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Animated Animals and Metabolic Machines: Affect in Vilém Flusser's Theory

I. Affect

Vilém Flusser dedicates the introductory chapter of his collection of essays compiled in the early 1990s, *Gestures*, to an elusive, suggestive definition of affect, positing it as the hidden mover of motion, the force through which otherwise inaccessible states of mind get manifested. Affect, as he puts it, "is a state of mind transformed into gesticulation" (Flusser 2014: 6). Cast as the involuntary motions of the inner invisible hand forcefully – yet undetectably – pulling the chords of human automata, gestures index unselfconscious, autonomic yet symbolically pregnant acts modeled by moods, emotions, and by the sedimentation of what by force of habit and repetition operate in any given culture as "truths." Gesticulation visually encodes mental phenomena and processes, delivering them through symbolic forms that are neither simply "natural" nor simply "artificial," and whose very composite status (both social and individual, both natural and cultural, both perceptual and objective) qualifies them as events irreducible to ontological or transcendental-phenomenological frames. For symbols, as Flusser remarks in the essay "Our Work" included in *Post-History* (1983), "are phenomena that have been consciously, semi-consciously, or unconsciously conventionalized in order to have *meanings;* they are "decipherable" to those who participate in the convention that established them" (Flusser 2013a: 30).

This is no small point to make in an introduction: shifting the weight of the discussion of meaning from the epistemologically shaky terrain of intention, emotions, mind and mental processes, to the *external*, *objectual* and thus apparently more precise domain of symbols, media forms and semiotic analysis means, indeed, to eschew the aporias of idealist philosophy and transcendental phenomenology alike, each in its own ways chasing after foundations and critical distancing, and to turn instead to aesthetics and reflective judgment for a more spurious, dynamic, and open account of the relation between expressions and mental states, signs and knowledge. After all, to consider gesticulation epiphenomenal of affect, irreducible to the control of subjectivity and determined – to some degree – by cultural automatism, as Flusser implies in the conceptual experiment he carries on in *Gestures*, means to declare performance and effects, rather than *nature* or *reality* (thing as they are, given), the proper

and social (rather than individual) objects of that peculiar kind of cultural analysis that in his hands becomes media theory, or *communicology*.

The explanation Flusser is after in the *Gestures* collection is one no longer reliant on the discretion and autonomy of object and observer and on the separation of nature and culture (or, as he would eventually put it, thinking, experiencing and "technical images"), but depends instead on their imbrications, displayed for his readers through autobiographical essays that explore how culture, technology, and nature stand as elements in the ongoing feedback loop between experience and mind that renders conventional concepts of nature obsolete and determines experience as always implying and impinging upon "cultural things" instead of nature (Flusser 2013b: 130). As Flusser put it in the conclusion to *Natural:Mind,* an earlier collection of essays written in the Seventies but published in English translation only in 2013 (and on which this essay will focus): "The aim of the selection was to illustrate the power exerted by instruments (of culture) upon everyday life, to illustrate how culture, far from freeing man from the determining forces of nature, constitutes itself as a determining condition. Therefore, as a 'second nature'" (Flusser 2013b: 132). Pursuing in the texts the logical implications of such premise, Flusser finds that when their existential impact is considered, "natural experiences are indistinguishable from cultural ones," and eventually concludes: "the ontological distinction between nature and culture is not existentially sustainable within the current context" (Flusser 2013b: 132).

