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Vilém Flusser, Popular Culture and the Bossa Nova¹

In his writings related to the experience of decades spent in Brazil, Flusser, in the best iconoclastic style, tried to demystify the notion of loveliness and generosity in the natural surroundings of the country, as well as renounce an amorous, or even aesthetic type of relationship with it. This is so on account that, for a European, the premise of an aesthetic relationship with nature is the acknowledgment of a “structure”, of an “articulation” within it, as occurs in the perception of works of art, whereas the lack of these in the natural world of tropical countries renders the transposition of this aesthetic attitude practically impossible. In the particular case of Flusser, the lack of such articulation and structure led to an enormous deception:

When we said “nature”, we used to imagine light green woods, flowered meadows, rocks covered with snow, and ocean bays penetrating the interiors of the country throughout. We knew, of course, that no such nature awaited us in the vast Brazilian wilderness. But nature had the paradise-like illusions that the term “tropics” provoked in Europeans. The disillusionment was terrible (Flusser 2007, p. 63).²

In an fitting commentary, Gustavo Bernardo explained the meaning of this “heresy” committed by Flusser in what concerns the Brazilian natural world, as a sort of phenomenological *epoché* regarding the clichés to which he alluded :

In his effort to suspend the existing judgments about the terra brasilis, Flusser does not see a bountiful, generous nature, that has provided for us as a magical cornucopia from Pero Vaz de Caminha onwards, but a rather eminently perfidious nature, increasingly up against man as he confronts it merely with words and prejudices (Flusser 1998a, p. 24).

¹ English translation by Maria Clara V. Galery – final version of the text discussed with its author.

² Flusser 2007, henceforward as “*Bodenlos*”.

In the two books where he addresses his Brazilian experience, *Fenomenologia do Brasileiro* (Phenomenology of the Brazilian) and *Bodenlos. Uma autobiografia filosófica* (Bodenlos: A Philosophical Autobiography), Flusser exposes in detail the geographical, meteorological, and climatic reasons, among others, that according to him, would justify the deception mentioned above. In this manner, he takes on the persona of a fictitious, unadvised tourist, abandoning his own status of an immigrant, with over thirty years of residency in Brazil:

But the deception of the tourist comes early, well warranted indeed. It arrives with the unbelievable monotony of Brazilian nature. The atmospheric pressure is uniformly high, restraining movement; the water content in the air, consistently high, provokes sweat; in the Northeast, there is only summer and the duration of day and night is constant; in the South, the distinction between summer and spring is problematic (but spring does not represent the awakening from winter); the beaches stretch out for kilometers in straight lines; and the Brazilian coast is notable for its lack of articulation (when compared, obviously, to the European) (Flusser 1998a, p. 63).

The above allusion to a lack of “articulation”, through which the endless shoreline causes the European to experience discomfort, becomes greater, according to Flusser, as one enters the interior of the country, where one finds an even more desolate state than the one observed on the coast:

But when the tourist abandons the beaches to penetrate the interior [...], it becomes terribly worse. An inarticulate landscape, having at the most five different types of vegetation, in a country of the size of a continent, mostly underbrush, opens up before the tourist travelling the road at a hundred kilometers an hour [...]. There are neither lakes nor streams; no hidden valleys, no majestic peaks, no glaciers, no volcanoes, only isolated rough formations (such as the Cachoeira das Sete Quedas), which remain tedious due to their gigantic dimensions and isolation. There are no visible mammals [...], few birds other than vultures, and the fauna is represented mainly by ants, termites, flies and mosquitoes. A complete desolation (Flusser 1998a, p. 63).

This evaluation of Brazil's nature does not correspond, according to Flusser, to the predominant attitude of Brazilians towards it, either contaminated by boastfulness, or consisting of pure and simple indifference, considering their full insertion in the environment. This attitude may even be belligerent, where nature is identified as an enemy to be fought and defeated for their physical subsistence. For, according to the philosopher, “Brazilian society struggles, unconsciously (and also consciously, in a smaller number) against a perfidious, evil stepmother nature” (Flusser 1998a, p. 71).

