Utopian Behavior

The Televisual Figure of a Pigeon That Hailed the Future

In 1971, Dutch television broadcast a debate between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky titled *Human Nature: Justice versus Power*, which has since become one of the twentieth century's most well-known examples of public scholarship. In the debate, Foucault and Chomsky contrast their views on the definition of *human nature* and the political implications of these definitions. Both men are dynamic onscreen presences. Chomsky's nebbishy attire and faltering suppositions seem a perfect medium for his tentatively idealist stance on the fundamental creativity of human nature, while Foucault at times seems to be a nonhuman predator preparing to pounce as he waits to interject with deconstructions of Chomsky's claims. Students filling an auditorium, standing in for the multitudes watching at home, are shown hanging on their every word, as Chomsky and Foucault spar for the cameras at center stage. Peter Wilkin observed in 1999 that these were "the major intellectual-activist figures of the past thirty years," and their presence together on television was a historic occurrence.[1] The fact that both would eventually become crucial theorists for understanding television and mass media—Chomsky through his coauthored book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Foucault through his description of the panopticon as a means of control—highlights the contradictions of this extraordinary moment, in which two of television's most important critics were featured on its screen.[2]

The implications of Foucault's and Chomsky's theories for cultural studies have been endlessly analyzed by media scholars since then. But one could argue that there is a third palpable yet absent character onstage with them as well, someone who was just as influential at the time, if not more so: B. F. Skinner. Skinner's ideas, language, and framework for understanding behavior provides an ever-present background throughout the program, even though his name is never uttered.[3] In response to the very first question, Chomsky begins by describing the difficulty

of studying the human "organism's" acquisition of the "behavior" of language and speech, rearticulating his famous critique of Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior*. Chomsky's claim throughout the program that humanity is uniquely defined by a creative drive is an extrapolation of this critique, which grounds his entire theoretical platform. Foucault, for his part, acknowledges the strategic validity of Chomsky's fight against "linguistic behaviorism" but argues that human nature is not a valid scientific concept but a way of delineating relationships and borders between disciplines. Like Skinner, Foucault argues that Chomsky's definition of human nature, on which Chomsky bases his revolutionary program for society, is in fact a reflection of his own historical biases, not a universal truth. Between Chomsky's affirmation of human nature and desire for utopian politics and Foucault's rejection of both lies Skinner, whose rejection of human nature and embrace of utopian politics was concurrently roiling the public sphere.

This chapter focuses on the many instances in which Skinner was actually onscreen, as he attempted to use television to propagate the political and philosophical program he derived from his animal experiments. As such, it is an attempt to write Skinner back into the story of media studies and television history, from which he has been mostly forgotten or ignored. Skinner advocated for what he called "psychological science fiction," in which research into animal behavior was to be used to comment on society as a whole, guiding it to a better future.[4] Practicing this approach, he elicited a broad-ranging conversation about the social implications of his work, becoming one of the most influential and polarizing thinkers of the twentieth century. His television appearances were a crucial part of this "psychological science fiction," which, like conventional science fiction, opened up a space for scientific topics to be discussed and debated by lay audiences and elite specialists alike.

At the heart of this project was the televisual image of the pigeon inside the Skinner box, which Skinner framed as hailing a utopian future but others saw as forecasting a dystopian, even fascist, turn in science-led policy. Belying the quotidian nature of many of the talk shows and popular science programs on which Skinner appeared, television was a space where important conversations about the role of science in shaping human society took place throughout the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It was also an essential tool for enacting this control over society, a space that was being theorized as a means for deploying the behavioral conditioning advocated by Skinner. I argue that Skinner's TV appearances attest to a robust national debate about the complex role of televisual specimens in producing institutional visions of future governance. The debates drew on national anxieties about the rising status of television itself as a means of influencing popular opinion. The first section of the chapter focuses on the public controversy surrounding Skinner's political project and the contested role of pigeons within this debate, while the second section turns to how this debate made its way onto television, leading to a visual rearticulation of the political potential of Skinner's

experiments. I conclude that we are still litigating the central tenets of this debate, even as Skinner and his pigeons have long since faded in prominence.

Skinner is a fascinating figure for thinking about television, especially publicly funded television, which frequently featured him in its foundational period of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In the controversies surrounding his work, one sees a refraction of the debates over TV's effects on viewer behavior. Just as Skinner was contradictorily viewed as both an advocate for a more just society and a potential authoritarian, the mandate of public broadcasting was also read as either fostering democratic debate or exercising control over public opinion. At the heart of these contradictions lies an uneasy relationship between the "public" of public television and the "mass" in mass media, which both Skinner and government-funded broadcasting sought to shape, guide, and control. As Laurie Ouellette writes, "Across policy, institutional, and cultural contexts, public television was envisioned *for* the people, not *by* the people, because its democratic potential was perpetually contingent on their transformation as subjects."[5] Similarly, Skinner was committed to a world without government, police, or other punitive or elite authorities, yet he believed that such a society could only be created through behavioral engineering that would utterly reshape human existence. Democracy in both instances was a program of uplift, which required the intervention of specialists to convert the masses into worthy citizens.

