

**Vilém Flusser****Beasts I – Ants***(Folha de S. Paulo, March 22, 1972)*

The United States (and presumably also the Soviet Union) spend considerable sums attempting to locate intelligent beings in the cosmos to communicate with them. The premises behind such quests are apparently these: such beings must exist because the cosmos is big, and such beings must be more intelligent than us, because it is difficult to imagine that they might be even less intelligent. The two premises are a little dubious, but they serve to justify the attempt of the human species to break through its agonizing loneliness.

In the past loneliness was not so terrible. Angels and gods used to make love with the daughters of men; magicians specialized in such tasks used to communicate with superior powers and medieval saints used to talk with birds and fish. Human isolation emerged with the Renaissance. Man (with capital M) started to assume that he is the sole subject of the world, he began to assume the world as his object and started to manipulate the world scientifically and technologically. Such human loneliness is elegantly called “humanism.” Currently the only possible extra-human contacts are the conversations of retirees with dogs and those of old maids with parrots.

This is surprising. The human species is not the only species on Earth, after all. Why spend millions of dollars to communicate with uncertain species on uncertain planets from Alpha Centauri if there are undoubtable species nearby, which we have not even tried to communicate with yet? Ants are an example. The answer is this: because it may be easy to communicate with angels, gods, and superior forces (once they speak Hebrew, Greek, or Nago), and with the inhabitants of Betelgeuse (once they speak English), but it is terribly difficult to communicate with ants. They are so thick-witted that they do not even comprehend such universal languages as mathematics and logic (Aristotelian or Russellian). Or rather are we the thick-witted ones, who do not even understand the symbols of the bees’ dance?

Every intelligent communication is conventional in the sense that it demands of its partakers to agree about the meanings of the symbols it resorts to using. If I say to a student “In Spanish, ‘dog’ is *‘perro’*”<sup>1</sup> and the student replies “I do not believe that and I do not like it,” I will never be able to speak Spanish with him. Who knows if we, instead of the ants, are the ones who behave like the student? It is worth trying to change attitude. Perhaps ants have information (e.g., about the social organization) that is worth something? As negative examples?

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, English, and dog. Adapted in order to keep the sense.

## **Beasts II – Chimps**

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Contemplate a caged chimpanzee in a zoo. It smokes cigarettes, rides a bicycle, and eats with knife and fork. It would be a highly educational spectacle for elementary school students if it did not sometimes assume frankly obscene poses. It can still be visited by elementary courses nonetheless, once both students and teachers pretend not to know the meaning of such poses. Innocence visiting innocence, a heart-touching spectacle.

Who is the chimpanzee, after all? Our indirect ancestor (let us say great-uncle), and our closest relative apart from other humans. Eating chimpanzee meat would be virtually anthropophagy, and a restaurant that included roasted chimp hands on its menu would even incur religious troubles. Although the immortal soul was a prerogative of our species (according to the teaching of Western religions), the facial expression of the chimpanzee articulates something very similar to the soul, much more similar than the expression of the cow (we apologize to Hindus that might be reading this article). Without a doubt such similarity disturbs us deeply.

It disturbs us in two senses. In a retrospective sense, and in a sense that points towards the future. Retrospectively, it disturbs us because it illustrates what we were once, and how, strictly speaking, little has changed since we “evolved.” Each one of us has his/her own little chimp very close to the surface that we exhibit to the world. And it disturbs us even more if we consider the future. Are we going to be, by any chance, the chimpanzees of a future species, and are we going, by any chance, to be caged for the joy of elementary schools of future super-men? Are we, by any chance, to do set-theory, moral philosophy, concrete art, and other primitive poses to amuse the kids of a more evolved species, our late offspring?

The disturbance is fair enough. Our evolved offspring perhaps might not be as late as we thought. Perhaps it already exists? Perhaps our species has already caused the “genetic” leap and super-men are already strolling among us, without us noticing them? Are the numerous cybernetic machines not the Adams and Eves of a whole evolution process that will eventually overcome the human species? Is there no a discourse about a “third generation” of computers? Perhaps we already live, without fully knowing it, in a zoo, and we function only for the joy of such monsters and pocket monsters? Without a doubt: good question.

Contemplate well the caged chimpanzee, a radiant example of a member of our consumer society. An example of our future?

## Beasts III – Unicorns

(*Folba de S. Paulo*, March 24, 1972)

Though they are not, strictly speaking, domestic animals, they are extremely useful to man. Their utility varies with time. In antiquity their horn, properly ground, would serve as medicine against any venom. In the Middle Ages, the unicorn is an attribute of virginity, and therefore of undeniable public utility. In Romanticism and Post-Romanticism, it was widely used as theme for poetry (despite the word “unicorn” does not rhyme with many others in the Latin languages). And currently it is indispensable for books on logic and theory of knowledge. Indeed, such books could not exist, if the unicorn did not exist, nor if he did.

To prove it, consider the following statements: “The apple is green. Blood is green. God is green. Freedom is green. The current king of France is green. The unicorn is green.” The first statement might be true or not. The second is false. Both have meaning. The other sentences do not have meaning. For this is easy to say, and to verify, once, when we say those statements, we are holding back laughter. Because these sentences do not have sense, they are ridicule and funny. The hard part is to say why such sentences do not have meaning.

