Image/Text

_____

Vilem Flusser

I

Photography. A Symbolic or Representative Image.

Community street work. Managua. Nicaragua. 1986.

A meditation on aesthetically utilizing the political image as 'objective photograph' to subjectively frame what is to be seen as real.

A photograph may no longer represent the actual but the symbolic which is more so a reference to a reality rather than a representation of it (which maybe objectively different to what is subjectively perceived). It is a matter of understanding what is visually presented not only by seeing with one's eyes but also by recognizing what is seen with one's mind to garner a truthful interpretation of what is actually real rather than what is assumed to be real. Take for instance this photo taken in mid-1986 of males working together to a repair a local street in Managua. The men appear cheerful and willingly doing what is worthy to improve the material

living standard of where they live. It was explained by a good humoured Englishman who I had befriended while in Nicaragua as to what was happening and who is also helping out and who like so many of the other foreigners at the time were in Nicaragua to show solidarity with the Sandinista government which was mostly under direct military threat from right-wing counter-revolutionary paramilitaries – the 'contras' – who were being backed by the U.S. government which at the time this photograph was taken Ronald Reagan was the U.S. President. The good I saw happening before me was an antidote to the bad that I had learnt was being committed by Reagan's so called 'freedom fighters' who were known to have attacked civilian infrastructure such as schools and medical centres and murdered innocent people. Thus such 'freedom fighters' were really terrorists. Therefore, I took this photo with a sense of genuine sympathy towards those who on a grassroots level were literally attempting both materially and politically building up what was for them a liberating new world; seemingly based on a community based participatory democratic model which even for us in the so-called advanced West resting on the supposed progressive laurels of our apparently maturing liberal democracies could view as inspirational. Such was the youthful optimism that one held at the time…and which one saw no reason to re-evaluate until much later when one surprisingly learnt more about what may have actually been taking place at the time which would lead to a need to recalibrate one's original hopeful outlook. It was not so much that what one had seen was untrue but rather what was true was more so perhaps multi-dimensional rather than singularly absolute. After all, there was a dilapidated footpath in need of much repair and there were many local citizens working hard to restore it for everyone's common use. Revolutionary civic action positively taking place. Yes, this cannot be denied and which must not be dismissed. Yet, what may be belatedly queried is the individual motivational factor of each participant who was involved in this erstwhile communal effort. A query that cannot be resolved by human vision but rather by human knowledge. A query that needs examination for it is assumed that social change that is to the good has been arrived at by voluntary communal consent and not by any political coercion of which a people's revolution would supposedly resist. While lately casually reading up on Daniel Ortega who has proven to be an authoritarian ruler during his second reiteration as Nicaragua's President in the 2000s – many years after when he was President of Nicaragua during the revolutionary Sandinista period of mainly the 1980s whose stated emancipatory ideals he has since emphatically betrayed – one learns of the Sandinista Defence Committees which depending on one's ideological point of view such a grassroots network organization which during their existence would be widespread throughout Nicaraguan society and (1) could be positively seen as participatory democracy in mass action or (2) negatively observed as a 'trojan horse embedding' of the party's will over the general populous. After all there was the official claim that these committees which could communally facilitate to meet community needs could also loyally serve as a neighbourhood watch to sight any citizens with sabotaging counterrevolutionary sympathies. Nevertheless, even on a benign level from what I have read it is clear that certain rights or privileges could be denied to anybody that was not interested in becoming involved in the activities of the defence committees and thus it made me wonder if the people I had seen working so enthusiastically to fix this footpath were there out of a genuine revolutionary zeal or because they feared to be seen as 'delinquents of the revolution' (if not outright traitors) and thus to be socially ostracized…? One now will never know - even though one also learns from reading various articles that perhaps by the time this photo was taken there would be official efforts to democratically reform the committees which by the mid-1980s were apparently also actually becoming less prevalent due to an unwanted vertical top-down power approach and thus to revive them by becoming more inclusively horizontal – to even eventually replace *'sandinista defense'* with *'community development'* in an attempt to be apolitical - but when I presently look at this photo I am somewhat compelled at the very least to question my original positive

