

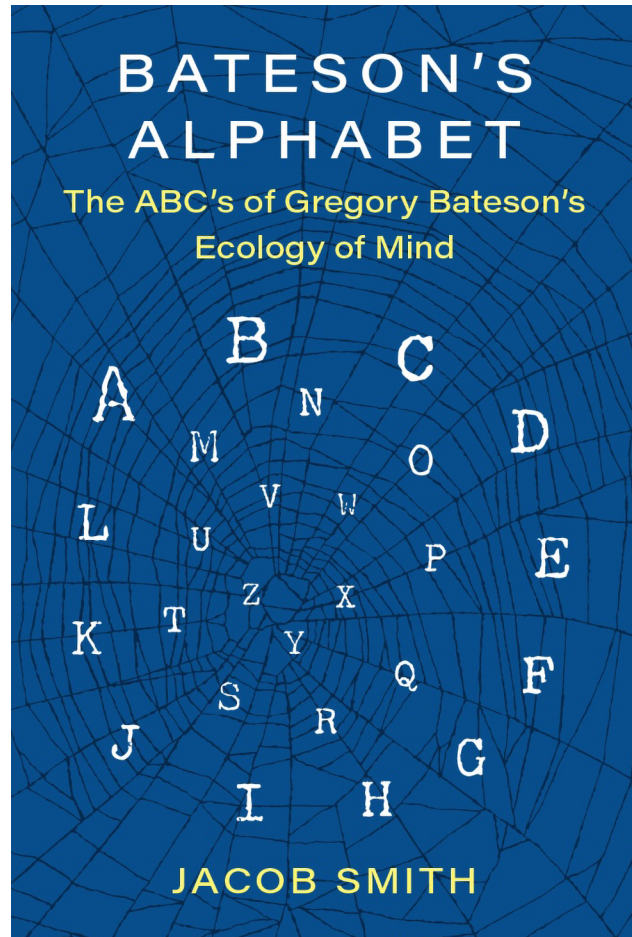
Jacob Smith, *Bateson's Alphabet: The ABCs of Gregory Bateson's Ecology of Mind*

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Jacob Smith. "David Lynch Presents William Blake's *The Sea of Time and Space*." *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, 10 Feb. 2025, zfm.wissenschaft.de/online/videography-blog/william-blake-nach-david-lynch. Video also at vimeo.com/1037133535.

WILLIAM Blake's legacy continues to inspire writers, poets, artists, and thinkers. His declaration that "[i]f the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite" is not only a poetic aphorism but also an epistemological proposition that rests upon the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate worlds. His artistic cosmology, built upon a fusion of contraries, anticipates many of the core ideas developed by Gregory Bateson, whose concept of an "ecology of mind" is based on similar foundations of interconnection, paradox, and aesthetic perception. Bateson's ideas and theories are revisited by Jacob Smith—a scholar in media studies, sound studies, and ecocriticism—in his hyperlinked book *Bateson's Alphabet: The ABCs of Gregory Bateson's Ecology of Mind*, which challenges media borders and connects words and ideas to voice and images. The progeny of this book is Smith's intermedial video essay that recontextualizes Blake's painting *The Sea of Time and Space* through the immersive soundscape of David Lynch. Smith's closely interwoven works—his open-access book and his video essay—are two sides of the same scholarly coin, with one deconstructing Blake through Bateson's ecology of mind and the other reconstructing the Blakean artistic legacy through Lynch's soundscape.



By fusing Blake's visionary Neoplatonism with Lynch's Gnostic-inflected sonic aesthetics, the video essay not only interprets Blake's cosmology but also reanimates it through spatial montage and audiovisual layering. Rather than relegating music to dramatic punctuation, the piece leverages the Sound Mountain Collection—the sound

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archive developed by Alan Splet and Ann Kroeber, long-time collaborators of Lynch—to an ontological medium, linking Blake’s Romantic cosmology with the industrial-modern soundscape of *Eraserhead*. Smith’s digital animation, spatial composition, and choreographed sonic rhythm reflect what Lars Elleström terms “intermedial transposition,” whereby one medium is restructured through another. Though the essay leans heavily on Kathleen Raine’s Neoplatonic reading of Blake, arguably limiting alternative interpretations, it nonetheless exemplifies Smith’s mastery of intermedial methodology. Crucially, this video essay is not an isolated experiment but rather an audiovisual companion to his larger multimodal project in *Bateson’s Alphabet*.

