Is Kevin Warwick a Dandy?

Observation, self-control and the evolution
Of perception-steering mechanisms

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ABSTRACT
In honouring certain achievements of Professor Felix Geyer, this paper explores the idea of 'Dandyism'. It reminds us that whereas, in the eighteenth-century, a 'fop' was a figure identified with femininity and folly through 'over-dressing'; the dandy originally exemplified elegance and self-restraint. Dandyism therefore epitomised a more masculine balance between fastidiousness and casualness. In discussing this issue, the paper refers to cybernetic principles that are now – as a result of Professor Geyer's leadership – more accessible to the field of sociology. In cybernetic terms, although this mode of 'self control' may sound austere it is different from first-order systems because its feedback and feedforward processes can be seen to co-create more than the nominal states and actions of the Cartesian ego, or what we might call the 'categorical self'. In order to be effective, it must reconcile many co-dependent ontological and epistemological layers that balance, for example, the anticipated and modified perceptions of others with those of the actative self, internalised self-image, self-other, and self-to-self-other image, etc. In seeking to reflect upon the spirit of Dandyism, the paper itself occasionally becomes a self-reflexive toy. As such it can be seen as a smart raincoat or favourite cigar, once part of a fashionable lifestyle, but now summoned only by masterly gesture or innuendo.

The Dandy of Cybernetics
This paper argues that if cybernetics has given sociology a new language of observer-centred observation, then we may develop its reflexive capabilities to explore Dandyism as an experiential model of autopoiesis. It suggests that the phenomenon of the Dandy can be seen as a technique of self-observing self-awareness that emerged partly as a critique of classical science. Our story is about a handful of cybernetics professors who helped to put these, and many other issues on the intellectual map. One has been described as a cyborg, at least one may have been a Dandy, and the third is our honoured guest. We will return to

these distinctions later. Two are Englishmen. Gordon Pask is famous for devising an elegant theory of conversation (Pask, 1975). He was often described as 'The Dandy of Cybernetics'. This was not because, like all Dandies he enjoyed a many-layered, self-reflexive conversation, but, rather disappointingly, because of his fondness for Edwardian dress.

A self-confessed cyborg
The second is claimed to be the leading expert on cybernetics. Professor Kevin Warwick of Reading University has had digital chips surgically implanted in his body. Many non-specialists readers will recognise his name from articles in the mass media. Indeed, he is frequently depicted as a cyborg, presumably because journalists of the popular press are always attracted to stories of technology, the uncanny and personal eccentricity. Compared with Gordon Pask and Kevin Warwick, Felix Geyer – in whose honour this paper has been written – may be less of a sensational or controversial figure. However, he is at least one hundred percent human and considerably less a Dandy. Without cigar or spectacles he is no more a cyborg than are you, or I. In Montreal, 1998, Felix led a campaign to have 'Sociocybernetics' formally acknowledged as an established feature of the Sociological landscape. His crowning success, the acceptance of Research Centre 51 within the International Sociological Association is an enduring testament to his genial tenacity and to his clarity of purpose.

Reconciling (and winning) hearts and minds
Felix's victory was not an easy one. Before Nikolas Luhmann brought credibility to systems thinking, the discourse of Cybernetics had been seen by many as being too mechanistic, reductionist and hard-edged. For some purist thinkers, Cybernetics had about the same importance on as an oily rag or a brass ball. For many years it failed to win the hearts and minds of those who feel nauseous or giddy when they hear the word 'system'. Behind the problem of bringing Cybernetics and Sociology within a common framework lies an older epistemological problem. It is the western tendency to separate 'medium' from 'content'. This is traceable to the introduction of alphabetical writing. It is also attributable to the influence of Pythagoras and his faith in mathematics as the originary and universal truth. It is behind the strong 18th century belief that reason should moderate human passion. Although Felix Geyer's achievement may not yet have served to unify these different schools of hearts and minds, future historians might one day see his work as a useful step towards it.

Reconciling the inside with the outside
In the 19th century, Lord Byron and his friends sought a discourse that would help them to describe their feelings and experiences. Although he

made famous the suggestion that his life was probably more important than his work, it is hard to know whether he was more interested in the public image or the inner life of his art. Today, we may say that they are co-dependent aspects of the same system. Similarly, Coleridge's invention and use of the word 'self-consciousness' does not really tell us much about his inner experience of the psyche and whether this was more, or less important to him than the way that it affected his fame or other aspects of outward appearance. By way of contrast, the Dandies drew attention to their image and presence rather than to their work or professional status. They had no explicit philosophy. They were neither rationalists of the Enlightenment, nor were they Romantics in the actively artistic sense of the word.

