

VILÉM FLUSSER On The Crisis of our Models.

(Theoretical considerations and a practical proposal.)

The motive of this paper is the suspicion that some new media of communication might offer possibilities for the elaboration of new types of models. This suspicion was provoked by some experiments with videotapes and films now in progress. This paper is therefore addressed to both the oretical thinkers and to those who experiment with the new media. It will be structured as follows: A. It will consider some aspects of the present crisis of models. B. It will submit a rudimentary proposal for the elaboration of a model of the human body through the TV medium. C. It will criticize the proposal and suggest that such an attempt is worth while inspite of technical difficulties and possible objection.

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A. Models are tools for the understanding of phenomena, they are made by those who seek understanding, they may be improved upon and substituted by better models. This statement is characteristic of the Modern Age, and it distinguishes it from other ages. For the Greeks and medieval Christians for instance models were eternal ideas or forms, and "wisdom" for them was the contemplation of unchangeable models hidden behind the phenomena. For moderns "knowledge" is in part the result of manipulations of models. This is an aspect of "progress". The question arises why models are being changed. The answer is that they tend to become unsatisfactory for two main reasons. (a) They become unsatisfactory if one no longer trusts their "fidelity". (b) They become unsatisfactory if they are hard to read.

(a) One may lose trust in the fidelity of models for various reasons, but at present there is a growing general mistrust with regard to a whole type of models. Models are projected from points of view on the phenomena that one wants to understand and handle. In the course of Modern Age one such point of view proved itself to be especially fertile: the "objective" one. It is the point of view of a subject standing above the phenomenon which is then seen as an object. Objective models show phenomena to be understandable and manipulatable objects. There were always theoretical difficulties about this point of view, because it was never quite clear how the subject can climb above the phenomenon to see it. But these difficulties did not diminish the trust in objective models, because they worked so well in the praxis of manipulating objects. This is now changing. It is becoming ever more obvious that one cannot really separate subject from object in praxis. The mere observation of an object by a subject may change the object. The Heisenberg principle and the praxis of ethnology are merely two among many examples. And once a model is projected the phenomenon tends to adjust itself to the model. This disagreeable feed-back is experienced in economy, sociology, politics, and many other fields of action.

VILÉM FLUSSER

Thus the difficulties about objective models are no longer only theoretical ones, but are also practical, because the fact that the subject interferes in the object in the process of knowledge can no longer be practically discounted. Consequent loss of trust in objective models may be called "the crisis of objectivity".

Now objective models are among the most important ones we possess. The greater part of all models supplied by the sciences and humanities belong to this type. If we lose confidence in them it becomes difficult for us to find our way in the world. This is why new points of view are being experimented from which to project new types of models. Phenomenological vision provides one such point of view. It does not stand above, but within the phenomenon to be understood and manipulated. Models projected from it do not show the phenomenon to be an object, but a living experience. This type of model may be called the "intersubjective" one. A good example is the human body. In objective models it is shown to be an object among many others, and to be of the type "organisms". In phenomenological models it is shown to be the way through which men are in the world and change it. Such models provide a knowledge of the human body which may be trusted better, because it takes the interference of subject within object as its point of departure. It cannot, for sure, substitute existing objective models, (like the anatomical, physiological, biomolecular ones and so forth), but it can work with them. This is the reason why this paper will propose such a model of the human body.

Such models are being proposed all over at present. For instance there is an ever growing literature which may be called "phenomenology of the human body". Still one cannot escape the feeling that such models are not yet capable of competing with objective ones, let alone of substituting them. The crisis of models as an objectivity crisis has not yet been overcome by these models. The reason why this is so may have to do with the medium in which these models are being articulated. The medium<sup>in</sup> which phenomenological researchers articulate their models are mostly books. Books do not seem to be adequate media for such a type of model. More adequate media for such a purpose are at our disposal. At least this is the suspicion this paper harbors. The next paragraph will argue the point.

(b) The second main reason why models may become unsatisfactory is technical: The way one uses models is this: first one projects it from a point of view with regard to a phenomenon; second one feeds it with information supplied by the phenomenon; third one understands the phenomenon as represented by the model. A geographical map may illustrate this. First one projects a map from a point of view with regard to a landscape, (for instance the Mercator point of view); second one fills in information supplied by the landscape, (for instance mountains and rivers); third one understands the landscape, (for instance can use the map for driving).

VILÉM FLUSSER

But the model can store only a limited number of information. If that number is exceeded, the model can no longer be read easily, and becomes unsatisfactory. New types of models must then be elaborated that can store the information. For instance: if information on a map becomes crowded, one may elaborate threedimensional maps in which mountains appear in relief.

