VILÉM FLUSSEER
IMMATERIALISM

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METAFLUX
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FIRST PUBLISHED IN PORTUGUESE AS AN ARTICLE IN THE BOLETIM DA SOCIEDADE BRASILEIRA DE HISTÓRIA DA CIÊNCIA, 1987

THIS IS THE AUTHOR’S OWN ENGLISH VERSION.

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1. PHILOSOPHY 2. POETRY 3. ART

FIRST EDITION
©2015 METAFLUX PUBLISHING

ART AND BOOK CONCEPT BY CHAGRIN

THIS BOOK WAS CREATED WITH COURIER NEW

PUBLISHED BY METAFLUX PUBLISHING
WWW.METAFLUXPUBLISHING.COM

DISTRIBUTED BY INGRAM CONTENT GROUP
WWW.INGRAMCONTENT.COM

ISBN 978-0-9933272-1-6
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WORDS MAY CHANGE THEIR MEANING. THE ONE THAT IS THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE MAY SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE. IT USED TO MEAN A PHILOSOPHICAL TENDENCY TO DENY THE REALITY OF MATTER (FOR INSTANCE BERKELEY). IT NOW OFTEN MEANS A FORM OF ART THAT RESULTS IN IMAGES WITHOUT MATERIAL SUPPORT (FOR INSTANCE HOLOGRAMS). BUT THERE MUST BE SOMETHING IN COMMON TO THOSE TWO MEANINGS. IF NOT, WHY USE THE SAME WORD? IT MUST BE POSSIBLE TO EXTIRPATE THAT COMMON NUCLEUS OUT FROM THOSE TWO WIDELY DIFFERENT MEANINGS. AND THAT NUCLEUS WILL HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE CONCEPT »MATTER«. NOW IF ONE SUCCEEDED IN DOING THIS, ONE WOULD HAVE OPENED AN ACCESS TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION WE ARE WITNESSING. BECAUSE »MATTER« IS OBVIOUSLY A BASIC CONCEPT OF OUR CULTURE, AND IF IT HAS SHIFTED ITS MEANING, THE ENTIRE EDIFICE OF CULTURE WILL BE SHAKEN. THIS ARTICLE WILL EXAMINE THIS SHIFT. CONCEPTS MUST BE DEFINED, IF THEY ARE TO HAVE A MEANING. THEY MUST BE DISTINGUISHED FROM OTHER CONCEPTS. FOR INSTANCE: THE CONCEPT »TABLE« CAN BE DEFINED
BY DISTINGUISHING IT FROM THE CONCEPT »CHAIR«. IT THEN BECOMES OPERATIVE. ONE MAY, FOR INSTANCE, CONSTRUCT A WIDER CONCEPT, NAMELY »FURNITURE«, AND HAVE IT COVER THE TWO ORIGINAL CONCEPTS. OR ONE MAY CONSTRUCT A GREY ZONE BETWEEN »TABLE« AND »CHAIR«, IN WHICH BOTH CONCEPTS APPLY, AND ONE MAY INSTALL, FOR INSTANCE, A SPECIFIC SORT OF SCHOOL FURNITURE WITHIN THAT GREY ZONE. NOW WITH THE CONCEPT »MATTER« THOSE OPERATIONS WILL NOT WORK, AND FOR A CURIOUS REASON. OUR TRADITION DEFINES »MATTER« WITH REGARD TO TWO OTHER CONCEPTS, NAMELY »SPIRIT« AND »FORM«. BUT IT DOES SO »DIALECTICALLY«, MEANING THAT THE TWO CONCEPTS DEFINED WITH REGARD TO EACH OTHER CONTRADICT EACH OTHER. THUS, »MATTER« IS EITHER DEFINED AS »OBJECT OF SPIRIT« OR AS »CONTENTS OF FORM«, AND, INVERSELY, »SPIRIT« IS DEFINED AS »THE SUBJECT OF MATTER« AND »FORM« IS DEFINED AS »CONTAINER OF MATTER«. NOW SUCH NEGATIVE DEFINITIONS DO NOT PERMIT OPERATIONS. NEITHER A WIDER CONCEPT, NOR A GREY ZONE BETWEEN CONCEPTS CAN BE CONSTRUCTED. IT