The self-reflexive ego
Sociocybernetics has established a discursive basis that could help us to describe both of these approaches. Today, as creatures of the 21st century, we subscribe to both doctrines. On the one hand, we often describe ourselves from a detached, external viewpoint; perhaps using medical jargon picked up from the Internet, or from late night educational broadcasts. At the same time we are obliged to make 'free' consumer choices and to experience the world in a uniquely idiosyncratic way. As global citizens in a world of consumption we are increasingly expected to live out a Byronesque sense of personal freedom whilst discriminating meaningfully between brands, styles, and fashions. On both levels, a kind of post-hoc and interpretative mode of self-observation is used to regulate personal actions at the level of instinct and bodily reflexes. This is where the culture of Holland may have inspired ideas that differ from those of warmer or colder climates.

The self-revealing ego
As socially responsible beings, the Dutch seem very relaxed with their individual freedom. Those I have met seem to understand it as part of a system that creates homeostasis at the social level. Many houses and apartments have large windows that reveal their occupants conducting their private business. For systems thinkers, it may come as no surprise to remind ourselves that the 'reality' TV programme 'Big Brother' was first developed in Holland. Likewise, we may remember that the inventor of the thermostat – Cornelius Drebbel (1572-1634) - was a Dutchman. However, whether we should also thank the Dutch for the systemic thinking behind capitalism is a sensitive matter. Protagonists of monetarism have argued that a self-organising monetary system is, ultimately, equitable. The Scotsman Adam Smith is usually praised (or blamed) as the originator of what he called the 'invisible hand' (1776). However, we should not forget that it was another Dutchman, Bernard de

Mandeville, whose joke (1704) about the social benefits of selfishness was taken seriously by Smith.

The virtue of self-regulation
From this, it may be clear that the protestant idea of open-source 'self-regulation' predates our three professors. In fact, the idea can also be traced back to the roots of humanism itself. In Confucian and Socratic terms we might even say that the humble thermostatic system merely reminds us of the moral lesson that every creature should get more closely in touch with itself. Half a century ago, Erasmus (1466-1536) challenged the Calvinist emphasis on Christ as the sole source of redemption. Instead, he espoused a belief in 'free will' and 'virtuous actions' as part of the equation. Within this humanist framework, our spiritual destiny became more answerable to the self. However, the Protestant license to become introspective led to a possible bifurcation between self-approval and self-criticism. This is one of the important boundaries upon which the Dandy does most of his 'conceptual surfing'. Crudely speaking this system can be seen as a building block of the 'self-organising self'. In cybernetic terms it presents a fine balance, and a creative interplay between 'me' and 'society', i.e. between autarchy and heterarchy. It can be regarded as a useful example of what cyberneticians call 'circular causality'.

The idea of the self as a system
Whereas the idea of *individual* self-control became conceivable during the 18th century, in the 20th century we increasingly refer to *systems* that regulate or create themselves. This idea derives from cybernetics and its collaborators from adjacent disciplines. Even after Luhmann, Lovelock, or von Bertalanffy there may be some readers who suspect that by using the word 'self' to refer to both 'people' and 'systems' we risk eroding more spiritual or post-Marxist ideas of 'self'. True, the conflation of these two ideas has probably contributed to the development of corporate instrumentalism and public cynicism. Nonetheless, cybernetics can justifiably claim some special understanding of concepts such as 'positive self-regard' (Rogers, 1951), 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959), and 'self-actualisation' (Maslow, 1987). Where second-order cybernetics appears to challenge the solipsistic legacy of Descartes and Berkeley, it is not always so simple. Heinz von Foerster's "we think, therefore we are"; "to know is to be". (1993, in Scott, 2002) goes some way to redeeming us, but certain dualistic assumptions are still implicit. Perhaps we would need to map the boundaries between inner-facing self-perceptions and those connoted from the feedback from others.

Honour and competition

Can Sociocybernetics help us to get in touch with the way Dandies feel and act? This raises questions about our self-regulatory styles and how we may monitor informational feedback and feedforward between outside and inside. Just as Greeks in the time of Socrates competed fiercely to attain honour, so the Duke of Wellington urged his officers to be well groomed and calm. Arguably, they are different styles of the same thing. However, this raises questions about how we maintain equilibrium between internal and external aspects of self-image. From a patriarchal perspective, the origins of Dandyism seem characteristically male. The idea of honour was one of the reasons for the rise of rhetoric and a pride in competition. There are tales of Spartan soldiers seen combing their hair before battle. When asked what they were doing they replied "We are preparing to die". Samurai warriors and North American Indians have said similar things. Perhaps this is the 'boys thing' that some countries call 'machissmo'. In all the above cases we may note that self-gratification is subservient to the goal of living up to one's reputation. This is part of what constitutes the psychic make-up of the Dandy.

