Session 1: A NEW IMAGINATION[1]

Homo sapiens possess the curious capacity to make pictures of the world. This may be observed on cave walls. Lately, another capacity is emerging: to make pictures of calculations. This may be observed on computer screens. Although both these capacities manifest themselves in the shape of pictures, they should be distinguished the one from the other. If not, we run the danger of missing what our cultural revolution is about. The purpose of this article is to help make such a distinction.

To make a picture of the world, on must step back from it. The question is: where to? It is easy to answer: from one place to some other. For instance: if one wants to make a picture of a pony – as they did in the Dordogne – one must step back from it and climb on a hill. But this is not the whole answer. We know from experience that it is not. When making a picture – when imagining – we step back from the world into ourselves. This is not really a place, it is a non-place. Imagination is our capacity to withdraw from the world to that non-place. (This is not an explanation, just a description, because how we do it is almost impossible to explain.) Thus, when making a picture, we no longer are within the world – we no longer in-sist – but we are outside the world – we ek-sist. We have become subjects to an objective world.

This is an uncomfortable situation. Because our arms are not long enough to bridge the abyss between ourselves and the world. We can no longer seize it and handle it. The world is no longer manifest. It has become apparent. It is no longer composed of objects against which we stumble. It is now composed of phenomena which we look at. Now why did we put ourselves into such an uncomfortable position? Into the

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[1] The text used here differs hardly form the version published in *Artforum*, April 1988, vol. 26, pp. 14-15 which was part of a series of five texts that Flusser wrote from January 1987 to June 1988 for Artforum entitled “Curie’s Children. Vilém Flusser on Discovery”. *Artforum* published twenty texts by Flusser. Another English version of the text can be found in Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, which was edited by Andreas Ströhl and uses in case there are no English texts by Flusser himself translations by Erik Eisel. (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) [http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/F/flusser_writings.html]

A German version entitled “Eine neue Einbildungskraft” can be found in: Volker Bohn (ed.), *Bildlichkeit*. Frankfurt 1990, S. 115-128, republished in a slightly shortend version in the Flusser-Reader: Stefan Bollmann (ed.), *Die Revolution der Bilder*, Mannheim 1995.

position of doubt, of alienation? We did it, in order to see the world as a context. To see the forest, and no longer to have to stumble against individual trees. And what is the advantage of seeing contexts? One may step back into the world, and seize it and handle it better than before: in accordance with the context one saw. Imagination is a “réculer pour mieux sauter”, and pictures are tables of orientation for seizing and handling the world better. (This is a contribution to art criticism.)

What has just been said may be contested. Are the wall paintings at Lascaux really nothing more than models for hunting? And what about pictures like those made by Malevich: are they really models for sizing and handling the world? This article will not go into that quarrel. Its business is not to criticize pictures, but to distinguish between the imagination just described and the new one.

However, an additional remark seems to be in order. To imagine – to step back from the world into existence – is not sufficient for making pictures. One must somehow fix what one has seen – for instance on walls or canvasses – and one must somehow codify it, for it to become meaningful for others. In other words: one must feed one’s imagination into a memory, and one must render it inter-subjective. But those are technical problems concerning the production of pictures. Here the question is not about the production of pictures, but about two different forms of imagination.

The new imagination is the capacity to make pictures of calculations. Most of us do not have any experience with it. Therefore we cannot here operate with elegant concepts like “existence” and “subjectivity”, as we did with the old imagination. In the absence of concrete experience those become meaningless terms. Instead, we must describe, what those people are doing who possess the new imagination. They sit facing an apparatus equipped with a keyboard and a screen, they press the keys and pictures appear on the screen. Where do they sit, and why are they doing this? Those are the same questions we asked of the old imagination. There, the answers were: people sit in “existence” – in subjectivity – and they do what they are doing – pictures – in order to seize and handle the world the better. People with common sense – reactionaries – will give the same answers in the case of the new imagination; because, for them, there is nothing really new under the sun. But the matter is not so simple.

The old imagination produces pictures of the world. But these are not clear and distinct models. They may lead to confused – magical – seizing and handling of the world; they must be clarified. For that purpose writing has been invented – some three thousand years ago. The purpose of writing is to explain – tell – pictures, to describe them, and thus to permit orderly – correct – seizing and handling of the world. But writing itself is linear: it follows the order of the line. It has been found that such is not always the correct order to seize and handle the world. Linear orders like classical logic or causal explanations do not always properly describe the world. This is why – some three hundred years ago – the lines of writing have been cut into points and intervals: calculus was invented. The purpose of calculus is to permit a minutely exact seizure and handling of the world. One of the results of calculus are those apparatus the keys of which are pressed by those who possess the new imagination.

