

VILÉM FLUSSER Size and greatness.

A crucial point in dialectics as a model for reality is that "jump" by which quantity turns into quality. The point is crucial, because it somehow negates the whole structure of dialectics. It is as if a crack opened in dialectical discourse, through which the surprised observer can see, however vaguely, the "mystery of creation". Namely a background to dialectics by which dialectics is dialectically denied: "Meta-dialectics". Now this crucial point can be observed in various contexts. In science, in the arts, in revolutionary praxis, in pure speculation. But also in the immediate experience of the world. The purpose of this paper is to report on a recent experience during which the "qualitative jump" was observed by the writer.

I have visited New York several times during the last thirty years. Its first impact on me has always been "size". Size as the essence of the city. It meant enormity, bigness, on all points of the scale. New York was big as a town, and in all its details. The airport was big, and so were the avenues and streets. The buildings were big, and so were the tunnels and bridges. The cars were big, and so were the shops and the posters. The telephones were big, and so were the sandwiches and ice creams. The noise was big, and so was the dirt and disorder. The aggressivity of people was enormous, and so were the programs of theatres, exhibitions and concert halls. The quantity of scientific and artistic experiments was enormous, and so was the quantity of political and social tension. An enormous amount of energy and unrest permeated the air. In short: New York was essentially bigness.

The first impact was followed by a phase of critical analysis, during which miniatures within the monumentality of New York were discovered. The millions of small houses and gardens, of little dogs and tiny costume jewelry, of small bars in Greenwich Village, of hundreds of small magazines and underground circles, of "minimal art" and the hundreds of small groups into which social, artistic, scientific and political life is articulated. But again: the difference between monumentality and the miniature was, by itself, enormous. The dichotomy between the very big and the very small was, by itself, a very big problem. So that the critical phase confirmed the first impact: the essence of New York is bigness. It is a phenomenon of size: it cannot be measured in "normal" (human) dimensions. It is essentially big: inhuman and/or superhuman.

The last time I saw New York its first impact was different. No longer was it "size", but "greatness" which impressed me. This is curious, because it was the "same" town I remembered. If anything, it had grown even to bigger size: new buildings on Park Avenue, and part of Sixth Avenue

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becoming a canyon. Even bigger confusion and pollution. Nonetheless, its size no longer seemed to be essential. The town had suddenly acquired a personality, a face, a style, a character of its own, and it was this new climate which presented itself to me as "the New York essence". He who likes to give names to things, may call the style "pop", and the character "virile". No longer was there any sense in calling the buildings, the bridges, the noise of the brutality "big": the size of all these things was a function of New York, (they were big or small in relation to the New York essence). From now on it is the city itself that supplies the scales of measurement: it imposes its own criteria of judgement. From now on size is an accidental aspect of the phenomenon "New York", and its essence may be called "greatness".

What has happened? The same sort of "qualitative jump" which, in the past transformed for instance Athens, or Prague, or Avignon into what they are: variations on the theme "town essence". Which means that from now on the study of the phenomenon "New York" is no longer the task merely of sociology, or of architecture, or of geopolitics, and so forth, but of philosophy of culture. For instance: the "pop" character of New York is from now on a problem of the type "the gothic character of Florence" or the "mudejar character of Cordoba". Or: the virile climate of New York is from now on a problem of the type "the feminine character of Paris". (By the way: towns are usually feminine, and the Romans knew it. They said that towns and rivers are females, except for "Neapolis" and "Tiberis", and, they would now have to add "New York" and "Hudson".) In short: a new structure is emerging, (to speak with Piaget), and we have to face a new type of problem where New York is concerned.

But "what has happened?" is not the decisive question. More interesting is to ask: "where and when did it happen?". In the town or within me? During my absence from New York, or the moment I saw it when I last landed at Kennedy Airport? And this is the answer: it happened within the relationship that connects me to New York, therefore in "radical reality", within my "Lebenswelt", in short: it happened to me. Which, of course, does not mean at all that the qualitative jump I am talking about is something "subjective". On the contrary: it happens, one way or the other, to many. In fact: the emergence of a new New York structure is a theme, (and a problem) for all of us who live at present. We are, in a sense all of us, witnesses to the mysterious process of creation. The adjective "new" in the name "New York" is acquiring, all of a sudden, its true meaning for all of us: something new is happening in our world and therefore to us. If we look at it carefully, (and humbly), we may be taken by that feeling of "admira-