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Suppose that: Scenarios for a Flusserian Ethics

I.

The critical appreciation of Vilém Flusser's work is inseparable from the desire to classify it. On the one hand, we are faced with biographical labels: exiled thinker (*bodenlos*), Czech-Brazilian, wandering Jew, Holocaust survivor. On the other hand, we are confronted with theoretical labels: independent and unsystematic philosopher, translator, and self-translator, multilingual, essayist of everyday life, disseminator. With the book *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge*, from 1989 (*What if?* [2022]), in the recently released English edition, and *Suponhamos*, in the partial version written in Portuguese by Flusser himself, which is currently in print by *É Realizações*, in a translation by Gabriel Philipson), it doesn't seem to be different.

It's clear that forging categories is an intrinsic part of critical thinking. There is no way of approaching a text or an author without inserting him into a tradition. Thinking is generalising, or, in Flusser's words, pulling the conversation by the simplest thread while recognising that the ball is diabolical. In the case of Flusser's readers, especially those who admire him, the movement is twofold: to include him within a broad context and, at the same time, to prove how he is capable of shaking up that same context. This is both a subversive and conservative position. Flusser is the always ignored author who, if taken into account, could make us rethink a certain theme. An example of this could be the reception of João Guimarães Rosa's work in Brazil. Flusser was a keen reader of the author of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956), at the very time his books were being published, but even today he is ignored by literary critics in this regard, even though in the 1960s he had already creatively extrapolated the dichotomy between the universal and the regional that dominated the debate¹.

Also in the 1960s, the professor and poet Lupe Cotrim Garaude stated that Flusser aimed to take over as the "malin génie" (Cotrim 1967) of the Brazilian intellectual scene. Among his detractors, as we can see, the lack of systematicity and academic rigour attributed to his philosophy extended to the controversial traits of his personality. In his books, Flusser turned form into content, and he didn't complain if this epistemological indistinctness led to judgements about his

¹ Rosa's Flusserian critique is completely ignored, for example in: SILVIANO, Santiago. *Genealogy of Ferocity: essays on Guimarães Rosa's Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Recife: Cepe, 2018. A contemporary exception is the work of Professor Gabriela Reinaldo, from the Federal University of Ceará.

personal life. It's not for nothing that Louis Bec brought his friend closer to the characteristics attributed to *Vampyrotenthis Infernalis*, a "scientific treatise" on an octopod, published in 1987, illustrated by Bec, and which adds to the list of Flusser's works that are hard to frame on bookshop shelves.

It's not unreasonable to admit that Flusser never wanted to be an *outsider*. Proof of this is the questionable diplomatic trip he undertook in the 1960s at the invitation of Itamaraty, when Brazil was already under military dictatorship; his commitment to forming part of the Brazilian academic community (USP, FAAP, ITA); the botched attempt to organise the 1973 São Paulo Art Biennial; etc. One of the reasons he left Brazil in the early 1970s was precisely because of the lack of recognition. So it's possible to say that he always wanted to be part of the *mainstream*, although he has the undeniable merit of having abandoned various professional initiatives when he realised that his dignity was under threat. It's not just anyone, of course, who bequeaths a work of this importance without having a single degree in hand and without being permanently linked to any university institution².

If we go down this path, we can assume that Flusser took advantage of this ambivalence in his wanderings as a free thinker, sometimes taking a seat in university and media positions, sometimes positioning himself as a theorist with an original contribution but ignored. In a letter to Maria Lília Leão, dated 29 January 1990, he said he was touched by the fact that the new Brazilian generation, when they remembered him, considered him a "cursed and marginal thinker"³: "Now, it is true that I was never absorbed by Brazilian culture, but it is equally true that, although I am 'recognised' here, I am still marginal (although not cursed)"⁴ (Flusser 1990).

Thus, faced with a work that is objectively unclassifiable and a subjective existence that is inapprehensible, it is only natural that critics insisted, and still insist, on the movements of tighter conceptualisation, either to reduce and discard, or to better understand and interpret. In this way, Flusser can continue as a marginal theorist, an ideal counterpoint to the conservative canon and university bureaucracy, but he can also gradually gain ground in the pantheon, both for having accompanied, even if obscured, the developments in the philosophies of language from the 1960s onwards, and for showing himself to be better adapted to the demands that contemporary technology presents. From this point of view, Flusser can be assumed as an avant-garde language

² Flusser's desire not to accommodate himself to the position of outsider is, naturally, questionable, since his roots were cut off by Nazism at a very young age. It can be said, therefore, that Flusser has an almost involuntary marginal position. Having said that, and preserving the ambivalence of interpretative possibilities, what can be said is that Flusser, even so, did not miss opportunities to participate in traditional institutions and certain positions of power, often complaining about how badly he was taken advantage of, and poorly read by the people who commanded these same forums.

³ In the original: "pensador maldito e marginal".

⁴ In the original: "Ora, é verdade que jamais fui absorvido pela cultura brasileira, mas é igualmente verdade que, embora seja 'reconhecido' aqui, continuo marginal (embora não maldito)".

theorist or the creator of a "religious glossolalia"⁵ (de Campos 1999), in the words of Haroldo de Campos, as well as he can also be recruited as a critical prophet of the new media and a harbinger of totalising technocracy or as an apologist for technical images who updates Marshall McLuhan's global village with minor differences.

