

The Foreigner

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The foreigner (and the foreign) is the one who affirms his own being in the world that surrounds him. Thus, he makes sense of the world, and in a certain way he dominates the world. But he dominates it tragically: he does not integrate into the world. The cedar tree is foreign in my park. I am foreign in France. Man is foreign in the world. (*Natural: Mente* 47)

When Vilém Flusser wrote these words, (*Natural: Mente* 47) he was living in France, after having lived for thirty years in Brazil. His life and work were really built between two continents. He was Jewish and born Czech in 1920. In 1939 he escaped from the Nazis and came to Brazil with his girlfriend, Edith Barth—at the time, all of his family was dead. He lived in São Paulo until 1971, when he moved to Robion, France. In 1991, he returned to Prague, the city of his birth, for a conference, where he died in a traffic accident.

Better known as a media philosopher, Flusser wrote in four languages—Portuguese, English, French and German—, translating his texts himself into those languages. To translate for him was both a political and an existential gesture: to translate is to go through the experience of death and, paradoxically, to go through the experience of the Other. He always tried to maintain the point of view of the immigrant, that is to say, the point of view of the foreigner.

He wrote many books, most of them published in German. He does not have many Brazilian readers, but his importance to us is greater than we usually acknowledge. His *Fenomenologia do Brasileiro*, published in German

in 1994 and in Portuguese in 1998, is a provocative and very interesting study of Brazilian character and culture. His thought brings together Husserl's phenomenology and Wittgenstein's logic, always trying to take the phenomenon by surprise in the moment immediately before symbolization takes place, in the moment immediately before the words freeze it.

Naturally, such an attempt cannot be achieved. We can call it a horizon, or a Kantian regulatory idea. But this attempt reminds literary theorists of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." According to Coleridge, all poetry and fiction readers must suspend their disbelief in order to allow themselves to dive into the text they read. However, this willing suspension of disbelief is, in fact, impossible, or possible only as a fiction. As theorists and teachers, however, we develop a sort of "suspension of the suspension of disbelief" in order to understand the process that allows and provokes that "suspension of disbelief." What Vilém Flusser proposes in his philosophy is something similar, but a step further. Perhaps we can call it a "suspension of belief"—a suspension of belief in *maps*, since maps include all theories, philosophies and sciences. This exercise of "suspension of belief" would be indispensable in order to learn to discern and to make choices.

In philosophical jargon, the suspension of belief is better known by the Greek term *epokhé*. For the Greeks, it was a state of mental rest, in which we neither assert nor deny. This state very often leads us to stillness, and leaves us open to all the perspectives of *phenomena*. Husserl revives the concept, turning it into the axis of his "phenomenological reduction." *Epokhé*, then, corresponds to the momentary suspension of judgment, so that one can try to "see" the phenomenon from a new perspective. In absolute terms, it is but an intellectual device. Thought, which necessarily merges itself with judgment, and thus with belief, has no condition of suspending itself. As a consequence, thought needs "to be deceived" to open new roads to another truth. Thought needs "to suspend itself," or to try to do so, even though the task seems impossible.

The whole of Flusser's life lies in this experience. He recognizes two basic possibilities for the appreciation of a literary work: it can function either as an answer or as a question. In the first case, literary work is regarded as an answer to the historical context where it appeared. In the second case, the literary work is regarded as a question to a particular reader at a given moment. If we try to understand the literary work as an answer, we need to analyze its relationships to the context from which it emerged. The realm of

this attempt is that of criticism. If we try to face the literary work as a question, as a provocation, we are obliged to converse with it. The realm of the second attempt is that of speculation. Without undermining criticism, Flusser opts for speculation, that is to say, he opts for taking his place in the “general conversation” implied in literature. But Flusser doesn’t suspend belief only to read fiction or poetry, but also to “read” culture as well as human beings. His movement of suspending judgment works by implication, resisting the reification of *phenomena*, thinking “ahead.” Indeed, he tries to think ahead of philosophy itself.

To do so, he brings religious practice close to literature as well as myth to culture. In an article published in 1965, Flusser recalls *Exodus* 20.4: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” This commandment can be synthesized in four words: “Thou shalt not imagine.” We can explain the prohibition as a result of the horror of the Bible towards paganism and the adoration of images. Images would be horrible because they are not the “thing,” that is, because they are fake. The Western form of monotheism relies on the fight against the falsehood of images. The monotheistic God is unimaginable, because He cannot and should not be imagined. If we understand God as the foundation of reality, and visual images as the models of reality, what our monotheism purports is that models of reality cannot exhaust reality itself and that they are therefore false. Paganism, as a consequence, is the belief that all models represent reality; idolatry would then be the explanation of reality through models. Models are false gods “against whom we address the hatred and nausea of the prophets” (Flusser, “Não Imaginarás”). Therefore, according to the Decalogue, the construction of models is considered a sin.

