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# “Inventing Hysteria” An Investigation on How Social Constructivism Uses Technology to Define Reality

178 In my paper I want to focus on the social constructivists and their approach of using technology to define (constructed) reality. Based on this, constructivists argue that technology can be a means to define social roles. Furthermore, I want to analyze this theory on the practical example of the photographs of women in different phases of hysteria, based on Georges Didi-Huberman's book *Invention of Hysteria* (1982).

Social roles are constructed, a statement many people would agree with. This so called social constructivism is based on the book *The social construction of reality* (1966) by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The theory is used to describe how individuals or groups participate in matters of the community. Those participating people not only agree with the theory but they also have to work actively on this ongoing process of change and adjustment. Therefore one can say that the social constructivism gets its support through the interpretation, the motives and the knowledge of people (Ozor, 2016).

In my paper I want to argue how photography in the year 1900 was used to “classify” hysterical women, which led to their role as social outcasts. Furthermore, I will focus on the way how social constructivists use technology to construct reality. This argument will lead to the question if their approach to construct reality also “works” on the argued case of the hysterical photographs.

The first part of the paper will give a short overview of the core arguments of the constructivist theory, their supporters and their approach to construct the nature of reality through the focus on the modern technological society. Therefore, I will give a short insight on the reasons why theorists, like Bruno Latour, argue for the conjunction of social constructivism and technology.

Afterwards, the second part will introduce a historical case study of photographs of women in different phases of hysteria. The main source of literature will be Georges Didi-Huberman's publication *L'Invention de l'hystérie* (1982) (*Invention of hysteria*). This case study is for the topic of social constructivism interesting because technology (the

camera) made the photographs of the hysteric women and through that they received the social label of “outcasts”. This part of the paper will also discuss that the women put themselves in the position of “being shown” in the way of being different. And being different made them to not compatible with the society and therefore “outcasts”.

The last two parts of the paper will be used to analyze the case study through the theory of the social constructivism. In the end the constructivists will argue that photography is reliable method to construct reality. In the last part of the paper I will argue that it's not a reliable method and that it's therefore not able to grasp reality.

## A (really) short introduction to Social Constructivism

Constructivism is a philosophical term which was used to describe how people learn. A Learner is actively constructing his/her own understanding of something. Furthermore for constructivists the objective Truth is unknowable. This means that a person is having his/her own subjective experience and constructs their own unique understanding of an objective reality. Still there are different constructivist theories on how accurate a subjective interpretation of an objective reality can be. However, all constructivists agree on one thing: it is not possible for a person to reach an “absolute Truth”, no matter what methods are involved (Luckmann: 1991: 14-17).

Besides the topic of knowledge and reaching the objective truth, there is also the debate on the nature of reality. For the sake of clarity and simplicity I will use the four clauses that Ian Hacking formulated to visualize the core of the constructivists' theory and therefore some of their “main problems”. The following clauses are, like nearly every philosophical argument, debatable (Kukla, 2000: 2-6). But for the means of my argument this will do.

“Constructionists about X tend to hold that:

- X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.

Very often they go further, and urge that:

- X is quite bad as it is.
- We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.
- In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted, X appears to be inevitable.” (Hacking, 1999: 6).

Hacking argues that one may realize that something, which first seems inevitable in the present state of things, was not inevitable at all and is not a bad thing. “But most people who use the social construction idea enthusiastically want to criticize, change, or destroy some X that they dislike in the established order of things.” (Hacking, 1993: 7).

This X can be defined through two different constructivist views. Based on the paper of D.C. Phillips you can separate constructivism into two groups:

- The “Individual Constructivists” argue that reality is discoverable. According to those theorists it is possible to get an understanding of the objective world through certain research methods. However, this does not including having “knowledge about x”.

Supporters of this theory, like Jean Piaget or Lev Vygotsky, focused their work on cognition. In general this means that their approach is to analyze the mental representation that a person has while experiencing the world (Phillips, 1996: 6-8).

- The second group is called “Social Constructivists” with their most prominent supporter: Bruno Latour. In their approach they focus on the social and political dynamics, which enables to socially construct an understanding. Furthermore, reality is for these theorists inconsequential. The more radical constructivists argue that there is no such thing as an objective reality (Phillips, 1995: 8-9).