In this sense, we believe that the challenge is to sustain Flusser in the gap. To get used to criticising him without, however, dismissing what he has to say. When writing his "philosophical autobiography" (Flusser 2007) - another of these unlikely nomenclatures - he states that, in the "Dialogue" section, aimed at theoretical-biographical summaries of some of his main conversations in Brazil, his intention was to erect a monument of the interlocutor, with a view to its subsequent demolition. This justification did not, however, prevent him from breaking up with Mira Schendel, nor did it risk an even longer-lasting friendship with Dora Ferreira da Silva, who was unhappy with the profile Flusser had written of her dead husband, Vicente.

Flusser sculpts sandcastles to be destroyed. He writes to be read, but above all to provoke a reaction. However, he responds to his readers with such forcefulness that, at times, he seems immune to counter-strike procedures. It's as if only the provisional monuments he builds himself, including those he builds for himself, are available for destruction. At best, it's as if Flusser only tests the image of his character, which he helps to nurture, in the same way that modern devices act, which, according to his theory of communication, are so well prepared that they even programme the feedback, the critical response. In these terms, Flusser's critical appreciation demands that we criticise him beyond the parameters that he himself offers us to criticise him.

Having made this prelude, the initial purpose of this essay is to reflect on the formal aspects of *Angenommen*, critically analysing the attempts at classification that accompany Flusser's work, which gained momentum after his death and never ceased to fall back on this book. Although these attempts do not represent the most imaginative method of analysing such an extensive and multifaceted production, they are not in themselves reprehensible. Therefore, the first step is to outline *Angenommen*'s structural proposal, and then place it in relation to Flusser's other endeavours. The aim is to demonstrate that the strategy is not new in his production, but rather recurrent. Finally, the aim is to present a reading of the book capable of going beyond an essential definition, deducing from this late work, and taking advantage of the notion of "engagement", which is fundamental in Flusser, a certain ethical disposition that accompanies his writings.

⁵ In the original: "glossolalia religiosa".

II.

Angenommen, published in German in 1989, is divided into four parts: scenes of family life (seven scenes), scenes of economic life (six scenes), scenes of politics (seven scenes) and *showdown* (one scene). These four parts are preceded by the first scene, "Suponhamos", like a prologue announcing the game that is about to begin. Each scenario thematically accompanies the section to which it is linked, and consists of a short text, between two and four pages long, which explores a hypothetical situation: a visit to Venus, a reflective monologue by a foetus, a congress of spirits, a ministry report, a colloquium on blackness, etc. Each scenario also carries, depending on its literary and theoretical motivations, more or less factual references: names of authors, geographical locations, historical characters, specific social and economic contexts, etc.

As will be seen below, in its general structure the book is not far removed from other Flusserian endeavours. However, *Angenommen's* programme begins to become more complex as we are drawn in by the warning that precedes the exposition of the scenarios. With the title "wanted", which refers to the images advertising criminals, missing persons and lost pets that are displayed on lampposts and bus stops on public roads, and which often offer large rewards to anyone who can provide a clue or information, Flusser encourages readers to encode the ideas and concepts presented in the scenarios into images. For those willing to take on the challenge, he asks them to contact the publisher *European Photography* by phone or letter.

The provocation that opens the book has a double purpose. Firstly, it makes an ironic invitation, "readers wanted", which implies that its readers are rare or that they are not necessarily prepared to deal with the programme. When he published *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* in Brazil in 1985, after launching the work in Germany (*Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*) two years earlier, Flusser also expressed, in the preface, his suspicion about the preparedness of the Brazilian audience to criticise the book. Because of this suspicion, and the repercussions the work had in Europe, he published *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* in 1985.

Secondly, *wanted* points in the direction of those selfless endeavouring to codify the text into an image. Readers would be rare not only because of the difficulty they might face in deciphering a work *avant la lettre* - this was Flusser's pretension in many cases - but also because few of those confronted with the book might be willing to transpose it into images, which, in the author's theory, would imply thinking from the presuppositions of *post-history*.

This second aspect deserves more attention. Flusser calls the brief chapters that make up the book "scenarios". This word has two meanings, which complement each other. The first is the theatre set, which structures the stage and where the actors play. In a series of lectures on theatre

given in Lisbon and Madrid in 1946, José Ortega y Gasset (2014), to whom Flusser confessedly acknowledges the influence on his thinking, states that play is man's purest invention - note that, like Flusser, he uses the term invention and not discovery - because all the others are more or less imposed or pre-formed by reality. To invent a game is to invent rules. And inventing rules is inventing a world. Since there is no game or world without rules, every time a rule is invented, a game and a world are invented. "God made the world, this world; well, but man made chess - chess and all the other games. Man made, makes... *the other world*, the truly other, the one that doesn't exist, the world that is a play and a farce"⁶ (Gasset 2014: 55).

Gasset's choice of theatre to theorise about play, rules and fiction is no accident. Theatre is the *as if* par excellence, the embodied metaphor. Men and women, human "as" the audience, cease to be "as" the audience the moment the curtain falls. In theatre, the creation of a fictional "field", the stage, allows us to clearly visualise the movement of opening up another time-space triggered by the rules of fiction. No twenty-first century person would be surprised to see men on a stage dressed in eighteenth century costumes. Those men on stage, also living in the 21st century, cease to be for a few moments, assuming the role of an 18th century man: "(the theatre is) an ambivalent reality consisting of two realities - that of the actor and that of the character in the drama, which mutually deny each other"⁷ (Gasset 2014: 42).