Emulating Bateson’s project in connecting networks, Smith intertextually and intermedially associates each entry in *Bateson’s Alphabet* with an anecdote, a poem, and a scene or image from a film. These various modalities open the space for deeper ecological reflections and highlight the idea that meaning in Bateson’s “ecology of mind” works through an interconnected web that cannot be fully grasped if each component is studied separately. This aligns Bateson with Blake, who believes that the barriers between different modes of expression should be melted away for a clearer and encapsulating vision.

Bateson’s belief that meaning does not emanate from inspecting different objects separately is the theme of Smith’s entries “Bagels” and “Wine Glass.” These entries shed light on Bateson’s idea of a spider’s web as a “resonating structure” (260) that clarifies the way that information is processed as an interconnected and highly dynamic operation. This notion is revisited in “Urchins” and “Crustaceans,” which illustrate Bateson’s view of ecological interdependence, echoing Barry Commoner’s maxim that “everything is connected to everything else” (231). In “Crustaceans,” references to a classroom demonstration involving a frozen crab and to Neruda’s poetry in the film *Mindwalk*, along with images combining flora, fauna, and urban forms on the cover of *Mind and Nature*, connect various media forms to better communicate Bateson’s ideas. This connectedness is also shown in “Empire State Building,” in which Smith successfully crosses media borders and integrates images from the real world to effectively present Bateson’s holistic vision that ties his ecological concerns to architecture, environmental consciousness, and cultural expression.

To elucidate the mechanisms used in Bateson’s hierarchical theories of learning, the entries “Dreams,” “Botany,” “Porpoise,” and “Recording” intermedially link Bateson’s abstract idea to lived experiences. “Dreams,” in which Smith frames dreams as liminal spaces between verbal

and nonverbal communication, illustrates the shift from Learning II to Learning III that marks a leap into reflexive self-awareness. “Botany” highlights Bateson’s three-level model of learning. In “Recording,” the shock of self-confrontation through recorded media is shown to enable a doubled perspective that marks Learning III. Linking animal behavior, psychology, and cinema, “Porpoise” illustrates the way that nonverbal communication and behavior reveal complex cognitive structures that melt the boundaries between Learning I and II and suggest the possibility of Learning III in nonhuman minds.

Bateson’s concepts of “double bind” and “double description” are duly presented and visually sustained in “Bread-and-Butterfly,” “Fabric,” and “Tiresias.” While “double bind” denotes the idea that paradoxes within human communication may create confusion, “double description” is the layered pattern of understanding meanings in “double bind” situations. These entries underscore Bateson’s belief that paradoxes are not just fanciful inventions but reflect real-world patterns of contradictory conditions.

The entries entitled “Grass,” along with others throughout the book, detail the multilayered paradigm of Bateson’s ecological critique. While “Grass¹” highlights his rejection of syllogism in favor of biosemiotic frameworks through the connectedness of mental, communicative, and ecological processes, “Grass²” communicates his ecological critique, with the lawn motif used as an artificial construct that mirrors a larger framework of cybernetic ecology. The multimodal perspective of “Grass³” shows the interplay of autobiographical memory, cinematographic imagery, and environmental critique to invoke his perspective of the way that humans contribute to ecological collapse. Bateson’s vision of the “Eco-god” (191) is dealt with in “Redwoods,” an entry that fuses science, philosophy, and environmental ethics to show his advocacy for “environmental education and action” (192) as prerequisites for ecological survival. Smith further highlights Bateson’s ecological concerns through the anecdote of the “boiled frog” (in “Frogs”) to denote society’s failure to perceive gradual ecological degradation. Similar messages run through “Garden,” which communicates Bateson’s concern with ecological collapse, and through “New College, Oxford,” which addresses long-term ecological foresight, aligning with Bateson’s cybernetic belief in “the larger gestalt; the longer time.” To transmit these perspectives, Smith opts for a multimodal layering of the narrative, the cinematic, the architectural, and the scientific.

