson also dated 1954, and a third letter commenting on the composition of the 1954 letter that Bateson sent to Wiener in 1959 form the second part of this dossier. The first letter to Wiener was composed not long after the Rockefeller Foundation had rejected Bateson’s request for another two years of funding. Bateson was thus on the lookout for colleagues, institutes, and foundations that might help him secure financing to continue the Palo Alto Group’s work. In the letter he includes an outline of his ongoing work, including an account of the “minimum constellation necessary for type confusion” likely to produce double-binding actions. This letter offers the first theoretical account of the double-bind hypothesis (albeit absent that term) and shows the conceptual translations that were involved in its development. Where *The Nature of Play* sought to transpose observations of animals onto a general theory of communications that would encompass human beings but also apply to other systems, the account offered to Wiener conceptualized animal behavior in theoretical terms that might circulate among, for example, engineers and natural scientists. When Bateson rediscovered the first letter five years later he wrote to Wiener again, identifying it as “the first version of the ‘double bind’ hypothesis on which we [the Palo Alto Group] have been working ever since,” adding that “it was because I was writing to you [Wiener] that I could think those thoughts on that day.”

Bateson’s ability to think those thoughts also rested on a longer history of medical and medial experimentation. In the 1930s Bateson and then-wife Margaret Mead had shot more than 25,000 photographs and 20,000 feet of film in an attempt to document “culturally standardized” behaviors of the Balinese, based on their hypothesis that the low incidence of dementia praecox (or schizophrenia) among the Balinese stemmed from distinct cultural practices that resolved the psychic tension responsible for mental illness.<sup>9</sup> Bateson put this work on hold in the 1940s as he busied himself with contributions to the war effort (e.g., studies of propaganda in film), adjunct lecturing at the New School for Social Research and Harvard University, and participation in the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics. In 1949 Bateson, amid the breakup of his marriage to Mead, decamped to

San Francisco to accept an appointment in medical anthropology at the University of California School of Medicine in San Francisco.<sup>10</sup> Besides instructing doctors at the Langley-Porter Neuropsychiatric Clinic, he worked part-time with the Swiss psychiatrist Jurgen Ruesch on a federally funded project investigating mental health from the perspective of communications and interaction. From 1949 to 1952 Ruesch and Bateson coproduced educational films and coauthored the monograph *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*.<sup>11</sup> Their book advanced an approach to psychotherapy that conceived of patients, their families, and therapists as part of an integrated network of recursive communication. As Seth Watter and I show in our essays in this issue of *Grey Room*, ongoing media practice throughout the 1950s, including experimental filmmaking and film analyses conducted with Ray Birdwhistell, members of the Palo Alto Group, and other collaborators, synthesized and disseminated this research. The double-bind hypothesis emerged from this milieu of media experimentation and provided a formula for its expansion to new realms.

The publication in this dossier of the film transcript and letters, as well as the essays in this issue on the broader scientific framework in which the double-bind hypothesis took shape, highlights the everyday media and research practices that recast mid-twentieth-century “social sciences” as cybernetically inspired “behavioral sciences.” The insight these texts offer into the multimedial composition and interdisciplinary context of 1950s communications research helps explain how the double-bind hypothesis came to reverberate across fields as diverse as critical theory, psychotherapy, anthropology, game studies, and the visual arts. Along with the publication in 2013 of Deborah Weinstein’s seminal study *The Pathological Family*, these texts reconstruct a heretofore occluded scientific itinerary by which cybernetics composed concepts drawn from communication engineering, ethnography, psychoanalysis, analytic philosophy, and psychiatry into a single conceptual program.<sup>12</sup>