mental framing of it based on what I was told at the time from what I have since learnt to be other possibilities as to why these men were there which could widely range on a political spectrum that went anywhere from sincere commitment through to covert fear. Thus, the truth of this image cannot be discerned from simply observing what is happening in it but having to also understand the underlying political pre-conditions which brought this communal action about (which definitely was not as co-operatively spontaneous as I first thought but rather involved an already government established incorporated 'people's template') and which may actually defy the assumed 'reality' which one may think is being 'revealed' in the image and thus lies the fine distinction in the 'mind of the beholder' between it being labelled as a factual visual affirmation of real revolutionary principles at work on a practical level or as a deceptive contrivance of 'political theatre' thus being a human illusion more befitting of being outright labelled as propaganda. (It really is all of a matter of one's perspective which brings up the deeper enquiry as to what is actually one's view of the world and how is it what one believes is authentic…?). Yet as to the authenticity of what is occurring in this photo although one can have doubts – as mentioned - I still have a vivid memory of this particular afternoon and by all accounts from what I can still mentally visualise and emotionally sensualize from such a long ago experience the vivid sense of celebration that I immediately encountered still makes me sense that most of the workers in this actual photo had a sincere desire to altruistically do what was best for their immediate community. (Such can be the 'human enigma').

Some articles on the Sandinista Defence Committees. *
 *There are many articles and one may like to look them up but for now have only chosen to highlight a handful

Sandinista National Liberation Front. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandinista_National_Liberation_Front
Sandinista Defence Committees. Encyclopedia. com.
https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sandinista-defense-committees

Nicaragua: Omar Cabezas Appointed National Coordinator Of Sandinista Defense Committees

Deborah Tyroler. LADB. (September 1988).

https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/227719461.pdf

Nicaragua. CDS: Revolution in the Barrio. Envio. (September 1989).
https://www.revistaenvio.org/articulo/2738

II

Vilem Flusser's Media Theory as stated for instance in his *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*.

 Yet why this sudden interest in an image…no matter what it maybe…? As a starting point one has taken an interest in the media theories of Vilem Flusser as stated in his *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* (Reaktion Books. 1983) as randomly discovered one day in a second hand bookshop and which immediately intrigued me.

A pdf copy of this book *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* by Vilem Flusser can be accessed by way of the following link:

http://imagineallthepeople.info/Flusser_TowardsAPhilosophyofPhotography.pdf
_____

  A short book which one could say – as what follows is a personal perception as well as response (which may be deemed as inadequate) to what I have read of this visionary book - deals with visual literacy or perhaps with a modern day lack of it as humanity - as it is suggested – enters a new epoch whereby in regards to human communication the image once more is becoming ascendant over text which in turn had been the major cultural transmission of human thought when writing was invented several thousand years ago which beforehand images had for the first time dominated. I have to say when I started reading this book I actually thought it was recently published well within the new internet age so was surprised it was written way back in 1983 as for me so much of what it states seems prophetic and easily applicable to the present digital realm.
_____

Other commentary by Vilem Flusser.

Thought and Reflection. Vilem Flusser. Flusser Studies 01.
https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/thought-reflection01.pdf

Line and Surface. Vilem Flusser.
https://monoskop.org/images/f/f4/Flusser_Vilem_1973_Line_and_Surface.pdf

 There are also various articles that provide an explanation of Visum Flusser's media theory including the following:

 How to Orientate Oneself in the World: A General Outline of Flusser's Theory of Media.
Bram Ieven. February. 2003. IMAGE [&] NARRATIVE. Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative.
Issue 6. Media Theory.
https://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/mediumtheory/bramieven.htm

Notes on Vilém Flusser's Philosophy of Photography: Chapter 1, the Image. Joseph Weissman.
October. 2007**.** Fractal Ontology.
https://fractalontology.wordpress.com/2007/10/23/notes-on-villem-flussers-philosophy-of-photography-chapter-1-the-image/

The polysemy of Vilem Flusser's concept of illusion. FRANCESCO RESTUCCIA, Sapienza - Università AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Studies. Issue Number 2. 2022.
https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/anicon/article/view/17655/17772

Vilem Flusser - The Pinocchio. Theory. shaviro.com
https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/anicon/article/view/17655/17772

Vilém Fluser: A brief introduction to his media philosophy. Siegfried Zielinski. Vilem Flusser Archive. Introduction II. Flusser's view on art. mecad online seminar._

III

Commentary. (i.e. various *ad hoc* comments).

