

PART THREE

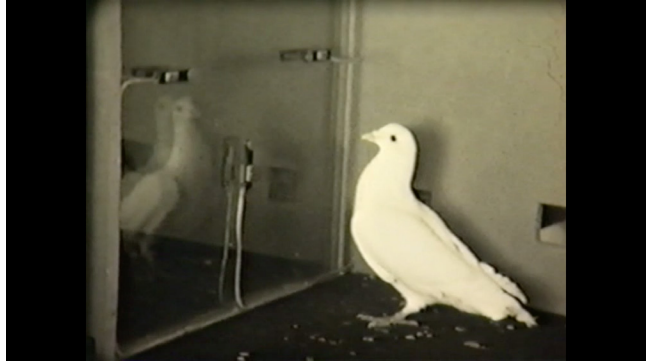
Posthuman Control

B. F. Skinner and the Onscreen Pigeon

THERE ARE FEW UNEDITED FILMS of the laboratory experiments of B. F. Skinner (1904–90). Nearly all the footage that currently exists is part of a promotional film, a televised lecture, or a documentary about his ideas. But the film provisionally titled *Shaping Pigeon Key Pecks* (1942)—contained in the Harvard Film Archives, which now houses all the films that were once owned by the B. F. Skinner Foundation—displays twenty minutes of seemingly unedited footage from one of Skinner’s experiments. Having the feel of a home movie, this film is composed of jittery start-and-stop handheld shots that are often undirected and unfocused. In certain shots, the camera operators do not even seem to realize they are filming, recording the corner of the testing apparatus’s walls rather than the pigeon itself. Without any framing material to guide the viewer, it is hard to understand what we are seeing or its scientific import. It seems to simply be footage of a pigeon in a strange box, acting utterly bewildered.

When compared with the roiling controversy surrounding the work of B. F. Skinner, easily one of the most famous psychologists of the past century, this footage stands as a reminder of the daily work of the behaviorist lab that largely remained out of sight during these debates.¹ Here, groups of animals were individually tested, day in and day out, in experiments that took intense patience and weeks of work to produce even the most modest of findings. These were often open-ended interactions between human scientists and animal subjects that did not necessarily have a particular goal in mind.² In filmed interviews, such as those in *A Change in Mind: The Autobiography of a Nonperson* (1978) and *B. F. Skinner and Behavior Change: Research, Practice, and Promise* (1978), Skinner insisted that the pigeon was “always right” and that the scientists’ “behavior was shaped by the

VIDEO 9. *Shaping Pigeon Key Pecks* (1942). Courtesy of the B. F. Skinner Foundation.
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pigeon's much more than visa-versa." This back-and-forth, a mutual interchange through periods of meaningless uncertainty, is present in the sustained observations of *Shaping Pigeon Key Pecks*. As a film, it simply documents the labor of the lab, before quantitative analysis, before meanings have been extrapolated, before findings have been published, and before the public response.

Skinner's lasting audacity was the extent to which he connected these laboratory interactions to human affairs, extrapolating not only to explain human instincts or drives but all of human social, political, and artistic life.³ Up to this point, the ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic importance of celluloid specimens has existed in the linkages of a lost or forgotten history. I have argued that the films of Robert Yerkes and Neal E. Miller are important cultural artifacts, pointing to subterranean logics of species, race, power, and aesthetics undergirding them. But with this final section, a new phenomenon emerges. Skinner, unlike his predecessors, was uniquely aware of the political potential of his animal research and sought to have this work taken seriously by society as a whole rather than limiting himself to conversations within experimental psychology. He consistently deployed his image as an animal experimenter in an attempt to shape major discourses on the issues of warfare, crime and punishment, education, scientific method, political governance, and economic structures. As such, Skinner believed that film and media could be used as a means of control, like his experimental apparatuses in the lab.