Such difficulty in reading models for excess of stored information is an important aspect of the present situation. We feel that we are being bombarded by new information which we cannot digest, because we cannot store it in the models at our disposal. Therefore we look for new types of models to not only store available information in a legible way, but also leave room for new information. Only then may we become "curious" again, namely interested in new information.

But to change technically the type of models is to change one's vision of the world. History supplies examples of this. For instance: at one point in the history of Mesopotamia traditional models like painted scenes were probably felt to be unsatisfactory for the storage of available information. The distance in time does not allow us to reconstruct the situation, but we can see it in outline. New types of models were elaborated which were able to store more information, (like the deeds of kings and so forth). Namely linear writing. This was made possible by the technique of tile manufacture. The result was a new vision of the world. "Historical vision". At one point in the history of Europe traditional geographical maps became unsatisfactory for the storage of information brought in by travels. A new type of map, namely globusses, was elaborated. The result was a change in the/ vision of the world too well known to be discussed. At one point in 18th century traditional mechanical models, (as for instance supplied by the French Encyclopedia), became unsatisfactory for the storage of information brought in by the various sciences. A new type of models, namely the dynamical ones, was elaborated. We still are under the impact of the change in world vision that resulted from it. To change technically models is literally to change the understanding of the world and man's place within it.

Practically all the models now at our disposal are space models. They are either linear, (like sentences, or equations, or curves); or they are plane, (like maps, or sketches, or two-dimensional statistics); or they are three-dimensional, (like atomic models, prototypes of machines, or models of architecture). Even our mental models are of this type, because a mental model is an effort to imagine a material model. Which means that most of our available models can show time only indirectly. Now this is as it should be for objective vision, because from that point of view phenomena are objects within time. But it is not satisfactory for phenomenological vision, because from that point of view phenomena are events. The more objective models fail us because of the practical difficulty mentioned above, the less are they

VILÉM FLUSSER

able to store incoming information concerning time. Only models of the type "space-time continua" can now satisfy us. One reason why present models as elaborated by phenomenologists fail us may be the fact that phenomenologists still write books, instead of using space-time media.

Films, videotapes and so forth are such media. They allow the elaboration of models better suited for phenomenological vision. And they allow the storage of a larger number of information than do traditional media, because they have one more dimension. Such media may therefore contribute to the superation of both the "objectivity crisis" and the "information inflation crisis". If they were used for the elaboration of models in this sense, our vision of the world would probably change in a way we cannot begin to imagine.

All over, and mostly in the United States, experiments are under way to use the new media in this sense. Especially experiments with videotapes and holograms seem to be very promising. But those who undertake such experiments tend to consider themselves to be "artists". They therefore tend to supply us with subjective models, not phenomenological ones. If scientists do recur to the new media, (like chemists, biologists and so forth), they tend to elaborate variations of objective models. The use of the new media for the elaboration of phenomenological models, for instance by philosophers, does not seem to happen. Which is surprising, given our situation. One of the purposes of the present paper is to propose a collaboration between philosophers and those who experiment with the new media.

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B. The human body is a good example for the crisis of our models. We have at our disposal a great number of objective models of our body. They show us ever better the objective aspect of our body as a living organism. They do not show the phenomenological aspect of our body, namely the fact that our body is how we experience the world and act in it. Literature does show this aspect, but does not provide us with good models. On the other hand we dispose of an enormous number of information concerning our body, but can no longer store it in our models. For instance we cannot coordinate the information coming from ecology with the information coming from molecular biology. Possibly a space-time continuum model could help? To illustrate such a possibility a primitive model of our body in the TV medium will now be proposed.

A hollow translucent sphere appears on the screen swimming within a context. The context is composed of elements of various shapes which are dense around the sphere and sparse toward the horizon of the screen. Some of the elements penetrate the sphere more or less deeply. The sphere sometimes secretes liquids that condense to form elements of the context. The sphere changes constantly its shape and color, and so do the elements of the con-

VILÉM FLUSSER

text. At times the sphere breaks open and closes again. At times other similar spheres appear on the screen and make contact with the original one either directly or through elements of the context. The vacuum within the sphere and the horizon of the screen remain always black. This action is accompanied by sound. It should cause a dramatic impression.

Labels are to be introduced. The vacuum within the sphere is to be labelled ("myself", the wall of the sphere "my body", the context "my world", and the horizon "my death". The stream of elements toward my body is to be labeled "my future", the secretions from my body "my past", incoming elements "my problems", outgoing ones "my works", the places on my body where elements come in "my passive presence", and where they go out "my active presence". Now one can try to insert information within the model as they are being supplied by body experience.

