

Transcript of Part Two (by Andy Elliot, 2007)

One of the problems that I would like to discuss today is the fact that – if you remember from the last lecture the switch from a sort of Enlightenment environment to another one grounded in images - probably the deepest consequence of this switch is an incompatibility between what we perceive and what we call knowledge. Basically, if there is a definition of postmodernity, it is exactly this. Postmodern time is a time in which we cannot put together in one person or in a group what we perceive as our ordinary life; what we understand as our present and what we understand as knowledge. There is a conflict there, we are struggling to put these together, because perception is going in one direction and knowledge pulls us in another one, so we are constantly struggling to combine these. This is the issue that I would like to address today.

And I will indicate it as the ‘constructivist’ perspective of knowledge, because constructivism is... let's call it a ‘school’ within philosophy which has acknowledged this incompatibility, trying to give an explanation of (1) why these incompatibilities happen and (2) what we can do about it. The key figure of this thinking orientation, if you like, is in my view the Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget. I did not include any of his work in our bibliography because I thought it might take too long and will take you far away from our main road. At the end of the day, we are combining some ideas from philosophy and some from cinema, and not solely philosophy, I thought it would be better to include someone like Glasersfeld who explains Piaget's ideas very quickly, and so I thought that would be much more profitable.

What is the Piaget’ perspective of knowledge? It's very simple in one way; he says that we construct our own reality, our understanding or reality and we construct our sense or idea of reality at the same time as we grow up as human beings. Basically, we establish language, knowledge and understanding at the same time, together. We

cannot distinguish one from the other. If you take a 19th century perspective about art or science, it is very simple: here was the world, called Nature, and here, separated, was the individual, so the connection between the two was what we called Knowledge. What the constructivists were saying was that this distinction can no longer be taken for granted. We are *in* the world; there is no rational or intellectual possibility of standing outside the world to make observations and then return to make an analysis. We and all the elements are there, so our notion of language, understanding and experience and perception are all developing at the same time, and all of them together. This is why it is so difficult for instance to face the intellectual problems, that this, switch into an image-orientated society environment, because there are too many things going on at the same time, and there is not enough time to make clear-cut concepts, understanding here, language here and perception here. Everything is entangled, leaving grey areas, really, and this is what some authors call 'postmodern reality'.

As another consequence of this perspective of knowledge there is the treatment which constructivism has received in relation to aesthetics. If you recall the last lecture, the idea in the 19th century regarding art was that the more perfect the representation of society in a novel, for example, or a person in painting, the closer to art it became. Well, with the movements of Symbolism and - most importantly, the development of *cinema* - that idea of art disappeared at the beginning of the 20th century, producing a crisis of representation. People found that this representation did not necessarily match people's expectations of art. My point is here that Constructivism tries to deal with this problem of aesthetics. In other words: what is the meaning of aesthetic in a world that (1) is grounded in images and not in history or Reason, and (2) where traditional representation is no longer working, and they give space to a different manifestation like cinema. So, in this switch, what is the meaning of aesthetics? Do we have aesthetics, or has it disappeared? All of these question marks are elements that some constructivist authors were trying to address. We have two issues (1) the idea of observer, (2) the idea of reality. What cybernetics calls the observer is what we traditionally call individual, perceiver, author or artist, someone who is perceiving, trying to understand something. The problem is that we can no longer separate the perceiver (or observer) from the thing which is being observed. Everything goes together, and this is what we can call the 'problem of the observer', that is, we need to

figure out a way to understand understanding, because we cannot make abstractions of the people who participate in a particular system, society, community. Everything goes together, and going back to the beginning, the introduction, we are facing here a very large cultural problem, because the diversity, the multiplicity of contemporary society is huge. And this is one of the problems: we need to sustain the idea of culture as a concept. We have so many things going on together that even the idea of *talking* about culture seems to be unconnected, too abstract to have any rapport with our normal lives. And the problem of reality is similar. The classical 19th century idea of ONE reality, which in one way or another was the reality of Nature, the Logic or Law system in which Nature operates, this idea of Reality disappears. Epistemologically, if we no longer have one reality, the effectiveness of plural and different Realities is less: it is less useful for us, because we have lost the security of having only one reality against which we can match what we perceive and then decide if we are right or wrong. The question is: do we need to have *a* reality considering that we have *many* realities? Well, the answer that some provide, as you may be aware, is that at least people need a *principle* of reality. We need a principle to decide what is important and what is not important, if we want to call that 'reality principle' of 'reality', fine, but we must remember that this principle is (1) not stable any more, (2) is no longer universal and (3) is changing constantly. We are forced, then, to *adjust* ourselves and have a constant change in the principle under which we take a decision and we try to understand things. And this is important, because if you want, in a way, this is cinema. Cinema is a particular context in which we change our perspective constantly, so the idea is that this stability of the 19th century, connected with literature in which we take *one* perspective to understand *one reality*, disappears, and now we are forced to adapt ourselves very quickly to a context which is grounded in images, in which our perception goes in one direction and our knowledge goes in another. And this is why I thought that the connection between philosophy and cinema, or if you like, between *space* and cinema, is crucial. Because when I say philosophy I am thinking in a sort of perspective which is grounded mostly on an idea of space and no more on time or 'temporality'.

So to allow you to have a better idea of these issues and this situation, I chose chapter two from Virilio's *War and Cinema* which is I think an interesting chapter in which he tracks down the cinematographical revolution and extracts some interesting

conclusions. It really is easy going, and not very technical. He sometimes makes slightly obscure references, of which not everybody will be aware, but except for this it's a very interesting article. Then the suggested reading follows the same pattern as the previous lecture, in which I pick up Glasersfeld (Chapter Eight) on Knowledge and Understanding, and then from P. Watzlawick, part of the Palo Alto school of Psychology, I take the first part, about sense of reality in our contemporary society. From B. Latour I take the third part of a very small book, but which is nevertheless interesting, because he makes an interpretation of an interpretation of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. This could seem very complex, but it is not, because what Latour did is an analysis from the spatial point of view of Einstein's perspective, and in one way or another tried to make a short analysis of what is the meaning of understanding understanding. Regarding the idea of an observer, I used Jonathan Crary, chapter one, because he really discusses these ideas in relation to an observer more connected with the 19th century, which is really interesting, and Chapter One is a sort of introduction giving an idea about what is the meaning of observer, and why we talk about observer and no longer artist or author. And finally another key figure coming from cybernetics into Constructivism, von Foerster, Chapters 8, 9, 13, because then is where Foerster discusses the link between cybernetics and Constructivism, and why they are important to our society.

I say it every week, but it is important to remember that you do not need to read *all* of these works, I'm just trying to give you an overview, and allow you to pick out the elements most suitable to your approach.

Recommended Reading

Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), Chapter 2.

Suggested Reading

Ernst von Glasersfeld, *Radical Constructivism. A Way of Knowing and Learning*

(London : The Falmer Press, 1995), Chapter 8.

Paul Watzlawick (ed.), *La realtà inventata* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1989), First part.

Bruno Latour, *Petites leçons de sociologie des sciences* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993), Part III ; ‘ A relativistic account of Einstein’s relativity’ in *Social Studies of Science*, volume 18, 1988, pp. 3-44.

Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), Chapter 1.

Heinz von Foerster, *Understanding Understanding. Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition* (New York: Springer, 2003), Chapters 8, 9 and 13.