Latour was one of those theorists who introduced the methodological premise that the modern world is composed of a network of social actors. Furthermore, that network includes living people and non-living technological entities (Winner, 1993: 366). He disagrees with the opinion that “science is about the discovery of truth whereas technology is about the application of truth.” (Winner, 1993: 365). According to him a conventional distinction between technology and society is no longer existent. In his essay “Do you believe in reality?” Latour points out that if the sciences achieved anything, then it is that they “added” reality to science and not withdrawn any from it (Latour, 1999: 2). This can be seen for the social constructivists as a chance to construct reality through technology.

Langdon Winner sees this approach in his paper more skeptical. For him Latour’s view seems to be like

looking inside the Black Box to show a colorful array of social actors, processes, and images and they all visualize the dynamics of conflict, disagreement and consensus. But what Latour doesn’t mention is that technology, while it surveys the evidence, lacks to offer a judgement or an answer to what it *all* means (Winner, 1993: 367-368). Of course there are those who wouldn’t use the word “lack” as being an issue. For them this means the chance for interpretation and something like “total objectivity”.

Technology seems to be the overall answer to many questions that social constructivists may be looking for, but still, they seem to take certain basic commitments of modern technological society for granted. “The attitude of the social constructivists seems to be that it is enough to provide clearer, well-nuanced explanations of technological development. [...] Perhaps the helpful insight they want to offer is simply that choices are available, that the course of technological development is not foreordained by outside forces but is, instead, a product of complex social interactions.” (Winner, 1993: 375). Latter leads to the key question in which ways our technology-centered world might be constructed.

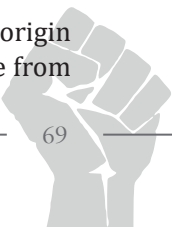
In this way of working with technology the constructivists have to first establish how technology is involved in the human affairs. Afterwards the “relevant social groups” have to be located, which are involved in the development of a particular technological device or system or process. Varies of interpretations of what a particular technological entity in a process of development means and how people act in different ways to achieve their purposes within that process.

As one can see the approach to define a constructed reality through technology has its limitations. Specially based on the questions and the focus one can find in the theory of constructivism. This will be now discussed in the following chapter by a practical example.

## Photographs of Hysterics – A Case Study

Hippocrates defined “Hysteria” in his thirty-fifth aphorism, where it is said: “When a woman suffers from hysteria or difficult labour an attack of sneezing is beneficial.” (Gilman, 1993: 11-11). For the ancient thinkers hysteria included the view that the uterus is endowed with the capacity of movement. This means that the woman’s womb is some sort of an animal. And its shaking means moving and agitating and it is just as dreadful as lechery, suffocation, swoons and real semblance of death (Gilman, 1993: 11).

This was the most prominent belief on the origin of hysteria and alternative explanations like the one from



German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel were rather seldom. For him the madness of hysteria was nothing other than a simple contradiction within reason. This means that, in principle, a madwoman should be supposed, or presupposed, to be quite simply a reasonable being (Gilman, 1993: 23).

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jean-Martin Charcot started to treat hysteria as a physical illness. His new scientific and analytical approach had its capital in the famous Salpêtrière. This teaching hospital and asylum in the modern sense had its first principle in the treatment of madness and was the general hospital for women, or rather for the female outsiders of society.

Charcot's teaching methods included experiments as an ethic of science. Hysteria made repetition a necessity (maybe even an obsession) and through the use of the same patients the ethics became soon aesthetics. This happened precisely in a way to not lose its "science-making" aspect (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 180).

In his way of teaching and experimenting Charcot can be easily compared to a stage director: While he focused on the clinical and pedagogical methodology, he started his lectures with: "In a moment I will give you a first-hand experience, so to speak, of this pain [hysteria]; I will help you to recognize all its characteristics" – how? – "by presenting you five patients" – and he would have them enter the stage of his amphitheater." (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 45). Besides the live experiments Charcot saw in photographs an experimental procedure, a museological procedure (scientific archive), and a teaching procedure (a tool of transmission). Didi-Huberman points out that the importance of photography for Charcot cannot be judged high enough, because through this technical medium he had a museological agency of the "observation" of the sick body. Now he had the possibility to generalize the sick cases into a *tableau* (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 30).