»OBJECT (OF SPIRIT)«, WHAT HAPPENS IF I THINK ABOUT »SPIRIT«? DOES IT NOT BECOME AN »OBJECT«, AND THUS A CURIOUS KIND OF »MATTER«? FOR INSTANCE, AS WITH DESCARTES, A »RES COGITANS«, A »THINKING THING«? AND, BEING A »THING«, MUST IT NOT BE LOCATED SOMEHOW SOMEWHERE, AT SOME MOMENT? THIS OF COURSE WOULD RESULT IN SUCH FUNNY PROBLEMS AS THE ONE THAT SEARCHES FOR THE »SEAT OF THE SOUL«. AND IF ONE PURSUES THIS QUEST FURTHER INTO THE DIRECTION OF ELEGANT SPIRITISM, ONE WILL FINALLY COME UP AGAINST THAT EVEN FUNNIER PROBLEM CONCERNING THE »IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL«. AN EVEN MORE IMPRESSIVE EXAMPLE FOR THE TROUBLES WE ARE IN WHEN TRYING TO OPERATE WITH THE CONCEPT »MATTER«: »SPIRIT« CONTRADICTS »MATTER« AND THIS CONTRADICTION MANIFESTS ITSELF AS »WORK«. THE RESULT OF THIS IS »CULTURE«. THEREFORE, CULTURAL OBJECTS ARE MATERIALISED SPIRIT AND SPIRITUALISED MATTER, ALTHOUGH NOT QUITE IN THE SENSE THAT EXTRA-OCCIDENTALS MEAN WHEN TALKING OF PHANTOMS, WHICH SHOWS THAT
METAPHYSICAL CONCEPTS ARE NOT VERY COMFORTABLE. OF COURSE: THIS GORDIAN KNOT MAY BE EASILY CUT THROUGH, EITHER BY DENYING THE »REALITY« OF »MATTER« (IMMATERIALISM IN THE OLD SENSE) OR OF »SPIRIT« (RADICAL MATERIALISM). BUT THIS IS NOT A VERY CLEVER METHOD. IT LEAVES »MATTER« AND »SPIRIT« UNDEFINED, AND THUS WITHOUT MEANING. TO SAY THAT »EVERYTHING IS MATTER (OR SPIRIT)« IS JUST AS MEANINGFUL AS IS A COCK’S CROWING. WE MUST FIND OTHER WAYS OUT, AND SCIENCE IS TRYING TO DO SO. SCIENCE DEVELOPED FROM PHILOSOPHY LIKE A BUTTERFLY FROM ITS COCOON, AND WHAT I HAVE DISCUSSED UP TO THIS POINT IS THAT EMPTY SHELL, WHICH SCIENCE HAS LEFT BEHIND. NONETHELESS, SCIENCE COULD NOT BUT INHERIT THE CONCEPT »MATTER« FROM PHILOSOPHY, BECAUSE THIS IS A BASIC CONCEPT. AND IT DID NOT KNOW VERY WELL WHAT TO DO WITH THIS CLUMSY CONCEPT, EXCEPT TO TRY AND MEASURE IT. THUS, IT INVENTED THE CONCEPT »MASS«, WHICH IS ALSO NOT VERY COMFORTABLE, BUT WHICH AT LEAST PERMITS ONE TO POSE THE QUESTION OF THE STRUCTURE OF MATTER. THE RESULT, ALTHOUGH NOT VERY HELPFUL, IF
THE OVERCOMING OF METAPHYSICS IS THE AIM, IS, TO SAY THE LEAST, SURPRISING. »MATTER« NOW LOOKS VERY MUCH LIKE A SERIES OF RUSSIAN DOLLS, ONE CONTAINING THE OTHERS. THE BIGGEST DOLL IS ASTRONOMICAL (EINSTEINIAN), IT CONTAINS THE MOLECULAR DOLL (NEWTONIAN), WHICH CONTAINS THE ATOMIC DOLL (WHERE MASS AND ENERGY MERGE), WHICH AGAIN CONTAINS THE NUCLEAR DOLL (WHERE CAUSALITY ABDICATES IN FAVOUR OF STATISTICS), WHICH AGAIN CONTAINS THE PARTICLE DOLL (WHICH POSES CURIOUS PROBLEMS OF SYMMETRY).