Alternately, Skinner's articulation of operant conditioning contrasted with the ruling Cold War logic of "soft power" in the United States, on which much of public television was premised during this period. Anna McCarthy describes public broadcasting being shaped in "a time when democratic nation building rested on the disavowal of the state as a source of direct political power." Television offered an avenue for exercising "liberal rule" over the shaping of an individual's thoughts and attitudes within an ostensibly free society.[6] Indeed, this was at the heart of Chomsky's critique of mass media, which he argues works to "manufacture consent." McCarthy writes that television helped develop "a common language of governance in which *freedom*, surely the period's most frequently used abstract noun, was a point of co-articulation for a host of otherwise discrepant agendas."[7] Within the heterodox and contested power structure of the American government, she argues that TV offered a common platform for exerting influence while still championing the value of freedom. Yet Skinner articulated over and over again the limits of "freedom" as a concept and resisted the vocabulary of individual sovereignty on which Cold War American citizenship models were based. His work highlighted and revealed the powerful effects of social structures to control individuals beyond direct oppression and violence, even as he was championing the use of this nonaversive form of power. Within networks that were from the beginning fraught with questions of top-down elitism and manipulation, Skinner's frank description of behavior modification through design was not entirely welcome, even as his own position on the issue of social control often mirrored

the backroom discussions of sponsors and programmers in public broadcasting. Ultimately, his ideas were implicated in the ongoing debates about the role of TV in a highly mediated society. In fact, Skinner was compared with Marshall McLuhan at the time, described by one commentator as fully embracing the elements of McLuhan's theories that others found ominous or dehumanizing.[8]

Within this context, the Skinner box offers a further refracted image of the power dynamics of telecommunications networks and the media hardware of the television set. As David Joselit argues, the television set created a feedback loop between individual viewers and corporate or governmental bodies, in which messages were sent to viewers through the screen and information about the spectators' viewing patterns were sent back through the network.[9] Here, the media ecosystem established by television creates a system of control by regulating the feedback loop, allowing advertisers and governing agencies to adapt their messages to viewer behaviors, which in turn are more likely to be affected by these messages. These dynamics mirror those of the Skinner box, raising many of the same problems of exercising power over unwitting subjects.[10] As we saw in the previous chapter, the Skinner box was designed to transform the unwieldy behavior of animals into an empirical subject that could be controlled by isolating the stimulus within its enclosed setting and providing data on the effects of that stimulus over time. Skinner articulated this as a form of dispersed control in which he responded to his pigeons' behavior and adapted to them, claiming that the pigeon had as much effect on the outcomes of the experiments as he did, but for many of his critics the overwhelming power differential between Skinner and his test subjects clearly posed startling ethical problems.

And let us not forget the pigeons, which, as we will see, were crucial to how the public considered the political ramifications of Skinner's work, both in print and on television. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Skinner ran televised demonstrations of his theories with his pigeons. In lectures, popular science programs, nightly talk shows, and other televisual venues, these pigeons had their own unique role on the small screen and directly influenced the questions of governance, media, and control revolving around radical behaviorism at the time. These were political signs, made to be transmitted to a national and international audience. Brett Mills positions television animal imagery generally as part of the medium's historic role in addressing the citizens of an "imagined community" through local or national broadcasting.[11] He argues that within this context, animal images should be understood as negotiating the status of nonhuman life in the body politic, whether as property, sentient beings, or (potentially) contributors. Skinner meant for his televised experiments with pigeons to serve as concrete evidence for the efficiency and morality of his overarching theories. As much as they were intended to depict science experiments, his demonstrations of animal behavior for TV cameras were also a type of political fable or parable, alluding to broader concerns over the question of control in a televisual culture. Like the

virtual animals described by Jody Berland, the image of these pigeons mediated between contradictory forces within the United States and its media ecosystem during the Cold War, seeming to embody both the aspirations of soft power and its threats to democracy.[12] Utopian liberation and dystopian fascism were both superimposed meanings atop the pigeon's image, each suggesting its own reading of Skinner's concept of operant conditioning and the role of television in America.

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UTOPIAN CONTROLS:
SKINNER'S POLITICAL PROGRAM

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In the B. F. Skinner collection at the Harvard University Library, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of handwritten letters to Skinner, stored for posterity. Composed by a broad cross-section of society, including laborers, teenagers, stay-at-home moms, and others, they all speak to a similar longing for a different world. Inspired by his theories, many, many people were moved to personally write to Skinner and ask his advice for improving or escaping their lives, which seemed to trap and contain them. As one first-year student at the University of Oakland wrote: "All of my life I have been searching for that something which would make me feel real, make me feel whole. From facts noted in your book, I have come to a sort of partial conclusion that a Walden Two would give me the chance to find myself."[13] Questions and speculation about communal living, about behaviorism's prescription for the good life, about the means by which alternative societies could be established fill the pages of these letters. Taken together, these letters speak to the broad public desire for a dramatically new society that radical behaviorism, and B. F. Skinner in particular, was able to evoke.

Skinner's most immediate description of his political aspirations was in his 1948 novel *Walden Two*.[14] As an entry into utopian fiction, the titular society of *Walden Two* is similar to other ideal societies from the history of speculative fiction, such as those of Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backwards* or Thomas More in *Utopia*.[15] Skinner's book describes a small commune governed entirely by the principles of behavioral engineering, which have altered every aspect of daily life. Among other changes, children are raised communally, people work significantly less each week, dirty or unpleasant jobs pay the most, and private property has been generally abolished. All careers are open to both men and women, and anyone can switch between vocations at a whim. There is no elected government in *Walden Two* but rather a board of fixed-term "planners"—each of whom oversees and specializes in a specific segment of production.