For the historian of material culture, the texts published here also provide traces in the media history (or medial history) of the twentieth-century sciences. The educational film that discloses patterns of animal behavior for reforming analysis by scientists in the laboratory and students in the classroom; and the letter that enacts a discursive leap from the anthropologist to the mathematician—taken together they map the materials, techniques, and trajectories by which postwar sciences of communications formalized observations from one field into a series of mobile (and often mutable) traces suitable for reception and reconfiguration in other fields of study.<sup>13</sup> The most oft-cited antecedents for this media-driven mobilization are the laboratories of World War II where interdisciplinary teams of engineers, physiologists, and psychologists devised instruments and techniques for integrating

the human body into complex machine systems. However, as several scholars have argued in recent years, this mobilization rested on a wider technical terrain that drew liberally from the arts as well as the sciences.<sup>14</sup> This literature suggests previously unnoticed proximities of wartime research—on media technology, on human perception—to experimental cultures of visualization in the arts (as well as praxeological and medial roots in the prewar contexts). Thus the close association of digital media with multimedia, long attributed to the universalizing powers of zeroes and ones, appears to have taken an important detour through celluloid, photography, magnetic tape, museum exhibitions, and print media. In this regard, the multiplicity of potential origins this dossier suggests for the double-bind thesis—in a film, a letter, scientific articles, and beyond—is not so much about uncovering mutually exclusive origins from which to choose. Rather, it is an exemplification of the media-technical dispersion that shaped postwar scientific and artistic cultures and continues to inform the multimedia cultures of today.

## Notes

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1. Gregory Bateson to Chester Barnard, 28 February 1952, in R.g. 1.1 (Project Files), series 200 Stanford University—Bateson—Communications and Psychiatry, box 60, folder 718 (FA 386), Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Tarrytown, New York.

2. Gregory Bateson et al., “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” *Behavioral Science* 1, no. 4 (1956): 251–64.

3. Bateson et al., “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia.”

4. See also the essays in this issue by Seth Watter and Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan that explore the wider gambit of media practices within which the double-bind hypothesis was developed and disseminated. On the other film, see Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), x, 179.

5. Bateson, 179.

6. The dating of this film presents some problems. Bateson’s colleague Jay Haley credibly claims that shooting began in 1952, before the awarding of the Rockefeller grant. See Jay Haley, “Development of a Theory: A History of a Research Project,” in *Double Bind: The Foundation of the Communicational Approach to the Family*, ed. C.E. Sluski and D.C. Ransom (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1976), 62. Raw footage held in the Gregory Bateson Collection at the Don D. Jackson Archive, University of Louisiana at Monroe, is dated 1953.

7. On the exhibition of the film at the conference, see Haley, “Development of a Theory.” An account of the film’s (poorly received) screening for officers at the Rockefeller Foundation appears in the professional diary of officer R.S. Morison, 19 April 1954, in R.g. 1.1 (Project Files), Rockefeller Foundation Archives.

8. These remarks are drawn from Bateson’s 1954 application to the Rockefeller Foundation for a one-year renewal of his grant. See “The Role of Paradoxes of Abstraction in Communication,” ca. April 1954, p. 8, in R.g. 1.1 (Project Files), Rockefeller Foundation Archives.

9. See Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1962), xii; Ira Jacknis, “Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali: Their Use of Photography and Film,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 2 (May 1988): 160–77; and Fatimah Tobing Rony, “The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s “Trance and Dance in Bali,”” *Discourse* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 5–27.

10. David Lipset, *Gregory Bateson: The Legacy of a Scientist* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 178.

11. See Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson, *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1951). For more on the films, see my essay elsewhere in this issue of *Grey Room*.

12. See Deborah Weinstein, *The Pathological Family: Postwar American and the Rise of Family Therapy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

13. Bruno Latour argues that natural science emerges from the production of immutable mobiles, semiotic systems that can travel across contexts while retaining

a certain set of immutable characteristics. See Bruno Latour, “Drawing Things Together,” in *Representation in Scientific Practice*, ed. Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 19–68. Cyberneticians tended to forge *mutable* mobiles that contributed to the eventual dissolution of cybernetics as a discrete and stable scientific field. However, this mutability also greatly increased the circulation of cybernetics.

14. See Peter Sachs Collopy, “The Revolution Will Be Videotaped: Marking a Technology of Consciousness in the Long 1960s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015); Eric de Bruyn, “Topological Pathways of Post-Minimalism,” *Grey Room* 25 (Fall 2006): 32–63; Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); William Kaizen, “Steps to an Ecology of Communication: Radical Software, Dan Graham, and the Legacy of Gregory Bateson,” *Art Journal* 67, no. 3 (2008): 86–106; Carolyn L. Kane, “The Tragedy of Radical Subjectivity: From Radical Software to Proprietary Subjects,” *Leonardo* 47, no. 5 (2014): 480–87; and Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).