The photos of the women in different hysterical phases [see images 1-3] supplements and explicates the images. They provide a commentary or legend for that which is supposed to be its essential mysterious content. After all the images were meant to illustrate, clarify, and prove the truth of the clinical discourse (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 32).

"When the body executes movements in various ways, or of such great extension that they cannot be directly inscribed on a piece of paper, photography compensates for mechanical procedures with great ease: it reduces the amplitude of movement, or else it amplifies it to a more suitable scale" (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 32).



Planche XIV.

LÉTHARGIE  
HYPEREXCITABILITÉ MUSCULAIRE  
Figure 75  
Régnaud, photograph of Augustine ("Léthargie: Muscular Hyperexcitability"), *Iconographie*, vol. III.

Image I



Planche XXIII

ATTITUDES PASSIONNELLES  
EXTASE (1878).  
Figure 64  
Régnaud, photograph of Augustine ("Attitudes passionnelles: Ecstasy"), *Iconographie*, vol. II.

Image II

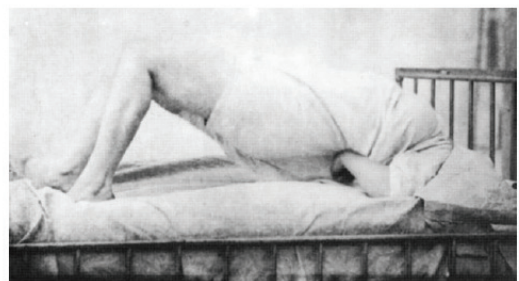
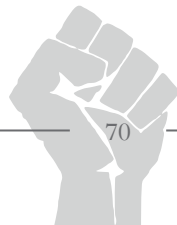


Figure 106  
Régnaud, "Hystero-epileptic attack: arc-de-cerle," *Iconographie*, vol. III.

Image III

This discreet but astonishing passage to the limit, in which medical practices relating to hysteria became a figurative invention, was only possible through the "power" of the camera. The physician made the attitudes





of his hysterics into a masterpiece. The women became the living image of the concept of the illness, and the physician practically glorified it – as an image. Even though the photographs seem to be taken freely, there were still procedures for posing: platforms, discreet yokes, boxes for framing the image (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 32).

Still it is obvious that there is no neutral distance between the subject and the physician. The photographer Paul Régnard published a series of those Salpêtrière images in a catalogue named *Iconographie photographique* (1876 and 1877). Those two volumes included also images that weren't used for lectures or other documentary purposes. On one of those photos the body of one of the physicians himself can be seen, using a long needle to pierce the arm of a young woman. For Didi-Huberman the young hysteric has a "knowing" smile – a smile of consent, as if contemplating the serious nature of the situation with an understanding of the experimentation on her anaesthetized body, and doubled with the procedures of photographic exposure (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 42).

Figuring and directing, but always at the limits of falsifying. For Didi-Huberman this is experimental fabrication. But still this method could not escape the figurative problem that obsessed every medical clinic: The problem of the link between seeing and knowing, seeing and suffering. How could all this passion be produced from figures of pain? This is the crucial phenomenological problem of approaching the body of *the Other* and of the intimacy of its pain (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 46-49). To put it differently: the problems we have here is the problem of seeing, because through experimentations on bodies they tried to make some part of them – their essence – visible.

In the Salpêtrière something was constructed. Something in the form of a great optical machine to decipher the invisible lineaments of a crystal: the great, territorial, experimental, magical machine of hysteria. To quote Didi-Huberman: "[...] In order to decipher the crystal, one had to break it, be fascinated by its fall, then break it again and invent machines permitting an even more visible, regimented fall, and then break it once again – just to see." (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 9-10).

But this produced a paradoxical situation: the more the hysteric delighted in reinventing and imaging herself to a greater extent, the more a kind of ill was exaggerated. A mutuality of charm was created between physicians, with their never-ending desire for images of hysteria, and hysterics, who willingly participated and actually raised the stakes through their increasingly theatricalized bodies. In this way, hysteria developed from an illness to a spectacle. Didi-Huberman calls it the moment hysteria was invented. Thereby the photographs helped to promote Charcot's theory of the four "classic" stages of hysteria. The photographs did

not only help to create those stages, because at a certain point the physician-patient dynamic lead to develop hysteria further *or* to construct even new hysterical poses that did not exist before (Decker, 2005: 354).