Flusser's notion of "as if" also points directly to another of his main influences, Hans Vaihinger's 1911 *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, for many scholars the first comprehensive study of fiction in the German language. Vaihinger (2011) states that human beings don't need to learn to use the preposition "as if", this peculiar way of synthesising, because it is innate and exercised almost instinctively. You can't act in the world without fiction. Fictions are not obstacles that must be moved out of the way because they get in the way of thinking. Fictions are not objects, but auxiliary and inherent means without which no science can stand on its own two feet. They are not a prerequisite for scientific knowledge, because science depends entirely on a good number of these "personifications"⁸ (Vaihinger 2011: 224). In a similar way to Flusser's models, fictional systems, for Vaihinger, are not concerned with true and false, but with their more or less effective functioning. The fact that a fiction can be considered wrong in theory does not prevent it from becoming fruitful in practice.

In short, the first meaning of "scenario" in *Angenommen* refers to the conventions of fiction, of theatre, of "as if". A scenario breaks with linear time and factual space. It opens up the

⁶ In the original: "Deus fez o mundo, este mundo; bem, mas o homem fez o xadrez – o xadrez e todos os demais jogos. O homem fez, faz... o *outro mundo*, o verdadeiramente outro, o que não existe, o mundo que é brincadeira e farsa".

⁷ In the original: "(o teatro é) uma realidade ambivalente que consiste em duas realidades – a do ator e a da personagem do drama que mutuamente se negam".

⁸ In the original: "personificações".

field of play. A scenario creates rules that must be followed and, at the same time, explored, like a child who, with a sheet and two chairs, covers part of his room and says: "this is my house now". This is how Flusser's concept of *programme* and *black box* operate, i.e. the exploration of virtualities in the face of an uncontrollable amount of potential in the device. The concepts of play and art, understood as the deliberate manipulation of symbols based on agreed rules, also come close to this. As Flusser often repeats, playing chess is easy, the hard part is knowing how to play well.

In this sense, *Angenommen's* sets can function as *scripts* for plays or films. As Flusser's challenge is geared towards codification into images, the sets can therefore be seen as pre-texts, i.e. texts that are intended to be transformed into images. In a letter dated 13 September 1990, also addressed to Lília Leão, he reiterates, when describing his proposal for "philosophical fiction", his willingness to write texts to be imagined: "Philosophical fiction: for a long time I have had the idea that the philosophical treatise (alphanumeric text 'about') no longer suits the situation of culture. That academic philosophers are dead people, and that real philosophy today is done by people like Fellini, the creators of clips, or those who synthesise images. But since I myself am a prisoner of the alphabet (despite my collaboration with Louis Bec), and since I enjoy philosophical vertigo, I have to be content with making texts that are pre-texts for images. The way to do this is to write fables, because the fabulous is the limit of the imaginable"⁹ (Flusser 1990b).

Apart from the desire to move from text to image, it is also important to scrutinise the way Flusser prescribes this passage. He encourages his readers to encode ideas and concepts in images, rather than the literal narrative of the scenes. The challenge is not one of faithful reproduction, but of conceptual translation. Imagining concepts is the main novelty opened up by the apparatus of image production and reproduction. Flusser calls this capacity *techno-imagination*. Techno-imagination implies thinking in a post-historical way, recognising that human gestures and actions are increasingly turning not to the concrete transformation of the world, but to the technical recording by the apparatus.

The question may be simpler than it sounds at first glance. When we photograph a landscape or record a video, we are already, in a sense, operating conceptually. This is because a *smartphone* camera is not a window to the world, but carries concepts in its black box. A photograph is not conceptual because it assumes a certain angle or perspective or because it inevitably results from the point of view of the manipulator, who decides to record this or that person, this or that landscape. A photograph is conceptual because its image is the result of the manipulation of an

⁹ In the original: "Ficção filosófica: há muito tempo estou com a idéia que o tratado filosófico (texto alfanumérico 'sobre') não mais se adequa à situação da cultura. Que os filósofos acadêmicos são gente morta, e que a verdadeira filosofia atual é feita por gente como Fellini, os criadores de clips, ou os que sintetizam imagens. Mas como eu próprio sou prisioneiro do alfabeto (malgrado minha colaboração com Louis Bec), e como sou preso da vertigem filosófica, devo contentar-me em fazer textos que sejam pré-textos para imagens. A maneira de fazê-lo é escrever fábulas, porque o fabuloso é o limite do imaginável".

apparatus, which in turn is the material unfolding of scientific sentences. According to Flusser, devices are concrete extrapolations of language.

In this sense, techno-imagination is not exactly a way of thinking that depends on an appropriation of technology reserved for specialists, but a strategy of imagination that recognises the linguistic, and therefore conceptual, substrate of the apparatuses. This first form of techno-imagination, which we could characterise as *high-tech*, is present, for Flusser, in contemporary science fiction, which is poor in its narratives in proportion to its special effects. Post-history is not the overcoming of alphanumeric culture, but its incorporation. Preserving the textual element when dealing with apparatuses is also safeguarding our freedom. According to Flusser, it's playing against the apparatus. That's why he insisted, until the end of his life, on writing texts, in the case of *Angenommen*, texts to be imagined. In this first sense of scenario, Flusser writes fictional texts and invites his readers to techno-imagine them.

