

Vilém Flusser
Orthonature / Paranature
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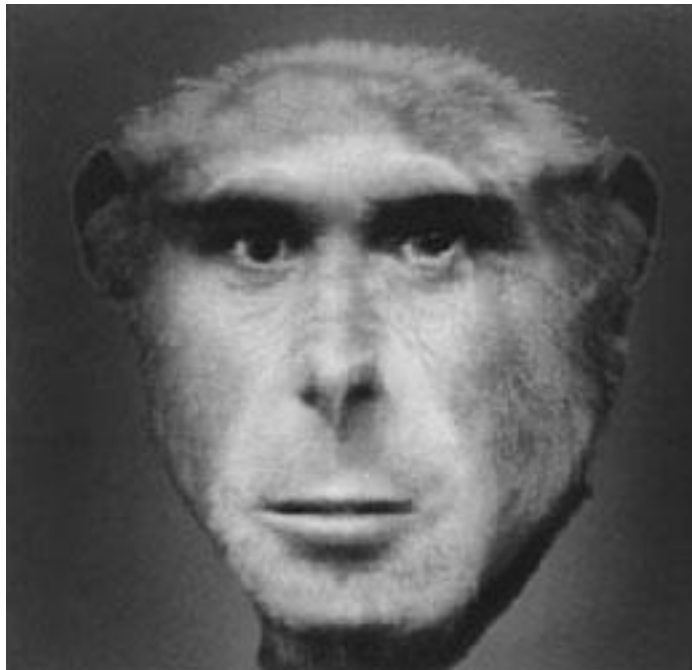


Figure 1: Nancy Burson, Evolution II (Chimpanzee and Man), 1984

We thank Vilém Flusser
for his willingness to contribute,
with this text,
to the general reflection carried out
by the Scientific Institute
for Paranaturalist Research
on the concept of paranature.

---- L.B and F.B.

Concerning the relationship between nature and culture¹, an idea exists that is so widespread it practically constitutes a general consensus: culture results from the transformation of nature. This idea appears in education and in writing in a variety of contexts; recounted in numerous myths and religious and political ideologies. It is found in practically all scientific anthropologies and philosophies. We therefore accept it and, having accepted it, we think we see its validity everywhere.

The process by which nature is transformed into culture seems alarmingly demonstrable. In agriculture, it's like sculpture. In industry, it's like pedagogy. It is an act in which humans take a natural object (a plant, a stone, a child) and transform it into a functional, cultural thing (breakfast cereal, a statue, a car, a citizen). We observe it everywhere and we all participate in it. Given this, how can we reject the idea that culture is nature transformed?

We could, however, imagine a very different idea regarding the relationship between nature and culture: nature resulting from the transformation of culture. There are good reasons to formulate such a paradox – and it is a paradox when compared to the orthodox thinking already mentioned. In fact, don't we see the opposite everywhere?

Ideas are models of observation. When one accepts the idea that objects rise or fall according to "justice" (*dike*),² every object seeks its appropriate place in the world. We see everywhere how the flame rises in the air and heavy objects fall faster than lighter ones. Moreover, when the idea of free fall was accepted, according to which any object falls in a gravitational field, we could see how objects fall according to a geometric acceleration independent of their weight.

If we accept that nature is the result of a transformation of culture, we see similarly the accuracy of this notion everywhere. But if ideas influence observation and all ideas are therefore equally accurate, why do ideas change? Because all ideas are not equal. The idea of free fall

¹ Produced in collaboration with the staff at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, this work melds the images of a chimpanzee and a human being. Conceived as an anthropological experiment, this work represents Burson's attempt to approximate an image of early man. Flusser wrote about Burson's work from this period in his column in *European Photography*. See Vilém Flusser, "Nancy Burson: Chimären/Chimaeras," *European Photography* 33 (January 1988): 46.

² Dike or Dice, the Greek goddess of Justice.

opens up parameters of observation that are broader than what we actually find in the world.³ It is better. The idea that nature is a transformation of culture is perhaps better and broader than the conflicting idea. That is the theme here.

Let's compare two ideas. According to the orthodox idea, nature preexists culture and there is only one nature, universal and omnipresent. Let's call this nature "Orthonature." Humans are situated inside it, "originally," and all they do is discover it. However, they don't accept it as is. They change it according to their desire to liberate themselves from it. Thus, they produce diverse cultures. Ultimately, this utopian process called "History" transforms all of nature into culture. In other words: all things exist according to human desire; humans will be free. According to the paradoxical idea, culture comes before nature. Humans find themselves "originally" in it and are surrounded only by culture. Culture determines them. To be liberated from it, they de-culturalize what they find and reduce everything to a solely epistemological dimension: they transform culture into nature, thereby producing diverse natures, or what we call "para-natures." The utopian result of this process is called "History," in which all culture will be transformed into nature. Which is to say, all things will be comprehensible and manipulatable. Humans will be free.

The disparity between these two ideas becomes obvious. For the orthodox idea, humans are a natural animal, originally a primate. In the antagonizing view, humans are a cultural animal, originally primitive. For the primate, everything is nature because everything is edible, copulable, or dangerous. For the primitive, everything is culture because everything is "spiritual" – which is to say, another who participates in the culture. For the primate, the structure of the world is necessity: it's necessary to eat and copulate and to be eaten. That is the structure of nature. For the primitive, the structure of the world is retribution: if the primitive wants something, another thing must be sacrificed. That is the structure of culture. For the primate, the problem is how to free oneself from necessity by imposing one's will. The primate becomes human by producing "values" and bestowing meaning upon the absurd world of nature. For the primitive, the problem is to liberate oneself from retribution by discovering the hidden

³ Flusser is referring to Newtonian physics in which gravity consists of time and space, unaffected by the objects. This is opposed to Einstein's theory of General Relativity, in which there is only spacetime and objects actually affect space.

need behind culture. That is what happens when one becomes cognizant: “demystifying” and discovering the absurdity of the world. Thus, the orthodox idea’s measure of progress is the development of culture, since humans are primates in evolution. The paradox idea’s measure of progress is developing a *demystified understanding of nature*, since humans are primates in revolution.

