

Vilém Flusser

The Brazilian Language

Excerpted from Vilém Flusser's "philosophical autobiography" *Bodenlos*, published in German in 1992, and forthcoming in Portuguese from Editora Annablume (2007)

Towards the end of the 1940s the first real contact with Brazilian culture was complete. This step was determined by the decision to become active in this culture. One wanted to grasp it as thoroughly as possible, not only to absorb it but also in order to act within it. This is an atypical way of getting in touch with another culture. On the whole there are three ways in which one can experience culture:

(a) The culture into which one is born, expressing itself in the surroundings and informing the self from the very beginning ('from the very beginning' here meaning both the awakening of consciousness as well as pre-conscious information), is experienced as a given world, therefore, as a condition. Prague had been experienced that way. And it is also the kind of experience with culture most people have. Such an experience of culture does not exclude, of course, any knowledge of foreign cultures. These are, however, not considered as alternatives to one's own world, but viewed and acknowledged¹ as factors to be found within the world that is arranged by one's own culture. One's own culture structures the world and offers, therefore, among other things, the very categories by which one views and acknowledges other cultures as well. In this sense all foreign cultures are contained within one's own. Since one's own culture does not only structure only the world out there but also the way I perceive, feel and experience things, the question arises if it is possible to view and acknowledge one's own culture, especially because this would require that one steps outside of oneself. It seems that if one cannot 'generally' experience foreign cultures, one can only get to know them, and one can not know one's own culture but only experience it. (A fundamental problem of all cultural studies is articulated by this question.) If one, 'by way of exception,' succeeds in stepping outside of oneself and viewing oneself and one's own culture from the outside, a first step has been taken that carries within it the seed of an ungrounded state. In that case one can view one's own culture as one among different alternative possibilities. And, in that way, one has faded the original experience of culture. What we are talking about here is the problem of 'transcendence,' and it is difficult in this context to avoid Kant.

(b) Once one has transcended one's own culture (that is, one has lost one's footing) a different kind of cultural experience becomes possible. One hovers above a whole set of cultures, and

¹ Throughout the text Flusser plays with ,erkennen' and ,anerkennen' and their past participles 'erkannt' and 'anerkannt' suggesting a connection between the two moments of getting to know a culture and accepting it the way it is, that is, acknowledging its existence (RG). Both verbs are formed from 'kennen', to know, the difference lies in the use of the two prefixes 'er-' and 'an-' (RG).

at the same time one is consciously experiencing this drifting. One can perceive how the different cultures interconnect with each other, how they form groups and hierarchies, how they distance themselves from each other, how chasms open up between them and how they fight against each other. And at the same time one experiences the impossibility to assess cultures, that is, to choose between them. One perceives oneself adrift, and since one starts viewing oneself as an “I” created by one of the cultures that one has transcended, the drifting itself is experienced as a progressive transcending of one’s self, as a progressive self-estrangement. (This is an aspect playing with suicide that has been referred to earlier). Cultures perceived, recognized and seen through² from a distance are not experienced as areas of a possible commitment, but as play-grounds from which to pick different elements in order to arrange them at will. (Such a ‘transcultural’ act explains in part the experience one had with the East, and also in part the loathing that it induced). This is possibly a ‘super-human’ way of experiencing culture, but it is surely inhuman, and Nietzsche has come close to it in his *Zarathustra*.

(c) One undergoes a cultural experience of a different type when facing the borders between two cultures. (This was not the case in Prague, because in Prague two different cultures had synthesized into one, Prague’s “own” culture). It is the cultural experience of the “classic” immigrant. As an emigrant he advances to the border of his own culture (which is internal to him); as an immigrant he crosses the border of a foreign culture (which forms his environs). This clash between inside and outside does not call for a synthesis but for an attempt to replace the internal culture gradually with the one that is external. In other words, one identifies the foreign culture, at first, with categories established in one’s own culture (it is, therefore, not “experienced”) only to then displace one’s own culture step by step with the one that is foreign, that is, it is being “experienced.” This complex process includes a double “forgetting”: that of the original cultural experience and that of identifying the culture at the moment of arrival. Indeed, this process is so complex that sporadic culture syntheses do occur and that it claims more than one lifetime. The children, even the grandchildren of the immigrant participate in this slow displacement of one culture by another. What is important is that a break that reveals one’s lack of footing can be avoided and one never needs to make a conscious decision for committing to one or the other culture. It is not necessary because within that clash the internal culture assumes a passive role and the external culture becomes active, and the classic immigrant glides into the new culture.

This third way of experiencing culture has never been my own. When I came to Brazil I did not have my own culture within me, I was in limbo. So I did not experience the Brazilian culture

² In the German original Flusser suggests through the specific choice of words a progressive estrangement from cultural settings achieved by a three-step viewing process: ‘erblicken’ (to perceive from afar), ‘erkennen’ (to view, from close up, to understand and accept as such) and ‘durchblicken’ (to see through something, recognizing its artificiality) (RG).

as a border culture, but I considered it one among many above which I hovered. I had never been a “classic” immigrant, and when I decided, more than ten years later, to become engaged with this culture, I experienced it in ways that do not correspond to the three types of experience listed above. It does explain why I felt closer to native Brazilians than to immigrants, following this decision.

The attempt to portray my own experience of Brazilian culture phenomenologically is eased by the fact that I experienced this culture primarily as language. Granted, language in general assumes a prominent role in experiences of culture, but in my case this role was given emphasis to because I approached Brazilian culture in order to establish myself as a writer. In the experience of culture (a) the mother tongue is experienced as language per se and it serves, among other things, to acquire all additional languages. It is a meta-language and all others are object-languages. In the experience of culture (b) one observes all languages from an extra-linguistic perspective, that is, from a Wittgensteinian position. (By the way, I had been aware early on of the connection between Wittgenstein and Nietzsche that is clearly apparent here.) In the cultural experience (c) the “new” language emerges first as a means of communication with the new environment in order to gradually displace the mother tongue as thought structure. In the case of my own experience of Brazilian culture, the Portuguese language took center stage for the simple reason that I had decided in its favor when I decided to become active in Brazil. It meant that I experienced this language predominantly as rough material, challenging me to work with and change it in a way so that this change may transform me and bring me into contact with others. That is, I experienced the Portuguese language as a challenge and a life-task.

The dialectic marking any relationship between the subject that wants to inform matter and between matter that is to be informed positioned itself between me and the Portuguese language. Epistemologically speaking, it meant that I endeavored to access the essence of the language in order to change it only to find that I was substantially changed myself. Emotionally speaking, it meant I began to love this language the more I discovered its beauty and that I began to hate it the more it resisted change. And existentially speaking, it meant that I began to live for this language, knowing all along that the essence of any language lies in being a means, not an end in itself. To summarize this dialectic: I tried to control the language only to be controlled by it, and I did that in order to be changed by the language and to come close to others. In short, I began to become a Brazilian writer.

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