While the problem of affect and its relation to expression was not yet at the center of Flusser's interest at the time of the composition of the essays gathered in *Natural:Mind* – the term "affect" never explicitly appears in the collection – the incipient theory of knowledge he was then informally sketching must be seen within the longer trajectory of the aesthetic phenomenology he was developing by binding the deconstruction of scientific epistemologies, scientific language, and Romantic ideologies to the emergence of a post-humanist understanding of the relation between experience and representation. Such an emergent aesthetic paradigm is detectable across the several essays written from the mid-seventies to the early nineties, where thematic overlappings and sometimes plain contradictions alternate – as was typical of Flusser's erratic style and open, experimental theoretical adventurousness – but can be particularly appreciated by looking at the sequence: *Natural:Mind* (1979), "Habit: The True Aesthetic Criterion" (1990), *Gestures* (1991), and *Post-History* (1983). The revision of that most conventional of Romantic genres – the nature sketchbook – Flusser pursued in *Natural:Mind* from the perspective of what he called "scientific" literature, would inevitably bring along a confrontation with *feelings* as the quintessential romantic trope for the mediation between nature and art. By scientific

literature Flusser identified all attempts at knowledge motivated by "an effort to scientifically understand the world that surrounds us" after the crisis of the sciences had revealed that a new method was needed to address "the interrelation between the knower and the known," and that science was no longer conceivable as a "pure discipline of a man that transcends reality" (Flusser 2013b: 138). In his life-long elaboration of an aesthetic theory adequate to address the radical transformations of human experience in the age of the end of science and the dominance of technical images, gesture would eventually provide the kinetic combination of "internal," affective, emotional states and "external," objective expressions: just like signs (but unlike affect), gestures belong to the domain of meaning and are subject to semiotic interpretation; however, because they are complexly bound to that "broad and ill-defined area stretching from sense perception to emotion and from sensibility all the way to ideas" (Flusser 2014: 5), gestures also are to be understood as "symptoms of something else," namely, symptoms "of the culture in which [they are] codified" (Flusser 2014: 5). Not unlike dreamwork in Freudian analysis, gesticulation encodes the symbolic (cultural) manifestation of latent affective content – never in itself directly accessible (whatever it is) – by shaping such latencies in semiotic forms that do not emanate from some private space, but surface instead from the symbolization of mixed social, cultural, and technological models; the latter being the rough material through which gestures partake of common sense. Hence, to put it in a slightly different way, affect – as Flusser states – "'intellectualizes' states of mind by formalizing them into symbolic gestures" (Flusser 2014: 7). This is why he can declare the non-primary, non-original, artificial status of states of mind and consign them, in their *original* composite form, to the province of aesthetics: "as affect, states of mind have become constructs. The 'artificiality' of represented states of mind is first of all an aesthetic problem" (Flusser 2014: 7).

This triple incursion in the deconstruction of ontological claims, in the artificiality of mental and affective material, and in the aesthetic grasping of its manifestations should help us understand that when in the opening pages of *Gestures* Flusser announces: "My plan is to feign ignorance of the meaning of affect and, by observing gestures, try to discover what people mean by this word. It is a kind of phenomenological effort, through the observation of gestures, to take affect by surprise" (Flusser 2014: 1), he is actually performing three acts: First, he is framing gesture as an aesthetic form; Second, he is positioning affect not on the register of the psychological, the unconscious, and the individual, but on the register of the cultural, the automatic, and the non-subjective (whether sub-infra- or super-); Third, he is already applying to his newly configured aesthetic object – gesture – his "informational" aesthetic theory based on the reformulation of the new/old dialectics through the principles of noise/order and information/entropy derived from the second law of thermodynamics, to which