Skinner saw moving images in much the same way that Harun Farocki does in his writing on "operational images," which is a term Farocki first introduced in his *Eye/Machine* video series from 2001. Farocki describes operational images as those that "do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation" and thus primarily act on the world rather than representing it.⁴ Such images include drone footage and surveillance footage and are usually made for machines as they interact with the world around them. In many ways Skinner's own research laid the groundwork for this theory. Farocki retroactively attributed his concept to

the writings of Roland Barthes, but his evocation of the language of “operations” evokes the changes in vocabulary brought about by midcentury behaviorists, specifically Skinner and his theory of “operant conditioning.”

Beginning with his 1938 book *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis*, Skinner used a discourse of “operations” to contrast his experimental psychology with those who studied the workings of internal human subjectivity through introspection.⁵ Rather than referring to feelings, mental states, or thoughts, Skinner confined his interest to the actions of organisms—which he labeled “operations”—reframing psychology as the observation, study, and control over such behavior. In this work, Skinner went further than Farocki, reading even theatrical films or compelling narratives as fundamentally operational. In Skinner’s framework, every image, sign, photograph, or film is just one of many functional components that tie living behavior to its environment. He believed that sensory experiences were simply part of the operations performed by an organism—the means by which it was conditioned to behave in a particular way—and thus not representations of an outside world perceived by an internal, transcendent self. For the Skinnerian, *all* images are operative, and *all* forms of spectatorship (human, animal, machine, or otherwise) are operations.

Skinner’s approach to film was therefore quite different from what we have seen so far. Rather than as a tool for documenting internal truths or building theoretical models, he most frequently used film as a technology of control. Through the moving image, he sought to shape not only the behavior of his experimental animals but also the behavior of his fellow scientists and the public at large.

We will approach the different facets of this approach to the moving image in each of the following three chapters. Chapter 7 analyzes the classified military research project code-named Project Pigeon, which Skinner initiated and oversaw from 1940 to 1943. The goal of the research was to develop a pigeon-guided missile that could maneuver its explosive payload to moving targets. Skinner used film both as a means of training and conditioning the pigeons who were placed within the bomb and as a promotional tool for convincing the army generals to finance his research.

Project Pigeon signaled a new way of studying and testing living things for Skinner, who modeled his subsequent scientific approach on his research for the military, moving away from theories of behavior and toward technologies of control. He adopted a new vocabulary for approaching psychology, which would come to be called “radical behaviorism,” in which all references to intentionality and internal states were eliminated. This approach is the focus of chapter 8, where I argue that his films, when paired with his writings on scientific method, not only demonstrate a criticism of past techniques in comparative psychology but also enact a form of media theory-through-practice by deconstructing past laboratory uses of film.

Despite his reservations over using the moving image in the lab, he and his pigeons did frequently appear in documentary programs throughout the 1960s and 1970s to teach, represent, and defend his work, particularly on TV. Chapter 9 analyzes the public forum of television, where Skinner undertook to manage and promote his vision of the behaviorist animal laboratory as a source of social engineering techniques and tools that could bring about radical changes in human culture and society. Here, the ideological meanings of the pigeon in the Skinner box were charged and transformed by the medium of television into powerful political avatars for understanding life in a mediated society.

Shaping Pigeon Key Pecks (1942) reminds us of the pigeons themselves. Unassuming, minor, and mundane, these pigeons tend to go unnoticed even as they surround us in our daily lives. But once they were introduced into the overlapping discourses of scientific theory, political power, and moving image aesthetics, their significance began to rapidly multiply, as the chapters in this section document. With the example of Skinner, we have an extremely public debate being waged with and about celluloid specimens, where images of animal experiments took on a newfound political and cultural importance. Skinner dismissed the animal research film's ability to scientifically document behavior, but this does not mean he was unaware of its powerful effects on audience members. Consistently, throughout his career, we see him using film to shape the behavior of spectators, both human and animal. In Skinner's eyes, the moving image was not an expansion of the human sensorium but a tool that operated through the unseen principles of control and conditioning. The pigeon in the Skinner box became an apt metaphor for film spectators, who found themselves caught in the machinations of an environment that they did not control but had a profound effect on the way they engage with their world. Within the menagerie of symbolic animals that human society uses to understand itself, Skinner's pigeons are not minor figures but transformative ones that reshaped the use of moving images to study animal life.