In the second significant possibility, the term scenario surreptitiously deviates from fiction to touch on the social field of analysing probabilities. A scenario can be a provisional description of a circumstance (political, economic, cultural), such as a television commentator saying that "the current scenario of the war shows us that..." In other words, a momentary and approximate drawing of a factuality, which does not describe it perfectly, but which, based on a set of supporting elements, allows us to draw up a panorama in order to better orientate ourselves. A scenario can also be the projection of probable worlds, in a kind of small inversion of the previous interpretative suggestion, as this same television commentator used to say "in view of this situation, there are many possible scenarios", in other words, in view of a situation that in theory has already been realised, for example, country A has dropped a bomb on the territory of country B, a number of possible consequences, scenarios, come to be envisaged.

As we've said, this other meaning doesn't claim to correspond to objective reality, to postulate a truth. However, even through hyperbole, it indicates a possible scenario. With great care, and some trepidation, we could say that if the first connotation indicates the creation of a fiction, it is as if the second indicates a more intellectual and investigative pretence. Every endeavour of thought starts from a first, non-original scene, because that's not what we're talking about, but an invented beginning. This is also techno-imagination: being able to imagine what Aristotle would say to Flusser, what Flusser would say to Freud, etc. Thinking can also be this: bringing disparate elements together in a provisional configuration in order to indicate a possibility.

The very title of the book reinforces this second reading of the word scenario: *Angenommen*, *What if?*, *Suponhamos*. Flusser invites us to enter an "as if", a "suppose that" or an "imagine that", which is fictional, as we have seen, but which also concerns, and therefore affects, our own factual circumstances. It's not that fiction doesn't permeate our daily lives. Quite the opposite. As Jacques

Rancière (2012) insists, the work of fiction is not to create fantastical worlds, but to reorganise the sensible categories of this very world in which we live. *Suponbamos*' endeavour is to radically assume fiction as a presupposition for critical reflection. Thus, the idea of scenario as analytical projection aims to reinforce the non-ingenuous character of fiction - literature is also a form of knowledge. It is in this way, as his friend Abraham Moles initially suggested, that fiction in Flusser can also be philosophical.

A third, unheralded meaning of the word scenario may corroborate this last argument. The etymology of the word goes back to the Greek word *skéné*, which can also mean "tent or any light construction that serves as a shelter". In this sense, a scenery can also be a temporary shelter, a partial configuration, a disposable but useful orientation tool. It is in very similar terms that Flusser defines his concept of a model as a "trap"¹⁰ (Flusser 1981).

A model is the linguistic articulation of concepts. And concepts are provisional traps thrown over supposed concrete data in order to understand it. Models don't reveal being, nor do they reveal anything, but they serve to solve problems and explain questions. When they no longer fulfil this function, they can be discarded. A model is a conceptual articulation that tends to slice up concrete data. It is impossible to formulate a model that leaves no remainder, that fully and definitively explains how life works. Models are incomplete explanations. They work like an umbrella on a stormy day: they only protect the portion underneath, leaving the rest uncovered and vulnerable. At the same time, there is no way to get closer to the raw data, to orientate oneself in the world, except through models. Our ability to theorise, to generalise, is linked to the development of models. And the more general the models, the better they work, even at the price of becoming more empty and less "real".

If we now join the three meanings of scenario, we can conclude that *Angenommen* is made up of 22 short fictions that act as temporary shelters to allow us to imagine the contemporary world. The book can also be manipulated like a programme. Despite the slight chronological thread that runs through the scenarios, the work can be read in jumps, as Flusser had already pointed out that the chapters of *Post-history* could be read in random order, and as he suggests that one could re-read *Universe of Technical Images* in reverse. The subtitle of the English version, "twenty-two scenarios in search of images", which is close to the subtitle of *Post-history*, "twenty snapshots and a way of using", reiterates this programme aspect.

¹⁰ In the original: "arapuca".

III.

If we return for a moment to Flusser's attempts at classification, it will be curious to see how we can hardly find the term "writer", while the terms "theorist", "philosopher", "thinker" and "essayist" are recurrent. His fictional work, therefore, does not seem to be considered so voluminous, or significant, as to warrant adding the nickname "writer" to his other determinations, as in the case of Paul Valéry, taken to be a poet and philosopher.

At first glance, we could passively accept this fact, recognising that Flusser was, in fact, always on the side of verbiage and the urge to articulate. He hardly followed the advice of Dora Ferreira da Silva, who urged him to pay more attention to *listening and forgetting*¹¹ - to silence (Ferreira da Silva 1980). Reality, for Flusser, was synonymous with articulated language. If he wasn't a systematic thinker, he couldn't control his constant desire to systematise his thinking either.

On the other hand, if we assume that fictional texts occupy a smaller portion of his work, we may be called to account, indicating which of Flusser's works are fictional and which are not. In an easy solution, it is possible to point to *The History of Devil*, *Natural:mind*, *Vampyrothetis Infernalis*, *Angenommen* itself, among others, as "literary". However, if the interlocutor wasn't satisfied with the answer, we could be asked to explain, for example, at what level *Natural:mind* is more fictional than *Language and Reality*, or even at what proportion *Post-history* is more philosophical than *The History of Devil*. At this point, the question would certainly become more complex. The critic would find himself in the same position as the literary theorists of the early 20th century, when they juggled rhetoric to indicate what makes a text a literary text.