This context suggests that the prohibition of images should be regarded as an ethical commandment. Out of context, the prohibition can even present itself as an aesthetic norm—it could be prohibiting figurative art, allowing only abstract art. Under more careful consideration, a theory of knowledge is also revealed when it is said that images bring us false knowledge. To Vilém Flusser, nevertheless, the three aspects of the commandment are inseparable. “Theory” is nothing but the imagination of reality by means of the construction of models, models which take the place of reality. For instance, Newton handed down to us a model that makes the movement of bodies imaginable; Darwin a model that makes the

development of life imaginable; Freud a model that makes the operation of the *psyche* imaginable; Marx a model that makes the behavior of society imaginable. But, if the models take the place of reality, other models can take the place of previous models. The theory of relativity prevails over Newton's model, but it did so in a problematic way: the theory of relativity does not make the movement of bodies imaginable; on the contrary, it makes the terms "movement" and "body" themselves unimaginable. In physics, we would find ourselves in a situation similar to that of the Israelites before the Golden Calf. Reality appears from behind Newton's model as an instructive demonstration—one of how inadequate the human imagination is.

Immersed with Flusser in the atmosphere of the Old Testament, we are trying to understand why the prophets feel disgust and horror before false gods, while people are attracted to them. We are trying to understand why the commandment "thou shalt not imagine" is far from being followed, since images and models of the surrounding reality and of God Himself do not cease to multiply, in people's homes as well as in churches. Idolatry can be readily understood: models make reality imaginable, and with it life becomes meaningful. In some way, "man builds models to protect himself against reality and to prevent its rays from reaching him" ("Não Imaginarás"). Reality—the deity—blinds man. Models are our sunglasses, so to speak. If we recall the models in fashion magazines, half-naked on billboards and in the centerfolds of male publications, we will see that these models depicted in two-dimensional photographs represent beauty and allow us to imagine and desire the women. However, at the same time, these models protect us from the real, three-dimensional women.

Biblical exegeses try to contextualize the commandment historically so that it becomes innocuous and inoperative, presupposing that its object was simply and solely the cult of Ichtar and not the cult of Freud. Flusser, however, distances himself from biblical exegeses and acknowledges, on both the existential and the aesthetic levels, the current validity of the commandment "thou shalt not imagine." The sight of a model, in fact, can cause disgust and horror, once it hides from us what we inwardly conceive of as being the reality or the beauty of life. Due to the omnipresence of the media, we try to deny this inner feeling even to ourselves, but the truth is that models (and female models) are dangerously close to disgust and despair. This means that Flusser doesn't make a liberating and glorious defense of imagination. The defense of the imagination *per se* does not combine with phenomenology.

Intimately, we feel that any model—Darwinism, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Constructivism, Deconstructionism—is a self-enclosed model which explains too well everything that it approaches. And this proves, without any doubt, its intrinsic falsehood. In other words, its condition is that of a model that pretends that it is not a model, but rather reality itself. Noticing this does not imply denying the need for models, but it forces us to critically reflect upon the reification of models. We now return to the starting point: the philosophical need not only for the suspension of disbelief, but, mainly, the suspension of belief and judgment. This is so because phenomenology is, according to Flusser, the attempt to adopt before any phenomenon a certain attitude in accordance with the commandment. Phenomenology avoids the models in order to ensure that the phenomenon is itself revealed existentially.

Flusser says in “*Não Imaginarás*” that our civilization is the synthesis of two great inheritances: the Greek and the Jewish. In the fields of morals and ethics, the Jewish inheritance prevails, in its Christian variant. In the fields of aesthetics and knowledge, the Greek inheritance prevails. Our art, science and philosophy owe much more to the Greeks than to the Jews. In these fields, in terms of the meaning of the commandment, we would still be pagans devoted to the construction of models. However, at present the Jewish inheritance seems to be felt in these fields as well, forcing us to experience our models as the expressions of false gods. The so-called postmodern theories, on the one hand, and Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle,” on the other, steer toward the fear of belief. As a consequence, we would be starting to exist inside an unimaginable world, which brings about a sense of disorientation and the loss of what we thought we possessed: the sense of reality. The world would gradually become more and more absurd. This means that, for the first time in the history of the Western civilization the Jewish experience of the world is articulated in science, art and philosophy through phenomenology and existentialism. The Jewish philosopher Vilém Flusser, however, does not celebrate that circumstance. He understands that this would be a dangerous moment for the development of our thought, because it can result in anti-intellectualism as well as in the articulation of a new religiosity. The two results are probably compatible, in spite of their inner contradictions.

