

VILÉM FLUSSER "Battlefields" by Antonio Amaral.

Description: It is a series of oil paintings of approximately 1,50 x 1 meters. The paintings show bananas. The bananas are on a plate, they are partly cut and beginning to rot, and cheap knives and forks lie beside them. This banal situation is made highly unusual by the fact that the bananas are tied with a cord of the type the hangman uses. The paintings are executed, (if one can use such a term after having spoken of a hangman), in a highly polished, very realistic, almost super-photographic manner. The backgrounds and the plates are sterile white, the forks and knives are dull white, the bananas are brownish, yellowish and greenish, and the cords are grey. The structure of the composition is heavy and clump-like. The paintings are of that type which transmit their message only to those receivers who open themselves to it. Some may pass by the paintings without getting any message to speak of. Others can become almost crushed by the climate of brutal terror and heavy oppression that exhales from the paintings. They were chosen to be subjects of this paper because they pose a problem which is both very ancient and painfully modern. The problem of the role of art as the publication of a private experience, as the attempt to dominate a specific material, as commitment to society, and as the conflict between these three aspects. The paintings are unusually interesting, because they propose a synthesis of the conflict.

A: Phenomenological vision: This method, as proposed by Husserl, consists fundamentally in looking at things as if they were seen for the first time. It is very difficult to see the things that surround us. They are covered up with two types of thick layers. One is the layer of habit, the other the layer of previous knowledge. Habit makes things invisible, because we take them for granted. And we can only see things if they intrigue us. All the others we pass by or use without looking at them. Previous knowledge makes things invisible, because we can explain them. Explained things are empty things, they are transparent and "no longer out there" in an existential sense of the term. They are no longer problems, and what makes a thing to be a thing is its being a problem. We cannot see what is not a problem. Phenomenological vision is a method to bracket out the layers of habit and previous knowledge, to lift them from the things and thus make them shine again as if they were new coins. A phenomenon is what shines, and phenomenology is the discovery of phenomena around us. The result is very often highly surprising.

Take a banana for an example. Who would care to look at it, especially in a tropical country, in Brazil for instance? It does not merit attention, (unless one slips on its peel), one does not consider it, one eat

VILÉM FLUSSER

it. And why should one consider it, since so many specialists have done so? It is well-known botanically, both from a structural and a genetic point of view, and its ecology is no problem. It has been analyzed very carefully as a food-stuff. The techniques of its planting, harvesting and processing have been satisfactorily developed. Even in "tropical" art and literature it has been used and abused "ad nauseam" and offers no attraction. There is nothing to bananas but to grasp them, peel them and put them in one's mouth in a sort of conditioned reflex. In fact: our attitude toward bananas is like the monkey's one with this difference: for the monkey it is a "natural", for us it is a "cultural" unquestioned condition.

But if we do look at the banana, it becomes a mysterious, almost uncanny object. It does not look like a vegetable at all, for two opposite reasons. On the one hand it is too amorphous, it lacks the usual botanical structure of a pine-apple or a cherry. It is a primitive plant, and it seems to have been preserved, by some odd coincidence, from a geological past long forgotten. We eat a sort of botanical dinosaur after dinner. On the other hand it has a very pronounced zoomorphic shape and texture, almost as if it were an organ of an animal's body. Seen thus it becomes frankly obscene, and we eat a phallus after dinner. And this is only the beginning of it. Consider for instance what happens if we cut it. Basically we can do it two ways. Either horizontally along its axis, or any other way, vertically diagonally or in various curves. If we do it horizontally, we discover its Cartesian organisation and we are in the world of rationalism. The banana is then an extended thing to which the logic of the thinking thing is adapted. But if we cut it any other way, we discover its amorphous lack of structure, and are in the world of surrealism. The banana is an absurd thing to which logic is unadapted. And one can go on this way almost forever. Because there is no end to the mystery of the things that surround us, once we pay them attention.

The paintings of Antonio Amaral's do this for us. Now it has been often held that this is exactly the role of art: unveil the mystery that surround us. By unveiling the mystery of the banana, Amaral shows us some aspects of its "essence" (eidos). He shows us some aspects of what stands behind of what we take to be "real", (and this may be the true meaning of the term "hyper-realism"). By taking a phenomenological approach to bananas, he takes one decisive step beyond photography: photography is "objective", but Amaral transcends the object "banana" and reaches out for its "bananity", its essence. According to this view, (that art is unveiling), according to Klee's aphorism that "art makes the invisible visible", he fulfills the role of the artist. The fact that his subjects are "mere bananas", and not some