As regards this stance, it is fitting to observe that all of these clearly negative aspects indicated by Flusser regarding the Brazilian natural world seem to converge on a single point, namely the philosopher's acknowledgment of the enormous capacity of the country's population to resist the vicissitudes of their surroundings. From this comes his position that the discomfort caused by Brazilian nature motivated him to get closer to Brazilian culture:

The goal was to come into contact with Brazilian nature, which resulted in total failure. It went the other way: the contact with this nature resulted in an almost pathological alienation, an irrational and strongly emotional denial of such inhuman vastness. Before attempting to analyze the causes of such an outcome, it is necessary to confess that the hatred provoked on us by the Brazilian natural surroundings strongly contributed to our subsequent engagement with Brazilian culture. We identified "Brazilian culture" with "fighting against Brazilian nature", and it was precisely this aspect of culture that we were keen on (Flusser 2007, p. 61).

Flusser, before migrating to Brazil, had known European metropolises, where large masses of people circulated, observing that, as also occurs in relation to the landscape, the multitude of residents of large cities in what he calls "historical countries", seemed more "structured" than their Brazilian counterparts. In the latter, he emphasizes a heterogeneity and an amorphous character, in spite of the existence of a single language:

The first contact occurs with a heterogeneous and almost amorphous urban mass. It is true that this mass speaks a single language (Portuguese), and this would seem to provide it with structure. But a keen ear discovers that this language is not an infrastructure (as occurs in European societies), but a mere roof that covers the masses, such as Esperanto or Koiné, under which various other languages pulsate. These are reflected in the Portuguese language itself, to enable the penetration and integration of the masses. (Flusser 1998a, p. 40).

This heterogeneity is related to the fact that the larger Brazilian cities were already growing in a disorderly manner at the time of World War II, amalgamating immigrants from Europe, the Middle East and East Asia, as well as immigrants from the poorer area of Brazil, generating miscellaneous habits, customs and ways of speaking. To this effect, Flusser introduces a distinction between "mixture" and "synthesis", emphasizing that, at the outset, the former characterizes more precisely the heterogeneity of the Brazilian environment at the time of his writing (the early 1970s); however, on the other hand, a real synthesis still had to take place. According to him:

But synthesis is not mixture. The obvious difference is this: in a mixture, the ingredients lose part of their structure, to merge at the lowest denominator. In the synthesis, the ingredients are elevated to a new level, where some of their covert aspects are unveiled. Mixture is the result of an entropic process, while synthesis is the result of negative entropy. Obviously, Brazil is a country of mixture. It is, however, by a qualitative leap, potentially the country of synthesis, as is suggested by the example of race (Flusser 1998a, p. 52).

But on the other hand, the idea of synthesis does not counteract – synchronically – only to the juxtaposition of human beings of the most diverse origins in a single geographical space: taking into consideration, exactly, the growing and continuous influence of “historical” cultures in Brazil’s predominantly “a-historical” situation, Flusser proposes a differentiation – now in a diachronical sense – between *delay* and synthesis. The former presupposes that an unbridled race of “backward” countries moves towards lessening their differences in relation to the developed (“historical”) ones. On the other hand, synthesis is an organic composition of “historical” and “non-historical” elements, in order to reach a higher plane, where the best qualities of each culture are preserved and perfected.

