

SCIENCE AS FICTION: Vilém Flusser's Philosophy

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Abstract:

This text comments the “philosophical fiction” of the Brazilian-Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser. It condenses one of the chapter of the book Vilém Flusser: an introduction, recently published in Portuguese. If René Descartes told us that thinking moves through doubts, Friedrich Nietzsche told us that truth is a multiplicity of metaphors, Hans Vaihinger told us that thinking moves through fictions and Ludwig Wittgenstein shown us that our thinking is limited by our language, what does Vilém Flusser tell us? Since the concept of fiction, Flusser looked for a original synthesis of those thinkers. He thought that all discourse need to make explicit its fictional condition – the philosophical discourse more than others, because Philosophy has always been close to Poetry. A poet-philosopher as Flusser writes making explicit the speculative conditions of his thinking in order to provoke and unfold new thinkings.

*The night – huge night
everything sleeps
except your name.*

This is a haiku written by the Brazilian poet Paulo Leminski. In Portuguese, we read: “A noite – enorme / tudo dorme / menos teu nome”. This haiku points to the indeterminate but active essence of the name of things: everything sleeps nested in the so vast night which nests everything but for the name which throbs and disturbs.

“Fiction” is a word, of course, but we can say that all words are a kind of fiction. We use words because we cannot show things and feelings all the time. Therefore, words replace things or feelings in order to fill their absences. This means that the fiction problem is not only a literary problem, it is the core of all philosophical problems.

The word “fiction” has positive connotations when it designates the art of literature. We refer to the fiction of Franz Kafka or João Guimarães Rosa with amazement, saying that their

fiction is either beautiful or intriguing. The same word “fiction”, however, has negative connotations when it designates the opposite of reality. We refer to the image of a certain kind of politician, for instance, with worry, saying that his fiction of himself is false.

Nevertheless, these connotations shuffle themselves. In different times, the reading of fiction works is seen as harmful to people because it would lead them to live out of reality, to live in a illusory world. That idea justifies police, pedagogic and cultural censure. In counterpart, the attention with the image of the politicians became bigger than the care with their histories or with the content of their ideas. This attention makes the politician who has the best proposal not to win the elections, because the winner will be that one who shows the best image, or, in other words: the winner will be that one whose fiction of himself will be the best.

The word “fiction” can be used still in another field: the scientific field. Scientists know that they cannot observe all things, all the time, in all possible variations. They do not have to say what nature is like but only what it would be like if, by hypothesis, they considered that their restricted angle of observation were enough. The scientific hypotheses are already a kind of deductive fiction. To carry out an experiment about the movement, the physicist does not consider neither gravity force nor air resistance. This lack of consideration is designated by the Latin expression “*ceteris paribus*”, which means: “everything else being invariable”. Well, the scientific use of “*ceteris paribus*” is also an exercise of fiction.

Poets experience fiction as the subject matter to build their truth. Historians experience the political fiction as the antagonist which they must bare to approach historical truth. Scientists experience the fiction of their hypothesis as their tools also to approach scientific truth. And what happens with philosophers?

A philosopher like the Brazilian-Czech Vilém Flusser, who we have studied for many years, tries to understand how we think what we think and why, to think about the world, we need to reinvent it by different fictions. While we choose a specific field to talk about fiction, the philosopher departs from the word itself to see how fiction draws each field: poetical, historical and scientific.

In the essay “*Da ficção*” (“On Fiction”), Vilém Flusser remembered the thinkers who saw a deceitful fiction in the world: when they were platonian, they asserted, “we see only shadows”; when they were impressionist, they asserted, “the world is only an as if”; when they were medieval christian, they asserted, “the world is a trap built by devil”; when they were renaissanceist, they asserted, “the world is only a dream”; when they were baroque, they asserted,

“the world is theatre”; when they were romantic, they asserted, “the world is only my representation”.

In all those cases, the thinkers lamented the fictional character of the world, and so of the reality. To our philosopher, however, all above-mentioned conceptions were correct in essence but improper in terms of attitude. One must recognize the fictional character of the world, but not to lament it. Some apocalyptic thinkers say today that the sign is absorbing the referent to become more real than the real itself: the simulacrum would convert, in a devilish way, the real in its own shadow. Flusser, nevertheless, disagrees with this kind of thinking; he warns that the known world always has been a simulacrum, as long as we cannot know all the world.

The virtual does not oppose the real, the virtual opposes the ideal of truth. The world itself is not a fiction, of course, but actually our noble explanations for the world are fictions. There are illusions in every place, either as ideals of truth or as the illusions of the end of all illusions. The depreciative connotation of the simulacrum is very old, it derives at least from Plato. The speech of the common sense takes all illusions by lie, although we need the illusion of the magicians as far as we need games and narratives. However, science, phenomenology and cybernetics recognize the impossibility to apprehend all the aspects of the world; that is why they need to rebuild them hypothetically and fictionally. The one who reproduces a phenomenon or an object by a simulacrum or a model knows not everything but something essential about the object or the phenomenon. So, it is necessary to insist to think, to investigate and to argue *as if* we could reach the truth of things and human beings.

Our approach to reality does not come up by the things themselves, it comes up by our relationship with them. This relationship, as abstract as a word, is built up in a similar way to that of a fiction. Therefore, if we understand how to write and how to read fiction we can also understand our relationship with the world and things. In a brief definition, we would say that fiction is an “as if”: the author writes it as if the world looks like him, the reader reads it as if what he reads is the truthful truth. The reading of a fictional work can be so intense to the point of fiction looking like more real than reality itself. We read as if it is true to the point of our reading looking like more truthful than the quotidian truths. We also read as if we are others, to the point of our becoming another person, a person converted by the intensity of the experience.

