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REPRESENTING AND FLUSSER WRITINGS

Prof. Dr. José dos Santos Cabral Filho

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We invited Prof. Dr. José dos Santos Cabral Filho to discourse on the notion of Re:pre:senting, under the main reference of the philosopher Vilém Flusser's writings. We publish here a video with excerpts of his testimony to V!RUS 08 and its transcription as well, aiming at enhancing the comprehension of this subject and inspiring new understandings based on these reflections.

JOSÉ CABRAL: Nowadays there's a lot of criticism about disproportionate representation in our culture, but the ability to represent has been crucial in human evolution, as human animals, this ability to create an internal model and act in the world according to this model. This was a huge milestone in the evolution of *homo sapiens*, whatever that is. But, then, I see that all of a sudden we have entered an era in which representation is widely criticized in all fields, regarding both graphical representation and political representation... all forms of representation.

All of a sudden, representations are attacked because of this incapacity of representation fully existing. We have reached this limit, but I think that it is due to excessive representation rather than what Flusser theorized, that is, the represented object being replaced with

representation. All of a sudden, representation becomes a veil rather than a window to what it is representing.

I've thought a lot about the problem of representation today, with respect to modeling, about that which allows modeling, of course, but also allows parameterization, and models that include dynamics, time, and changes... in my opinion, models that change radically. Then, we can speak of an old way of representing and a new way of representing, which is the way we find nowadays, including the time of several different paths. This enables both the idea of emergence and the acceleration of the act of representing.

This acceleration produces a novelty, which is a possible emergence of unforeseen things, as in tests, process simulations. We can, for the first time, represent processes. And the scary thing is that it's not representation in the sense of making something that existed present, but rather of anticipating a more prospective perspective of representation. In other words, we begin to simulate, simulate processes, not just shapes, but procedures and processes.

Then we reach the point where we're now today, that of thinking that representation accomplishes everything – digital, computerized representation.

It's obvious that, as a good native of Minas Gerais, suspicious of everything, I'll promptly ask: What is there that's impossible to represent? What's the limit to representation? What is there in the object that doesn't lend itself to representation? What is there in the world that doesn't deliver... doesn't lend itself to representation?

Let's think: texture, weight, these you can simulate, represent... Then you touch the chord: we can include time, but fail to include the inexorability of real life. The appearance of the concrete world, the existential world, which is inexorable, doesn't lend itself to representation. And I think, too, that this is the limit of representation.

The [philosopher Vilém] Flusser has a little system that I find nifty, a theoretical scheme, more poetic than scientific. That is, it doesn't coincide with the truth, but opens the way to the truth, in which he builds on the idea of a path towards abstraction in the history of mankind.

He fantasizes a bit, resembling historicism, about the first drawing of a horse in southern France. The prehistoric man draws a horse and he distances himself from the horse. He has to take a step away from the horse to draw it. Then, he makes a scrawl of the horse in an attempt to understand it.

But when he draws the horse, the drawing becomes more interesting and he turns to the drawing and not to the horse anymore. In so doing he falls hostage to image worshipping, i.e., the image gains a stronger presence, gains self-sufficiency, so to speak.

Then, he says that we take another step and, suddenly, the image alone doesn't describe the world and neither can we by looking at it. Images don't suffice anymore. Then, we take another step back and invent writing.

He comes up with a cute, also poetic, description of writing as deriving from drawing: drawing breaking down and giving way to writing. It seems that the thing about Mesopotamia is historically accepted, i.e., that writing was invented to elucidate images.

Except that writing will also acquire this very oversufficiency. We leave the cult of the image and enter the cult of the text, which he says is the scientific text, the kind we produce at academia. It's the text that no longer describes the world; it's inadequate. Then we take another step back towards abstraction and create the digital image.

It is a sequence of steps towards abstraction, detachment from reality in another attempt at understanding it... with the digital image, which derives from the text. This becomes clear when we receive a truncated image in which what was originally a photo is viewed as a lot of alphanumeric characters. Then, suddenly, we create this digital image. He [W. Flusser] doesn't say digital: he first talks about photography as an attempt to explain, illustrate the text. And there comes the digital image, which he describes as a total abstraction moving towards dimension zero. Then he says, in fact, that it's not the end of the world, but, on the contrary, it opens up a world of possibilities, because we're in the absence of values and, theoretically, dimensions. That could be seen as an opening to the emergence of a new man.

This thing about Flusser... I think it's nice to consider that step. It's a cute little scheme, a series of backward steps into the unknown. Because our back is turned to representation, we're staring at reality, at the horse. We step back to better see the horse... We draw and drawing becomes a veil that conceals the horse. We take another step back into the unknown; we're looking at the drawing. Then, we create the text and, again, step back into the unknown. So that's where we are now: this dimensionless, non-dimensional technology based on ones and zeros.

We don't know where we'll get to.

[I wanted to] bring up this point, as we move towards increasing abstraction, for I think that we've reached an absurd level nowadays with these digital technologies; absurd because we don't understand it, it escapes the logic of intuitive understanding. At an absurd point, really, of abstraction and thinking: Will this constant abstracting and representing... I mean, will this attempt get us anywhere?

What I feel is that in the 1990s, when virtual reality was being widely discussed, there was this fantasy that we'd manage to represent everything: all the feelings, all the smells, all the emotions... This idea still exists today.

I think there is, then, another serious problem, which is to see the world as a repository of data that can be mapped. And, if they can be mapped, we can represent them. So the world is seen as something given that can be approached. Thus, if it can be approached, we can deal with it; if we can map it, we can enter this map into any machine, a machine whose origin dates back to the construction of perspective in the Renaissance and eventually becomes a computer. A machine that maps this world and that, consequently, allows us to act in the world as broadly as possible, with total power, because we hold so faithful a representation of the world.

Huge delusion! We wish it was like that, huh? Since the world has reached a point where it just won't yield... All philosophers affirm that. There's a point beyond which we cannot know the world. And to me that point is when it's impossible to grasp that which is inexorable... what Prigogine calls the irreversibility of time, or something like that. This point is the real challenge. What do we do now? This representation of the entire world, this we wouldn't be able to include.

There are some hard-line scientists that believe that it's just a matter of time, it's a question of increasing the memory capacity of computers, but it's obvious that it's not the case.

[The cyberneticist Ranulf] Glanville claims something that I also find interesting. He talks about an issue that, somehow, is connected to the idea of representation. It's the idea that if we learn the theory, we know the theory, and by learning the theory we can apply it to the world, and, therefore, we are able to act more efficiently. It's a little like that which is behind the idea of representation. It's the same thing about the world, right? It's a theory with such admiration for something external.

He [Glanville] says that, but our experience as human beings tells us the opposite, because, in the beginning of our lives, of a baby's life, that's exactly the opposite. A child doesn't learn a theory in order to act. It acts so it can learn from action. Hence, it's an inversion, and we grow up and think it's the opposite: we keep trying to understand, trying to represent in order to be able to act regardless of the fact that we grow wiser from acting, which leads us to build models. It's acting that enables us to build, grow, and learn.

I think it's important to remember this basis because it appears impossible whenever we try to question a little this concept of theory and its applicability to practice. As Glanville puts it: the superiority of theory... the idea that it will, for this reason, be applied, that it stands out... But our basis for learning is quite the opposite.