VILÉM FLUSSER

god or other noble principle, makes this even more patent. And the fact that there is nothing like a man, (nothing anthropomorphic) in these paintings is a proof of the honesty of their phenomenological end savor: there is a specific relationship between myself and the banana, the banana is part of my "Lebenswelt", of the context of my experience, and in order to grasp this relationship, I must eliminate all others from it. This deliberate elimination of man, (who was the almost exclusive subject of previous art), is characteristic of the phenomenological and structuralist attitude (and is the reason why these attitudes are considered to be "antihumanistic" by their opponents). These paintings are publications of a private experience with bananas, because they are products of a phenomenological vision, and must not be confused with traditional "still lifes", (natures mortes); they are, for being phenomenological, self-portraits of the painter with reference to bananas. And this is true "publication" in the Latin sense of the term: show oneself in public. The artist is an exhibitionist by exhibiting the mystery that surrounds us. This is therefore one aspect of the message these paintings offer: they unveil the "essence" of bananas, and thus reveal the relationship between the painter and bananas. And this is very important not only because we ourselves are surrounded by bananas and must relate to them, but because bananas can be models for all things, and the relationship that links us to them can be a model for all the relationships we maintain with the world. In short: the paintings offer "aistheta", (models for experiencing the world).

B: Ethical vision: Yes, but obviously this is not their only, or even their basic, message. They are not "hyper-realistic" paintings. The bananas they show are not like they are usually, but bound with hangman's cords: to say the least a very unusual situation. If we met such a situation in the course of our daily life, (at a restaurant table for instance), it would disturb us rather profoundly, (it would scare us to death is a better way to put it). The question we ask when we face such a situation, (in reality or within the fiction of a painting), is: what does this mean, for Heaven's sake? We ask the "semantic" question. Now, according to some, this is not a good question to ask of a painting. A painting "is what it is what it is", (according to these thinkers), and to ask what it means outside itself is to miss the point of the painting. Art is no longer "anecdotic", such people would say, it tells no story and should not. Painting has liberated itself from its "semantic dimension", and has become at last music-like: pure "vision", namely pure structure. Even if it is not abstract. It then shows, not its own structure, but the pure structure of the thing it shows: "hyper-realism". But, quite obviously, these pictures shock us to ask the "semantic" question. They ask to be "decyphered".

VILÉM FLUSSER

The difference between "showing" and "meaning", (between "presenting" and "representing"), is the fact that in a "show" we perceive the message, whilst in a "representation" we must read the message in order to perceive its meaning. The elements of "representation" are symbols ordered within a code, and we must decodify them. For instance: the letter "a" shows the typewriter which has produced it, (it "presents" it), and means a specific sound, (it "represents" it). Now there is a problem. We can prove objectively that the letter "a" shows this specific typewriter, because it is connected to it by the chain of cause and effect. (In fact, detectives do this sort of reasoning.) But we can do no such thing with regard to what is represented by the letter. It may mean a sound, or an arithmetic concept, or a logical concept, and so forth. It depends on the code it is part of. In other words: There are various ways to read a symbolical message.

The case of the paintings under consideration can now be stated more clearly: They "show" bananas in such very unusual situations that we are forced to "read" them as "representations" of situations not shown, but which have a similar structure to the shown one. In other words: The phenomena shown are also symbols which have a meaning that imposes itself on their reader. They do not allow us the freedom of interpretation usually connected with representations. They not only oblige us to "read" them, but also to "read" them the way the painter intends us to. They are imperatives.

Before "reading" the paintings, it is important to stress the fact that they are not "representative paintings" in the common sense of the term. They do not tell stories, they are not indicatives of something. They shout orders, they are imperatives which command us to do something. In a sense they are not a return to "representative painting", but they are post abstract. This is an important formal distinction.

The key to the decodification of the symbolic meaning the paintings have is imposed on us both by the things "shown" and by the climate in which they are shown. It is a very easy reading. No problem of decodification. The message is this: The unusual situation shown; (bananas cut with cheap knives and forks and bound by hangmen's cords), means an intolerable situation in the world of real facts, and something must be done about it. The bananas mean an amorphous mass of slowly decaying tropical people, and there can be no doubt what people: their greenish and yellowish coloring indicate it. (The Brazilian flag shows these colors.) The cheap forks and knives mean the instruments which cut and manipulate this mass of people. The cords mean the situation in which these people find themselves. The sterile plate and background mean the general background of indifference against which this is happening. The heavy atmosphere of terror and oppression

VILÉM FLUSSER

emanated by the paintings is common both to the situation shown and the situation represented: it imposes this specific reading. And it gives the message its imperative form: this situation must not be tolerated! No story is told, no "facts" are given, but "normal", (models for a behavior in the face of an unmistakeably meant situation), are offered. Models for behaving in this our world. And this is, according to some, the role of art: to change our way of living.

C: Technical vision: They are traditional oil paintings. There can be no doubt about the very close relationship between art and technique, and the Greek word for both is "techné". The artist is one who manipulates a specific material in such a way, (technique), that its inherent potentialities become patent. He thus explicit what is implicit in the material he has chosen. He experiments with his material, and this is, according to some, the role of the artist.