he dedicates his essay "Habit." In the essay, Flusser identifies in the production of what is new the specific achievement and domain of aesthetic experience, whether objectively or subjectively attained, as his statement attests: "the word *new* here means objectively any situation that emerges from the tendency toward ever-increasing probability […] and subjectively any situation that makes us tremble because it is unexpected" (Flusser 2002: 52). Framing art within the affective domain of the unexpected, or even the terrifying, Flusser stretches a parallel between the tendency of art to grow more predictable as it gets more common, easier to understand and communicable by repetition, imitation and circulation, and the tendency of communication to become more redundant, and thus less informative, as it becomes more predictable and hence more entropic. Beside engaging experience (and hence iteration and difference, rather than monumentality and transcendence) as the defining component of the aesthetic phenomenology, and equating both to a (first order) cybernetic circuit, Flusser's definition of art "translates into English" the second law of thermodynamics, leading him to elect habit as the fundamental criterion in relation to which aesthetic value is measurable; literally, computable: as in physics all information tends to degrade toward redundancy, so in art all works "tend to slide in the direction of habit" (Flusser 2002: 53). Habit, as he claims, "here means the aesthetic equivalent of 'entropy' in physics. And, as entropy is a basic category in physics (and in ontology in general), so habit must become a basic category in aesthetics" (Flusser 2002: 53). Next to reconceiving the epistemology of the break foundational to modern art as the reframing of the new/old distinction along the axis of information/redundancy, Flusser's newly established aesthetic phenomenology also redefines art in relation to habit – "what opposes habit but must of necessity return to habit" – and to time, here addressed as a constitutive factor of experience and a force that erodes all claims to ontology: "In aesthetics there prevails a different nonontological climate than in physics. 'Aesthetics' means 'capable of being experienced' and 'habit' implies anaesthetics: that which has become habitual is no longer experienced at all" (Flusser 2002: 53). Aesthetic value, so framed, is determined as a gradient on the scale of habit, which, in itself, entails experience: a cybernetic circuit.

This second incursion in the fundamentals of Flusser's aesthetic theory will finally help us clarify the relation between affect, animation, and animals the title of this essay announces, starting from the deployment of gesture as sort of trojan horse that will let the theorist not only investigate what affect means, but also and especially "take affect by surprise." But what's at stake in framing affect as an event depicted as a citadel to be expunged? First, it is clear that by affect Flusser does not mean anything akin to what in Brian Massumi's generative and immensely influential Deleuzian theory of affect is indicated as what occurs below the threshold of cognition, "the immanent potential" for

variation proper to "the affective adventures of matter" (Haynes and Sharpe 2015: 117). Neither, in Flusser's lexicon, does the term evoke excessive emotional states or limit experiences such as rage, pain, anguish, terror, joy or what Ruth Leys, Massumi's most incisive critic, has called the "Basic Emotions paradigm" (Leys 2011: 439-40). Instead, Flusser associates affect to *cultural* "unstated habits" (Connolly 2002: 44) or automatisms, rather than to *perceptual* or *sub-perceptual* automatisms that occur beyond and below "the threshold of conscious awareness and memory" (Leys 2011: 240). These processes carry the potential for newly emergent, "*deliberately produced* improbable situations" that stand at the opposite end of habit and constitute the highest (and newest) kind of aesthetic experience as a specific kind of affect: the terrifying, itself generative of the beautiful before time, habit and reuse will transform it into the kitsch (Flusser 2002: 52, my italics). However – and here we see how Flusser's aesthetics departs both from the trope and the language of the sublime inherited from transcendental idealism and from the contemporary phenomenology of affect – the occurrence of the new and the concurrence of its affect is an event that – unlike the sublime – is not "eternal" but dynamic (as the tendency of all that is new is to drift toward habit and, eventually, kitsch), and unlike affect in phenomenological, non-representationalist ontologies, is not an "a-signifying" *bodily* intensity disconnected from the functionalist axis of meaning, but a pre-personal, a-signifying, non-subjective, *artificial*, *technical form* that constitutes the cultural environment of signification, and connects humans, technology, and "nature" prior to embodied cognition. In the cybernetic culture to which Flusser referred, particularly intense affect forms are digital images and data.

