

## MAN AS SUBJECT OR PROJECT

PRO, Rotterdam, 29/9-2/10/89

This contribution will submit the hypothesis according to which we are about to change our attitude in the face of the world we live in. Ever since history proper began, (ever since the second millennium BC) we assumed ourselves to stand both inside and outside the world, to be both part of the objective world and subjects of it. This contradictory anthropology led to the curious division between body and mind with all its insoluble intricate problems. Although in the course of history this contradiction has taken numerous shapes (the last being the separation between the natural sciences and the humanities), none of these formulations of the double position of man has provided a satisfactory answer to the questions concerning our relation to the world (our understanding, evaluation and manipulation of it). It now appears that no satisfactory answers were possible, because the contradictory anthropology poses false problems. A new anthropology is slowly emerging. This contribution will attempt to consider some of its aspects in the light of "Man versus Environment", which is the subject of our meeting.

History proper may be said to begin when some people on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean began to ask questions about what we now call ek-sistence (meaning the fact that we are somehow capable of looking at the world from outside, and even of looking at ourselves as we look at the world from outside). Of course: people had looked at the world from outside ever since they made pictures of it, ever since they made cave paintings. But they had taken this curious capacity to step back from the world for granted, and they did not ask questions about it. About the second half of the second millennium BC those questions could no longer be avoided, possibly because techniques like metal production had reached a degree of complexity which demanded a new degree of abstraction. By the beginning of the first millennium BC two separate answers to that question were being formulated. The one type of answer is due to Greek philosophy, the other to Jewish prophecy, and those two types of answers were repeatedly combined and recombined to form the basis of Occidental knowledge, values and action. Although there is a profound difference between those two types of answers, and although no true synthesis between the two is possible, they both agree that man is somehow a stranger in the world (an alien coming from somewhere else), and that there are methods for him to overcome that alienation. This is why the title of our meeting "Man versus Environment" is a typically Occidental expression.

One of the results of this self-understanding of man (possibly the most important one) is Occidental science. In its modern form it poses the question of how man can adequately his thinking to the envi-

## PROF. VILÉM FLUSSER (BRASILIA)



born 1920 in Prague, Czechoslovakia; lives in Robion, France; full professor for the Theory of Communications at the Faculty for Communications and Humanities, FAAP, São Paulo, Brasilia; in Europe since 1972; writer of numerous essays published in European, American and Brazilian magazines and newspapers; participant in numerous international meetings on communication and related subjects, and in the organisation of numerous art events and exhibitions; most important book publications: *Lingua e Realidade*, Herder S. Paulo 1963; *Historia do Diabo*, Martins, S. Paulo 1965; *Da Religiosidade*, State Cultural Commission, S. Paulo 1967; *La Force du Quotidien*, Mame, Paris 1972; *Natural: mente, Duas Cidades*, S. Paulo 1979; *Pos-Historia, Duas Cidades*, S. Paulo 1982; *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, European Photography, Göttingen 1983; *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, European Photography, Göttingen 1985; *Die Schrift*, Immatrix Publications, Göttingen 1987; *Vampyrotheuthis infernalis*, Immatrix, Göttingen 1987; *Krise der Linearität*, Benteli, Bern 1988; *Angenommen*, Immatrix Publication, Göttingen 1989; (some of these books have been translated in various languages)

in: "Constructivism: Man versus environment"  
(= 3. PRO-Konferenz '89), Rotterdam m.a. 1989

ronment he lives in ("adaequatio rei cogitantis ad rem extensam"). It appears that the structure of our thinking is quite different from the structure of our environment (including the structure of our bodies). Our thinking is clear and distinct (it has an arithmetical structure), while the environment is compact (it has a geometrical structure). Efforts were made to render those two structures comparable, analytical geometry being the most efficient one, and this was improved upon by calculus, which finally permitted man to understand his environment (including his own body), and to manipulate it. This is the basis of the first and the second Industrial revolution. However, although these methods of knowledge and manipulation were extremely powerful and successful, there was always something uncanny about them. How can it be that our thinking (in fact: the equations and formulæ we elaborate) do indeed function when applied to our surroundings? Why do the numbers we draw on a blackboard do indeed permit us to build bridges? Why are the laws of nature algorithms? The first attempt to explain this uncanny fact was to say that the world is the product of a mind which is similar to our own, that God is a mathematician. But somewhat later we began to suspect that such a curious God (who is not such a perfect mathematician after all, if we look more closely at the world), may be our own projection. That it is we ourselves who project our thinking into the world, and then re-discover it, as if we had forgotten that we had projected it there in the first place. That the laws of nature are not really discoveries of ours, but our own projections. And this suspicion questions the whole of Occidental anthropology, with all the epistemology and all the values implied therein. No longer is it a question of "Man versus Environment", but it is now a question of "Man and Environment Projects".

One point should be made clear from the start: If we suspect that it is we ourselves who project the rules according to which the environment (the objective world) behaves, this does not justify "idealism" in the sense that we dream up the objective world. Because if the world were a dream of ours, any old rule of ours would be just as good as any other. This is obviously not the case: the rules we project must somehow adapt themselves to what is there, and some of the rules we try to project are shown to be erroneous. "Idealism" in this sense is nothing but an extreme form of Occidental anthropology, the other extreme being "realism", and both must be abandoned. What we have to assume, if we adopt the suspicion of our being the projects of rules, is that there are impossible projects.