Technological progress has produced a great number of new materials lately. With inherent potentialities that are practically unknown. They demand to be manipulated by artists in order to reveal how they may be dominated. For instance: plastic materials, neon tubes, videotapes, cybernetic systems, (to give some examples taken haphazard). The so-called "avant-garde" art has taken up this challenge. In fact: the present scene of the "plastic arts" is one not of new types of messages, but of new types of media through which messages may be transmitted in the future. Artists are learning how to speak several new languages, before they can say something. (The suspicion that they have nothing to say can therefore not be easily eliminated.) This scene unproves McLuhans polemic aphorism that "the medium is the message": we have a great amount of new media but very little new message. In such a context oil paintings look a little bit archaic. Why should one bother to experiment with oil, the potentialities of which have been explored time and again during the past centuries, and which therefore can hide no surprising secret? In this sense Amaral is no artist. Or is he?

To answer this question we must go back to what was said under "Phenomenological vision" in this paper. Possibly the material which Amaral manipulates, and which with he experiments, is not oil, but bananas? Possibly he has chosen oil, (every traditional material with little technical problems), exactly because it poses little problems? In order to get through it at a material, (bananas), the potentialities of which are unknown? Not quite unknown, of course, because people like Spoerri do manipulate foodstuffs directly. But still: the indirect manipulation of bananas through oil seems to offer vast possibilities not yet explored if a

VILÉM FLUSSER

a phenomenological technique is applied to them. Possibly the material Amaral has committed himself to dominate is this: oil-mediated bananas.

Let a parallel with music illustrate his problem. There are those like Bach and Schoenberg who experiment with the structure of music. They are undoubtedly "avant-garde" artists, in the sense that they reveal hidden potentialities in the material they have chosen. And then there are those like Mozart and Beethoven who do not tire to take one single theme and vary it over and over again to see what can be done about it. They are not less "original" for it. The series "Battkefields" by Amaral is a variation on the theme "bananas". It can probably be fully understood from the technical point of view only if it is considered as a diachronical series of paintings. A film or a videotape could do this for us. Such a film would show the progressive revelation of the "bananity" of the banana, and also of the essence of its symbolic meaning. Thus Amaral's paintings are an example for some future uses of the new media: those paintings are not, structurally, meant to be exhibited in the traditional form, but for instance as TV programs. Their apparent "traditionality" is therefore an illusion.

In fact: the paintings offer us "models of use", (techné) in two directions. They show how bananas may be manipulated, (and what they symbolically mean may be manipulated). And they show us how paintings may be manipulated. If to reveal inherent potentialities of specific materials, (for instance: bananas and paintings), is the role of art, Amaral is an artist.

D: Synthesis: This paper has attempted to show three dimensions of Amaral's paintings, which are usually taken to be symptoms of works of art, but which are usually taken to be in conflict with each other: the aesthetic, the ethical and the technical dimension. There is a tendency to believe that they represent some sort of existential choice for the artists. They either commit themselves aesthetically: they publish a private experience and thus provide us with models to experience the world. In that case the technical aspects of the work become secondary and means to achieve the aesthetic aim, and any ethical aspect of the work becomes a sort of impurity to be avoided. Or they commit themselves ethically: they serve society and thus provide us with models to behave one way or another. In that case the technical and aesthetic aspects of the work become means to achieve the aim of ethical commitment. Or they commit themselves technically: they fight the resistance of a specific material and thus provide us with models for using the things that surround us. In this case any aesthetic and ethical aspects of the work are accidental, (although possibly wellcome). We know this triple dilemma well from history, and many suffer from it at present.

VILÉM FLUSSER

It does not seem to exist for Amaral, and for a curious reason. It is because of their aesthetic quality, (their phenomenological attitude), that his paintings become ethically relevant: they are, because of it, "true" to the situation they mean, and therefore "good" for that situation. It is because of their aesthetic quality that they become technically relevant: they make it possible to manipulate the material because they have aesthetically revealed the potentialities dormant in it. It is because of their ethical quality that they are aesthetically relevant: because they are "true" to a meaning that transcends them they can ~~possess~~ make the phenomenon contemplated interesting enough to be contemplated. It is because of their ethical quality that they are technically relevant: it is worth while to experiment with bananas, because they mean something that transcends them. It is because of their technical quality that they are aesthetically relevant: the bananas can be experienced because they have been appropriately manipulated. And it is because of their technical quality that they are ethically relevant: because they have been manipulated the way they have, the bananas can mean something. The three dimensions, in Amaral, are therefore not in conflict, but on the contrary they cannot exist without each other.

Possibly the same is true of every true work of art, and is a symptom that it is authentic. But such a synthesis is to be very rarely found at present. It is easy to find, in almost every work nowadays produced, (and be they so-called "great works"), the predominance of either of the three dimensions. It is easy to say, for the vast majority of present works, whether they were produced by "aesthetizing", "politically committed", or "experimental" artists. This is the reason why Amaral's paintings are so interesting. One can walk by them, give them a glance and classify them as "traditional paintings", and therefore as anachronisms. Or one may stop and consider them, and suddenly every effort at classification becomes futile. Which is, after all the only symptom of true art: ~~it~~^{it} stands there in its own right, demands from us that we accept it in its own specificity, makes us richer, and defies classification.