Conspicuous solipsism

In western modernist art we have seen this exemplified in peculiarly male genres. We can discern it from the 20th century rise in conspicuous, egoistic solipsism that could be mapped into alternative pathways that follow Beethoven and Wagner, through to Schönberg, Stravinsky, Cage, and Glass. In more popular music it might be explored through Charlie Parker, Lou Reed, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Cash, or Oasis. It could also be traced through Caspar David Friedrich, William Turner, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock, Damien Hirst, and the Chapman brothers. Likewise, we could find a similar trajectory through John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, William Burroughs, and Ted Hughes. At the actative level, the dynamics are different but, for obvious reasons they are more blatant and accessible. Male actors such as Lawrence Olivier, Humphrey Bogart, Richard Burton, Michael Caine, James Fox, and Jeremy Irons have all helped to make the techniques of self-observation accessible to non-actors. In a less heroic way way, this also happened with female actors such as Dame Edith Evans, Bette Davis, Angela Lansbury, Elizabeth Taylor, Meryl Streep, Julie Andrews, Barbara Streisand, Goldie Horn, Cher, and Glenn Close.

The celebration of lack

In the evolution of our globalised system of consumption this experience was useful as a performative ethics of being and becoming that was part of the system of marketing. Summarised as an embodied philosophy of being and becoming it could be summarised as 'feeling good, looking

good'. Once, this positive mode of enactment was enough. Indeed, the golden years of Hollywood abounded with images of glowing self-contentment and power, as celebrated in the charm and charisma of actors such as Clark Gable, John Wayne, David Niven, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis Junior. In more recent times, the insatiable demands of our global growth economy has encouraged us to focus upon desire, rather than its gratification. Today, many of the most famous male stars in Hollywood are better known for their tireless enactment of disappointment and disdain. Here, we may pay particular attention to the self-awareness that accompanies an uncomfortable sense of craving. Indeed, in the 'needy look' of actors such as Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood, Al Pachino, Harrison Ford, Michael Douglas, or Samuel L. Jackson we see an infantile ego that seems to say, "I deserve more".

Enacting the post-modern reflexive condition
In the last few decades, cynicism has become a vital ingredient of global capitalism. For this reason we can also find that we are moving towards narratives that cannot be bound by their own internal structure and logic alone. In all cases, higher orders of feedback are becoming necessary to sustain continuity across the whole system of production. This can be seen in the ironic, self-aware productions of Mel Brooks, Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, or George Michael. Many artists have long shown a natural flair for self-reflexive self-promotion. Salvador Dali, Marcel Duchamp, and Gilbert and George have all used it. Today we now find it at a more sophisticated level in the self-awareness of Cindy Sherman, Madonna, Tracy Emin, Damien Hirst and David Blain. Any such study of the self-observing observer raises methodological issues because observer, observed and observation cannot always be differentiated. This problem will become even more difficult when we encounter further levels of reflexive irony. This can be exemplified in attempting to map the levels of arrogant self-awareness of Ricky Gervaise (star of the TV series 'The Office') and in the self-effacing, self-analytical self-promotion of British novelist Will Self.

Regulating the 'self-made man'
How valid would it be to conduct our research as a Dandy? As we have seen, it may be easier to explore the origins of Dandyism, rather than the most recent and ephemeral trends. The Dandy movement became fashionable in the late 18th century until the early 19th century. The Dandy was characterised by a rigid sense of protocol in which clothing must be perfect, but understated or even inconspicuous. Socially (and cybernetically) speaking the Dandy was a self-made man. He pretended to be amoral, passion-less, and disinterested in politics or ambition. It was therefore essential to balance an air of self-superiority with an apparent

disregard for what others might think. Beau Brummel was the original dandy, who took enormous care over his appearance, yet had no wife or lifelong partner. Here, he may be seen as the prototype for the 21st century consuming self. Under Byron's influence (1822) the Dandy looked nonchalant, but at the same time ill and tragic. As the style developed the Dandy developed an insolent look. Today, heroin chic, arrogant self-satisfaction and 'supercool' are familiar features of the fashion catwalk. They may therefore have some connection to the alarming rise of eating disorders in young women.

