

Presentation of *On Rabies* by Vilém Flusser

During an *online* conference organized by the Flusser Club (<http://flusser.club/>) on the occasion of the centenary of Vilém Flusser on May 12, 2020, one of the participants asked if there was any writing by Flusser whose theme could be somewhat related to the current pandemic. Flusser wrote indeed a few texts about masks, but they deal with theater masks, which he sometimes compared to facades, and not with surgical masks. We have found only one text by Flusser about viruses, and we thought it would be interesting to republish it now, in these times of the COVID 19 pandemic.

It is an article titled *Da raiva*, On Rabies, published in issue 613 of the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, on February 8, 1969, on page 4 of the Literary Supplement of the newspaper. A copy of the published article is kept in the folder M3_ESTADO SAO PAULO of the Vilém Flusser Archive. In this copy of the published article, a handwritten mention was added by Flusser to the title: "Bacterias que provocam doenças", "Bacteria that cause disease". But in the text of the article itself, Flusser correctly mentions viruses, not bacteria.

Several identical typescripts of this article can be found in the folder BOOK 32-1-COISAS [2332]_COISAS QUE ME CERCAM of the Vilém Flusser Archive: this could indicate that Flusser had thought of including it in his book project *Coisas que me cercam* (Things around me) which was presented to the Fund for Culture of the State of São Paulo in 1970 but was never published.

The original text in Portuguese was transcribed by Marc Lenot from the published text; it was translated into German by Lothar Hartmann (revision Steffi Winkler), into English by Baruch Gottlieb and into French by Marc Lenot.

Flusser has repeatedly expressed an interest in biology and zoology as programmatic models; perhaps the most striking example of this interest is his friendship with Louis Bec and the book they produced together, *Vampyrothentis Infernalis*, starting in 1980 or 81. In this article on the rabies virus, Flusser first proposes to consider how the virus "sees" man; it then analyzes the hierarchy between humans and the virus according to three criteria, genetical, structural and behavioral.

Reversing the perspective between human and non-human, Flusser thus shows that the virus is more coherent than humans, knowing which organs to attack, planning its invasion of the human body, while the human victim undergoes this attack which causes incoherent symptoms in his body, such as wandering restlessly and having an aversion to water (the symptoms due to Covid are also incoherent: respiratory problems and loss of smell and taste).

However, from a structural point of view, man is considered more advanced than the primitive virus, because it has a more complex structure. But, from a genetic point of view, the virus is more

evolved, because its existence presupposes the anterior existence of man. In terms of behaviour, the virus knows how to use the human structure to achieve its ends (this is also the case of the coronavirus). The virus has a predetermined behavior (programmed one might say, thinking of his texts on the *apparatus*), thus closed and predictable, while man has an open behavior that allows him to decide for himself and act (and, for instance, to cure himself).

A hierarchy of living beings could be based on the degree of pre-determination of behaviour by hereditary, purely biological factors: man, who could enjoy more freedom, would be at the top of this hierarchy. But Flusser, then entering into a comparison with primates, questions this freedom of behavior: if the baby monkey is born perfectly formed, and therefore entirely determined by its uterine circumstances, the newborn man needs a year or more to achieve a similar "structural perfection". During this semi-fetal period, the human baby is therefore subjected to a social and cultural conditioning (including language) that will determine it as much as heredity. For Flusser, basing a hierarchy between species on this criterion of determination and openness avoids the excesses of genetics and a static and formalistic structuralism.

Starting with a reflection on the rabies virus, Flusser's thinking leads him to the issue of the determination of freedom by the degree of openness of a structure, whether human or animal.

(Marc Lenot)