Even when faced with an apparently fictional work like *Angenommen*, it is possible to identify scenarios that are more or less literary, depending on whether they focus on factual issues or on the greater recurrence of objective references. As far as this subject is concerned, from the point of view of the author of this essay, the best scenarios are those that are openly fictional or those that pose, despite the fictional veil, as short philosophical essays. As you can see, even a skilful writer like Flusser doesn't always find it easy to sustain the ambivalence between fiction and philosophy.

In any case, reading the 22 scenarios allows us to deduce, beyond their fictional aspect, the main theoretical and existential concerns that dominate Flusser's thinking at the end of the 1980s: the crisis of the West and the subsequent advance of a computerised East; the tension between nature and culture, the natural and the artificial; the epistemological revolution in the face of the dissolution of the notion of the "object" of knowledge; the transformations in forms of work and

¹¹ In the original: "ouvido e ao olvido".

the notion of retirement; the dialectic between political practice and theologising theory; among others.

In a letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva, dated 15 December 1974, Flusser comments that his friend shouldn't be aware of his "science fiction" side (Flusser 1974). He says that during the period in which he wrote *The History of Devil*, still in the 1950s, he also wrote several stories with a scientific basis, but for different purposes. One of them was *Bibliophagus*, one of *Angenommen's* scenarios, which he attached to the letter and asked Dora to read carefully, as it would fit in with the Brazilian reality. Flusser would have liked to have materialised the *bibliophagus*. He was planning to ask his friend Joan Fontcuberta to bring this unique species of ant to "life" through a montage to be photographed or through a computer programme.

It is important to clear, therefore, that Flusser's first philosophical works were accompanied by fictional works, or rather, his philosophical work was always philosophical fiction. *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, which appeared in German in 1987, synthesises Flusser's long-standing obsession with the octopus, from *The History of Devil*, in which he states that "from the point of view of the gigantic polyps that inhabit the abysses of the oceans, cephalopods are the most 'developed' genus"¹² (Flusser 2008: 65), to *Gestures*, his last book published during his lifetime in 1991, in which he frequently offers the example of the octopus as a counterpoint to the human.

The recurrence of the animal in Flusser's essays can be seen in a letter dated 4 March 1986, in which Maria Lília (1986), who became his publishing agent in Brazil, suggested that Flusser include "Vampirotoitus" in a trilogy, which would also include "Devil" and a third book to come, or perhaps the already published "Natural:mind" (1978). In response, Flusser admitted that "Vampyroteuthis" was a kind of continuation of "Devil", but in a "more ironic, fluid sense, the animal inhabits the grey zone between fiction and reality"¹³ (Flusser 1986).

The *Vampyroteuthis*, in a sense not dissimilar to the *Angenommen*, is an allegory of post-history. Not just because the animal lives post-historically, and from there functions as a meta-model for the human, but because this fable translates Flusser's philosophical fiction methodologically and practically. His pseudo-treatise is at once scientific, artistic and political. What's more, it fulfils the function that, according to Flusser, texts should have in the second half of the 20th century: being written to be imagined.

Like the *bibliophagus*, Flusser imagined encoding the *vampyroteuthis* in an image. The information is contained in letters exchanged with his friend Milton Vargas. For Milton, the attempt to create animals like the *vampyroteuthis* was on the same path as Hitler's attempt to create a

¹² In the original: "do ponto de vista dos pólipos gigantesco que habitam os abismos dos oceanos são os cefalópodes o gênero mais 'desenvolvido'".

¹³ In the original: "mais irônico, fluido, o bicho habita a zona cinzenta entre ficção e realidade".

biologically superior man, a pure, Aryan superman. Milton says that at the time, in the late 1980s, he had the task of recording the *Star Wars* series, which was shown on Fridays, so that his grandson could watch it on Saturdays when he was off school. For him, there was no difference between the philosophical fable and the television programme and, sarcastically, he asked his friend to urgently write the biography of an animal as powerful as Darth Vader, who could overcome the dark side of the enemy's force with his luminous sword (Vargas 1988).

Vargas' irony did not go unnoticed. Flusser replied a few days later, when he had just presented *Vampyroteuthis*, together with Bec, at an event in Frankfurt. "The bug will have a 'leisure' sword"¹⁴. From this sentence, Flusser comments on the positive repercussions of his mollusk squid in Germany: volunteers expressed interest in making a hologram; a molecular biologist assured that he would study the genetic viability of the animal; and one of the directors of the Guggenheim-NY expressed his desire to exhibit it. Flusser also promised that the floppy disc of "Vampy", his monster's affectionate nickname, would be ready by July. "It became clear in Frankfurt that 'fantastic philosophy' could become a discipline as rigorous as phenomenology"¹⁵ (Flusser 1988).

Along the same lines, other examples could be mentioned, mainly based on critical collaboration with friends. Firstly, Louis Bec's *sulfanogrades*, sulphur-based animals that the artist brought to the 1981 São Paulo Art Biennial at Flusser's invitation. Although informed by scientific rigour, the *sulfanogrades* are assumed to be lies from the outset, a counterpoint to science's insistent need to declare itself pure and objective. The animals proclaim the challenge of thinking about a society that guarantees humans the possibility of simultaneously articulating their artistic, aesthetic and political dimensions. This is the main characteristic of what Flusser considers a model. "This is why sulphanogrades are not 'science fiction', that utopia at the service of the various establishments. On the contrary, they are 'fictitious science, science that is known to be a figment of the mind, at the service of a society more worthy of man"¹⁶ (Flusser 1981). According to Flusser, the result of Bec's work can be called *paranatures*.