Because on the terrain of affect nature/culture and unexpected/habit are terms connected by a cybernetic circuit of communication – dynamic, non-ontological and nonhuman by definition – "taking affect by surprise" names the desire to interrupt the automatism of habitual ways of "intellectualizing" aesthetic experience by "deliberately producing improbable situations." But bringing about the shocking experience of the unknown – "what makes us tremble in front of the unexpected" (Flusser 2002: 52) – is a highly improbable event that may occur outside and independently of intentionality and that opens the only possibility left, according to Flusser, to alter our techno-culturally affected affect. At the time of the "Habit" essay, the convergence of *kitsch* with the *unperceived*, that is, with those products that, bearing no longer any information, "'anesthetize' their receiver" (Flusser 2002: 55), introduced habit as the always already "communicational" or "informational" homeostatic equilibrium, the zero-degree affect condition *out of which* the negative affect of *nausea* for that "ocean of habit" may "propel us out of sweet habit into terror and which shows us our own emptiness as opposed to the excessive fullness of kitsch" (Flusser 2002: 55). Uncontrolled, ungoverned, and un-intentional, the

automatism of *nausea* – and automatism is key – is the trigger that brings about "our 'humanity'" as the empty signifier filled with that inchoate flux of looping phenomena wherein "kitsch turns into ugliness again, and then glides on from beauty to prettiness to return to kitsch" (Flusser 2002: 56). But if our humanity turns out to be just the queasy responsive site where that looping cycle, "the aesthetic equivalent of the negative entropic epicycles in physics and in cosmology" gets manifested, then human intentionality and humanity more broadly can no longer be posited as the source of an art and of an aesthetic discourse that pull us out of kitsch. At best, it is conceivable as an element tangential to the looping cycles that enframe "physical and informatic theories" in the non-linear mixing of "the upper with the lower, the sublime with the infernal" (Flusser 2002: 55), shared by the epistemology of aesthetics and the epistemology of apparatus.

So understood, nausea appears as the inborn, automatic *program* for the simultaneous concurrence of art and humanity via *information*. It is at this spot that Flusser's critique of the transformation of modern science – turned, in the course of the Modern age, "from an explanatory to a manipulative discipline," from engaging with the search for truth, to becoming "a manual of applied technique" and "an observational type of discourse" (Flusser 2017: 9) – merges with his elaboration of *apparatus*: a disciplinary structure of belief, a frame for the production and the structural implementation of "behavioral models" whose truth-making power replaces science once science stopped speaking the language of truth it spoke in the Renaissance and, from being an "explanatory discipline" that structured reality by speaking its rules, turned into "a discursive discipline" (Flusser 2017: 13) only capable of creating models: "sets of sentences that serve as models of behaviour," tautologies "that explain nothing and mean nothing" (Flusser 2017: 13), fictions of truth crucially actualized as (biopolitical) structures of power-knowledge. As Flusser put it: "The apparatus is the realization of a model, […] the empirical proof of the validity of the model" (Flusser 2017: 13), and "the ultimate product of progress," fully inscribed in Western culture as "a project that seeks to transform itself into an apparatus [….] for the transformation of all phenomena, including the human phenomenon, into an object of knowledge and manipulation" (Flusser 2017: 9). In this light, Flusser argues, the ultimate victory of the Western spirit is "the ultimate objectification of the Jews into ashes" (Flusser 2017: 9), a virtuality perfectly actualized by the Nazi *program* of the Holocaust,[1] when, "for the first time in the history of humanity,

[1] On this, see Batlicková 2017, which approaches the fundamental importance of the Holocaust for Flusser's philosophy; see also Flusser 2009, reprinted in a slightly different version as "Our School" in Flusser 2013a.

an apparatus was put into operation that was programmed with the most advanced techniques available, which realized the objectification of man, together with the functional collaboration of man" (Flusser 2013a: 6).

Interestingly, the enslavement of Africans is the other historical event that Flusser names in his exemplification of the biopolitical "utopia" (his words) inherent in Western culture. However, he argues, "even if the horror is so colossal," enslavism (to use Sabine Broeck's term) can still be condemned as a *crime* while continuing to be Western. But Auschwitz "is not a violation of Western models of behavior, it is, on the contrary, the *result of the application* of such models" (Flusser 2013a: 9). It is a revelation of the real face of Western culture. The ashes of Auschwitz delivered our post-historical society; post-historical because as "the first realization of an inherent virtuality within the Western project," the event of Auschwitz cannot be historically overcome, but "will repeat itself in other formats" (Flusser 2013a: 8), by means of new apparatus, with perhaps less brutal models – such as the scientific, technical and administrative apparatus – and externally not similar to the Nazi extermination camps, but carrying on in the postindustrial society of the future the same program of objectifying all phenomena.