As its name suggests, Skinner saw *Walden Two* as the product of a particularly American form of political thought. His utopia is as much a paean for America's "stammering century," and its pastoral experiments in communal living, as it is a vision of an uncertain future.[16] As a portrait of society, *Walden Two* embraces many of the same culturally conservative tenants that defined earlier "back-to-nature"

movements, including a commitment to heterosexual monogamy and drug-free living, which makes the later embrace of it by 1960s and 1970s countercultures all the more surprising. Still, despite often looking backward, there are aspects of the book that adopt some truly radical tenants. In a brief addendum to *Walden Two*, titled "News from Nowhere, 1984," Skinner himself situated his fictional commune as part of the legacy of nineteenth-century anarchism: "*Walden Two* is state ownership without a state. Its members are not employed because there is no employer. They come into direct contact with the world, as people did before there were governments, religions, or industries."[17] Relying on the writings of Karl Marx—with the caveat that Marx "was not a full-fledged behaviorist, alas"—Skinner argues that such a society would eliminate alienated labor through a rich variation in activities and the use of rewards rather than punishments to motivate prosocial behavior. At the heart of this utopian perspective is the idea that a society built on positive reinforcement will not only lead to happier individuals but also be more productive, stronger, and better able to survive in the long term.

Largely ignored during its original publication run in 1948, *Walden Two* unexpectedly resurfaced as a popular text in the late 1960s, generating heated discussion, enthusiasm, and several attempts to actually create the society depicted in its pages (most prominently with the Twin Oaks Community, which is still running in Louisa, Virginia).[18] Its resurgence was paired with a slew of polemics written by Skinner in the interim, all of which amounted to a sustained attack on the language, politics, and philosophy of liberal humanism. *Science and Human Behavior* (1951), *Verbal Behavior* (1957), *The Technology of Teaching* (1968), and, most controversially, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971), each expands the implications of Skinner's laboratory findings to argue that hallowed attributes of humanity such as creativity, insight, freedom, dignity, and morality are all the product of predictable interactions between individuals and their environment over time. In these works, Skinner claims that humans are fundamentally controlled by their surroundings, and he extols the engineering of their behavior through planned interventions into their lived spaces and social structures. He argues for the eradication of most forms of punishment, which he argues are inefficient and based on flawed notions of humans as free moral actors that he and other behaviorists have disproven in the lab. Skinner concludes that the liberal values of happiness, creativity, benevolence, and peacefulness could all be fostered through operant conditioning rather than being left up to the vagaries of chance, which is how he describes the libertarian and humanist models influencing most American society.

The backlash to Skinner was intense and came from all sides, bespeaking how out of step he was with prevailing doctrine. In his autobiography, Skinner recounts congressmen denouncing him on the floor of the House and Spiro Agnew giving a speech calling him fundamentally un-American.[19] Thousands of pages were dedicated to hashing out his ideas in the popular press at the time.[20] Accusations against Skinner were widespread and often withering. Some took a sardonic tone.

In 1972, journalist and editor Christopher Lehmann-Haupt sarcastically evoked counterculture figures like Timothy Leary to describe Skinner as the "high priest of behaviorism": "one tends to think of Professor Skinner as a distant cousin of Dr. Strangelove. His determination to view human beings as mindless machines, his experiments with mazes and other controlled environments, his suggestions that human society can be perfected through conditioning, his syntactically glutinous theoretical statements all militate, at least in the popular mind, to suggest a narrowness in the man, a certain lack of humanity."[21] These pieces were at times accompanied by inhuman caricatures of Skinner himself, depicted as one of his pigeon experimental subjects or as trapped within his own creation, the Skinner Box. Such illustrations and articles worked together to portray him as doddering, naive, blinkered, or simplistic in his comparisons between laboratory research and human society.

Other critics took his theories more seriously by raising questions of power and authority left unanswered by Skinner's utopian program. Echoing earlier critics of Pavlov, who connected his canine experiments to Stalinism, Skinner was often accused of totalitarian aspirations and an utter lack of empathy for other human beings.[22] As one detractor of his "repellent doctrines" wrote, "The actions of behaviorists in formulating their laws must be totally lacking in freedom and ethical value."[23] As part of this attack, a controversy from the 1940s over Skinner's alleged experiments on his own daughter with his "baby-tender" device—little more than an air-conditioned crib—resurfaced and was relitigated in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.[24] Getting straight to the heart of the debate, the sociologist Richard Sennett returned to *Walden Two*, writing: "This utopian program raises a terrible set of questions: Who makes decisions about what behavior will be praised and what behavior discouraged?"[25] Sennett observes that Skinner often substitutes his own parochial and subjective ideas of happiness and morality for universal goals that are meant to organize all society. These detractors did not so much see Skinner as naive but rather as a dangerous ideologue generating tools for a fascist society. Underlying this feverish critique was a commensurate thread of anxiety—that perhaps the society of control these authors so feared may already be in place in contemporary America and that without the armature of concepts like "freedom" and "individual dignity" this control would be laid bare. For them, Skinner was a dangerous thinker, not because he was clearly wrong but because he might be right.