It thus appears that what we have here is a sort of loop: First, images produced by old imagination have been analyzed into lines by writing, then those lines have been analysed into points by calculus, and now these points are being re-synthesized into images by the new imagination. That loop has taken three thousand years to unfold, and it is, in fact, identical with Western civilisation. May it not be said that the people who possess the new imagination sit somewhere outside Western civilisation – so to say at the back of it – and that they are doing what they are doing in order to restore pre historical magic? Those cannot be the correct answers to our question. The matter must be examined further.

The first picture to be synthesized from points – the first grainy picture – is the photo. It is true, that under the calculating gaze all previous pictures – like all the objects in the world – are seen to be grainy: composed of molecules, atoms, and even smaller point-like bits. But photos are the first pictures which have come about by deliberately assembling point-like bits, by computing. This is why photos are the first manifestations of the new imagination, and they must be taken as the point of departure for our examination.

The grains of which a photo consists – molecules of silver compounds – are too small to be assembled by fingers. This is why apparatuses must be invented to do this. Those apparatuses are programmed in such a way that they capture rays with the molecules, and then compute them into pictures. They can do so automatically, without any further human intervention. (Of course, photographers may press the releaser, but they are nothing but unnecessary substitutes for automatic releasers.) What is the purpose of all this? This is a question which should not be asked of the early camera inventors (and even less of the photographers): they did not know, then, what they are doing. It is only now that we possess synthetic computer images that we can answer that question. Very characteristically, the computer should not be taken as a consequence of the camera – it should not be explained causally – but on the contrary: the camera should be taken as a primitive computer (it should be explained prospectively.

It now appears that cameras were invented in order to emancipate imagination from the necessity to make pictures, and to render it free for the programming of automatically produced pictures. This new imagination programs an apparatus and then waits until an enormous amount of pictures is vomited by the apparatus. Some of the pictures thus produced will surprise the programmer: they have not been expected. Those are “informative” pictures, improbable pictures. Imagination withdraws from picture making into apparatus programming, in order to become more powerful, more informative. It can now imagine the improbable, the unexpected.

But this is not the whole truth about the new imagination. As imagination withdraws from picture making into programming, it somehow reverses itself. And the pictures which result from it point to the opposite direction of those produced by the old imagination. This is difficult but necessary to understand. The old imagination withdraws from the world into an un-place where it produces pictures. It is thus a motion of abstraction: it abstracts from the world the two dimensions of the picture surface. The new imagination advances from the points of the calculus towards an apparatus which produces pictures. It is thus a motion of concretion: it projects from the zero-dimensional points into the two dimensions of the picture surface. This is why the old and the new pictures point to opposite directions:

The old pictures are tables of orientation within the world: they point at the world, they show it, they mean it. The new ones are projections of calculating thought: they point at thought, they show it, they mean it. Now thought itself does not mean the world as it is, but as it could be. For example: a synthetic picture of an aeroplane does not show a “real”, but a possible “aeroplane”. It is the representation of a “thought” plane. The same is true of a photo, a film or a video, but there it is less obvious than in the synthesized picture.

Thus thanks to the new imagination we no longer face the world as its underlings – as subjects – but we now possess the faculty to calculate it as a field of virtualities, and to compute some of those virtualities into simulations of realities according to our own program. This is the new imagination. The consequence is that we no longer seize and handle the world in order to change the real, but that we do so in order to realize virtualities. We are no longer sub-jects, but pro-jects. Our head turns if we try to execute such an existential revolution.

This article has attempted to show the difference between the old and the new imagination. Thus: thanks to the old imagination we can, inexplicably, withdraw from the world into existence, perceive its context, and we can then seize and handle the world better; and thanks to the new imagination we can advance from total abstraction into fields of virtualities, and there compute simulations of real worlds. Now this seems to be a rather elaborate formulation. It is not. He who is committed to the production of old and new pictures experiences it concretely. And this explains the curious creative dizziness which takes hold of those who program synthetic pictures, who possess the new imagination. With each key they press they dive into a field of virtualities, and entire worlds emerge which they themselves had not expected. A new level of existence is opening up, with new experiences, sentiments, emotions; concepts and values proper to it. Homo sapiens is about to bring a faculty into play which so far has been dormant.