Thus in the following collection of personal commentary although somewhat expansive is initially a response to some of Vilum Flusser's insights on media issues so it should be declared that some of his points of view are embedded within it. It should also be stated that the following discussion mainly focuses only on that photography which it could be said is beholden to a political dimension looking at the possibility of blinding any human reality rather than revealing it; with that said it should also be made clear there is much photography that serves a positively instructive humanizing purpose such as one sees at the World Press Photo exhibition that one attends every year which can be particularly educative on various aspects of the human experience in relation to many political, social, environmental etcetera issues. It is a matter of recognizing that as the image seemingly prevails evermore over text in this modern era that the viewer simply not be passive but develop a critical eye on what one sees in order to discern what is true; as it has to be understood that photography which can be generally assumed to be an objective creative form can have a subjective quality to it (both intentional and unintentional) which could adversely affect one's perspective on believing what is real and thus it is simply a matter of keeping this possibility in mind when viewing a photograph and how as well the viewer also has a responsibility of realising that one may even project one's own views onto an image which may even be vastly different from the viewpoint of the photographer. In essence, photography is often seen as a window on reality but the window may only be revealing a certain cropped aspect of it, rather than what it may fully be. Thus, in relation to political-orientated imagery a distorted reading may then unfortunately result and which can be especially dangerous when any simplistic or populist point-of-view is allowed to be significantly affirmed, so as to insidiously over-ride the actual contextual social, cultural, political and historical complexities of any milli-second visually presented situation. Not to only (visually) make human memory, but to change it.

As it is one possible reason that media such as images and texts exist is so humanity can symbolically make sense of the world around it which is otherwise chaotic and perhaps even without meaning. Although one may argue that as humanity's consciousness lays down its own cultural template onto the surrounding world to make sense of it there is the paradox that while seeking out for what is real humanity will only achieve in defining reality on its terms; especially when the human imagination seemed at first to be more so involved to mystically provide the world with spiritual or metaphysical meaning rather than to fully rationally understand its physical forces as well as its mechanical and biological operations; thus to have visionary supposition predominate over cognitive analysis rather than say for there to be a dynamic balance between intuition and logic and thus leading, in hindsight, at least, to an instinctive self-reflection whereby humanity to this day must question whether our comprehension of reality – including what reality is - is actually subjective rather than objective.

Religion. Science. Ideology. Theology. Morality. Politics. Medicine. Architecture. Agriculture. Engineering. Mathematics. Design. Strategy. Language. Literature. Poetry. Astronomy. Art. Education. Psychology. Philosophy. So many countless various strands of human thought and activity that highlight for us how there are multiple psychic aspects of human knowledge (being within the human mind) that ceaselessly avails to learn what is validly true.

Truth. Reality. To shift from hypothesis or speculation to data and fact. One may say that one aspect of human history is an ongoing learning by study and experience to progressively bring on human advancement; yet, regressively as well there has been and still is human failure; for human healing and human cruelty seemingly go so much hand in hand which has always perplexed and cursed the human species despite also the many blessings. One of these blessings has been able to communicate symbolically such as by way of pictorial imagery as cave paintings in Europe e.g. of animals and perhaps also 'capturing' human memory with psychic narratives associated with such animals transferred by hand onto a cave wall to serve various purposes whether it maybe ritual, spiritual, instructional or even historical.

Nevertheless, I speculate as I am not referring to any anthropological studies or theories and yet I will suggest to an uneducated modern audience what is portrayed on cave walls may along with any religious purpose may also have concrete applications to those who originated them involving various biological, social and cultural aspects of daily life through to any possible communal and internalized spiritual processes that linked human beings to the environment in which they lived proving to be essential not only for their survival but also to protecting and respecting their surroundings which also needed to be regenerative for the survival any prehistoric human society.