There is also the series *Herbarium* (1982), by Joan Fontcuberta, another model who also influenced Flusser in his fabulation of the *vampyroteuthis*. The work consists of a set of photographs of plants. But they are not "natural" plants, as they are made from industrial waste, bones, pieces of plastic, bits of plants and animal remains that the artist has collected on the outskirts of Barcelona. More than artificial plants, Fontcuberta's plants are artificions. Some of them are monstrous in appearance, resembling unidentified beasts and dinosaurs more than plants.

¹⁴ In the original: "O bicho vai ter espada de 'lazer'".

¹⁵ In the original: "Ficou claro, em Frankfurt, que a 'filosofia fantástica' pode vir a ser disciplina tão rigorosa quanto o é a fenomenologia".

¹⁶ In the original: "Por isto os sulfanogradados não são 'fissão científica', essa utopia à serviço dos vários estabelecimentos. São, pelo contrário, 'ciência fictícia, ciência que se sabe figmento da mente, à serviço de uma sociedade mais digna do homem'".

Fontcuberta's plants were not physically exhibited, i.e. the small organic-inorganic sculptures were not taken to the art gallery. The exhibition is made up of images, so it is possible for the artist to assume that his plants are the result of manipulating photographic information, rather than genetic information. Fontcuberta invents mutants, plants that are absent from biology textbooks, by manipulating the lens.

Flusser (1985), in stating that Fontcuberta's plants can be considered scientific, dismantles the values on which science is based. If Fontcuberta's plants are artistic, deliberate productions of nature, by openly manifesting their operative gesture, they don't defend any definitive value, unlike genetically adulterated plants, which, by claiming to be useful and beneficial - they reproduce, don't die from the plague and are good for food - take pragmatism and functionality as their primary values and, furthermore, try to pass them off as neutral. The most nefarious side of science is that it works, as a practice of purity, to improve the physical and moral condition of human beings.

In a very similar vein, Flusser states that the herons in Guimarães Rosa's short story call into question the descriptive and objective nature of the so-called natural sciences. The herons, as they actually exist, are not in biology books, but in Rosa's short story: "The nature of the natural sciences is an abstraction of the nature of short stories like this one, and the various species and genera of biology are abstractions of the *bichinhos se-mexentes*"¹⁷ (Flusser 1964). It is in the word "*se-mexente*", for example, that the naturalness of the heron manifests itself in an authentic sense.

It's naïve to think that literature's job is to start from concrete data in order to build imaginary worlds through movements of distortion, amplification and hyperbolisation. The irony is not to distort reality, but to point out that reality is only realised in the gesture of invention: "By criticising Guimarães Rosa's language, we will be doing 'natural science' in an ontologically more immediate sense than through the system of physics or biology"¹⁸ (Flusser 1964).

IV.

Before moving on to the final axis of the argument, we should summarise what we have tried to establish in the previous sections: a) the appreciation of Flusser's work is accompanied by a recurring effort at classification, which is not uncommon in the human sciences in general. Thus, the author oscillates between the canon and the marginal, an ambivalence that Flusser himself fuelled. In any case, stabilising this balance in the name of an essential definition doesn't seem the

¹⁷ In the original: "A natureza das ciências naturais é uma abstração da natureza de contos como este, e as diversas espécies e gêneros da biologia são abstrações dos bichinhos se-mexentes".

¹⁸ In the original: "Criticando a língua de Guimarães Rosa, estaremos fazendo 'ciência natural' num sentido ontologicamente mais imediato que pelo sistema da física ou da biologia".

most appropriate way to criticise him; b) starting from the possible meanings of the word scenario, we have seen that the chapters of *Angenommen* fluctuate between fiction and philosophical analysis, an aspect that is, in the end, a hallmark of all Flusser's work; c) by comparing *Angenommen* with other works by Flusser and collaborating with artists and writers, the aim was to include *Angenommen* in the context of Flusser's previous works and to indicate, above all, that the methodological and epistemological presuppositions were also close.

In this sense, the idea of the next few paragraphs is, in addition to analysing the scenarios individually, which would also be productive, to deduce a line of reflection that runs through the book and which can be related, according to this reading, to questions relating to ethics and, above all, to engagement, a notion so fundamental to Flusser.

In the first scenario, "Suponhamos", which, as said, introduces the scenarios to come and explains how the game works, two characters stand out: the terrorist and the futurologist. The former is impatient, goes to meet the future, in short, he's *engaged*. The latter, on the other hand, has the merit of recognising that the future is what comes - *ad-venire* - and therefore adventure. From this point of view, the author of the book admits that the series that begins (the book) would be more in line with the futurologist's position, because it promises adventure in order to arouse curiosity. And curiosity, according to the narrator, is what makes people stand on their tiptoes and surmise the future. So if the terrorist is more engaged, the futurologist is more theoretical.

