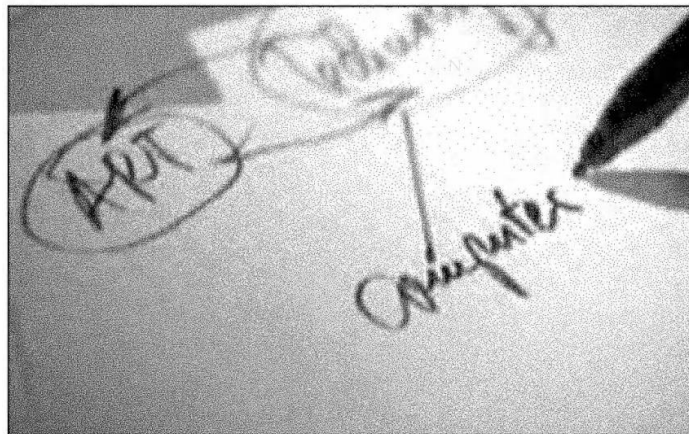


Entangled in the Matrix Net

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The Net, a documentary by filmmaker Lutz Dammbeck, explores the relationship between the development of the Internet and Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, top. Mr. Dammbeck postulates that artists and scientists use apparently similar patterns and concepts in their work.

I'm having a *Matrix* moment. You know the feeling: a vague sinking sensation when reality seems as if it is being simulated inside an enormous computer. A neo-Neo moment.

This week, Google bought YouTube for \$1.65-billion. YouTube, in case you've been dead or under a large rock, is the website where you can view videos that people have uploaded to the Internet. Only a little more than a year old, it has the largest library of videos available on the Web. Most of them are pretty silly, but in among the shots of people getting hit in the crotch, and croc hunter Steve Irwin being fatally barbed by a stingray, are some other more curious offerings.

YouTube is a conspiracy theorist's dream, as the number of clips that claim the collapse of the World Trade Center was a setup attest to. This democratization continues on Google Video (soon to swallow YouTube whole and complete its domination), which offers a number of feature documentaries including one called *The Net* by German filmmaker Lutz Dammbeck.

The Net recently screened at the Vancouver International Film Festival, but you can watch it free on the Web as many times as you would like.

This documentary explores the curious relationship between the development of the Internet and Ted Kaczynski (a.k.a. the Unabomber).

Mr. Dammbeck interviews several influential people, including John Brockman and Stewart Brand (old hippies turned founding members of the digerati); Robert Taylor, who helped to initiate the Arpanet (the precursor to the Internet); and the 90-year-old father of cybernetics, Heinz von Foerster, who offers up a few wry observations about the nature of reality itself.

Along the way, there are also traipses through Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, the Macy Conferences, Theodor Adorno's Authoritarian Personality, the connection between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the military, Norbert Wiener and cybernetics, Henry A. Murray and the LSD experiments at Harvard and crazy old Mr. Kaczynski with his terror of mind control and supercomputers.

Are you lost yet? I've watched the film a few times, and I'm still not quite sure what it all means, or if it means anything at all. Like the Internet itself, the bewildering density of information requires careful sorting.

But one idea does jump out. John Brockman paraphrases a quote from *Doubt and Certainty in Science: A Biologist's Reflections on the Brain* by J.Z. Young that states: "We create tools and then we mould ourselves through our use of them."

In the brave new world of Google Video, YouTube, MySpace, et al., what does this mean? If we create technology and then become what we have created, have we now succeeded in making Jackass World?

Although Johnny-come-Knoxvilles abound at YouTube, the site doesn't actually make money. This matters little. What Google is paying for is popularity, the sheer number of eyes looking at dumb videos. The lowest common denominator often rises to the top; here, the inmates are not only running the asylum, they also built it brick by brick.

In traditional media, still characterized by parental figures, or gatekeepers if you will, someone can decide that watching beheadings is probably not in the best interest of the public.

In the case of the Internet, which sometimes appears like a Wild West version of democracy, or maybe, more correctly, romper stomper room, the dubious cost of freedom is as apparent as the crotch shot on your screen.

Should you really be allowed to watch snuff films, even if they do originate at the end of an innocent stingray? Even more dubious is access to more porn than is wise or healthy, and its deleterious effects on young women and men. The information superhighway, as it was once so quaintly termed, has a dark swollen underbelly, bloated with cheap product and questionable content.

The ability to transfer information of all varieties — good, bad, and more often really silly — raises the question of the evolving role of the Internet. How did we get here, and just exactly where are we going? If we're all open-system neural nets, hooked into some vast social network of goofy videos and other assorted fripperies, are we, like little old Keanu, plugged in and tuned out? Does the Internet really represent a borderless cyber-world of global citizens partaking of the ultimate, free-to-be-you-and-me democracy, open to all voices and all viewpoints, however silly or dangerous.

And, what if, as Mr. Dammbeck hints in his film, it's not quite that simple. The history of the Internet itself bears witness to the strange collusion of hippie-style counterculture with what author Fred Turner, in his new book,

From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism, calls "Cold War-era military-industrial information theory." Mr. Turner's book traces the same slice of history as Mr. Dammbeck's documentary, but offers a different interpretation. Stewart Brand, like many of the originators of the modern digital era, came of age when communication was quite literally about saving the world. Where this utopian impulse went is another topic, but, as Mr. Turner notes in a phone interview, the many users of MySpace "have yet to form a political party."

It is easy to write off someone like Mr. Kaczynski — he was pretty crazy, after all — but just because you're crazy doesn't mean you don't have a point, as some critical thinkers, most notably Bill Joy, co-founder of Internet titan Sun Microsystems, have noted. Dangerous Ideas is also the central theme at the 10th annual POP!Tech Conference (Oct. 18–21), at which many of the world's pre-eminent thinkers (everyone from Richard Dawkins to Brian Eno) will be posing some tricky ethical questions about evolving technology.

So, are you being controlled by an elite group of cyber-hippies and ex-CIA military types without even knowing it? Or, as Theodor Adorno believed, lulled into a state of passivity and pseudo-individualization by pop culture. Or are you part of what Marshall McLuhan heralded as the new dawn in which "we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned."

Or as Morpheus said to Neo, “The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us... It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.”

I’m starting to feel Keanu-ish again, staring blankly into space, saying, “Whoa ...”

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The Ted K Archive

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The Globe and Mail, Oct 14, 2006, page 86. <www.theglobeandmail.com> &
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