Images can be produced so as to help human beings to find their way around the world as well as their place in it. However, already being once removed from the world such images which can both symbolize or represent can as Flusser has suggested be maps but also be screens between us and the world which we wish to orientate ourselves in and from what I gather this may come about when the image is allowed to interpret the world for us as a *function of distortion* rather than simply describing it as a *function of accuracy* and thus the image may present the world as it *might be* and which may have control over us rather than simply being a visual tool to be used by us to act in the world *as is*.

As previously mentioned cave paintings often depicted animals far more so than humans (with, mysteriously, only human hand prints actually being most common in regards to human representation) and as well the animals represented were not always necessarily those that were hunted for prey which implies the possibility that such images may have played some sort of ritualistic role rather than just being initial attempts to record observable reality. Although it is now likely that the portrayal of animals could also have had a pragmatic motive in terms of informational record keeping as next to some depicted species there have been found as a sort of proto-writing with a row of dots which according to the hypothesis may actually be calendars referencing animal behaviour such as when they mated which hunters obviously saw as useful to know i.e. animals with a row of dots beside them symbolised lunar month cycles when breeding occurred and if so this would be a very early form of pictograph which over thousands of years was to eventually develop into linear writing.

Yes, human observation was essential in order to accurately paint the animals depicted but the *purpose* of these images involved psychologically requiting the human imagination which

may have been *interpreting* reality on an *abstract* level so as perhaps defensively cope with a world of motion with its changing seasons and weather that was seemingly brought on by *unseen* natural forces while amidst this natural wilderness were animals such as those depicted on cave walls who could survive as if being part of nature and not separate from it while human beings had to rely solely on their intelligence rather than falling back on their biology as animals could to stay alive. After all, animals are biologically equipped to live in the natural world while humans in their naked state are not. Thus, to hunt to eat that which may have also been revered.

It is not fully understood what motivated our distant ancestors to paint these animals within these deep caves but one could hypothesize that these images of 'natural beings' may have served as symbolic conduits to the natural forces that had such a major influence on humanity's chances of liveability. That which is unseen as *spirit* and thus to accommodate the spirit world would suit a vulnerable humanity seeking guarantees to preserve its ongoing existence. Religion as a human abstract to authenticate a humanity instinctually implementing observable human practices to achieve the survivability of the species in this *seen* world.

As it is after survival there would be ascendency.

Art in the caves (presumably along with ephemeral shamanistic and communal cultural practices that have not survived the passage of time) played a significant social function and so it can be hypothesized that although from a human perspective there may have been a belief that human culture was being underpinned from an objective reading of the world it is clear that what was being deemed as real was coming by way of a subjective point of view.

Thus, one could presume that the images would change as the society would change and as it is as religious interpretations of the world would stay dominant the previous realistic ritualistic depiction of animals would culturally metamorphize to symbolically become mythical representations of gods who held unquestionable sway over the natural order of which they had even created and would have as their 'human conduits' aristocratic leaders of increasingly urbanised societies which along increasingly patriarchal lines had developed strict hierarchical social structures with a priestly caste that sanctioned the absolute power of a warrior ruler who was emphatically seen as 'blessedly' bestowed with divine authority. (Although with the Ancient Greeks they seemed to more so than other ancient societies to have distinctly humanized their divinities).

Reality could be thoroughly shaped by those in power and so images would be utilized towards this overarching end which were to theocratically verify the 'objectivity' of such an overtly subjectified political supremacy. One of course, speaks generally, yet, as it is: it is common knowledge that art can serve an ideological purpose which is the case to this day and can extend its propaganda influence not only in the political realm but also in accompanying economic and social spheres of our human world.

Nevertheless, it is of interest that at the zenith mythological height of political illusion that as existed in ancient times (although the totalitarian regimes of these mostly secularized modern times may equally measure up to those absolutist kingdoms of the past in regards to the totality of their ideological capture of reality) it became vital as societies became more complex that there develop for the purposes of smoothly securing the state's ongoing prowess and existence a transportable form of recorded human communication that could actually *objectively* verify

most human activity within its borders as well as with other states. e.g. to keep accurate accounting records of the transactions of goods.

 Human calculation to overcome or supersede human imagination.