It is from the vantage point of the tension between apparatus, program and the possibility of generating new information that we should read Flusser's attempt to theorize a "quantifying art criticism" that addresses the emergence of the new along "information" lines (Flusser 2002: 57), as a game of probabilities and calculations in non-humanist terms, away from subjectivist perspectives that celebrate the role of ideas and intention in structuring human experience, and toward an understanding of phenomena and of the relation between knowledge and experience as governed by chance. For programs, Flusser argues:

> Are systems in which chance becomes necessity. They are games in which every virtuality, even the least probable will be realized of necessity if the game is played for a sufficiently long time. The least probable structures, such as planetary systems emerge necessarily during the course of the evolution of the program contained in the Big Bang, according to the second law of thermodynamics. But they emerge at a particular moment. Absurdly improbable structures, such as the human brain, emerge necessarily in the course of the evolution of the program contained in genetic information, even thou they had been entirely unpredictable in the amoeba. Wonderful artworks, such as the *Marriage of Figaro* emerge necessarily in the course of the evolution of the program contained in the initial project of western culture. (Flusser 2013a: 22)

Because in *programmatic society* probability and chance replace intentionality, finality and causality, then conventional epistemologies and aesthetic methodologies based on whatever version of human intentionality aimed at demystifying the programmer behind the program are anachronistic, particularly as, in Flusser's words, "Apparatus always functions increasingly independently from their programmer's intentions" and even if "some specific programmers judge themselves, subjectively, to be 'owners' of the decisions taken by apparatus […] in reality they are nothing but functionaries who are programmed to think of themselves in this way" (Flusser 2013a: 26). In other words, in the inhuman conditions of knowledge and communication inaugurated by the programmatic society, freedom, art, new information are only conceivable "as an absurd game" (Flusser 2013a: 26), played more efficiently and with higher chances of generating *new information* and emancipating us from functionalism by running a program or playing an absurd game long enough that some possibility inscribed as a virtuality in the program may occur automatically – like nausea for art.

It is in this context that aesthetics – as a secondary, reflective discourse "provides models to grasp unhabitual and unusual phenomena" even if it cannot account for their occurrence (Flusser 2013a: 72). Aesthetics includes strategies imbued with subversive affect, articulations of idiosyncratic thinking performed by coveting habit to the point of absurd, a practice he performs in *Natural:Mind*, where the reductio ad absurdum of the argumentation turns the conventional (the old) into the unexpected (the new), generating a surprise-effect that blocks the reproduction of common sense (habit) by what he calls "apparatus." By virtue of its very structure, Flusser claims, apparatus is driven toward "total slavery;"[2] it defines the matrix and limit of function; it coincides with administration, bureaucracy; with the operational, in-human logic of a social system whose operations are entirely blind, yet entirely predictable, and increasingly autonomous; it is a logical order reproducing truism under the illusion of truth; it is a truth regime based on habit. In the convergence of "habit" and "truth" and their service to social determination, rather than social freedom, Flusser reiterates Nietzsche's critique to the notion of truths as "illusions" whose real status of worn out metaphors has been forgotten or obfuscated by habit and conventions. As Nietzsche remarks in his essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense": "To be truthful means using the customary metaphors – in moral terms: the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie herd-like in a style obligatory for all" (Nietzsche

[2] Cf. Flusser 2009: "L'appareil est, par sa structure même, l'esclavage totale. S'il y a encore de liberté, de vie active, de valeurs, de travail, de loisir, de politique, c'est parce que l'appareil ne fonctionne pas encore bien. Quand l'appareil sera parfait […] tout le monde sera fonctionnaire (aparatchik), et le fonctionaire ne peut pas savoir ce qu'est un valeur, un travail, ou le loisir. L'appareil est son horizon, il fonctionne dedans, et il ne peut pas le transcender. […] **L'appareil n'a pas de propriétaires. Il est trans-humain**" (2).