Crucially, these discussions over the ethics of Skinner's work were not purely academic, as his behavioral programs were already being implemented in a wide variety of institutions, including juvenile detention facilities, schools, rehab venues, asylums, and prisons, among others. In these spaces, the ethical and political debates surrounding Skinner took on real-world consequences as his ideas were used as guiding principles for governing people's lives. In the end, Skinner's utopian goals, as he articulated them, were not as far removed from the ideals of

progressive humanism as his critics claimed: an abolition of punishment, jails, police, bosses, presidents, and so forth, all while retaining and naturalizing power, order, and control. The fact that he often drew from Rousseau when explicating his ideas points to his indebtedness to the history of Enlightenment thought as much as he was often perceived as breaking from this tradition. He believed his theories could bring about the world that previous humanist thinkers had imagined, in the face of what he saw as a more and more punitive American politics and destructive foreign policy. In actuality, though, the application of his ideas was not the either/or proposition that he had envisioned but rather both/and. Skinner's techniques for control, and the naturalizing effects of these techniques, were implemented within the discipline and punishment models of prisons, schools, and asylums. In these settings, his technologies often compounded the power of their overseers rather than dispersing them, a point repeatedly raised by his critics. It is therefore unsurprising that Foucault would read Skinner as intensifying neoliberalism's economic vision of humanity in its "purist, most rigorous, strictest or aberrant forms."[26]

At the center of all of this were Skinner's pigeons. His animal experiments were vital for the arguments of his opponents, the most famous of which was Noam Chomsky's 1959 takedown of *Verbal Behavior*. It was here that Chomsky first began articulating his notion of an inborn universal human grammar to contrast with Skinner's comparison between the behavior of humans and animals. (Skinner later claimed he had not bothered to finish Chomsky's review and never wrote a full rebuttal.)[27] Chomsky directly attacked Skinner's use of animal research, repeatedly characterizing the lab animal as a symbol of reductivism, totalitarianism, and manipulation.[28] As the linguistic historiographer Julie Andresen argues, Chomsky's descriptions of animal experiments "played up and played on the worst fears engendered by behaviorist approaches to human activity."[29] Others were quick to adopt Chomsky's position. In his 1967 book of philosophy, Arthur Koestler coined the term *ratomorphism* to describe Skinner's work, which "substituted for the erstwhile anthropomorphic view of the rat, a ratomorphic view of man."[30] In 1979, author and critic Rosemary Dinnage wrote in the *New York Times:* "The control it is possible to exercise over the behavior of small caged animals . . . has led Professor Skinner into the almost appealingly naive view that there is a science of behavior that can be used to control wars and all the other social problems that beset us."[31] One reviewer evoked the specter of animal experiments to describe the entire debate as "trapped in a Skinnerian Maze."[32] In these examples we see how Skinner and his utopian aspirations for behaviorism were haunted by the figure of the animal in a cage as much as they were bolstered by its evidentiary power.

That said, there was nothing inherently controversial about using animal experiments to model human behavior and society; it was common scientific practice. Indeed, there are plenty of contemporaneous examples that were accepted and even exalted by the national press as long as the research led to more socially

conservative conclusions. Take the case of behavioral psychologist Harry F. Harlow, who claimed to demonstrate the importance of love in human relations by cruelly isolating infant macaque monkeys from their mothers.[33] Harlow was a vociferous critic of Skinner's behaviorism and, unlike Skinner, was largely heralded for introducing humanism to psychology with his famous "mother-love" experiments.[34] No matter how torturous these experiments were in practice, he was able to rehabilitate them by cloyingly sentimentalizing his findings in the press. The *New York Times* reprinted without comment a poem Harlow wrote about his own research, which paired photographs of snuggling mother and baby animals with lines like: "Though mother may / be short on arms / Her skin is full / of warmth and charms."[35] This is just one example of Harlow using hackneyed sentimentality to effectively shield himself from the claims of cynicism and inhumanity that dogged Skinner throughout his career, even as Harlow's experiments were often deeply sadistic and his application of their findings to human settings more undisciplined and indiscriminate.[36]

How an animal experiment was framed for public consumption was therefore essential to how its political potentials and dangers were broadly understood and navigated. Aware of this fact, Skinner responded with an ongoing public performance in which he endeavored to secure control over the image of his animal experiments. Throughout his career, he attempted a major overhaul of the public face of behaviorism, introducing it into popular discourse to an extent that it never had been before. The sentimental frame adopted by Harlow was the antithesis of Skinner's own approach and outlook and was therefore unavailable to him. Instead, he sought to depict the lab animal, particularly the pigeon, as a symbol of emancipation through design rather than oppression through coercion, a political symbol beckoning viewers to accept behavior modification as a means to utopia.

SKINNER TV: THE TELEVISUAL SPECIMEN

Writing in 1987 about the highly mediated environment of American society at the time, Skinner states: "Consider the extent to which labor-saving devices have made us button pushers: We push buttons on elevators, telephones, dashboards, video recorders, washing machines, ovens, typewriters, and computers, all in exchange for actions that would at least have a bit of variety. Systems that save labor also save laborers, and the familiar problem of unemployment follows. But even if everyone could enjoy a share of the labor saved, there would still be alienation."[37]

In this description, the technology surrounding us not only leads to heightened inequality but also exacerbates human alienation under capitalism. Television exemplified this numbing quality of contemporary life for Skinner. Interviewed for the student film *The Communique Did Not Make Clear Whether the Shooting Was Absolutely Necessary* (1972), he bemoans the negative impact of TV on children, stating that "a spectator viewing a screen is doing almost nothing." In one

of his three autobiographies, he generalizes the effects of "any mass medium" as creating spectators that "simply looked and listened."[38] Writing about educational television, he acknowledges TV's capacity to create a "multiplication of contacts" with viewers but argues that these are not effective, since broadcast images cannot respond to individual spectator behavior in real time.[39] Like the critiques of Guy Debord and others, he saw television as substituting fundamentally passive behavior for actual and variegated engagement with the world.