Coming from my future a problem reaches my passive presence. Let us label it "liver pain". One should resist the temptation to label the spot where it comes in "my liver", and thus start a mapping of my body. Experience shows that my liver cannot be experienced unless it is part of an incoming problem. It is therefore not, phenomenologically speaking, part of my body. The model can show this. The moment the problem "liver pain" presents itself, the sphere emanates a red aura and a specific sound appears in the sound track. It is within this aura that my liver is to be located, in an intermediate region between my body and my world. This region is to be labelled "theoretical aspect of my body". Other problems that present themselves may also be located within that region. For instance the problem "my genetic information". In that case the region will have a different color and the sound will be different. The various phases of that region may be synchronized on the screen. The region will then appear to largely coincide with the traditional objective models of the body. Those models should be used for the mapping of that region.

Coming from my future a different problem of different shape, color and sound reaches my passive presence. Let us label it "a newspaper". The wall of the sphere opens up, forms a channel, and the newspaper drifts through it toward the inner vacuum. The channel is to be labelled "my eyes". At that moment my body becomes, as a whole, an organ for the sucking in of the newspaper. It changes its color and becomes green. At the next moment a different problem presents itself, to be labelled "my pipe". My body opens a different channel of different shape to be labelled "my finger". It turns partly pink. Thus various channels have to be shown diachronically and synchronically, to be labelled "my mouth", "my sex" and so forth, and the color of the sphere has to change to show the interplay between the various channels. The sound track will have to show the intensity of the channels. The model will have also to show how the incoming problems are being

VILÉM FLUSSER

moulded by the various channels. They will have to change shape and color as they pass through the channels.

The model will also have to show how the various channels relate to the vacuum. For instance it will have to show the difference of the experience of my eyes from the experience of my fingers. My body has various fingers, and one may finger the other. But although my body has two eyes one cannot see the other. Therefore my finger is a channel more obviously than is my eye, it is more obviously part of my body. In other words: my eye is more like myself, and my finger is more like my world. Therefore the model must show my eye to be like myself, (blackish), and my finger to be like my world, (variously colored). And the whole body must be shown at moments to be myself-like, and at others to be my-world-like.

A secretion begins to condense on the inner wall of the sphere, it penetrates the wall in complex curves, erupts on the outside at the spot of my active presence and flows toward my past to form an element of my world. Let us label the secretion "my gesture of writing", and the new element of my world "a letter written by me". During the process the shape of my body changes and becomes a pointed cone. The point of the cone is to be labelled "my hand". At this point the secretion leaves my body. But an even more dramatic event happens. One of the elements of my world leaves its context, turns around to face the context, and attaches itself to my hand to form the true point of my body. Let us label this element "my fountain pen". At the same time all other problems of my world recede, and my body points at the single problem "my letter". This event is to be shown through various shapes, sounds and colors. The model must also distinguish between turnable problems and others. Turnable problems are to be labelled "tools", and their totality "culture".

It serves no purpose to continue inserting information into the model. The number of available information is enormous, especially if one considers that more than one sphere may be shown within the same context. What is interesting about this experiment is the fact that none of the information inserted is new. On the contrary: the informations are of a type so common that they tend to be forgotten. This is the purpose of a phenomenological model: to reveal forgotten available information. This does not exclude, of course, that the model here proposed may not reveal new information, but that is not its purpose.

Its purpose is to supply a new structure for available informations. This seems to be important. Now available objective models of our body permit us to know and manipulate our body ever better as objects. This leads to an increasing alienation from the body of a special type, (specialized medicin, sports, robotisation and so forth). We also have excellent subjective models of our body, as supplied by artists and so forth.

VILÉM FLUSSER

This leads to an increasing alienation from our body of a different type, (abandon to body sensation, drugs, the whole complex of the so-called "anti culture"). The two forms of alienation go together, and are due to the lack of intersubjective models. Models like the one here proposed may therefore contribute toward a dis-alienation from our body. And what is true of the body is very probably also true of many other phenomena in the midst of which we live.

The model here proposed is obviously primitive, and it suffers from the lack of practical experience of the possibilities offered by the new media. Only those who have this practical experience may judge whether such a model is feasible, and if so, whether it can provide a new type of experience and a new type of knowledge. (It must do both if it is to be a truly phenomenological model). One of the purposes of the present paper is to suggest to those who experiment with the media to try the elaboration of such a type of model.

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C. The model here proposed is very vulnerable to theoretical objection. Such objections must be raised, and it would be intellectually dishonest were this fact not mentioned in the present paper. Although it may be hoped that they can be met better during the process of experimentation than at the out start. But two of the objections must be at least stated right away, because they seem to question the very basis of this proposal. (a) The epistemological, and (b) the religious objection.

(a) Models are epistemological tools, their purpose is to know the phenomena they model. Therefore they are reifications of a specific theory of knowledge held by the one who projects them. In consequence new types of models cannot really change our vision of the world. Only a new theory of knowledge can do this, a theory of which new models are only manifestations. This can be seen from the examples taken from history here offered. The theory had to change in all the examples offered, before new models could be elaborated. And this can also be seen from the model here proposed. One can see the theory of which it is a reification. In its middle stands the knowing subject, around it is the knowable object, and around it an empty horizon. This is the structure of the theory of knowledge of existentialist philosophy. Therefore not the medium of a model is decisive, but the theory which underlies its structure.