2006: 115-23). The relevant point here for our discussion of the place of affect in Flusser's theory is that affect partakes of the same process that binds the "artificial" production of "truth" and the "customarization" of life according to conventional lies. Similarly, the "natural" world dissected in *Natural:Mind* is subject to determinations by technology, culture and habit; in fact, nature is produced by culture and is part of apparatus. Art, itself a generator of models is also placed by Flusser at the opposite end of kitsch, as we have seen, and in that function, it carries some potential for destabilizing apparatus, although destabilization can't occur by subjective intentions, but only as either statistically (the running of a program) or experientially (fear; nausea).

II. *Natural:Mind*: Animated Animals and Metabolic Machines

We can turn now once again to the Flusser's "Nature Sketchbook" in the collection *Natural:Mind*. What does then the expression "Animated Animals" stand for? Why is it necessary to add animation to what is already defined by "anima"? First of all, animated animals are not "natural" animals. They are not simply living organisms equipped with movement and senses; they are, instead, aboriginally maximized animal machines, artificial, "potentiated" fabrications that stage and celebrate the victory of culture over nature. Like Trojan horses, they are ruses, war-machines used by Flusser to storm the naturalist fortress that shelters humanist humanity.

Let's take cows, for instance, one of the subjects of his "nature sketchbook." In the short piece republished in *Natural:Mind*, Flusser presents us Cows in a frame that is simultaneously familiar and uncanny. Just like in one early essay on "apparatus," the *fonctionnaire* is the embodiment of future humans, an assemblage, a nature-culture-organization mix, so in this collection the cow is a metabolic machine. As Flusser puts it in three passages that are worth to be quoted at length:

"The cow's inventor has provoked an authentic technological revolution, in both a functional and aesthetic sense that opens the horizon to a new "being in the world" of future man." (Flusser 2013b: 45)

"Man may not recognize his own project in the cow, he may forget that the cow is the result of his manipulation of reality *according to his own model*, and accept the cow as something that is somehow a "given" (for example: he may accept the cow as some kind of "animal" and therefore, as part of "nature"). In this case, the cow will assume ontological and epistemological autonomy and will, so to speak, become a model for humanity itself behind man's back." (Flusser 2013b: 47)

"In being precisely such a highly sophisticated and anthropomorphic machine […], the machine essence of the cow could become obscured. In such a case, "genetic explanations" of the cow

that prove it is a result of human manipulation will be of little use. Through daily contact with the cow, the impact will be at an existential level. At this level, all "explanations" will become irrelevant (just as such "explanations" are currently irrelevant for those who have daily contact with computer. The mere daily presence of the cow will exert its "cowifying" influence." (Flusser 2013b: 48)

Cows are thus defined not along the human/animal, but along the nature/culture axis. To turn them into effective examples of the victory of culture over nature, Flusser frames cows not in evolutionary terms, but in anthropological, aesthetic or functionalist terms, treating them rather as biomorph than as organisms: cows, he claims, are "efficient machines for the transformation of grass into milk." He continues, "They are a triumph of a technology that points to the future," and "could be considered as prototypes of future machines" (Flusser 2013b: 48).

What makes cows so interesting in Flusser's post-natural thinking is not their existence as a species, but their existence as human products and as efficient, human-made metabolic machines obtained through long processes of domestication, a process which took place on a millennial scale of operation whose outcome Flusser describes as "the triumph of a technology that points to the future" (Flusser 2013b: 44). Domestication, is here to be understood as a biopolitical program that organizes the living by separating animals from their earthly, "natural" habitats and by reintegrating them through subjection into a techno-cultural network. In other words, domestication is both a technology and a program for reframing being into purposive existence: Flusser's cows mean insofar as they are inserted into a chain of signification organized according to purpose. They can still be the subject of artistic expression, the object of scientific studies, the remainders of our childhood, and the bearer of human violence or any other affect. But the specific quality that makes them significant in the conceptual fabrics Flusser waves is their capacity to be charged by and to charge the program of humanist humanity. Here the question of truth as a reminder of an older epistemology rendered moot by cyber culture resurfaces: the question is no longer what the true nature of animals is, but under what discursive and technical conditions are cow significant?