Despite all of these reservations, television remained a central site where Skinner waged his battle over the meaning of his animal experiments. He repeatedly took to the airwaves to advocate for his ideas, acknowledging the importance of the medium for reaching broad audiences. As he claimed in an interview with William Buckley for *Firing Line:* "If you're going to take over, you grab the TV stations."[40] This stance also grew out of his work. As we saw in the previous chapter, Skinner conceived of all visual imagery as a vital part of humanity's "verbal community," a system of audiovisual cues and signs that make up our environment as social animals. As such, this imagery could be modified to effect behavior. Addressing an audience of television programmers at a celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of RCA, he suggested that they reconsider the rhythm and tempo of highly stimulating content in their shows, varying these at random intervals just as slot machines do to keep gamblers playing.[41] Similar to his approach to film, he believed that television should primarily be considered part of a viewer's environment and thus as capable of exerting a limited control over them. Plus, Skinner had experience with the moving image's capacity to shape behavior (see chapter 7). What he describes as the "colossal scale" of television made it a powerful force within the verbal community, even as its effectiveness in directly changing behavior was restricted.[42]

Unlike many of his fellow scientists, Skinner believed in the necessity of addressing popular opinion and saw his television appearances as part of this engagement. As he wrote in response to a request to be a guest on the BBC: "I am more than ever convinced of the current importance of the behavioristic position, but to make this clear to the general public is rather a problem."[43] Ultimately, he pursued television as a solution to this problem, even as he was frustrated by its limits. In his varied appearances, one can trace his compromised engagement with contemporary popular culture, as Skinner attempted to leverage television's status as a mass medium in order to advocate for behaviorism's initiation of an equally massive social change.[44] These appearances also demonstrate the contentious fissures and frictions that occur when celluloid specimens expand beyond scientific discourse and are broadcast for a general public. As we will see, the onscreen image of the laboratory animal was ultimately highly contested within public discourse.

When the format permitted him to do so, Skinner effectively used his experiments with pigeons as essential set pieces in his argument. Educational programs, such as *Learning and Behavior: What Makes Us Human* (1959); *Behavior Theory*

in Practice (1966); *B. F. Skinner Demonstrates Operant Conditioning* (1971); *The Autobiography of a Nonperson* (1978); and *Cognition, Creativity, & Behavior* (1982), provided this opportunity, as they were styled as pedagogical tools for understanding Skinner's work. In these programs, Skinner benefits from the preexistent history of live televised animal demonstrations, which were a central feature of the first science programs like *Science in Action* and *The Johns Hopkins Science Review*. Early TV animal demonstrations were constructed to maximize the specificities of the medium by combining spontaneity from the live broadcast with the spectacle of an animal on display.[45] In an early guidebook for creating educational television, Lynn Poole, the creator of *The Johns Hopkins Science Review*, listed animals as one of a handful of visual spectacles that guest scientists could use to illustrate their ideas, adding an element of natural spontaneity and suspense to what were otherwise highly scripted affairs.[46] As *Science in Action*'s executive producer Benjamin Draper flatly observed, "Animals are unpredictable."[47] This unpredictability, paired with the "liveness" of television, created an ideal setting for portraying the scientific experiment as an unfolding event in which the truth of an idea about animal behavior was demonstrated through that animal's reactions in real-time. Like Skinner's description of television for the RCA audience, the potential for sporadic, instantaneous, or aberrant behavior on the part of the animals activates television's instantaneity, creating images that are hard to turn away from. Here, Skinner found a means of translating his scientific procedures into an image that functioned within television's logic of the live spectacle.

Although Skinner's animal demonstrations come much later in television history and were usually recorded and edited, the strict continuity between shots, long running times, and inclusion of sequences where pigeons seem to make "mistakes" or fail to perform as expected all contribute to this sense of real-time contingency in which we observe "with our own eyes" the evidence for Skinner's theories as it unfolds. A good example comes in *Skinner Demonstrates Operant Conditioning*, which depicts one of Skinner's lectures to an auditorium full of students. Here, a test pigeon actually flies away from the open-air testing apparatus at the front of the room and circles over the heads of the auditorium audience. The bird eventually returns, and the experiment continues. Perhaps more than any piece of written work by Skinner, this moment dramatically makes his case regarding the morality and efficacy of his animal experiments and, by extension, the morality and efficacy of his behaviorist politics. Conditioning is framed in this scene as an ongoing process of interaction between the scientist and the animal in which both parties are willing participants, able to discontinue the experience whenever they so desire. But perhaps most importantly, Skinner masterfully controlled the medium as well as the pigeon in these demonstrations, transforming his animal experiments into lively and absorbing events that could entrance viewers as they were performed.

Other settings did not accommodate this approach. Skinner was often featured in televised lectures, debates, and public forums, whose format precluded