Bearing this concept in mind, Flusser is revealed as a great admirer of Brazilian cultural experiences, wherein such syntheses have taken place. Some of these include, for example, the so called “Barroco Mineiro” (Minas Gerais baroque style) of the eighteenth century, or the Brazilian modernism of the Modern Art Week, in 1922. Considering the cultural experiences Flusser underwent during his period of residency in Brazil, and bearing in mind especially the phenomena of the decades of 1950 and 1960, several examples of synthesis even more complex than those of the “Barroco Mineiro” and the “Modern Art Week of 1922” are mentioned by him, inasmuch as they depart from a larger number of elements of heterogeneous character. These might concern Brazilian science or art:

A painter of Italian origin became the bearer of a *caboclo* [miscegenated Brazilian] message thanks to French technique; a painter of Jewish background synthesized geometric concretism with abstractionism, relying on Brazilian colors; a painter of Japanese origin used Zen techniques to arrive at an American abstractionism with equally Brazilian colors. A poet of Arab origin used Portuguese idiomatic expressions as they were employed by Italian laborers to reach pseudo-Koranic compositions in American concretism; a poet of Greek origin was capable of the reaching the same concretism thanks to Greek rhythm and the use of German meter in the Portuguese tongue; a poet of Brazilian origin, in collaboration with a philologist of Jewish origin, translated Maiakovski, turning him into a model for Brazilian poetry [...] a

writer of Brazilian origin resorted to the language of the interior, enriching it with European elements and putting it in the mouth of a *caboclo* who has read Plotinus, knows Heidegger and Camus and has a Kafkian vision of the world (Flusser 1998a, p. 89).

Flusser's admiration for a possible culture of synthesis, which was being developed in Brazil at that time, is allied to a positive evaluation, which the philosopher made, about the possibilities of a democracy not merely formal, but enrooted in a profound manner of being of the people in the country. These were related to a human reaction to the perverse characteristics he found – whether or not he was right – in Brazilian nature. According to him:

If dialogue is democracy, then Brazilian society is authentically democratic, often in spite of the institutions that attempt to structure it. Brazilians are existentially democratic. In spite of all the enormous differences (larger than elsewhere) between classes, races, cultural and ideological levels, Brazilian society is profoundly united as a society of those who wish to impose the mark of human dignity upon a malign nature (Flusser 1998a, p. 71).

When Flusser says that “the Brazilian people are essentially democratic”, considering even their enormous economic and educational disparities, this generalization is certainly not directed to a more formally educated sector of the population, who might simply declare itself to be democratic, by virtue of its admiration for nations which stand as examples of liberal democracies without effectively being so (the example of such hypocritical mimicry is, incidentally, very present in current day Brazil...). Flusser is referring especially to the majority of the population, those of pronounced African background, who not only have a positive outlook towards life, but also embellish it with an effectively aesthetic dimension, consolidating what he call a “fundamental rhythm”:

In reality, the fundamental rhythm does not manifest itself mainly in acrobatic stunts, nor necessarily in “works” (these, such as samba and playful fights, are nothing more than epiphenomena); it is present, rather, in daily gestures, gestures which inject a rhythmic and sacral element in everyday life and radically distinguish Brazilians from other peoples. The rhythmic way of walking of girls and young women, the dancelike steps of young men in the streets [...], the constant drumming on matchboxes with spoons, the use of typewriters in offices as if they were drums, the transformation of hammers into *atabaques* [percussion beaters], the graceful gestures of young boys when they play football, even the elegance in the street fights, all of this is the manifestation of a profound culture (Flusser 1998a, pp. 136-137).

For Flusser, these non-European roots of Brazilians are exactly what grants them great originality, at the same time as they characterize Brazil as a largely non-historical society, permeated with a religious spirit, impregnated and alive with aesthetic resonances. The potential for creativity in such a culture also results from the possibility of an emergence of a truly new culture, one that would be a synthesis of the “profound culture” of African background with a repertory of European origin. The intellectual elites identify with the latter, being influenced by what is usually denominated as “high culture”. About the possibility of this synthesis, the philosopher declares:

Brazil is a non-historical society, constantly irrigated by the West. The extent of its non-historical character is verified by the African rhythm that characterizes this base culture. In such a culture, a festive and sacred atmosphere permeates daily life and gives Brazilian life its flavor. The extent to which it is irrigated by the West is verified by a false historical culture. The latter places a cloak of blankness and blotter over the base culture, turning the lives of those engaged with it tragic. The false historical culture inundates the lives of the bourgeoisie with fake ambiance, posture, and the articulation of an alien spirit [...]. But this culture also enables its rupture by those who have found themselves and have been able to create a new type of culture, which is a synthesis of the base culture with some Western elements, but which remains fundamentally non-historical, in spite of all (Flusser 1998a, p. 151).

