

METATEXT

IMMATERIALISM

VILÉM FLUSSER

METAFLUX

IMMATERIALISM

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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

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IS AS IF WE HAD DEFINED
 »TABLE« AS AN »ANTI-
 CHAIR« AND »CHAIR« AS
 AN »ANTI-TABLE«. THIS
 TYPE OF CLUMSY CONCEPT IS
 CALLED »METAPHYSICAL«,
 AND ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT BE
 ELEGANT IT IS NOT VERY
 USEFUL. ¶NON-WESTERN
 CULTURES DO NOT SEEM TO BE
 TROUBLED WITH THIS SORT
 OF METAPHYSICAL SCRUPLE,
 AS FAR AS THE CONCEPT
 »MATTER« IS CONCERNED.
 FOR INSTANCE, THEY QUITE
 HAPPILY CONSTRUCT A GREY
 ZONE BETWEEN »MATTER«
 AND »SPIRIT«, WHICH THEY
 FILL WITH THIN MATTER OR
 THICK SPIRIT OF THE TYPE
 »GHOST«, OR »ANGEL«, OR
 »ASTRAL BODY«, AND THEY

EVEN PHOTOGRAPH THOSE
 PHANTOMS. OF COURSE: THIS
 INTERMEDIATE POPULATION
 EXISTS IN THE WEST JUST
 AS WELL AS ELSEWHERE, BUT
 WITH US IT IS CONSIDERED
 EITHER AS A REMNANT OF
 A PRIMITIVE AND ALMOST
 EXTINCT RACE, OR AS
 ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION.
 BECAUSE WE, THE TRUE
 HEIRS TO THE ANCIENT JEWS
 AND GREEKS, DO NOT PERMIT
 ANY SPIRITUALISATION OF
 MATTER OR MATERIALISATION
 OF SPIRIT. FOR US, THESE
 ARE OPPOSITE CONCEPTS,
 AND AN ABYSS SEPARATES
 THEM. ¶YES, BUT: IF
 »SPIRIT« MEANS »SUBJECT
 (OF MATTER)« AND »MATTER«
 MEANS

»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

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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 SYNAPSES, 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. ¶SO-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: PALAEOLOGIC 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 DISTRIBUTED 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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(A ZERO-SUM GAME), BUT
 IN THE COURSE OF THIS
 ACCIDENTS MAY OCCUR,
 UNFORESEEABLE SITUATIONS.
 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
 TO BE 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.

¶ ONE MAY NOW TRY TO SEE HOW FAR THIS ARTICLE HAS SUCCEEDED IN UNCOVERING THE COMMON NUCLEUS OF THE TWO MEANINGS OF THE TERM »IMMATERIALISM«. WHEN FIRST USED, THE WORD STOOD IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT WHERE »MATTER« WAS EITHER DEFINED AS THE »OBJECT OF SPIRIT«, OR AS THE »CONTENTS OF FORMS«. THESE DEFINITIONS ARE NO LONGER USEFUL. AS IT IS NOW BEING USED, THE WORD STANDS IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT WHERE BOTH »MATTER« AND »SPIRIT« MUST BE THOUGHT OF AS IMPROBABLE »FORMS« OF WHAT MAY BE CALLED

¶ 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«.

»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.

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