live animal experiments. Examples include "The Limits of Human Freedom" episode of *The Open Mind* (1974), in which Skinner debates the philosopher Charles Frankel and the psychologist Eugene Kennedy in a sparse, all-black studio set; "B. F. Skinner on Education," from the *Distinguished Contributors to Counseling Series*, which features an hour-long conversation between Skinner and Dr. John M. Whitley in a Washington University in St. Louis auditorium; *Behavior Control: Freedom and Morality*, in which Skinner discusses his theories with the philosopher Geoffrey Warnock in a lavish, yet domestic, living-room scene; and finally, *Talking with Thoreau*, where Skinner absurdly debates an actor playing an outraged Henry David Thoreau criticizing Skinner's use of the title "Walden" in *Walden Two*. Featuring participants drawn from an almost exclusively white male elite, in these shows the academic critiques of Skinner's work, like those of Chomsky, were articulated by other scholars, scientists, artists, and journalists. They also embody precisely the dynamics of condescending elitism that dogged public broadcasting at the time, fostering a blinkered notion of who qualified to participate in rational debate. The title sequence of *The Open Mind* begins with a rotating sculpture of a human head containing an open hole approximating the mind, as if we are now entering directly into the hallowed space of thought. The program is framed as a dramatization of the classic Cartesian subject, where the defining characteristics of the rational mind are epitomized by the exchange of ideas between elite white men that follows. In the hermetically sealed sets of *The Open Mind* and the other lecture programs, conversations range over major social problems (racism in city planning, political corruption, current geopolitics, and the Cold War), as well as individual and interpersonal issues (hypothetical questions of heterosexual romance, desire, and duty). It is implied that we are getting a glimpse into not only the internal operations of a rational mind but also the deliberative process by which a scientifically managed society might be governed, a view into the backroom conversations of the elite planners. Audiences are positioned as silent spectators, watching intently as different modalities and philosophies of governance are discussed and evaluated, making decisions that could eventually be implemented "outside" in the world in which we live. These programs thereby code their onscreen space as that of transcendent thought, which both gathers the world into its rational discourse and projects itself outward through the televisual broadcast and the implementation of policy.

Through their formal structure, programs like *The Open Mind* invite viewers to treat their imagery as secondary to the concepts espoused by their featured speakers. The simple conceit, editing, and sets downplay the visual components of the programs, and their claustrophobic refusal to take spectators beyond their constructed settings creates a fundamental visual monotony that persists throughout their running time. Laurie Ouellette argues that programmers at PBS were deeply distrustful of the spectacular appeals of commercial television.[48] Needing to distinguish the channel from these appeals, public broadcasting adopted a

sober bitter-medicine approach to high-minded debate that eschewed visual pleasure and that, by its very structure, was exclusionary to many. Michael Cramer describes this aesthetic as indicative of the value placed on "pure informationality" in the utopian conceptions of public television.[49] He argues that fuzzy, degraded TV images were not meant to create deep immersive experiences like cinema but rather were conceived as emulating a direct transmission of information and ideas. In the programs featuring Skinner, we can see that these priorities led to an antivisual aesthetic, which promoted viewing the onscreen image as a code to be deciphered or interpreted rather than as a space to be inhabited.

But in the absence of other visual material, the bodies of the speakers become the carriers of these codes. As Wayne Munson describes, talk shows like these reconnect "knowledge with knower through performance but [do] so in a residually modernist frame of spectacle and mass mediation."[50] Here, like the animals in Skinner's televised demonstrations, speakers were expected to perform their status as reasoning, enlightened humans through the visual performance of adroit argument and lucid criticism. Therefore, even as programs like *The Open Mind* prize transcendent thought, they also transform this thought into a visual spectacle embodied in the image of their speakers. Within the logic of public broadcasting at the time, the transmission of these audiovisual spectacles of thought could lead audiences across the country to adopt the norms of academic discourse they saw onscreen.
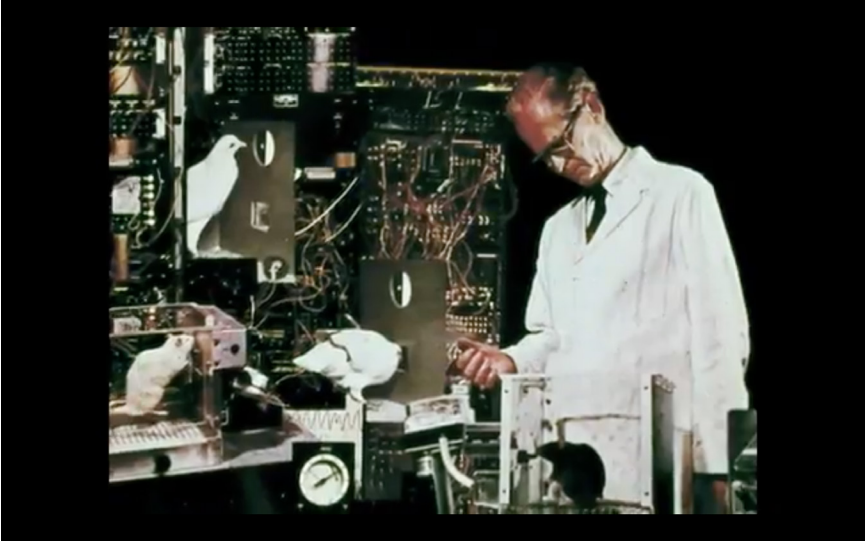
As a performer and image, Skinner is a unique, though not entirely effective, presence in these talk shows. In "The Limits of Human Freedom," he is often flustered, nitpicking, backtracking, silent, staring down at his notes, or refusing to make eye contact. His disquiet points to his discomfort with the format of the programs themselves. In so many ways, Skinner's entire project was diametrically opposed to the conceits of these live debates. As we saw in the previous chapter, he objected vehemently to Cartesian dualism and human exceptionalism, which he believed were dangerous misconceptions. In these settings, which prohibited the presence of animals or alternative epistemologies beyond conceptual reasoning, Skinner was often left without his most convincing evidence.

