ENGLISH 150D
CYBERNETICS; OR CONTROL AND COMMUNICATION IN THE POSTWAR NOVEL
Tuesday – Thursday, 1:15 – 3:05 pm, 60-118

Jasper Bernes
bernes@berkeley.edu

BOOK LIST

William Burroughs, Nova Express
Samuel Delany, Nova
Philip K. Dick, Ubik
Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49

Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The title of this course plays on Norbert Wiener’s highly influential 1948 book, Cybernetics; or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine. Though hardly remembered today, the field that it inaugurated, cybernetics, enjoyed a non-specialist following that was nearly unprecedented in the history of science, influencing philosophy, social science and literature and the arts in particular. This course will track the influence of key cybernetic concepts – entropy, information, feedback, control – upon postwar fiction in the United States, as we try to understand how this cybernetic vocabulary helped writers address the problems of a newly technological society that seemed convulsed by stagnation and homogeneity on the one hand and volatility and breakdown on the other. Our main course readings will comprise four American novels, from paperback science fiction to postmodern experiment. We will also examine texts on cybernetics that these novelists might have read, as well as more recent works of intellectual history and literary criticism that engage cybernetics. Students will be expected conduct and participate in regular discussion, attend class consistently, and write two essays: a short 4-6 page paper, and a longer 7-10 page one.

SCHEDULE

Tuesday – March 31
• Introduction

Thursday – April 2
• Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings
• Peter Galison, “The Ontology of the Enemy”

T – Apr 7
• Philip K. Dick, Ubik

Th – Apr 9
• Ubik

T – Apr 14
• Ubik

Th – Apr 16
• The Human Use of Human Beings
T – Apr 21
  • Pamela Zoline, "The Heat Death of the Universe"

Th – Apr 23
  • William Burroughs, *Nova Express*

T – Apr 28
  • *Nova Express*

Th – Apr 30
  • *Nova Express*

T – May 5
  • Friedrich Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society”
  • N. Katherine Hayles, “Self-Reflexive Metaphors in Maxwell's Demon and Shannon's Choice”

Th – May 7
  • Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

T– May 12
  • *The Crying of Lot 49*

Th – May 14
  • *The Crying of Lot 49*

Th – May 19
  • Samuel Delany, *Nova*

Th – May 21
  • *Nova*

T – May 26
  • *Nova*

Th- May 28
  • William Gibson, “Burning Chrome”