

Transcript of Part One (by Andy Elliot, 2007)

The idea that I would like to briefly discuss in this lecture has to do with the fact that the 20th century represents a definite switch in the way that we conceive our intellectual world, as well as the way in which we approach our environment and surroundings. The idea is that we have been working for one or two centuries, at least since the 19th century, on the assumption that literature in one way or another within the arts and within culture was the least imperfect way to represent feelings, perceptions, world conceptions, beliefs, and so on. What happened during the 20th century, especially towards the end, is that we switch from that scheme, which is grounded in literature (writing, text) to another one which is grounded purely in images (vision). As you can imagine, the consequences for areas like philosophy and cinema are obvious. This, then, is in brief the hypothesis. Why do I say the end of the Enlightenment? As you know, the Enlightenment is a theory, in a way, which assumes that we use Reason to enlighten a particular problem, or to enlighten Nature to understand what happens in a society and individually, to ourselves. So what really disappeared in the 20th century is this assumption that we can use Reason to better understand society, so the idea is that reason breaks down so there is no longer only one idea of reason; at the same time the notion that we can *logically* understand social, psychological and political issues disappears. So basically, what disappeared is this strong idea of History. This is why we talk about Ricoeur's 'Renoncer à Hegel', a chapter of one of the volumes of *Temps et Récit*, in which he discusses the strong historical Hegelian perspective which has for so long dominated all of the thinking and speculation about society and culture in Western thinking. So what happens in the 20th century, according to Ricoeur, is that this Hegelian idea has disappeared in terms of legitimacy, as you will see in some of the suggested readings. This assumption of the Enlightenment, a Classical period around the 18th century - that we have one world composed of Nature with its own laws and logic, and *us* who try to understand and represent nature in order to understand ourselves in the 20th Century - it is this

principle which disappears. And that's why I say one world, too many worlds, because we no longer have this World with a capital, or Nature with capital, in which we are supposed to learn and understand how to treat ourselves and deal with problems in society. So we now have too many worlds, and this is the problem which we now need to face, we need to combine these different perspectives, these different worlds which are in existence at the same time.

So now we deal with representation. In art a *true* representation - and this idea of Truth is crucial here - was basically grounded on the fact that the closer to nature a representation was, the more truly it became representative. And is this also what disappeared in my view, in the 20th century: the idea that a True representation was possible. We no longer make any representations because Nature doesn't exist any more in the classical sense, so we create, we *construct* Nature and things in this post 20th Century period. And this is why I bring in the idea of Cybernetics. This idea, as some of you know, of Cybernetics came up in the 1940s and 50s, mainly in the USA, but partially in Europe. It referred mainly to 'hard' or natural sciences, and the idea was the we no longer understand *any* systems in general terms. So basically all systems, technological or human, need to have a local explanation and, in this explanation, the role of the observers involved in the system is crucial. So, this situation where we cannot make an abstraction of the observer, and we cannot make a generalisation of any system, has great ramifications in epistemology, because it means that (1) we can only understand things locally, and (2) we can only understand if we have the individuals (observers) who are part of that system. Therefore we cannot make a fraction of the individual or the observer, either, to understand a particular situation.

As you see, in all of this Enlightenment era, where you have Reason with a capital R, or Man with a capital M, all these generalisations and general perspectives disappear, and we are forced to understand things specifically, locally. That is what Cybernetics was about, in a nutshell, and some of the bibliography suggested may explain better than I do now.

So to explain this general situation, I recommended to you this short article by Bukatman which explains how someone connected with literature experimented, or

perceived, a switch from one society grounded in writing, say, or in a particular idea of art, to another society grounded on images. This 'Gibson's Typewriter', is a sort of metaphor; a small, but I believe precise, perception of the consequences of this switch from one type of society and culture to another. What is interesting - and this is why I have started the course with this panorama - is that this switch did not happen in a sort of revolutionary way; we didn't wake up one morning as image-orientated people. It has been a slow, and sometimes silent process of changes. It's in our ordinary life, in the way in which we deal with machines, technology, the way we think which has been switching/evolving in two or three generations. Yet not in a way that we can say that in *this* year, or *that* year this happened; it has been a process of 150 or 200 years which became clearer at the end of the 20th century, because all of these ideas about culture were no longer effective - and for us no longer effective in our ordinary lives to give explanation and to understand things - so authors, thinkers and people started to think that maybe we needed new tools, and new instruments.

The selected readings are a sort of anthology, a key to explain these issues on which I have roughly commented. Virilio is one of the key figures in this social Cybernetics context, and the chapter I have recommended to you is a sort of introduction, so it's easy reading, not very complicated. Paul Ricoeur's chapter refers to this idea of History, and how we have been dominated by History for so long. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-modern Condition* is a very, very good book, not too long, I would recommend 2 chapters but it is worthwhile going through the whole thing, because even today it's the best book written about the meaning of this end of Enlightenment and the meaning of this post-modern condition. Glasersfeld's is an excellent book about Constructivism which is - let's put it this way - an evolution from Cybernetics, so Radical Constructivism has its roots in the Cybernetics perspective. Again, it explore these two elements deeply, that (1) the explanation must be conducted locally and (2) the author/observer is crucial to understand what we are seeing and perceiving.

Then there is a long chapter from one of my books. Unfortunately it's in Spanish only, but for those of you who read Spanish, it's a useful introduction to the problem of science in terms of writing, and the problems that science faces in this evolution and this change; how we understand things, and produce science in a society which is

grounded in images, or, if you like, which is grounded more in cinema. Then for the problem of representation, I selected an article from Peterson, and again, I selected, Bruch, which is a brief introduction, but very solid and interesting. Then another article in Spanish by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, which explains to you - from the point of Constructivism - this switch from Knowledge and Understanding. Finally, from a book by Martin Jay, I have picked Chapter Two, because even if his books refer only to the French tradition, it is a good allegory for this wide problem. As I suggested in the introduction, you don't need to read *all* of these material, but I think the recommended article at least will give you a taste of this problem and open up the way ahead. I hope in this brief lecture I have introduced you to some of the key issues at stake here, so you can select which ones appeal to you more and consequently pick the bibliography. However, as I say, if you have any trouble with these, then just contact me.

Recommended Reading

Scott Bukatman, 'Gibson's Typewriter' in Mark Dery (ed.), *Flame Wars. The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 71-89.

Suggested Reading

Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1961), Chapter 1.

Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit 3. Le Temps raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), Chapter 6;
Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), Chapters 1, 4 and 5.

Ernst von Glasersfeld, *Radical Constructivism. A Way of Knowing and Learning* (London: The Falmer Press, 1995), Chapter 1. (download)

C. Canaparo, *Ciencia y escritura* (Buenos Aires: Zibaldone, 2004), Chapter 12.

Aaron Sloman, 'Towards a general theory of representation' in Donald Peterson (ed.), *Forms of Representation* (London: Intellect, 1996), pp. 118-140.

M. Peschl and A. Riegler, 'Does representation Need Reality?' in A. Riegler *et al.* (eds.), *Understanding Representation in the Cognitive Sciences* (New York: Kluwer, 1999), pp. 9-22.

H. Maturana/F. Varela, *El árbol del conocimiento. Las bases biológicas del conocimiento humano* (Barcelona: Debate, 1999), Chapter 1.

Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1994), Chapter Two. (download)