In program after program, he struggles to import the authority of his scientific experiments into the conversation and redirect it back to his material examples. He repeatedly attempts to redefine the language of the debate away from political, judicial, and moral vocabularies and toward his own laboratory-made lexicon of "aversive or positive reinforcement." He bristles at the constant use of hypotheticals, abstractions, and generalizations. As he states in *Behavior Control: Freedom, and Morality*, "the moral is not a different world. It has something to do with the world we are living in. It has to do with practical problems in that world." Skinner's approach was born out of specificity and the accumulation of detailed tabulations over time rather than the speculation encouraged in these settings. Or, as he says in "The Limits of Freedom": "I want to look at the contingencies and the

individual history [of a person's behavior], which are responsible as far as I can see, in deciding whether a person does this or that." Ultimately, Skinner's attempts at reformatting the nature of the debate itself usually seem to fail. Often his interlocutors can be seen actively smirking or laughing at him as he awkwardly articulates his ideas in this hostile environment, without the evidentiary power of the celluloid specimen. His presence on these shows demonstrates some of the limits to how public broadcasting's mandate was realized, even as he himself embodied many of the traits that these programs valorized.

One final televisual arena where Skinner's work was presented was the news or popular science specials dedicated to his ideas. As Marcel Chotkowski LaFollette observes, from the 1960s to the 1980s science was incorporated more and more as part of the shifting landscape of TV news: "By presenting scientific inquiries in the context of rough-and-tumble politics rather than isolated in academe's ivory tower, by addressing both research risks and benefits, and by interpreting science as part of, rather than apart from, culture, television news made important statements about how science fitted into modern life."[51] This was certainly the case with Skinner's representation in news programs, which sometimes took a straightforward pedagogical approach to behaviorism but more often was styled along the lines of investigative journalism, in which the controversy over Skinner and the application of his ideas was explored. Here, Skinner was often positioned as one voice among many, including the institutional bureaucrats and technicians overseeing the implementation of behaviorist programs, as well as the subjects of these programs.

Throughout these episodes, montage is an essential and repeated technique for demonstrating behaviorism's applicability to society, establishing a narrative of continuity between the principles studied in the lab and human behavior in different social settings. These programs visualize and make explicit the comparisons between animal subjects and human behavior in *Motivation and Reward in Learning*. Most often such comparisons are produced through crosscutting, in which the activities of laboratory animals and humans, especially children, are compared through match-action cuts, creating a visual parity between various "characters" and settings. In the process of making such comparisons, the formal elements of the behaviorist laboratory are imported to scenes of human behavior. For instance, in *Cognition, Creativity, & Behavior*, the isolation and control of the experimental apparatus is mirrored by a blank white background where children of various ages are filmed demonstrating behaviors similar to those we have just seen the pigeon perform. Like the Skinner box, this constructed set allows the filmmakers to isolate and specify the elements of the environment affecting the children's behaviors. The continuity in the mise-en-scène establishes a conceptual continuity between the animal's behavior in the lab and the behavior of human children, presenting the world through the mobile TV camera as a kind of lab itself in which the dynamics of the behaviorist experiment are everywhere.

VIDEO 13. Clip from *The Skinner Revolution* (1978). Courtesy of the
B. F. Skinner Foundation.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.145.13

    In the shows that are primarily educational, this comparison remains unques-
tioned, but in the investigative specials, it becomes weighted with ethical and
political concerns. These latter programs featured extended sequences dedicated
to the application of Skinner's ideas. Reform schools, prisons, asylums, psychiatric
offices, marriage counseling sessions, and casinos are all backdrops for demon-
strating the wide-ranging effects of Skinner's theories of behavioral modification.
Such illustrations of Skinner's work emphasize its power for social control, placing
his laboratory experiments at the center of debates over best practices in rehabili-
tation, medicine, education, and psychotherapy. Such portrayals focus on Skin-
ner's ideas as tools for institutional control rather than as grand philosophies of life
and consciousness. As Skinner's daughter complained in a letter to Philip Blake,
the filmmaker behind *The Skinner Revolution:* "I think the audience will get the
idea that Skinner's psychology works with rats and pigeons and with a few special
cases off somewhere in institutions, but will miss the basic point of BFS's position
that all of us are being shaped all the time."[52]
    Here, the intercutting between laboratory and institutional settings can take
on unexpected meanings. For example, take the sequence illustrating Skinner's
comparison between the behavior of gambling addicts and a pigeon responding to
intermittent reinforcement at the beginning of *The Skinner Revolution*. The camera

focuses on the blinking lights of the slot machine in the foreground of the casino, while the players exist as out-of-focus hands emerging from off-frame. The film then crosscuts from the flashing bulbs at the casino to an unusual close-up of the pigeon's bobbing head superimposed with the blinking light of the Skinner box. The composition of these shots establishes a broader comparison beyond the applicability of Skinner's theories. Through the sequence's emphasis on the hypnotic elements of the setting rather than foregrounding the behavior of the pigeons and humans, it evokes feelings of claustrophobia, dread, or miasma. In the scene's cluttered, overwhelming framing the pigeon turns into a metaphor for the individual within a society of spectacle, suggesting that both it and the casino-goers are the product of their technological surroundings in ways beyond their capacity to understand. Simultaneously, the undeniably psychedelic and experimental effects throughout *The Skinner Revolution* point to the expansive stakes of Skinner's work, which promise both new horizons of thought and terrifying tools for control. In this program, as in others, Skinner's appeal to elements of 1960s and 1970s counterculture is presented onscreen through such effects, incongruously positioning him and his pigeons as part of psychedelic visual culture.