Flusser’s perspective here also applies to elements already present in the Brazilian cultural milieu, such as the carnival, for example, which provides a synthesis of historical and non-historical elements and cannot, according to him, be considered as primitive. In this popular celebration, a sort of sacredness is achieved, thus consolidating a new human type, the *homo ludens*, who, by being open to games and playfulness, is able to give meaning to apparently absurd events, thus projecting upon them a fuller and happier mode of existing. To this effect, Flusser makes an appeal for Brazilian philosophy to approach this phenomenon adequately, for it is not yet part of its themes: “A phenomenology of the carnival is yet to be made”³ (Flusser 1998a, p. 103). A possible exception to be made with regard to the passion of many poor Brazilians towards the carnival, is that it is not rare that some of them place it above their own physical subsistence, which would be a form of alienation: “The fact is: the Brazilian proletarian tends to look for happiness in games before their basic needs are met,

³ See Flusser 1998a (p. 148) regarding the indifference of Brazilian philosophy in what concerns the development of music in the country.

which renders the whole process problematic. Once these needs are satisfied [...], one might live authentically in the game and for the game" (Flusser 1998a, p. 104).

In the presence of the richness provided by the culture of African extraction, Flusser is a harsh critic of the fact that the Brazilian elite makes an explicit choice towards European music, probably in search of the status this choice rewards them. In this context, he considers European music to be "out of phase", to the detriment of important experiments of synthesis, according to the model mentioned below:

Bourgeois alienation has closed its ears to concrete facts, such as that in the base culture, a type of music that has accomplished a synthesis combining Portuguese melody and harmony to African rhythm and instrumentalization; this music has been composed in a country without opera houses (out of phase Italian operas). The bourgeoisie continues building out of phase statues of out of phase composers in out of phase squares; but these remains have been surpassed, for the musical situation has changed radically (Flusser 1998a, pp. 147-148).

In what concerns the possibility of syntheses mentioned before, Flusser is referring to a real revolution in the field of music that was taking place at the time, calling attention to four main tendencies. The first of them, which is probably related, although he does not mention any names, to nationalist tendencies of erudite music, synthesizes "over a Western musical structure, elements of extra-Western music existing in Brazil" (Flusser 1998a, p. 148). The third tendency, which merely taking into account the philosopher's vague description, does not indicate identifiable concrete phenomena, in his view, "attempts a return to the bases of Western music, in order to discover, there, an origin that might be synthesized with other structures" (Flusser 1998a, p. 148). In what concerns the theme of the present article, the second and fourth tendencies are of interest. They are described in Flusser's own words in the following manner:

A second [tendency] attempts to take as its basis North American "protest" music and Russian public declamation, and to inject this basis into the popular music of the base culture, as for example that of the carnival, and that of the "*choros*", also resorting, in this endeavor, to Brazilian poetry. The result, known all over the world by various names (for example, "bossa nova"), is changing the behavior of the Brazilian elite [...] The fourth [tendency] tries to take the carnival as a model of a true *happening*, in which music (including electronic) is no more than an element of game. Such tendency perhaps is not strictly musical, but because it is ludic, it might be the one that changes the scene most violently (Flusser 1998a, p. 148).