Having said this, let us try and see what science itself has to say about this. Take neurophysiology as an example. It says that the tips of some of our nerves receive stimuli in what we now call a "digital code": point-like impulses which are either received or not, and that there is no strong or weak stimulus, but either stimulus or non-stimulus. The-

se point-like impulses are processed by the nervous system to form perceptions of the world. Thus the objective world as perceived is a computation of the nervous system, and in this sense a projection of it. And all our thinking, feeling, wishing and acting is based on that projection. Which is a way to answer the classical paradox how the brain which is part of the world may contain the world: the brain projects the world.

Very similar statements can be found in scientific disciplines quite unrelated to neuro-physiology and to each other. For instance: it has become obvious in physics that observation is not neutral, but that it influences the observed phenomenon in what is called the "Heisenberg factor". Which means that the object and subject of observation cannot clearly be distinguished. Another instance: it has become obvious in psychology that what we call the "individual subject" (the Ego) is at best the point of an iceberg of collective psychic phenomena, and at worst a mere convenience for psychological investigation. Which means that to speak of an individual subject is a loose way of speaking. All these (and other) examples suggest that we have now reached a point where the distinction between subjects and objects of knowledge, (and therefore of evaluation and action) is no longer useful, and that a new ontology and anthropology is called for.

In fact, Husserl's phenomenology (as refined by successive investigations) provides us with the tools necessary for such an elaboration. It says quite simply that there can be no object without any subject to observe it (no "thing in itself"), and that there can be no subject without any object it is subject to (no "pure subject"). It says that "subject" and "object" are abstract extrapolations from concrete relations. There is no such thing as a "human spirit" on the one side, and an "objective environment" on the other, but there is the concrete "man-environment" relation. We may call this concrete relation the "Lebenswelt", and we may say that it has a dynamical, projective, "intentional" structure. Let me give an example: I am sitting here at my table and typing this contribution. This is the concrete fact: the intention to write this. Within that intention I become concrete (realize myself) as a writer, and the table and the typewriter become concrete therein as how the contribution is being written. Outside that concrete relation I, the table and the typewriter are nothing but mere virtualities for the writing of this contribution. Of course: I may realize myself in some other concrete relationship (for instance as a father or the bearer of this shirt), and the table and the typewriter may become concrete in some other relationship; but to become concrete those virtualities must be part of some relationship or another. All this is very simple, but it is difficult to grasp, because it is contrary to Occidental tradition.

Now if you consider such a field vision of the world and ourselves within it, you might begin to understand what is going on around us. You will see

overlapping fields of virtualities, which are variably strewn, and which become concrete according to some projects. You will see that tree yonder as one possible concretion of a specific project, and you will see yourselves as concrete knots within the network of virtualities which bundle and unbundle according to specific projects. And computer screens may help you to see this. You will see there how virtualities (if you like: electromagnetic particles) become concrete as images according to a project the structure of which you may see as a wire net, and you will see that the computer artist himself becomes concrete within the image. It is no coincidence that computer screens help us to have this vision: they are themselves products of the new existentials attitude that is emerging. Computers are among the tools by which we begin to assume ourselves as projects.

Let me try to put this attitude as follows: Unlike our ancestors, we no longer feel that we are surrounded by objects which conditions us, which impose their rules upon us. We no longer feel to be subjected to objective conditions. We no longer believe that we must emancipate ourselves from those conditions in order to be free. We no longer hold these beliefs, because it is doubtful whether the objects which surround us are given to us, or whether it is not ourselves who have produced them, either spontaneously through our nervous system, or deliberately through our intention. We no longer believe in the reality of an objective world. On the other hand we no longer believe to be somehow outside that objective world and thus mysteriously capable of emancipating ourselves from it. We no longer believe in the reality of a self, a mind, a spirit. What we now begin to feel is that there are innumerable virtualities around us and within us, that there is no difference between around and within, and that those virtualities are opportunities for us to become concrete according to specific projects. By thus realizing ourselves we also realize those next to us and the environment within which those realisations occur. Like our ancestors, we want to be free, but no longer from

rules (which we feel we project ourselves), but now to be free in order to become realized and to realize worlds.

This new anthropology, for which man is an intention toward realization and the world is the result of this intention, no longer suffers from the fateful Occidental contradiction between subject and object, soul and body, mind and matter. All those concepts are now seen to be metaphysical, and must be abandoned. Instead, we should operate with terms like concrete and abstract. A phenomenon is the more concrete, the more virtualities therein have been "computed" by projects, and it is the more abstract, the less a project has succeeded. No longer is there any difference between "real" and "fictitious" (between the sciences and the arts), but all is now a question of the degree of realisation. (As computer artists say: it is a question of density of definition.) A table is not more real than is its hologram, if in the hologram our projects become as concrete as they do in the nervous system responsible for the concrete perception of the table. For such an anthropology there is no difference between a simulated and a simulating world: both worlds (indeed all possible worlds) are computations of virtualities according to projects, be they spontaneous (according for instance to some genetic program), be they deliberate (according to the programs we are beginning to establish).

If you have followed this argument, you will have seen that this new anthropology (and the ontology it involves) takes man to be a virtual constructor of himself and his worlds. If the term "constructivism" has to have any meaning in the future, I believe that it will be precisely that meaning: we are projects for the construction of ourselves and of alternative worlds. To be sure: this contribution was far too succinct to do justice to the point I am driving. Still: in this context which is "Constructivism: Man vs. Environment", I hope my arguments will find their place, if I add the following statement: Instead of "Man versus Environment" we should say "man as a project for himself within his environment", and that would be true constructivism.

Vilém Flusser