 Writing came about to serve an utilitarian function which was the everyday acquisition of essential information that the state needed so as to properly function. A new linear symbolic structure would evolve which was at first pictorially based (much like images visually 'capturing' objects from the actual world) and then to eventually be replaced by phonetically based alphabets based on the actual language word use of human oracy; along with 'capturing' sounds that are unseen there would also come the accompanying symbolic 'capture' of human conceptual thinking which is also unseen i.e. *ideas*. Thus, while text would initially serve a factual purpose (and which it still does) it too would also eventually serve an ideological purpose (which of course it still does to this day).

 However, a media theoretician such as Vilum Flusser - assuming I have read him correctly; would state that text would for centuries come to predominate over the image and which apparently also brought into the human psyche a sense of linear progression which can be perceived as historical consciousness until the advent of photography which now apparently supersedes text as the prime carrier of human communication so much so as to even directly affect human action as evidenced in this modern age with its ubiquitous saturation of the visual so much so whereby human behaviour has changed to the extent that it deliberately devises to act in a way simply for the benefit of a photograph to be taken.

 To have a photograph no longer passively or arbitrarily documenting the human world but actually directly affecting the human world so it may then be deliberately recorded for some social (or propaganda) purpose.

 (Notably, a photo is meant to have the 'upper hand' on truth with the assumption that it can technically provide humanity with an objective 'window' onto reality which for instance other visual forms such as painting, printmaking readily cannot).

 A photograph can capture a historical moment that can now exist out of linear time or as Flusser would say to now rise up into a state of transcendence which is where all other art could be said to exist and so one could also presume that whatever the original meaning may have been applied to the photograph by those who first saw it may actually change in the years ahead by later generations who could view it differently depending on how it will be contextually reframed. In other words, the photographer had one reason (or attitude) as to why the photograph was taken but an observer may have another reason to view it to even perhaps confirm an attitude that may even be opposite to what the photographer had intended.
 Yet, to return to this already much observed human world by way of Flusser who in one chapter of his discussion - *The Reception of Photographs* in *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* – he mentions what our response could be towards a typical war scene in Lebanon which maybe in a newspaper. Although there is accompanying text which may involve the actual complex historical circumstances that have brought about a tragically horrific war scene that we are presently witnessing for a few seconds through the photograph taken by a photographer who is immersed in the reality that he visually depicts it is usually the case that our moral judgement of this war scene will be mostly devised by what we see rather than by what we read as we seek out to understand the human drama before us in a simpler binary way wanting to determine that which is good and that which is bad in terms of who is responsible

in a casual (or cause or effect) way; our opinion is not necessarily formulated from the article of which we may not trust or agree with anyway but rather by seeking out visual cues from the photograph because it is 'real' which can 'verify' what is our already pre-determined view of the war and who it is that is at fault and thus should be blamed as well who we should support to mete out punishment on the wrong side. In other words: there is a preference or inclination to a one-dimensional aspect of reality rather than to a multi-dimensional one which can be more readily accommodated by an image rather than by any textual analysis. It is not to suggest that everyone en masse only looks at a picture and ignores the article but to point out that this maybe the case when an especially polarizing news item is brought to our attention which such as one involving a war.

 After all, one feels confident to say that war is a heinous topic that is often a highly charged emotional matter...while those directly involved may take a predictable partisan stance and view any media article (as well as documentary, discussion or photo essay) from a highly prejudicial point of view as the moral clarity of the war is obvious to them for outside 'neutrals' it can more be the case of having to mentally venture through a 'moral haze' which they hope various news items will be able to mindfully disperse for them especially if genuinely interested in seeking out the truth of the war situation (thus one suspects such apparent neutrals who, as well, will often only have a superficial comprehension of a particular conflict would be the 'target audience' of any disingenuous, well-organised social media disinformation campaign which may - or not be meted out - by both - or more - of the opposing warring sides and it is so often presently the case that the image can be the pre-eminent rhetorical weapon in such disinformation campaigns which aim to have their narrative gain the moral high ground with human emotion often utilized so much more so as to trump over human logic in order to manipulatively acquire an audience's allegiance).