Smith mirrors the way that Bateson’s theories can best be understood by crossing media borders between the literary, the musical, and the visual to emphasize Bateson’s belief in the multimodal nature of communication (through

entries such as “I Give Thee All, I Can No More” and “Insects”). As communication for Bateson is not confined to the verbal, Smith highlights the interest in nonverbal communication in “Vincent Van Gogh,” which conveys Bateson’s view of the capacity of art to move one’s feelings and communicate affectively across media and generations. Bateson’s focus on metacommunication is underscored through multimodal and intermedial perspectives in “Jackdaw” and “Zoo,” as they combine zoological observation, cybernetics, film, literature, and stop motion.

Bateson’s perspective on perception is presented as tightly connected to Blake’s. The exploration in “J. S. Bach” and “LSD” of his preoccupation with the states of perception that happen through LSD intermedially aligns sonic, visual, and narrative codes to elucidate his proposition that perception is not direct, but emerges through recursive systems of mediation. He often quoted Blake, particularly the words “I look through it [eye] and not with it” (148), to affirm that perception operates not through the eye as a passive receptor, but as a cognitive interface shaped by underlying patterns. This idea is equally explored in “Eyes,” which communicates Bateson’s insight that the eye goes beyond its function of observation to be a medium of emotional expression. Bateson’s theories of perception are masterfully tackled in “Outlines” too, where he is shown to be deeply influenced by Blake, especially the visionary *Head of the Ghost of a Flea*, which aligns with Bateson’s artistic vision in its negotiation between conscious intent and unconscious emergence. Asserting the connectedness between Bateson and Blake, “Hind” highlights the way that Bateson’s reading of the Book of Job through Blake’s visionary perspective is linked to his multimodal engagement with ecology and religion. Blake’s fusion of the literary, the theological, and the pictorial is shown to parallel Bateson’s call for an ecological gestalt. Bateson’s philosophy converges also with Blake’s dual vision of the world, and Smith’s entries “Bus” and “Tram” underscore Bateson’s interest in paradox and duality through the use of limerick and metaphor to explore the psychological and existential tensions between youth (tram) and age (bus), freedom and constraint.

Bateson is revealed to be a master of multimodal and intermedial products, as he deemed film studies to be a major component in decoding ideological structures and understanding cultural paradigms. This idea is communicated in Smith’s book through “Movie Houses” and revisited in “Yams,” where films are shown to function as critical extensions of Bateson’s epistemology; these entries position his work within a broader matrix of race, ecology, and media. While “Television” highlights his critical perspective of television as a medium of trivialized communication and addictive feedback loops, his cybernetic epistemology is depicted as having influenced early video art, where videos function as active participants in the co-constitution of perception. Likewise, “Tripod” reflects Bateson’s preference for mobile, embodied camerawork over static objectivity.

Influenced by Blake’s amalgamation of different media in delivering his messages, Smith’s *Bateson’s Alphabet* bridges the gap between theoretical paradigms and the real world. This work is particularly recommended for readers prepared to move beyond conventional modes of scholarly engagement and enter a rich terrain in which each alphabetical entry serves as a nexus connecting Bateson’s theories with visual art, literature, cinema, sound, and design. It will be of considerable interest to scholars in intermedial and multimodal studies, literature—especially those concerned with the visionary epistemologies of Blake—ecocriticism, cybernetics, and anthropology, as well as those working in the environmental humanities, film studies, education, and gender studies. In its accessible articulation of Bateson’s complex ideas, the book serves as an invaluable guide for readers who may find *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* abstruse or conceptually dense. For those who are already well versed in Bateson’s intellectual framework, certain entries may appear too concise, privileging creative intermedial experimentation over sustained critical analysis. Nonetheless, Smith’s project aligns powerfully with Blake’s insistence on the integration of sensory, intellectual, and spiritual faculties, offering a contemporary enactment of Blakean methodology, in which knowledge is apprehended not through analytic fragmentation but through a dynamic synthesis of perception, imagination, and form.