So, the expression “as if” is very important both to fiction theory and contemporary philosophy. Nevertheless, when fictions represent the world they produce another world, which generates internal contradictions which, in due time, generate paradoxes. Such contradictions must not be denied or “solved”, because thinking moves across contradictions and paradoxes.

René Descartes told us that thinking moves through doubts. Friedrich Nietzsche told us that truth is a multiplicity of metaphors. Hans Vaihinger told us that thinking moves through fictions. Ludwig Wittgenstein shown us that our thinking is limited by our language. What does Vilém Flusser tell us?

From his concept of fiction, Flusser looked for an original synthesis of those thinkers. He thought that all discourse needs to make its fictional condition explicit – the philosophical discourse more than others, because Philosophy has always been close to Poetry. Nevertheless, that connection between Philosophy and Poetry has caused some conflicts.

The philosopher opposes to the poet because the first is a friend of the concept and a lover of the “orthotes”, that is, of the agreement between the concept and the thing. At universities, the philosophers tend to prefer the scientific rigour than the poetical indeterminacy. A poet-philosopher as Flusser, however, walks in the contrary direction: he writes making the speculative conditions of his thinking explicit, in order to provoke and unfold new thinkings.

In the essay “Do espelho” (“On Mirror”), Flusser remembers that in Latin the word “speculation” derives from the word “mirror” (in Portuguese, a latin language, we see that “especulação” derives from the word “espelho”). He considers that the mirror in fact reflects the reality, but it also inverts the same reality. That is why everyone who reflects and thinks necessarily thinks about the mirror.

Precisely due to its speculative character, Abraham Moles entitled his essay to pay homage to Flusser “Philosophiefiktion bei Vilém Flusser”, in a book entitled *Überflusser*. Moles considered Flusserian style as a kind of “philosophical fiction”. He understands that Flusserian philosophical fiction is able to open a fissure by which life and philosophy communicate with each other.

Gabriel Borba, who was Flusser’s assistant in São Paulo, explains this philosophical fiction through a metaphor. At page 34 of the book *Vilém Flusser no Brasil*, Borba asks us to imagine a carpet on the floor; he asks us to raise it up, also imaginatively, by holding the carpet

at any point, and to do that for several times. It doesn't matter where we start to raise the imaginary carpet: at each time we can raise the whole carpet. But: the minimum variation of the point that we choose to raise the carpet provokes big variations in the original patterns of the carpet, exactly because of the corrugations which take shape during the process.

According to Borba, Flusser's style can be compared to the different attempts to raise the imaginary carpet: the points from which at each time we raise the carpet are like pills of matter; they are like nimble vortices of reflection and argumentation. Such vortices are good for dazzling rhetorical constructions. What does the philosopher do? He takes each subject as if it were the imaginary carpet and then he raises it up several times, but each time by a different point, provoking big variations in his own theme. He is not concerned with finding the truth, that is, finding the final agreement between the concept and the thing, but he is only concerned with exploring the truth as a poet or as a story-teller. Thus, the Flusserian style, the same in his class, lectures and books, was opened to interpretations and modifications as a kind of "Wikipedia", that is, as a kind of dynamical encyclopaedia "avant la lettre et la Internet".

Gabriel Borba's description shows us Flusser's generous thinking, in the etymological sense of the adjective "generous": the thinking which generates and engenders other thinkings. So, we see that the concept of fiction is fundamental to the whole work of Vilém Flusser, but he also thought about the fiction in a restricted sense. He did that almost like Borges.

It is said that the Argentine writer Jorge Luís Borges, when he had taught at the university, guided his students first not to read the reviews and the theories about the novels which they were reading. After he had convinced them of that, he had guided them to do exactly the opposite, that is, to read all the reviews and theories about the novels which they were reading.

The upset students could not follow the two guidances, because they were contradictory. Borges' solution was very simple. He had said to them: read twice *as if* you were two different persons. In the first reading, he had said, you must read as if you were still naïve readers, suspending your disbelief to really "live" the story. In the second reading, he had said, you must read as if you were already expert readers, analysing critically both the book and your first reading.

Borges had used the expression "as if" because he knew that a student of literature is not either a naïve or an expert reader. However, he had defended that the readers try to intensify either one position or another, according to the moment of reading. His paradoxical

advice had taught the students not to say hurriedly their final interpretations of the text, just to explore it at least from two different ways.

Flusser's solution to the reading of a literature work is equally twofold. In his text "Esperando por Kafka" ("Looking forward to Kafka"), he says that we can read a fiction text also from two ways: as an answer or as a question.

In the first case, we understand the literary work as an answer to its context or to a preceding text. In the second case, we understand the literary work as a question to the reader. When we understand the work as an answer, we criticize it to establish relations with its context or with the preceding texts. When we understand the work as a question to us, we talk with the work and try to give our own answer: the text becomes a kind of pretext to our own text, in other words, to our own speculations.

The two fields demand two different attitudes: criticism presumes curiosity, speculation presumes involvement. The philosopher prioritizes speculation, but he understands that, to develop it better, it is also necessary to study the relationship among the fictional text and the preceding texts critically.

Flusser recognizes the world as a huge set of fictions, which does not mean that reality does not exist. His idea of fiction was not on the level with the notion of lie, therefore, his idea of fiction does not oppose the idea of truth. What he asks us is to recognize the fictional character of the models which inform our life, to recognize fiction as the basis of science and ethics.

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