Curiosity, however, the narrator continues, is irrational. It tries to jump from today to tomorrow. At this point, the series of scenarios that opens up is driven by an irrational adventure, an invitation to an improbable journey. The futurologist, although a theoretician, draws a grey future because he only tries to calculate probabilities, while the human being is an animal that approaches the improbable: "And that's why the unseasoned soup of the futurologist is unpalatable. The series of scenarios introduced here promises to be flavorful. It will project improbabilities" (Flusser 2022: 3).

The futurologist's fundamental flaw is to exclude death from the horizon. It is only by eliminating the finite condition of the human that an accurate calculation can be imagined: "Probability is a chimera, its head is true, its tail a suggestion. Futurologists attempt to compel the head to eat the tail (ouroboros). Here, though, we will try to wag the tail" (Flusser 2022: 3). The conclusion is that you can't embrace fiction and truth at the same time. Hence, in Flusser's case, the admission of philosophical fiction.

But philosophical fiction shouldn't be seen as the solution to the dilemma either - the ideal third term. In the seventeenth scenario, "To perpetual peace", the author takes up the question again, but replaces the characters. This time, the agent and the player come into play. The former is the one who keeps up with the rush of the day and is beset by urgency. He is an actor who stars

in his own agony and antagonises all the other victims of the same rush. The second, on the other hand, opposes the course of things, because his world is no longer an object, but a set of possibilities made present. Things no longer run away from him, but can be stored in a manipulable memory. It is in this sense that the player (*homo ludens*) is also called an artist: “It is evident that the dealer acts in accordance with the program of the artist. The artist proves to be the dramaturge of the drama History, and the dealer proves to be his chess piece, his puppet. We total artists at rest, we, the programmers of all dramas and agonies, paradoxically represent the source of all acts. We are the unmoved movers, the motors behind all motives” (Flusser 2022: 64).

From the late 1960s onwards, Flusser's postulation of the figure of *homo ludens* recurs, the artist programmer who does not produce works of art, but offers games that must be manipulated, complemented in a critical and creative sense, by the spectator. The artist assumes the position of a futurologist who plays with the improbable. The futurologist, although he doesn't engage like the terrorist, is not an authentic player, according to the author, because he limits himself to considering the most probable. He is a theoretician who limits himself to operating within the established rules. The artist, on the other hand, works to reprogramme the rules. He plays *on the*. It was in the desperate and unlikely endeavour to become an artist that Flusser returned to Europe in the early 1970s.

On that date, the possibilities in Brazil seem exhausted. In fact, he invests on several fronts, but in none of them does he achieve the expected response. He believes that the routine in São Paulo had become "irrational". Very little could be done, and the little that was done yielded derisory results compared to the effort and expense expended. What was learnt and absorbed in the last attempts at engagement was "banal". In a letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva, dated 29 December 1975, Flusser confessed that he had postponed his return because of his attachment to his friends and what he called "Brazilian things"¹⁹, as well as his children's always admitted passion for the country, but that the decisive moment had come when "one side of the scales definitively outweighed the other"²⁰ (Flusser 1975).

His last great attempt to engage with Brazilian culture was also over. And without success. With the failure of the "Bienal model" or the "Bienal laboratory", Flusser recognises, in a letter to Edmar de Almeida, that "With the Bienal, I have also given up on all earthly Jerusalem"²¹ (Flusser 1972). With the Biennale, he abandoned any possibility of applying a theoretical model to a social reality.

¹⁹ In the original: “coisas brasileiras”.

²⁰ In the original: “um dos pratos da balança superou definitivamente o outro”.

²¹ In the original: “Desisti, com a Bienal, também de toda Jerusalém terrestre”.

At the same time, interest in his work in Europe began to grow, and Flusser also saw his return as a chance to create another form of engagement, or even to give up all engagement, as he admitted in a letter to Miguel Reale: "But mainly there is this: I don't engage there. To hell with the Europeans, as long as they pay me. There I can do what I'm meant to do by vocation, without respect for society. Namely, at the moment: I can isolate myself to write an analysis of my immediate circumstances, inspired by phenomenology, to be called, perhaps, ('things that surround me'), the title of a collection of my articles to be published by the State Culture Commission, whose manuscript, accepted and paid for with a hundred cruzeiros, is currently making its way through the Kafkaesque labyrinths of this administrative apparatus. So I could perhaps be a 'famous man' in Europe, but I could almost certainly work without being disturbed by engagement"²² (Flusser 1971).

He is convinced that, in the current situation, and in his in particular, isolation "is the only form of dignified existence"²³, but he nevertheless suffers from a "hunger for engagement"²⁴: "I will summarise the judgement (which could also be easily elaborated): I feel very well in isolation, and I think and write relatively well in it, but I feel that I am being useless to those I am interested in"²⁵ (Flusser 1975b).

He is looking for a possible form of engagement in retreat. A groundless engagement that didn't depend on the factual situation, that didn't have to respond to a specific social reality. Flusser concludes that it is in the articulation of what is totally different to me that the most authentic engagement manifests itself, and that it is in Europe where he could best follow the transformations in human gestures, have more time to write, more qualified interlocutions and fewer everyday problems. That's why he resigned from Brazil. Flusser became a naturalised Brazilian citizen in the 1950s, and states that "it took until 1972 for me to painfully decide to give up my engagement to Brazil and move to Provence, that anti-Brazil"²⁶ (Flusser 2007: 229).