AND THE SMALLEST DOLL IS THE QUARK DOLL (WHERE IT IS DIFFICULT, EVEN MEANINGLESS, TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PHENOMENON AND MATHEMATICAL SYMBOL). NOW THIS DOES NOT SOUND VERY HELPFUL, EXCEPT FOR ONE BIG SURPRISE, WHICH IS THAT WHATEVER PHILOSOPHY SAYS CONCERNING »MATTER« RELATES EXCLUSIVELY TO THE MOLECULAR LEVEL. ON ALL OTHER LEVELS, IT IS NONSENSE TO SAY THAT »MATTER« IS AN »OBJECT OF SPIRIT« OR A »CONTENT OF FORM«. »THUS, ALL OF THE ETERNAL PROBLEMS THAT PHILOSOPHY HAS WITH MATTER, LIKE THE
PROBLEM OF THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL OR THE MATERIALISATION OF THE SPIRIT THROUGH COMMITMENT TO CULTURE, ARE SHOWN TO BE MOLECULAR PROBLEMS. AT FIRST SIGHT, THIS DOES NOT SOUND VERY STUNNING. DO WE NOT LIVE ON THE MOLECULAR LEVEL, ITS DIMENSIONS BEING OURS (OUR BODIES ARE MEASURED IN CENTIMETRES, AND OUR AGE IN SECONDS)? ALL THE OTHER LEVELS OF MATTER ARE EXISTENTIALLY IMMEASURABLE FOR US, AND DO NOT CONCERN US. THE ETERNAL PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY ARE THUS OUR PROBLEMS, AND NOTHING SCIENCE MAY SAY CAN CHANGE THIS. SCIENCE IS INCOMPETENT IN THE FACE OF THIS KIND OF PROBLEM.

AT SECOND SIGHT, HOWEVER, THIS BECOMES UNTRUE. WE DO NOT LIVE EXCLUSIVELY WITHIN THE CENTIMETRE/SECOND DIMENSION. PROCESSES GO ON WITHIN OUR BRAIN AND OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM, WHICH HAVE ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS. PARTICLES ENTER THOSE SYSTEMS, THEY JUMP QUANTICALLY BETWEEN THE NERVE SYMAPSES, AND THEY ARE PROCESSED THERE. AND WE EXPERIENCE THIS AS PERCEPTION, IMAGINATION, WISHING, THOUGHT, AND DECISION MAKING. WE LIVE CONCRETELY JUST AS
MUCH ON THE LEVELS OF PARTICLES AS WE LIVE ON THE MOLECULAR LEVEL, WHICH GIVES RISE TO A CURIOUS SUSPICION: WHAT IF »SPIRIT« WERE THE NAME WE GIVE »MATTER« ON THE LEVEL OF PARTICLES, AND WHAT IF »MATTER« WERE THE NAME WE GIVE »SPIRIT« IN THE MOLECULAR LEVEL? THIS MIGHT NOT SOUND LIKE A VERY ORIGINAL SUSPICION (IT SOUNDS LIKE SPIRITISM) BUT, UNLIKE SPIRITISM, IT PERMITS TECHNICAL EXPERIMENTATION. UNTIL RECENTLY, ALL EXPEDITIONS UNDERTAKEN INTO THE VARIOUS LEVELS OF MATTER STARTED FROM THE MOLECULAR LEVEL. DEMOCRITUS LEFT IT IN SEARCH OF ATOMS, ARISTOTLE IN SEARCH OF THE STARS AND SCIENCE CONTINUED TO DO SO, ALTHOUGH IT ORGANISED ITS EXPEDITIONS A LITTLE BIT MORE CAREFULLY. THIS IS CHANGING. WE NOW WITNESS EXPEDITIONS COMING FROM THE LEVEL OF PARTICLES THAT INVADE THE MOLECULAR LEVEL AS IF FROM BELOW. THINGS LIKE THERMONUCLEAR POWER STATIONS, COMPUTERS, ROBOTS, OR ELECTROMAGNETIC IMAGES ARE PARTICLES INVADING OUR MOLECULAR LEVEL. THEY EXPLODE OUR ETERNAL PROBLEMS. IT IS NONSENSE TO SAY OF A
THERMONUCLEAR PLANT
THAT IT SPIRITUALISES
MATTER; OF A COMPUTER,
THAT IT IS A MATERIALISED
SPIRIT; OF A ROBOT, THAT
IT DECIDES AND ACTS UPON
DECISIONS; OR OF A TV
IMAGE THAT IT IS A PURE,
PLATONIC FORM. ALL SUCH
METAPHYSICAL FORMULATIONS
FAIL, WHERE SUCH PARTICLE
INVASIONS ARE CONCERNED.

