Interview with Lutz Dammbeck

Even in an isolated forest cabin you are still part of the system

Helmut Merschmann

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When did you have the idea to make a film about the Unabomber?

It emerged during my research work on the topic of art and new technologies. Around 10 to 15 years ago, concepts like multimedia, virtuality, etc. appeared for the first time in the art context. That interested me very much, since I was "socialized" with Expanded Cinema and Multimedia. Up until then, I had simply regarded the computer as a trivial tool. Looking for protagonists for the film, I came across the American literary agent John Brockman, a great communicator, who had spun a web of his own; ranging from neurophysiology to Harvard, the banking world and the art scene of New York – he even had contacts to the LSD scene. I was fascinated by this character and I read all the interviews with Brockman that I could find on the Net.

Towards the end of 2001, I traveled to the USA and had a preliminary conversation with him. I met Stewart Brand and other people through Brockman. A link to John Perry Barlow, the songwriter of the Grateful Dead and a founding member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation also developed.

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I hadn't realized how closely connected it all was, and what a small world it is. Ultimately, Ted Kaczynski appeared during my Internet research on John Brockman. That was when it turned out that Brockman was also the literary agent who had represented David Gelernter, one of the victims of the Unabomber. Initially, I was skeptical, because of the Net-hype surrounding the "Unabomber" at the time; I asked myself whether the man really existed.

What was your intention with the film?

In a way, it is possible to understand people like David Gelernter or Marvin Minsky, one of the pioneers of AI (Artificial Intelligence) and their technocratic world. They simply wanted to be involved in the development of things like cyberspace, virtuality, and artificial intelligence. Set against the background of the dismal Fifties and Sixties, computers and the first technological networks were very glamorous; as insiders, they felt a bit like the Good Lord himself. Now things have developed further – and differently – and one has to ask oneself whether the technocratic utopias and abstract ideas that originated from these people should actually be realized at all. Or whether they should stay imaginary and abstract constellations, like higher mathematics? In one of his letters, Ted Kaczynski referred to higher mathematics as a "prank", and to mathematicians as "artists".

Kaczynski's attacks certainly hit a sensitive nerve, a key area in our present-day competitive society. When Clinton was in power, people realized for the first time how vulnerable the nets are, for example when it comes to electronic trade or money transfers. So it was necessary to make them more secure. It is possible that the Unabomber

came at a very convenient time for some people – people who needed legitimate reasons to push through legal regulations and prohibitions in order to make the Net "safe".

That was also the time when the Net began to be parceled out. Up until then, the Internet had been a utopian free space, a playground for artists and pirates of every kind; you only need think of Hakim Bey's T.A.Z. (Temporary Autonomous Zones). Net space appeared to be entirely without restrictions – and then the time came when that was over. Paul Garrin used his "Namespace" project to follow the legislation concerning the Net critically. He found out to whom the Net actually belonged, what interests were represented there, and who the members of the Board of Trustees were among those entirely private and semi-private Internet companies: And the answer was – government representatives and former CIA officers.

How did you perceive your correspondence with Ted Kaczynski, who is now serving a life sentence in prison?

I wanted to compare some information that I had received from third parties with what he could tell me. So I posed many questions in my letters.

Actually, in his answers he only took up the things that interested him. Of course, I would have liked to have visited and interviewed him, for some questions will always remain open in letters. But as yet, he has always refused. He doesn't give interviews. The only people permitted to visit him are journalists and his family – but he refuses to see either. However, he apparently corresponds regularly with a large number of people. I think he must get at least 50-60 letters a day. He regards himself as an intellectual and he does know a lot. I believe that he can be authoritarian, and he is perhaps also rather a know-it-all.

In the meantime, he has the text of the film and also the book about the film produced by a Hamburg publisher – that includes a German translation of the version of the Manifesto that he has corrected and refers to as "authentic". He wrote that down by hand and permitted me to read it. I haven't given up hope that he will agree to an interview. In a recent letter, he wrote that it was still too early.

How do you explain the refusal of your interview partners in the film to talk about Kaczynski?

If you go to Harvard or to MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), you will not only find an architecture of power, but also an air of power. They consider themselves an elite. There is a proximity to power there, you notice it immediately. And if someone drops out, it's like it was in former times when someone renounced his status at court: He is not merely dropped, he no longer belongs to the "family", he is an outcast.

Kaczynski – who belonged to the generation surrounding Brockman, Brand, or Taylor – swapped sides, and he is now regarded as a traitor and a denigrator of his own kind. Another conceivable psychological motive is a bad conscience. The extreme, radical ideas expressed by Kaczynski are separated and locked away – in a psychoanalytical sense – as representative of one's own evil. Most utopias of Brockman's "third culture",

by which he meant a reconciliation of the arts and sciences, have not only remained unfulfilled, but have led to a chilling present with uncomfortable visions for the future – the promises of biotechnology and biogenetics, for example. Currently, other artists – like the Critical Art Ensemble – are also concerning themselves with this. But what Kaczynski formulated on the subject in his Manifesto certainly meets the heart of the matter.

Not least: As a student at Harvard, Kaczynski was a "guinea pig", a test person in psychological experiments, ones using drugs as well, which would come into the category of "psychiatric abuse" if judged by today's standards. So he knows what he is talking about – as a victim and a scientist.

Perhaps his case hit a sensitive nerve of the Americans' self-image; perhaps even more directly than in the Manchurian Candidate by John Frankenheimer or in the current remake by Jonathan Demme, for example.

What do institutions like the media, military, science and art – which are the connecting threads in the film – have to do with one another?

Before a machine is constructed, it is usually preceded by a philosophical super-structure and a utopia, which originate in literature, philosophy, or fine art. That is the necessary humus and intellectual climate before the engineers can reach for the drawing board. The times have to be ripe for the realization of an idea. In this case, one must look back to the pre-forms of cybernetics and system theory, to the Vienna Circle, Newton, Descartes, and even further back to Leibniz or Cusanus, back to the "beginning", when doubts in former certainties arose, and people first conceived of the "boundless".

Unfortunately, the length of film available was insufficient to give space to all this and its true complexity.

Ultimately, my intention was to create an awareness, a feel for the historical dimension of a technological development that doesn't just consist of its current manifestation. In the USA, there is a great deal of historical amnesia, also as far as the Internet and its origins are concerned. In one of the preliminary conversations, a computer scientist who had studied at the University of Illinois told me that Heinz von Foerster – the father of cybernetics, with whom there is an interview in the film – is no longer known to many of today's students at the University of Illinois, where he had his famous BCL (Biological Computer Laboratory). As he put it: Foerster is "not hot".

To what extent do you, as an artist, follow up your earlier works through this film?

I work with several artistic means, including research and documentary film as well as fine art. Heracles' Concept, which I began in 1977, was already concerned with the ways in which a person can evade standardization – the norm – and accomplish resistance. The Grimm's fairytale and the Heracles text by Heiner Müller are good

patterns: By following the trail of the Hydra's blood, Heracles finds out that he himself is within the Hydra and that he is a necessary part or cog in the works of the Hydra. The fact that someone finds himself amidst a system from which there is no escape is also the key to Kaczynski's tragedy. He simply hadn't grasped the fact, when it came to the system he was dealing with, that there was no "outside". Even isolated in a forest cabin you are part of the system.

The Ted K Archive

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