Regarding the second tendency, Flusser is explicit in his reference to the bossa nova, highlighting the convergence in it of music of very popular roots, such as samba (and even *chorinho*) with poetry (a paradigmatic case is the partnership between Vinícius de Moraes and Tom Jobim, Carlos Lira, Baden Powell, among others). Besides this, the philosopher refers to a trace which is more characteristic of the second, “more engaged” phase of the bossa nova, which effectively incorporated elements of protest music, as well as an association to a dramaturgy that Flusser interprets as being “Russian”. The fourth tendency, without the philosopher making it explicit, certainly refers to Tropicália, even bearing in mind its immediate political repercussions, such as the imprisonment and the exile of two of its main creators, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, and the association of this musical movement with the youth protest movements at the end of the 1960s.

Concerning the goal of this exposition, it is of utmost importance to insist a bit longer on the role played by bossa nova within the scope of the Brazilian syntheses mentioned above, ones that deeply impressed Flusser. For him, in reality, the importance of bossa nova went much further than that of a movement of Brazilian popular music, for it reached, in a positive manner, the very core of the Portuguese language as it is spoken in Brazil, with repercussions in the entire culture of the country, going even further than the erudite art movements, such as the Modern Art Week of 1922 (which was, by the way, greatly admired by the philosopher):

Portuguese is a prime example of a melodic language, and speaking Portuguese is almost like singing it. Thus melody is not a challenge, and Portuguese and Brazilian romantics are sweet to the extent that they're hard to digest. The challenge for Portuguese is harmony [...], but especially rhythm. It seems incredible, but this challenge was not perceived until bossa nova appeared. In a country where the African rhythm is dominant in all fields, something which, in a certain sense, grants personality to the culture as a whole, literary and poetic production was limited to a mechanical calculation of syllables, completely alienated from reality. In this manner, more than the renowned Week of 1922, it is the bossa nova which represents a first rate aesthetic revolution. Not so much as music, but as literature. It is the first conscious manipulation of the rhythm of the language (Flusser 2007, p. 77).

A little further ahead, Flusser resumes praise for the bossa nova, at the same time as he criticizes the formalist tendencies in Brazilian poetry. These are tendencies which place the metric aspect above all others, giving emphasis to the written character of the Portuguese language, in detriment of the above mentioned melodious speech: “But Portuguese and Brazilian literature do not count, in the syllables, the ‘quality’, but the ‘quantity’, and it does this inauthentically, that is, disdaining the spoken

reality – the exception, let us repeat with emphasis, occurs with bossa nova” (Flusser 2007, pp. 78-79).

Although Flusser suggests that the importance of bossa nova is literary rather than musical, and considering his emphasis that “the challenge for Portuguese is harmony”, it should be remembered that the harmonic richness of this Brazilian style, derived from jazz and French impressionism, is also an integrating part of this additional example of synthesis in Brazilian culture, in which a culture of African origin prevails.

As an additional topic to be highlighted, it can be seen that, from the mid 1970s onwards, Flusser would only occasionally deal with themes related to Brazilian culture, concentrating mainly in aspects of his philosophy of the media, including the “technical images”, as well as concepts related to his notion of “post-history”, such as “apparatuses”, “functionaries”, “programs”, etc. Even so, in his most important book about this conception, *Pós-história. Vinte instantâneos e um modo de usar*, Flusser makes a reference to bossa nova once again. This book deals with, among other topics, the most typical situations of our tumultuous contemporary world, such as the oppression of individuals by technological society, the manipulation of mass communication media, and the loss of meaning in human relations. In one of the chapters, entitled “Nossa espera” the philosopher makes a reference, without naming it explicitly, to Chico Buarque’s song “Pedro Pedreiro”, identifying it as bossa nova, even though it is more fitting to classify it as “MPB” (Brazilian Popular Music). For Flusser, the typical act of waiting in post-history converges with the situation of the “functionary”, (the bricklayer, in the sense given by the philosopher, is also a functionary), who finds himself in the constant expectation that his life will improve, although it does not happen. According to the philosopher, “There is a ‘bossa nova’ that sings of a functionary that waits for the five o’clock train, while his wife waits for him at home with the dinner and in her womb a child waits to be born in order to the wait for the five o’clock train. This is the phenomenological description of waiting in times of functionalism” (Flusser 2013, p. 122).