INSTEAD, IT BECOMES
POSSIBLE TO EXPERIMENT
WITH THESE SORTS OF
PROCESSES, WHICH ARE OF
THE ORDER OF MAGNITUDE
OUR BRAIN INHABITS.
ISO-CALLED »ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCES« MAY
SERVE AS EXAMPLES FOR
THIS TRANSITION FROM
METAPHYSICS TO TECHNICAL
EXPERIMENTATION. THEY ARE
RUDIMENTARY SIMULATIONS
OF A FEW BRAIN FUNCTIONS.
NEUROPHYSIOLOGY HAS NOT
ADVANCED VERY FAR INTO THE
SECRETS OF THE BRAIN, BUT
FAR ENOUGH TO PERMIT THOSE
SIMULATIONS. THIS IS NOT
SURPRISING: PALAEOLITHIC
MAN DID NOT NEED A WELL-
ELABORATED THEORY OF
MECHANICS TO SIMULATE
A FEW FUNCTIONS OF HIS
ARM TO INVENT THE LEVER.

OF COURSE: IT WOULD BE
AN EXAGGERATION TO CALL
A LEVER AN »ARTIFICIAL
ARM«, JUST AS IT IS AN
EXAGGERATION TO CALL OUR
CRUDE SIMULATION
OF BRAINS »ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES«. STILL, THE LEVER IS THE ANCESTOR OF ALL MACHINES, AND MACHINES HAVE NOT ONLY TAKEN OVER MOST OF THE MUSCULAR BODY FUNCTIONS, THEY HAVE EXCEEDED THE MECHANICAL CAPACITIES OF THE BODY BY A LONG WAY. WE ARE, AS FAR AS OUR INTELLECTUAL CAPACITIES ARE CONCERNED, AT THE STAGE OF THE LEVER. NOW THESE CRUDE SIMULATIONS SHOW THAT MUCH OF WHAT PHILOSOPHY (AND THEOLOGY) USED TO CONSIDER »SPIRIT« (LIKE LOGICAL REASONING OR DECISION MAKING) CAN BE PERFORMED BY APPARATUS. THUS, »SPIRIT« IS BEGINNING TO ESCAPE FROM ITS IMPRISONMENT WITHIN THE SKULL, AND MAY BE OBSERVED AS IF FROM OUTSIDE. THE FOGS OF PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND OTHER IDEOLOGIES THAT ENVELOP IT ARE LIFTING. WE SHALL HAVE TO THINK EVERYTHING CONCERNING »SPIRIT« ALL OVER AGAIN. ANOTHER SUCH INVASION OF PARTICLES INTO THE MOLECULAR LEVEL IS ELECTROMAGNETIC IMAGES, AND THEY TOO OBLIGE US TO RETHINK ETERNAL PROBLEMS. BUT WITH THEM, IT IS NOT THE DIALECTICS OF »MATTER–SPIRIT« THAT
ARE IN QUESTION, BUT THE DIALECTICS »MATTER-FORM«: LET US CONSIDER IT. THERE IS A CURIOUS MYTH THAT SUSTAINS WESTERN THOUGHT IN THIS RESPECT, AND WHAT IT SAYS IS THIS: IN THE BEGINNING (WHATEVER THAT MAY MEAN), THERE WAS A FORMLESS SOUP CALLED »MATTER« AND OVER IT HOVERED EMPTY FORMS (SOMETIMES CALLED »IDEAS«). THE FORMS SOMEHOW DIPPED INTO MATTER LIKE SPOONS AND FILLED THEMSELVES, AND THIS IS CALLED »CREATION«. NOW, ALTHOUGH THIS MYTH IS UNBELIEVABLE, IT IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN US. WERE WE TO GIVE IT UP, WE WOULD HAVE GIVEN UP JUDEO-CHRISTIANITY AND THE GREEK BELIEF THAT THE UNIVERSE HAS A MATHEMATICAL STRUCTURE. WE WOULD ALSO HAVE TO GIVE UP THE ENDLESS QUARREL BETWEEN »MATERIALISM« AND »IDEALISM«. BUT WE WILL HAVE TO GIVE IT UP IN THE FACE OF SCIENCE. SCIENCE SAYS THAT THE UNIVERSE IS A PROCESS, OR AN EVER MORE UNIFORM DISTRIBUTION OF THE PARTICLES FROM WHICH IT IS COMPOSED. IT TENDS TOWARDS THE TOTAL LOSS OF FORM. IN FACT, THIS TENDENCY TOWARDS LOSS OF FORM MAY BE TAKEN AS
A MEASURE OF THE AGE OF
THE UNIVERSE AS A WHOLE,
AND OF EVERY PHENOMENON
THEREIN (E.G. THE CARBON
TEST). THE EQUATIONS
THAT PERMIT THIS
MEASUREMENT ARE THOSE OF
THE SECOND PRINCIPLE OF
THERMODYNAMICS. NOW,
WHAT THOSE EQUATIONS MEAN
IS THAT EVERYTHING TENDS
TO BECOME MORE PROBABLE,
AND THAT WHAT WE CALL
THE »UNIVERSE« IS AN
IMPROBABLE, TRANSITORY
STAGE OF THIS PROCESS.