Flusser's disappointment with Brazil was not specifically with Brazil, but rather with the discovery that the idea of a homeland is the "sacralisation of the banal"²⁷. In order to maintain his

²² In the original: "Mas principalmente há isto: lá não me engajo. Os europeus que se danem, desde que me paguem. Posso fazer lá o que me compete fazer por vocação, sem respeito pela sociedade. A saber, no momento: posso isolar-me para escrever uma análise da minha circunstância imediata, inspirada pela fenomenologia, a chamar-se, talvez, ('coisas que me cercam'), título aliás de uma coletânea de artigos meus a serem publicados pela Comissão Estadual de Cultura, cujo manuscrito, aceito e pago com cem cruzeiros, está tramitando atualmente pelos labirintos kafkianos desse aparelho administrativo. De forma que talvez poderia ser na Europa 'homem famoso', mas quase certamente poderia trabalhar sem estar perturbado por engajamento".

²³ In the original: "é a única forma de existência digna".

²⁴ In the original: "fome de engajamento".

²⁵ In the original: "Resumirei o juízo (o qual, ele também, poderia ser elaborado com facilidade): sinto-me muito bem no isolamento, e penso e escrevo relativamente bem nele, mas sinto que estou sendo inútil aos quais estou interessado".

²⁶ In the original: "demorou até o ano de 1972 para que eu me decidisse, de maneira dolorosa, a desistir de meu engajamento no Brasil e fosse morar na Provença, esse anti-Brasil".

²⁷ In the original: "sacralização do banal".

stateless freedom, he remembers that it is necessary to refuse this mystification of habits. This doesn't mean refusing the connections made in Brazil, as he felt responsible for them, but opening himself up to other connections, to which he could incorporate the Brazilian experience. "It's not that Brazil isn't my homeland, because 'homeland' for me is the men for whom I have responsibility"²⁸ (Flusser 2007: 230). From there, we could ask: is a *groundless engagement*²⁹ possible? This is Flusser's attempt: to engage with his Brazilian interlocutors.

Is this why, from the 1980s onwards, Flusser repeatedly insisted that technical images disregard objective reality? Is that why, also in this period, he shifts his argument slightly and begins to admit that thinking about the contemporary world was no longer about proposing models, but about playing strategically with models? What does giving up "all earthly Jerusalem" mean for the continuity of Flusser's thinking? How can stateless groundless and social disengagement be combined? Is engagement based on gestures and not places, as he points out? Flusser returned to Europe and wrote his autobiography, *Bodenlos*, a "monument to engagement"³⁰: "Here [with *Bodenlos*] lies an engagement born in 1940, killed on the battlefield in 1972, and waiting for the resurrection of bodies"³¹ (Flusser 1973).

Roughly speaking, what is defined as engagement is decisive for Flusser, as he says in his autobiography: "... all the themes have been and will continue to be variations of a single one: the problem of engagement from a groundless situation. This is because one's own life (essay-life) is a variation on this single theme, which can be aphoristically formulated as: 'the search for faith in disgrace'"³² (Flusser 2007: 81).

To this existential axiom that defines engagement, *the search for faith in disgrace*, we could add another, on our account, of an epistemological order: *the search for the improbable point of view*. Flusser rejects engagement (terrorist) and scientific theory (futurologist). The refusal is accompanied by the admission that the third term, the ideal synthesis, is not given. The artist's action has no place, it is improbable, but that does not mean it is utopian – without *topos*. Utopia is next to science fiction. It's a projection of imagery that doesn't serve knowledge.

In some of *Angenommen's* scenarios, an apparently privileged point of view takes centre stage, as if it could finally solve the human problem and serve as a model for us. This is the case with the ninth scenario, "Economic Miracle". In this chapter, we come across the *taenia solium*, our

²⁸ In the original: "Não é que o Brasil não seja a minha pátria, pois 'pátria', para mim, são os homens pelos quais eu tenho responsabilidade".

²⁹ In the original: "engajamento desterrado".

³⁰ In the original: "monumento ao engajamento".

³¹ In the original: "Aqui [com *Bodenlos*] jaz um engajamento nascido em 1940, morto no campo de batalha em 1972, e a espera pela ressurreição dos corpos".

³² In the original: "... todos os temas têm sido e continuarão a ser variações de um único: o problema do engajamento a partir de uma situação sem fundamento. Isto é assim porque a própria vida da gente (vida-ensaio) é variação desse único tema, o qual pode aforisticamente ser formulado como: 'busca de fé na desgraça'".

parasite, which has overcome economic necessity (social substructure, according to Marxist theory), because it has already secured its subsistence without effort.

The tapeworm, which doesn't need to work, is free to live an orgiastic life. And since it has both male and female sexual organs, it can have sex and reproduce as it pleases. However, as its scientific name implies, the worm is solitary, it doesn't have the other. The tapeworm has sex and reproduction, but it doesn't have love - so it's a model that should be discarded.

In this way, we can conclude that Flusser puts into play the proposition of a non-totalitarian and non-totalising thought - without blood, without land, without homeland - that doesn't fall into the bullshit of the universality of ideas. Flusser's bet, in *Angenommen* and other works, is on the improbability of love. As he states in a letter to Mira Schendel dated 22 September 1980, his search is for an "aisthesis (*koerperliches Erleben*) as a method of political criticism"³³ (Flusser 1980). Flusser's ethics have not yet reached the present.

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