Environmentally well-integrated prototypes, Flusser's cows are shaped by processes of bio-techno-cultural manipulation that deliver "the models of all future cows." Not only are these cows antithetical to nature, and impervious to affect, but their very essence as "instrumental beings" and "available resource" renders any conventional concept of "nature" inadequate to describe them and prompts a question over the very "nature" of man and the implications of its mode of "being-in-the-world". The essay recalls the Heideggerian concept of *gestell,* the logical matrix embedded in technology as its essence. As a relation that orders and destinates nature – and man – as "standing reserve" or

"resource" not by actually being put to use, but by authorizing a thinking that produces such a "use" as a destiny, *Gestell* is the essence of modern technology, and as such it brings forth a world by revealing nature as the chief storehouse of the standing energy reserve (Heidegger 1983: 324). *Gestell* can be aligned to the concept of *apparatus,* as its enframing is unveiled by Heidegger as the danger intrinsic to technology and of utmost danger on man's progress toward the truth of being, because it institutes an inauthentic – that is, non originary – relation of man with himself and with nature (see Wolfe 2012: 22). The super-cow is anthropocentrism at its most successful manifestation: the naturalization of what is built. In that respect, the cow's invention is not only a victory of human-ist culture; it is also revolutionary, because, as Flusser claims: "The mere daily presence of the cow will exert its *cowifying* influence" (Flusser 2013b: 48). But what kind of influence is it? Can this influence be called affect? By the logic of what we've discussed, *cowifying* refers to the program for realizing "the objectification of man, together with the functional collaboration of man" (Flusser 2013a: 6), via the naturalization of such affects: usefulness, purposefulness, utility expectation, well-being of being instrumental.

At first, Flusser's highly automated cows "controlled by an internal computer (a brain), that governs a cybernetic system made of highly refined electrical and chemical pulses that guarantee its functionality" (Flusser 2013b: 44), don't shed any clarifying light on cows and their relation to us. For it is only by returning to Flusser's later concept of apparatus that we can begin to understand what tentative theory of affect underscored his earlier work. Affect then surfaces as a function of apparatus that allows us a foresight on our future by creating the expectations for "the objectification of man, together with the functional collaboration of man." This is what the *cowifying* influence is about. "Man," Flusser argues, "may not recognize his own project in the cow, he may forget that the cow is the result of his manipulation of reality according to his own model, and accept the cow as something that is somehow a 'given' (for example, he may accept the cow as some kind of 'animal' and therefore, as part of 'nature'). In this case, the cow will assume ontological and epistemological autonomy and will, so to speak, become a model for humanity itself behind man's back." (Flusser 2013b: 47)

Here, in the transformation of the mechanical cow through domestication – and behind awareness, humanist ethics, and intention – the passage of the hyper-domesticated animal from metabolic machine to model for humanity, the scientific, aesthetic and philosophical grounds for the future of humanity as the production of cows-like techno humans are laid bare, and, as is often the case with Flusser, the ironic tone of the essay does not diminish the force of his critique to the very nature of ontological and epistemological representations delivered by humanist science and confirmed by humanist philosophy. Ironically, the "victory" of science on nature will only once again after Auschwitz,

push the utopia of our culture toward its unmasking. In the constant battle for humanity that reveals itself as a contest between bestializing and taming tendencies, it is the taming tendencies that will affect the human precipitation into its instrumental destiny, its destiny as "standing reserve" – as Heidegger famously put it.