THUS, WHAT WE CALL
»MATTER« IS AN IMPROBABLE
FORM OF ENERGY THAT WILL
DECAY INTO UNIFORMLY
DISTRICTED HEAT
(THERMIC DEATH). THUS,
»MATTER« AND »FORM« COME
to mean the same thing,
NAMELY A TRANSITORY AND
IMPROBABLE STAGE OF
ENERGY DISTRIBUTION.

WHAT IS SURPRISING IN
THIS IS NOT SO MUCH THAT
THE ANCIENT DIALECTICS OF
»MATTER-FORM« HAS LOST
ITS MEANING. RATHER, IT IS
THE CENTRAL POSITION THAT
THE CONCEPT »PROBABILITY«
TAKES. IT HAS SOMETHING
to do with games, with
chance, with luck, with
accidents, in short:
with dice. THE UNIVERSE
APPEARS AS A KIND OF BLIND
GAME, WHICH WILL RESULT IN
THE END IN THE EXHAUSTION
OF ALL ITS CHANCES
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   ESISSYNT H
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(A zero-sum game), but in the course of this, unforeseeable situations, accidents may occur, and it is these accidents, these strokes of luck, which concentrate our attention. The equations of the second principle of thermodynamics, which measure the tendency towards the ever more probable, may be turned around, and they will then point towards the improbable, the accidental. This turning around has been achieved by the theory of information. And electromagnetic images may be considered results of this theoretical understanding of information, what one sees, if one looks at images like video-clips, holograms, or those synthesised on computer screens is highly improbable configurations of particles like photons. These improbable configurations have not come about by blind chance (as they do, for instance in genetic information), but by human deliberation. They are the result of a deliberate inversion of the universal tendency towards uniform.
DISTRIBUTION. HE WHO PRODUCES THEM PLAYS WITH CHANCE AGAINST CHANCE; HE PLAYS AGAINST THE BLIND GAME OF »NATURE«. THIS MAY BE SEEN IN EVERY IMMATERIAL IMAGE, BUT WITH SYNTHETIC IMAGES THE STRATEGY USED (IN THIS GAME AGAINST THE GAME) IS CLEAREST: IT IS THE STRATEGY OF COMPUTATION. AND THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT THE TERM »IMMATERIALISM« HAS COME TO MEAN: A DELIBERATE PLAY WITH PARTICLES, SO THAT THEY MAY ACQUIRE IMPROBABLE FORMS; THAT THEY MAY BECOME »INFORMATION« USING THE STRATEGY OF COMPUTATION.

ENERGY (A TERM THAT DEFIES DEFINITION). NO DOUBT, HERE, WE HAVE COME UP AGAINST A PROFOUND CULTURAL REVOLUTION. THE VERY PILLARS OF WESTERN CULTURE, »MATTER«, »SPIRIT«, AND »FORM« HAVE FALLEN. BUT WE HAVE BY NO MEANS OVERCOME METAPHYSICS. WE HAVE DEMYSTIFIED THESE THREE PILLARS, BUT A MYSTERY NOW ENVELOPS THE CONCEPTS OF »ENERGY« AND »PROBABILITY« INSTEAD. IF ONE THROWS METAPHYSICS OUT THROUGH THE DOOR, IT COMES BACK THROUGH THE WINDOW.

STILL: FUTURE »IMMATERIAL« CULTURE, THE CULTURE OF »PURE INFORMATION« WILL BE ALMOST COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM OURS. AND THIS, IS WHAT IS SUGGESTED HERE BY THE SHIFT IN THE MEANING OF THE WORD »IMMATERIALISM«.