 Thus while photography may have been hopefully perceived as a reliable new format to record historical events objectively human choice is still involved in the selection and production of an image thus it can still have a subjective quality which is not an issue in of itself but unlike a painting whereby it is clear that what is presented - no matter how pictorially accurate the image maybe of an event, landmark, building, landscape or person - one is still aware that another human being was involved in producing it; to thus understand that what one sees is at least one step removed from reality; yet, with a photograph where upon the viewer is presented with a direct revelation of a historical reality of any subject matter (although it may at first have only been a monochrome version) there is a greater sense that what is being viewed - and which has also relied on the laws of science to miraculously come into existence rather than by a painterly human hand – is assumed to have a neutral quality even though it is mindfully known (if even only on a subconscious level) that a photographer with a particular camera format produced this apparently lifelike reproduction of the world.

 It may not always occur to the viewer that by uncritically looking at any technical reflection of the world which has been taken from the exact point of view as the photographer that what is also being captured is the viewer's loyalty to the photographer's vision of reality. It is not that such acceptance is an issue but rather that it be assumed there is no need to query a photograph especially when it so much affirms what one believes reality to be (as against what it may actually be).

It does seem if there was any modern day hope of dispassionately affirming reality over illusion by way of the 'technical image' (Flusser's term for the photograph) it has not adequately been realised.

It should also be mentioned that in the ubiquitous digital era of social media - which can have a greater societal effect than the previous analogue period of mass media - there has been for politically driven propaganda purposes so as to undermine any opposing narrative the malicious use of manipulative digital techniques to create false technical images whereby such bad faith actors insidiously betray any initial trust in the photograph being a truthful window on reality.

To assuredly discern the *real* which has been a human dilemma since prehistory when the first cave painting appeared being the first intimations of when human beings in good faith began to abstractly reflect on the physical world around them it does still seem remain so to this day that even with the increase in human knowledge that has been acquired over the many tens of thousands of years since and with our many scientific and medical advances in some ways we still do not really know what the real is in much the same way that ephemeral mental universe we know as the mind - with which is human consciousness - essentially remains a mystery.

There is the quantum realm with its wave-particle duality which seemingly defies classical physics and so one cannot but think of Vilem Flusser pointing out during an interview in Budapest that as scientists in their reductive attempt to calculate the universe down to its fundamental element - which for now in the Standard Model is the quark a subatomic particle within the neutron of an atom - which despite a quark apparently being indivisible there is still an interest in exploring the subatomic realm; which may yet prove to be an infinite proposition when any human sense in regards to the materiality of matter becomes dealing ever more with immaterial qualities and so much so that a theoretical or mathematical ambiguity may arise whereby as Flusser had envisaged that there could be the worrisome quandary that what may no longer be studied is reality itself but rather a human projection of it; which may speculatively only take us back to wondering about the natural forces of the universe as well as it composition with a human sensation strikingly reminiscent of instinctual Neolithic interpretations of those same natural forces that were to cave painters visibly in evidence in a primal world of a primal universe.

Thus against all expectations to have to comes to terms with a loop metaphysical 'understanding' of the physical order if a cohesive unity that may exist between a space-time continuum with its three dimensions and a quantum multi-dimensional realm remains beyond our mental grasp while being unable to measure or observe if it all exists.

To only have faith in the unknown if it cannot be discovered due to an ongoing inability to directly observe may have us exploring in a 'no person's zone' of human knowledge where there may not be a fusion but at least a sounding out between science (human vision) and philosophy (human instinct).

In much the same way a hunter may know where to find prey but inevitably will still rely on instinct to thrust one's spear if what is sought after remans hidden in the terrain.

It could be mused humanity in its ongoing mediation to acquire further knowledge has to deal with the shadows of a seemingly infinite micro subatomic or cosmic dark matter underbrush that still stealthily camouflage the outer fields of matter on both such micro and macro levels of all reality.

It was the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov who mused that science does not necessarily exactly hand out absolute truth but it is a human discipline that can work as a mechanism that allows us to keep trying to enhance our knowledge of nature. Thus presumably for Asimov the scientific method as a system - with its process of hypothesis and experimentation - allows us to test our thoughts against the universe to see if what we presume about the cosmos does match up with what we discover; thus for our lives what we envisage as imagination can be re-envisaged as real and Asimov was of the belief that people would want to know that what they assumed to know about the character of the universe was accurate, in any case at the very least know as much as humanly possible about what the universe is really like.

https://libquotes.com/isaac-asimov/quotes/universe