Let’s not fall into the trap of following the orthodox idea, however: that humans were primates before becoming primitives. Because it is precisely such an assertion that the paradoxical idea rejects. For the orthodox idea, there is no sense in a projection of the past beyond human existence, except as an extrapolation. In this idea, the world “begins” precisely with human perception. The ontic dignity of the world exists for humans. The primate, within this idea, is a demystified human. The primate is also subsequent to humans: discovered in the nineteenth century; it was only thanks to Darwin that we were able to become primates. Here one can see the fundamental difference between the two ideas: in the orthodox one, there is a natural history in which human history is the last chapter. In the paradoxical view, nature is a recent discovery: in the strictest sense, it only begins with the natural sciences, and it is only now that humans begin to find themselves in nature.

The orthodox idea conceives of nature in an ontological manner: it is part of things not made by man. Meanwhile, the paradoxical idea conceives of nature in a methodological fashion: it is part of things explainable by the methods of the natural sciences, among others. The methods of the natural sciences seem applicable to even wider fields, and in these fields, culture is transformed into nature, because to apply scientific methods is to dispel myths, specters, gods, and ideologies. What remains after applying these methods is nature. We can see this process everywhere, and we see it more clearly in fields that have been recently deculturized: in the field of justice, where the concept of crime and punishment is being abandoned in favor of psychological motivation and social therapy; in the field of art, where the concept of Beauty is being abandoned in favor of the concept of information; in the field of politics, where the concept of freedom is abandoned in favor of functioning. Everywhere we can see the decline of values – which is to say, of culture, before nature.

Both ideas are valid; the reasons for accepting them are equally good. The question is, however, which of the two is broader? If one says that the paradoxical idea's proposition, "nature gradually eats culture," corresponds to the proposition of the orthodox idea's "nature is gradually eaten by culture," then the two ideas are complementary: one is the opposite of the other. But if we admit that, in the process of demystification, culture produces various natures, it is evident that the paradoxical idea is greater than the orthodox one. Because the diversity of nature is not like the diversity of cultures: unlike the various cultures, the various natures are not located on the same ontological plane. On the contrary: each of the various natures have their own reality, although these realities may be connected. The only thing these various natures have in common is the method by which they are known: epistemology.

Admittedly, the paradoxical idea is the broadest. It opens up a larger parameter for observation, but also for action, since the orthodox idea limits action only to the transformation of nature. Meanwhile, the paradoxical idea opens up a field of action in which we can produce many paranatures. This inverts the meaning of the term "Art." For the orthodox idea, art is the method of transforming nature into culture. For the paradoxical idea, art is the method of producing paranatures. It's just that we only have one response: the natural sciences. That is why we have only produced one paranature so far, and that is the one dictated to us by natural science. And since this paranature is unique, we confuse it with the ortho-nature of the orthodox idea. To show that the paradoxical idea is broader, it is necessary to develop additional arts – which is to say other methods of producing paranatures which parallel those of the natural sciences, but in other domains of reality.

This is the goal of the Scientific Institute for Paranaturalist Research: the I.S.R.P. [l'Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste] starts with the epistemological premise according to which any idea is a model for the observation of reality. It must be accepted that the paradoxical idea is better than the orthodox one. The first consequence of accepting this is a reformulation of the term "art": it is a method of fabricating paranatures. The second consequence is a reformulation of the term "science": it is an art among other possible arts. The impact of these consequences must be considered briefly. Art is the method for producing paranatures and science must be considered art. Naïve faith in science collapses.

The issue of whether or not the organisms produced by the I.S.R.P. are natural beings is a poor question. They are as natural as the animals described by zoology, but they belong to a different paranature. The degree of reality is the same in both, but reality itself changes. Zoology animals are not surreal, compared to I.S.R.P. organisms, and vice versa. Zoologists and the I.S.R.P. are radically realistic, only they work in different paranatures. Therefore, the plurality of realities, of paranatures, arises in a concrete way. We see that zoology is an art and paranaturalism is a science.

If the difference between art and science disappears, if all science is an artifice, the criteria of truth changes. Scientific truth is no longer an idea's suitability to a given real, but an idea's sufficiency to a real fact caused by this idea. And the organisms of the I.S.R.P. are concrete proof of an epistemological revolution. Not only is science an art, but art that has become self-aware is a science – which is to say, a way of knowing. To judge such an art, it is necessary to apply epistemological criteria. As a result, there is not one truth, but several versions, and the knowledge sought by the I.S.R.P. is no less scientific than the knowledge sought by zoology, although different. Curiously, however, this knowledge is structurally the same, since it is based on the same tools: *logic, methodology, controlled experience*. Knowledge is a human activity structured by the same categories, regardless of which reality it's based on. If science is an art, and art became a deliberate science, one could apply aesthetic criteria to both. It is therefore not just an epistemological revolution, but an aesthetic closely linked to epistemology.

From this overview we conclude the I.S.R.P. is concrete proof that there is not merely one nature. There are as many natures as there are methods of producing them.

Any paranature should be undergirded by irony, a dangerous but interrogating approach.