## Photography as a means of reality (?)

For Walter Benjamin photography "is the means through which the beginning of a confrontation [caused by history] occurs. [...] this confrontation is not seen for what it is – the beginning of a general confrontation between art and technology, rather a confrontation between art and one mode of technology – confirms the extent to which photography is only the beginning of a development [...]. Photography provide[s] a local habitation for the political significance of history. Photography becomes, in this sense, not merely a means of producing images, but rather becomes itself an image, a technique for the production of history's political significance." (Benjamin, 2006: 22).

Benjamin felt himself confronted with the discussion if photography should be a "slave" (Benjamin, 2006: 22) of the arts.<sup>1</sup> Based on the quote he argues that photography is not art but a medium to capture history and "becomes an image" itself. Latter is the acknowledgment of the uniqueness and authenticity of photography, because there exists only one photography with exactly "that" person on it, with exactly "that" pose and exactly "that" composition. Every other sample of "that" photography is just a copy from *the first one*.

So with this argument of Benjamin photography receives a unique role, because it becomes *the* source of accuracy. But this is also the moment where one could say that photography is a medium for reality. Latour would say yes.

So photography turns into a unique image, which can also be a source for history and a proof for reality. In this case the reality would be the hysterical women as being different to other (healthy) women and their role as social outcasts through their "otherness".

For the social constructivists reality is constructed, but here I ask: is that enough?

In the example of hysteria the photographs were used as a way of documentation and as a proof for Charcot's theory. Furthermore, they were a means of making the illness a spectacle. This was enabled through the methods of art, like staging, composition or posing. A further element of the creation of the images was the physician-

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1 The less dramatic formulation would be to call photography a „form of art“. Still, this description wouldn't capture the quintessence of Benjamin's argument. Calling photography the "slave of the arts" makes the negative relationship between arts and photography visible. A relationship which is – for Benjamin – not balanced or equal.

patient dynamics and the willingness of the hysterics to start to exaggerate. At this point it should be mentioned that contemporary studies question how deep Charcot was involved in the production of the photographs. Even though some argue that he wasn't involved at all, he still had the benefit of the images promoting his theories.

This case visualizes perfectly the double-sidedness of technology as...

- A source for a constructed reality
- A documentation for fabrication.

## Conclusion

In the final and last part of this paper we can now formulate three points (or problems) that social constructivism has when it comes to elaborating the reality construction through technology:

- The social constructivists' view on technology as a method for reaching a constructed reality should be handled carefully. They seem to lack an explanation for the problem of a multicentered spectrum of technical possibilities and in some ways some social interests are favored while others are excluded.
- Furthermore, they neglect the possibility that there are dynamic pieces of evidence in technological change beyond those revealed by studying the immediate needs, problems, solutions, and interests of specific groups and social actors.
- And finally one has to be satisfied with the rather radical point that reality is constructed.

To me, the third one seems rather unwise. Social constructivists find themselves here in a difficult position: By saying that there is only one reality, which is constructed, they fail to deliver a satisfying explanation for the shift of the social roles to explain the physician-patient dynamic and the way a "not judging" technological medium infects the social roles.

By agreeing to two realities (one of them is constructed), they could argue to use the constructed reality as a tool to reach the "absolute reality". Still, there is the question: have we reached it (the absolute reality) yet? And when we do – how do we notice that?

The photographs of hysterics are an impressive example of the way how social roles can shift and how difficult it is to define a "role for technology." Also it is impressive to analyze the physician-patient dynamic and the tools of photography. In the end, it's not only reality which seems to be problematic to grasp through this example, but also the definition of an illness and therefore the uprising question of "what is normal/healthy" and what is art?

## Sažetak

**Doris Stadler,**

**„Otkriće histerije“ Kako društveni konstruktivizam koristi tehnologiju kako bi opisao stvarnost?**

*U ovom se radu želim fokusirati na društveni konstruktivizam i njihovu upotrebu tehnologije kako bi se opisala stvarnost. Na temelju ovoga, konstruktivisti argumentiraju da tehnologija može biti sredstvo određivanja društvenih uloga. Nadalje, željela bih analizirati ovu teoriju putem praktičnog primjera fotografija žena u različitim fazama histerije iz knjige Georgesa Didi-Hubermana „Invention of Hysteria“ (1982.).*

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