As Flusser quotes the lyrics from memory, since the book was written after the period in which he definitely left Brazil and moved to the south of France, there are various imprecisions and incorrections regarding the content of the song, as may be checked in Chico Buarque’s songbook, where the lyrics are also included (Hollanda 1989, pp. 24-28). One might, however, question why Flusser automatically links this song to the bossa nova, especially since, as mentioned above, Chico Buarque’s identity is not necessarily associated with this tendency. The answer might have to do, initially, with the fact that according to the philosopher, “protest music” has an aspect that is clearly configured as denunciation of the proletariat’s exploitive situation, which has very little chance of improvement.

Besides this, and considering that the song belongs to Chico Buarque's first phase, bossa nova remains a strong influence, in a purely musical sense. This may be verified by the harmony incorporated to the song – if not established, at least authorized by the composer – which relies on a purely bossa nova harmonic progression, as of the type T-Sr-D-T (tonic, relative subdominant, dominant and return to the tonic), using the major chords of a sixth, seventh, ninth (major and minor) and thirteenth, as well as the minor chords of a seventh, as it can be seen in the passage below:

The image shows a musical score for a bossa nova song, consisting of three staves of music. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes. Above the notes, chord diagrams are provided for various chords: G6, Am7, D9, G6, Am7, D9, G6, Am7, F#m7, B9, Em7, and Am7. The lyrics are: "Pe-dro pe-drei-ro pen-sai-ro es-pe-ran-do o trem Ma-nhã pa-re-ce co-re-ce de-es-pe-rar tam-bém Pa-ra o bem de quem tem bem De quem não tem vin-tém Pe-dro pe-drei-ro fi-ca ai-sim pen-san-".

To conclude, it is interesting to observe that when Flusser mentions bossa nova, he is referring to a rather elaborate type of “popular” song, not only in terms of its musical aspect (considering the parameters for this sort of music), but also in terms of its textual aspect. This does not keep him from noticing that there are important differences in terms of the quality of material transmitted by mass media. In a harsh criticism of such commercial musical hits, he declares:

The popular song of the present has an ephemeral existence; it appears in an epidermal form, in thousands of records, gushing out of thousands of loudspeakers to flood the air, and then drowning in an ocean of forgetfulness. It bears the indelible mark of commercialism. Its simplicity results from a search for the lowest common denominator, and its economy is the result of a quest for profit. But the phenomenal success, in spite of being ephemeral, of some of these songs is proof of their capacity to capture, as by a fortunate strike, an aspect of the collective consciousness (Flusser 1998, p. 78).

The difference of the bossa nova, as an example of the Brazilian cultural synthesis so admired by Flusser, in relation to this sort of music for

masses is that, in the former, the “aspect of the collective consciousness” is not captured by “a fortunate strike”: it is, rather, the result of a long and deep amalgamation process, combining African and European elements to arrive at a musical form that is far from being an ephemeral object of consumption.

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Vilém Flusser, who lived in Brazil for over thirty years, became a very interested observer of several aspects of the life and the culture of the country. In opposition to many foreigners who visited Brazil in the previous times, Flusser was not well impressed by the nature of the country and his benevolent judgement was directed solely to its culture, which he evaluated as a very curious mixture of European, African and indigenous elements. He was always aware of the possible syntheses that could arise from all these influences, having a special passion for the Afro-Brazilian cultural phenomena. Among these he emphasized the role of the Brazilian popular music, specially the one of the Bossa Nova, that synthesized Afro-Brazilian rhythms with impressionist and jazzy harmony and modernistic poetry.

KEYWORDS: popular culture, cultural synthesis, afro-brazilian cultural phenomena, modernism.