The objection is correct, but does not attain the essence of the proposal. It aims at a change in world vision through the practical application of an already existing theory of knowledge. Thus the model here proposed will certainly not contribute to a theoretical resolution of the "subject-object" problem. It leaves it untouched, but tries to remove it from praxis. In praxis the knowledge of our body is hampered by the barren an-

VILÉM FLUSSER

tinomy between body and soul, or spirit. Phenomenological vision shows that "body" is an objectivation of "body experience", and "spirit" is an objectivation of the way "body experience" happens, and that the concrete reality is only the body experience itself. This phenomenological vision structures the proposed model and therefore should permit a knowledge of the phenomenon of "body experience" from which the antinomy has been removed. But of course this does not abolish the epistemological problem. It now appears one step removed, in the question: "What is the relationship between the model and its users on one side, and the phenomenon on the other?". In this sense the objection is valid: the model does not provide answers to questions of theory or knowledge. But that the epistemological <sup>question</sup> is in fact removed one step, which is to say that it is put into brackets in practice, is the true purpose of the model. In sum: it must be admitted that basically revolutions in world vision are the results of changes in theories of knowledge. In our case a change might have happened in Husserl. But this revolution can only manifest itself in the form of new types of models. And the model proposed is meant to suggest that the new media of communication are very useful for the practical manifestation of the revolution in world vision. In this sense the present proposal can live with the epistemological objection.

(b) Models are tools for the orientation in the world. They are meant to facilitate answers to questions of the type: "where am I and what can I do to go some place else?" Now this type of question is basically the religious type of question. Because it ~~asks~~ asks: "What is my "Befindlichkeit", i.e. how do I find myself in the world?". It may be shown that we find ourselves in the world in a way which is imposed on us by the religions of our tradition, whether we accept these religions or not, and whether we are conscious of it or not. Which is a way of saying that we find ourselves in the world within the structure of Western civilisation. All the models we elaborate are manifestations of the way we find ourselves in the world. Indeed the fact that we do elaborate models is a manifestation of this our specific finding ourselves in the world. Therefore models can only answer this type of religious questions because the answer is already contained in the model. This can be seen clearly from the proposed model. The vacuum called "myself" in its center corresponds to the place occupied by "soul" in Western religious structure, and the vacuum called "my death" on its horizon corresponds to the place occupied by the "transcendent God" in Western religious structure. That these two places are vacua in the proposed model corresponds to a state which Western traditional religions have reached for many at present. Therefore new types of models, whatever the medium they are made of, can never change the way we find ourselves in the world. Such changes are results of religious revolutions, (however we want to define the word "religion").

The objection is correct, but curiously enough, it does not attack



VILÉM FLUSSER

but sustains the proposal, if carefully considered. It is true that all models hide a specific "Befindlichkeit", a specific religious structure. But the problem is exactly the fact that they hide it. For instance the models of our natural sciences do not seem to be the results of Judeo-Christian transcendence, and therefore the knowledge they provide seems to be independent on our religious tradition. Only a phenomenological analysis of those models will reveal this. Now it is an advantage of phenomenological models that they show their dependence on religious structures. For instance it is an advantage of the proposed model that it shows our body experience to be modelled by the tradition of "incarnation". That it shows that our body experience follows the structure of "incarnation" whether we know of it or not, and whether we accept "incarnation" or not. In fact: it is one of the purposes of phenomenological models to reveal such aspects. In this sense, of course, the proposed model, nor any other, cannot provide new answers to the religious question. It cannot be used as a tool to answer the question of the salvation of the soul, nor as a tool for the removal of the soul myth. But this is not what it was meant to do. It was meant to reveal, among other things, our religious determination whilst experiencing our body. And to suggest that this can be done better with the new media of communication. In this sense the objection is no objection, but sustains the proposal.

The short consideration of these two objections has pointed to some limitations of the effectivity of all models, including of the new type here proposed. No doubt: the consideration of other objections would reveal further limitations. But the consideration also suggests that within those limits the new type of models here proposed might have revolutionary results for our vision of the world. One of the purposes of the present paper is to contribute to a discussion of the limits and possibilities of such an undertaking between philosophers and those who experiment in the new media.

We find ourselves, with respect to numerous problems, in an ambivalent position. On the one hand we have a feeling of decadence and disappointment. On the other hand a feeling of challenge, of adventure. As if we were living simultaneously in the evening and in the morning. This applies also to the problem posed by models. The fundamental purpose of this paper is to infect others with the feeling of adventure.