How can this epistemological distraction happen? As we have seen, science's shift from an intention toward knowledge to a program for progress and for generating models to describe reality, coincides with a movement from freedom to manipulation (and from science to technocracy) in the name of progress and to a scientific discourse reduced to a sort of pre-modern (postmodern) language game in which "observation" and "theory" do not designate "two ontologically different forms of thinking. They designate two forms of [mutually irreducible] sentences," namely, prescriptions and descriptions (Flusser 2017: 11). As a discipline that creates models, that is a "set of sentences that serve as models for behaviour" (Flusser 2017: 11), science is no better than art in providing descriptions of reality. In fact, for Flusser "art is better than truth" (Flusser 2017: 6). But this primacy of art on science should not be seen as another reinstallation of the Romantic favor for speculative knowledge over empirical knowledge, or as a revamping of the power of (extra) human imagination on the infra human perception of natural facts. What ignites Flusser's reflection is the pretence of transcendence vindicated by modern science, a discourse whose claim to objectivity rest on an anthropological, immanent, and by definition limited, hypothesis that over valorizes its own epistemological caveat, namely, "pure" reason.

In "La creation scientifique et artistique," Flusser explains how modern science "observe par la théorie, et théorise par l'observation" (Flusser 2018: 1), generating the dynamics called "progress" which is unconceivable outside of modern science. The consequence of this dynamics, he argues, is the emergence of "technique," the application of theory that leaves no room for art, that intensifies the dialectical play and installs a radical break with art. But, as he puts it, "if progress is – as the technocrats affirm – a process through which natural events are transformed into linear events, then 'progress' is not enough. What is urgent is to maintain and refine the critical capacity of values" (Flusser 2013b: 32). And again, "Things are good only inasmuch as they contribute to my liberation, And this is also the measure of culture. Technology is not culture yet. And technocracy is anti-culture. In sum: culture is technology plus freedom" (Flusser 2013b: 33). It is on this opening that a return to aesthetics in terms that recall Heidegger's one in *The Question Concerning Technology* in order to posit art as the domain of the narrow chance of "the saving power." What can be called the post-cow (of pos-history) is a fantastic creature paradigmatic of a certain relation to "cultural nature" whose history is a history

of technology and a history of an episteme that operates by analogy, inversions, and feedback looping between techno cows and techno-humans. Humans, Flusser claims, "have a tendency to mirror themselves in their models": they project a model in order to modify reality, they construct reality based on those models, then forget the model behind and adopt the new construction as their own models of behavior. In other words, the humanist improvement of the world generates as a side effect the post-humanist overcoming of the human.

At the end of the parable of the post-cow, Flusser presents us with a fantasy whose overtones, again, are Heideggerian through and through. This fantasy reveals "the vision of a humanity transformed into a herd of cows. A humanity that will graze and ruminate, satisfied and unaware, consuming the grass in which an invisible 'shepherd' elite has a vested interest, and that will thus produce milk for this elite. The elite will manipulate humanity in such a subtle and perfect manner that humanity will imagine itself to be free. This will be possible thanks to the automatic functionality of the cow. The illusion of freedom will perfectly obscure this rustic manipulation. Life will resume itself in the typical functions of the cow: birth, consumption, rumination, production, leisure, reproduction and death. A paradisiacal and terrifying vision. Who know, as we contemplate the cow, are we contemplating future man?" (Flusser 2013b: 48)

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger frames art as the locus for the decisive confrontation with technology – that phenomenon whose essence is not technological – but only if reflection upon art "does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth, concerning which we are questioning" (Heidegger 1983: 340). In *Post-History* and in "Habit" Flusser also evokes art as the highly improbable, non-subjective and non-intentional place for grasping un-programmatically, the realizations that may "emerge by chance in the course of the [absurd] game" we are condemned to play in the aftermath of Auschwitz – but we can succeed only if we emancipate our reflection upon art from idealism, from functionalism and from humanism.

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