

**The notions of information/noise, communication/meaning, author/literature as a self-regulating machine in Italo Calvino's *Cybernetics and Ghosts* (1967) and Thomas Pynchon *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).**

The transition to an information society is determined by the moment in which information work dominates the work force. This happened in the United States in 1960 where about 30 percent of employees were information workers.

In the middle of 1940s, Robert Wiener captured the essence of the science of communication and control coining the term cybernetics: the English pronunciation of the Greek word *kubernêtês*, which means steersman. His scientific revolution influenced many sectors of science and technique, from the environmental science to the modern economic theory, and from the artificial intelligence to the cognitivism. Besides, cybernetics affected literature and arts across the 1960s on both sides of the Atlantic.

The influence is evident on two authors' texts: Italo Calvino's *Cybernetics and Ghosts* published in 1967 and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* published in 1966.

**Quotations:**

From Calvino, Italo. "Cybernetics and Ghost." In *The Literature Machine*. Trans. Patrick Creagh. London: Pan/Secker & Warbrug. 1987.

- "Will we have a machine capable of replacing the poet and the author? Will we also have machines capable of conceiving and composing poems and novels?" (Calvino 1987,12)
- "The work continues to be born, to be judged, to be destroyed or constantly renewed with the eye of the reader" (Calvino 1987,16)
- "Literature is a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit of its own material, independent of the personality of the poet, but it is a game that at a certain point is invested with an unexpected meaning" (Calvino 1987, 22)

From Porush, David. *The Soft Machine: Cybernetic fiction*. New York: Methuen. 1985.

- "Cybernetic fiction is a means for the author to present himself or his literature as a soft machine, a cybernaut-like hybrid device, combining human vulnerability and imagination with machine-like determinism" (Porush 1985, 22)

From Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. London: Picador. 1966.

- "His voice begins in heavy Slavic tones as second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate, looking for an escaped bat; modulated to comic-negro, then on into hostile Pachuco dialect, full of chingas and maricones; then a Gestapo officer asking her in shrieks did she have relatives in Germany and finally his Lamont Cranston voice, the one he'd talked in all the way to Mazatlán" (Pynchon 1966, 6)

- "I'm the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also" (Pynchon 1966, 54)

From McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill. 1964.

- "Mental breakdown of varying degrees is the very common result of uprooting and inundation with new information and endless patterns of information" (McLuhan 1964, 25)

- "Subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them prisons without walls for their human users" (McLuhan 1964, 29)

- "Cotton and oil, like radio and TV, become 'fixed charges' on the entire psychic life of the community" (McLuhan 1964, 30)

From Klapp, Orrin. *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Society*. New York: Greenwood Press. 1986.

- "The more information is repeated and duplicated, the larger scale of diffusion, the greater the speed of processing, the more opinion leaders and gatekeepers and network, the more filtering of messages, the more kinds of media through which information is passed, the more decoding and encoding, and so on – the more degraded information might be" (Klapp 1986, 126)

### **Suggestion for further reading:**

Calvino, Italo. "Cybernetics and Ghost." In *The Literature Machine*. Trans. Patrick Creagh. London: Pan/Secker & Warbrug. 1987.

Conway, Flo, and Jim Siegelman. *Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener – Father of Cybernetics*. New York: Basic Books. 2004.

Dutta, Anindita. *The Paradox of Truth, the Truth of Entropy*. 1995.  
<http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/entropy/paradox.html>

Klapp, Orrin. *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Society*. New York: Greenwood Press. 1986.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill. 1964.

O'Donnell, Patrick, edit. *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49*, Cambridge: University Press. 1991.

Poirer, Richard. *Embattled Underground*. 1966.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchonlot49.html>

Porush, David. *The Soft Machine: Cybernetic fiction*. New York: Methuen. 1985.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. London: Picador. 1966.

Shanken, Edward. "Cybernetics and Art: Cultural Convergence in the 1960s." In *From Energy to Information*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. 2002.

Straubhaar, Joseph, and Robert LaRose. *Media Now. Communications, Media in the Information Age*. Stamford: Instructor's edition. 2000.