

# The Construction of an Itinerant Self

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This occasion — in a city, which has been the cradle of many movements that formed the intellectual history of the last Century — while specifically convened as a tribute to Heinz von Foerster, also seems to offer an opportunity for reflection on the effort by a generation to develop a mental framework called General Systems Theory and Cybernetics. It evokes a mood for a summing up.

Cybernetics and Systems Theory, with us at least since the 17th Century, have evolved — through stages of metaphysical, ethical and philosophy-of-nature speculations, generalized theoretical schemata, mathematical formulations, computer and technical artifacts and generalized schemata — into a standard way of theorizing in the established sciences. Constructivism and Second Order Cybernetics however, except for attempts such as ethnomethodology and minor aspects of decision theory, have not so far been employed in the sciences.

In trying to make myself a picture of the world — perhaps this allusion is permissible in the Wittgenstein House — I have attempted to address similar issues in the context of psychological and sociological theory. Accepting as possible and necessary a dual description of complex — not only living — systems as *res movens* and *res cogitans*, a project for a cybernetic phenomenology has ensued. I tried to systematize what I was able to absorb from epistemology as well as from biology, psychology and the social sciences into a historical account of the quest for a general system theory and into a formulation of systems of orientation, motivation and decision. This became a part of a project I now call *System and Significance*.

I shall first sketch a conception of the nature of experience as the deformation of the boundary of a system. A system constructed (in a revised Cartesian fashion) as a subject in semantic space has as a center of subjectivity an entity called the Self. The Self is generated and regenerated through the life history of the system. Its trajectory in physical spacetime can be visualized as a swath of form within the field of indefiniteness. In semantic spacetime, one can conceive of the history of the Self as the metabolism of indefiniteness into form and back into indefiniteness through a sequence of modal transformations.