The resurgence of the commandment “thou shalt not imagine” brings to the surface an inheritance that had been submerged. We must view the event not only from an aesthetic angle, but also from ethical and epistemological

perspectives. The commandment "thou shalt not imagine" forbids one to imagine God in our own image and likeness. The commandment can thus be updated in the following way: "the world rhymes with itself." It implies that we cannot imagine ourselves as the measure of the world, which certainly represents a more demanding imperative than the Kantian categorical imperative. We understand the extension of this demand when we admit, along with Flusser, that language in fact creates reality, which does not mean that language has it under control, but rather the opposite. Just like Sisyphus, language articulates the foundation of the world, in other words, that which cannot be articulated. Language follows a direction that is opposite to the one the commandment establishes. "Thou shalt not imagine" means: "Thou shalt not mirror thyself," or: "Thou shalt not multiply thyself." The verb "multiply" in turn serves another command, in truth a curse, at the expulsion from Eden (*Genesis* 3:16): "Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception." Due to that existential contradiction, language becomes less than a means of communication, but rather an inexhaustible source of multiple misunderstandings.

Consequently, to undo the enigma is a sin. To search for the truth, to make it a tool, is a sin. The last chapter of Vilém Flusser's last book, *Gesten* (*Gestures*), begins precisely with the gesture of searching. It maintains that our present crisis is in reality a crisis of science: a crisis of our gesture of searching. The gesture of searching, or of researching, would be the paradigm of all our current gestures, just as the religious gesture informed all other gestures in the Middle Ages. However, Flusser contends that the gesture of searching *should not* be a model for other gestures, because it does not search for anything that has been lost. It searches with indifference; it does not set goals, does not ascribe values. The place taken by scientific investigation in our society would be, therefore, in contradiction with the very meaning of investigation. The scientific investigation escapes from the problems that interest men and is devoted to unimportant objects. Because those objects stay at a distance, they are "simply" objects, and man can become their subject, knowing them in an "objective" way. In relation to such things as rocks and stars, man puts himself in the place of god, establishing coordinates and formulas. In relation to such things as illnesses and wars, man puts himself in the place of a victim, defending himself with vaccines and short-term agreements. When his interest is vital, scientific interest is paradoxically hidden. When there is no vital interest, then science is interested. However, the gesture of searching for objective and exact knowledge

is about to be converted into something impossible. Contemporary physicists (with extreme seriousness) search for the ultimate theory, the one that can integrate the infinitely small into the infinitely large. They search for—in this manner and *hybris*—God, or rather, they want to make God their object. We find ourselves, therefore, on the edge of the abyss.

This forces the emergence of new perspectives. One discovers the search with desire and suffering, that is, with values. Knowledge is, among other things, passion, and passion is in its turn a type of knowledge. All this happens in the fullness of the human life. The gesture of a “pure” attitude, ethically neutral, is a concealed gesture. It is an inhuman gesture, alienation, madness. When it comes to know inanimate objects, this alienation is exclusively epistemological, and in this case it is simply a mistake. But when other things come into play, such as illnesses, wars, injustices, alienation turns into a criminal gesture. The social scientist, who approaches society as if it were an anthill, and the technocrat, who manipulates the economy as if it were a chess game—these two characters are criminals.

They are as criminal as, for example, the brilliant engineer mentioned in *Territorio Comanche*, the novel by Arturo Pérez-Reverte. He invents a bullet that zigzags inside the enemy’s body, names it *Bala Louise* and goes with his family to Disneyland to celebrate. Doctor Frankenstein and Oppenheimer shake hands. The researcher transforms *phenomena* into objects: from the song of a bird he makes an acoustic vibration, from human pain, a dysfunction of the organism. He disconnects from his conscience the fact that he is paid by someone to research, he does not consider whether the invention he might devise (or the research paper he delivers) is good or bad for society. He is solely concerned with publishing (or perishing).

Vilém Flusser formulates a proposal to confront the apparatus, technicism and “developmentism”—to confront sin. Flusser’s proposal, as usual, lies in the text and in the philosopher’s style. His proposal consists of attributing value. Only in this way does the gesture of researching, as well as the other gestures, turn into a gesture that searches for the other—for the one whom we simply cannot and should not turn into an object. He saw, in his relationship with the other, the road that begins in religious revelation and ends in a moral imperative, which helps us to understand the road traveled by Flusser from prayer to literature.

Just as art was made from religion, literature can be made from prayer. Literature, then, can be seen as a privileged realization of ethics, since it

allows for the perspectivization of truth. Questions make sense only when they have no answers. Questions engender a sweet, heavy and mysterious fruit, commonly known as "fiction." This fruit is a prayer directed towards authenticity.

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