'Being Kevin Warwick'
At this point we will return to our original question, 'Is Kevin Warwick a Dandy?' As a Professor of Cybernetics, Dr. Warwick is a professionally active man, so that would seem unlikely. However, his all-encompassing quest is to *be* a Cyborg, and this is different from *designing* or *building* one. Indeed, we are told that his obsession overrides everything including that of a normal life. Because he conducts research into artificial intelligence, control and robotics, the attainment of self-sacrificing perfection is a heroic objective that is reminiscent of the Dandy. One of the Dandy's characteristics was his restricted regime of dress codes and self-regulatory control. It implies a focus on behavioural, rather than on emotional intelligence. This may remind us of military drill that is usually intended to operate as a closed, first order cybernetic system. This enables algorithms to prescribe predictable outcomes, but does not tolerate carelessness. Within such an Aristotelian approach, flexibility is assumed to be something that can be added later as an additional feature.

Self-regulation can reduce choice
By naming the object of his desire – i.e. becoming a cyborg – Professor Warwick's system of control resembles the mechanism of the modern hedonist in which choice lets us know whether to enjoy a certain pleasure. This reduces the individual's sensory experience by steering his attention too overtly towards his own gratification (Barthes, 1977). Indeed, some of his early implants have merely enabled Kevin to perform rather like a simple thermostat or electric door opener. For at least four hundred years our society has allowed itself to be managed by solipsistic mechanisms such as clocks and thermostats. (Wood, 2000:3, 2002, 2003) These have caused modes of spatio-temporal alienation that we intuitively know are problematic, yet commonly assume to be part of 'reality'. This is what normalises Professor Warwick's development of devices that would stimulate what he calls 'artificial' sensations in the body. For when everything is connected up as planned, Kevin would be able to communicate with his wife Irena. Where Felix Geyer has put more people

in touch with a system of thought that can address issues at the macro level, Kevin Warwick appears to be generating potentially memetic technologies that would intervene initially at the local level, and could then spread themselves more widely.

Machine-like intelligence
Scientists seldom seem to elicit the level of public consensus that would properly be required to undertake risky technological experiment. In this case, Professor Kevin Warwick's concern is with the possible threat to human society that advanced 'artificial intelligence' might impose. However, instead of focusing on the fear that his machines might become more 'intelligent' than their human counterparts, we might ask Kevin why, where, when, and under what relational context intelligence *takes place*. Arguably, the dangers of 'machine intelligence' come more from the quality of 'structural coupling' (Maturana & Varela, 1980) within the system, rather than whether or not their intelligence seems 'superior' to that of society's. Technology is not just a discrete instrumental process of fashioning, it is an emergent system of sensing and integrating that implicates the whole eco-system (Lovelock, 1979; Swann, 1994). Indeed, it would be impossible for organisms to communicate without it. Without communication at the ecological level there could be no threat from 'intelligent' machines. As such, the quality of their integration is more important than their intelligence. This is why we should be wary of Professor Warwick's approach. Any technology that masks or distorts our self-reflexive awareness of the biosphere – including us as individuals and societies - carries risks that should be critically evaluated by everyone.

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Biography

John Wood is Reader in Design Futures at Goldsmiths University of London and co-founder of the 'Attainable Utopias' network. He is also a consultant to the 'WritingPAD' research project, which is exploring the way that artists and designers write in an academic context. He has practised as an artist, inventor, author, and performer. Before writing several radical, holistic degree courses in Design, Wood was deputy head of Fine Art at Goldsmiths'. His interests include the philosophical and ecological aspects of technology and design in the era of global consumption.

Wood has published over a hundred articles and papers, and a book "The Virtual Embodied" (Routledge, 1998). His band 'Deaf School' made five albums (the latest double album "Second Honeymoon" was released in November 2003). Between 1990 and 1994 he developed a software authoring system for designers called 'IDEAbase'. As an artist he has exhibited more than 20 countries, including the Australian Biennial (1988). Between 1973 and 1976, he invented, marketed, and published a series of energy conservation systems.

PURPOSE OF PAPER
To celebrate the life and achievements of Felix Geyer by addressing issues of mutual interest, in a light-hearted and informative fashion.

Design/methodology/approach/findings
Polemical style that encapsulates the conclusions that will appeal to many types and affiliations of reader.

Research limitations
No empirical work included.

Practical implications
None.

Originality
Style, agenda, and range of concerns are unorthodox.

Findings
That, on the one hand, Felix Geyer is a cool dude who once smoked cigars and wore a raincoat. That, on the other hand, by walking around with 'implants' in his body, and by celebrating/publicising this fact to the mass media - Kevin Warwick raised issues that remind us of the cult of the Dandy.

Viewpoint
Personal reflections and opinions of the author that do not intend to reflect those of any other individual or group.