Perhaps the most remarkable element of these altered comparisons occurs when the human subjects of Skinnerian behavioral modification are interviewed. Here, the participants of behaviorist programs are given brief, restricted opportunities to speak of their own experience, even as their voices are often devalued, circumscribed, or placed in competition with other perspectives that are given more weight. An example of this occurs in the *Behavioral Revolution* series. The first episode of the series reproduces the familiar structure of introducing the principles of behavior modification through animal laboratory experiments and then working its way through a variety of human settings in which these principles are being deployed. But in the fifth episode, simply titled "Ethics," the explicative mode is momentarily broken when prisoners are asked to discuss their own experiences of behavioral counseling based on Skinner's theories. These incarcerated Black and Latino men articulate Skinnerian programs as a form of coercion, telling story after story of being forced into group therapy. As one unnamed individual describes his case: "Well, I've never been in one, but they're trying to force me to be in one. I don't know, I just seen my counselor this morning and in order to become eligible for referral he keeps insisting that I have to participate in some kind of therapy program." Here, it becomes clear that Skinner's rhetoric of abolishing punishment is at odds with how his ideas are actually being implemented. In scenes such as these, the comparison of lab animals and human subjects expands beyond the principles of behavior to include ethical relations of power and containment. Just as Skinner himself was enmeshed in military, academic, and political institutions of elite power, his ideas were also put to use within the systems of punishment he claimed to refute. Scenes like this one thus call into question Skinner's notions of generally acceptable benevolent design, suggesting that behavioral modification

techniques might carry with them the inherent ethical and political problems of the laboratory, no matter what utopian aspirations are used to frame them.

Ultimately, surveying Skinner's televisual presence in the 1960s and 1970s, one sees an example of how the rhetoric of humanism is used to defend carceral and capitalist power. Anthropocentric discourse is trotted out in high-minded talk shows to strip Skinner's ideas of their most dangerous elements: their commitment to Marxism and a critique of models of punishment. In the alternately flimsy and gaudy sets of these programs, the great ambitions of human exceptionalism are put on full display, haughtily offended at the suggestion that human beings could be controlled or manipulated by their environment. But, simultaneously, in all the spaces where groups of marginalized people were currently being imprisoned, processed, and controlled, Skinner's ideas were being busily instituted and heartily embraced. This televisual history implies a hollowed-out anthropocentrism that was little more than a canard, a veil to be lowered or a shield to be raised when necessary but certainly not a fundamental principle of society. Skinner became entangled in this discourse to such a degree that most of the radical potential of his ideas was ultimately denuded or diverted. Meanwhile, his regiments of reinforcement and reward were incorporated into the punishments and confinements of the prison, the asylum, and the classroom. Within this history, the pigeon experiments' political resonance was not the promise of mutual interaction, as Skinner had hoped, but the mirroring of the laboratory's architecture of control and confinement.

OUR CURRENT REALITY:
SKINNERISM WITHOUT SKINNER

It is generally thought that Skinner lost his public battles. His biographer, Alexandra Rutherford, observes that "many psychologists have resoundingly dismissed his system, characterizing it as naive, misguided, and theoretically bankrupt."[53] Jill Morawski concurs, writing that Skinner "dwells in our cultural imaginary as a scientific buffoon, a caricature of the now so evidently naive ambition assiduously to extend reductionism, naturalism, experimentalism, and materialism to all of human nature."[54] But, as Rutherford and Morawski emphasize, his influence is not gone. No matter how effective the outrage of liberal humanists was in the 1960s and 1970s, Skinner's work lives on in the techniques and mechanisms he invented to apply his radical behaviorism, which continues to be used in many institutional settings. He may have lost the battle over the high-minded ideals of human exceptionalism and free will represented in the televised debate format, but he succeeded in transforming applied psychology nonetheless. John Mills argues that Skinner's story largely reflects the fate of behaviorism overall, in which the brand has become *terra incognita* even while the positivist methods and vocabulary continue to define the field of psychology.[55] Rutherford additionally stresses that many

behaviorist designs and approaches are now being employed by private industry to market products and control workforces.[56]

A similar claim could be made about mass media. Although Skinner is not thought of as an important media theorist, his framework for understanding media effects mirrors the operations of the largest global media companies today. Fred Turner argues that the "managerial mode of control" of media programming has persisted from its postwar American origins to our current internet age.[57] In this context, Skinner's theories of media and his appearances on TV reflect not only the ethical and political stakes of television in its historical moment but also raise questions about our own media environment as well. There is ample reason to believe that in the era of big data collection, Skinner's work is being deployed more than ever.[58] Some new software companies are now selling their talents to control user behavior based precisely on his work.[59] But even more broadly, the notion that media makes up an essential part of our environment and exerts a powerful control over our behavior is no longer a controversial notion but an accepted premise within most of Silicon Valley.

In these contemporary uses, the unanswered questions surrounding expertise and ethics that plagued Skinner and his pigeons persist. We have not solved the riddle of what should be the final takeaway from his demonstrations with pigeons in the Skinner box. The history presented in this chapter makes clear the political polyvalence of celluloid specimens when they enter the public space, how their meanings become contested and fought over. Perhaps our current discourse would benefit from returning to this public debate from the 1960s and 1970s, where the politics of the celluloid specimen were frankly on display on a national scale. As in the case of Project Pigeon, reopening the discussion of Skinner's televisual pigeons promises to reconfigure how we see our contemporary world. The questions of control raised by these debates, whether on digital platforms or in prisons, remain central, even as the figure of the pigeon in a Skinner box has faded into the background.