It would be easy if we could say that those sentences do not have any meaning because their subjects, which are God, freedom, the current king of France, and the unicorn, do not exist. But we cannot do so. One cannot say God does not exist, because it would be necessary to define the term “God” before. An impossible task. One cannot say that freedom does not exist, because its presence or absence are clearly noticeable. The sentence “Freedom is green” has no meaning, though freedom exists. One cannot say that France’s current king does not exist without saying additionally when one is speaking. For example: in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was a king of France who was present, and the sentence was then probably false, and therefore had meaning. But concerning the unicorn, everyone agrees it does not exist. Therefore, we can tell clearly why the sentence “The unicorn is green” has no meaning. The sole clear case among the provided examples.

If it was not for the unicorn, books on logic and theory of knowledge would have no sense. Because they would not be able to exemplify what does it mean “not to have sense.” This would be a shame, especially for professors of logic and theory of knowledge. However, fortunately, there is the unicorn, and Socrates is his faithful companion. So, Socrates is mortal, and the unicorn is green. Long live culture.

## Beasts IV – The Seven-Headed Beast

(*Folha de S. Paulo*, March 25, 1972)

I never understood why they talk about the seven-headed beast as if it were something from another world. I can perfectly imagine encountering a friend at Augusta Street<sup>2</sup> who would carry a seven-headed puppy in their arms. A miniature Cerberus. It is true that I would be a bit surprised to see such a pet, but I would not go crazy, nor would I tell biology to go to hell. On the contrary, I would soon imagine some biologic hypothesis that would explain the reason for the seven heads. And I have no doubt: if a seven-headed beast exists, biology can explain it.

A much more terrible case would be this: I see the head of a dog looking through a gate, and, when I get close, I see that the dog's head has the body of a cat. Then indeed I would probably go crazy. Or join a monastery. Or start to believe in macumba. For I cannot imagine a biological hypothesis that would explain a cat with the head of a dog. Not being able to imagine such a hypothesis, I must throw away the whole of biology in the presence of an observed fact. And, throwing away biology, I must throw away also all contemporary science and with it the culture I belong to. It is better to get crazy than to do this or to opt for another completely different culture.

The curious thing is that not everyone would react the same way. Afternoon papers publish news of cows giving birth to rhinos, and of women giving birth to calves, and nobody kills themselves, as far as I know. The explanation for that must be this: the great majority of population, though belonging to a culture deeply influenced by science, ignores the rules according to which science works. Therefore, it does not know how to distinguish between extraordinary events that are scientifically explainable and others, definitively unexplainable. And it does not know that, if definitively unexplainable events really took place, this would be the end of the culture that shelters them. The end of TV, for example.

Apparently, such ignorance opens the field for a fertile imagination, populated by seven-headed beasts and cats with a dog head. But it impoverishes phantasy enormously. Because only an "exacting" fantasy can be fertile. To have fantasy is not to imagine impossible things, but possible ones, although highly improbable ones. Therefore, we can distinguish two types of "science fiction:" the impossible type, which is uninteresting and boring, and the possible yet improbable type, which is interesting and stimulating. The great majority is of the first type. The minority that belongs to the second type is a window for us to see the seven-headed beast which is our future.

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<sup>2</sup> Famous street in São Paulo.

## Beasts V – People

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What distinguishes man from the other animals so radically that he merits an theoretical analysis that is completely separated from zoology? It is this: all the zoologists belong to the human species themselves. Since Man is man's most passionate topic, and since zoologists are men, they need a scientific discourse that is separated from zoology. For example, anthropology. And then, obviously, they discover, that Man distinguishes himself from the animals in many aspects. Obviously because if, instead of Anthropology, they used Arthropodology, they would discover that insects distinguish themselves from animals in as many aspects as Man does.

All species are completely distinct from the rest under certain aspects. If it were not like that, it would not make any sense to speak of distinct species. And all species, each one for itself, represents a culminating point in the evolution of life. If it were not like that, the species would be extinct. They represent, each one of them, a culminating point in evolution, though each one the culminating point of a branch of evolution that tends to divergent goals. It is only in this sense that Man is the most evolved animal. All the existing animals are, in this sense, the most evolved.

Is, thus, our profound conviction concerning Man's special position in the context of life just an expression of our human chauvinism? Is not there be an "objective" criterium that allows us to affirm that we are superior to earthworms? Are we really condemned to say that "objectively" the earthworm overcomes us, for example, in its capacity to regenerate lost parts of the body? Possibly there is no such criterium. Possibly objectivity forces us to recognize that all animals are equal, including man. Orwell's "Animal Farm." But what does this mean? Absolutely nothing.

Damn objectivity. Long live human chauvinism (the sole chauvinism that currently justifies itself). We are humans, and nothing human is alien to us. Let us sing the praise of Man, not *because* it is only an animal just like the others, but *because* he is only an animal just like the others. And let us not sing only the praise of so-called "great" men. That would be easy. Sophocles and Mozart can do without our praise. Let us sing the praise of people. This is what is hard. It is hard to see in the uniform, grayish, and unexceptional mass of men that surrounds us the fact that each one of these men is potentially our partner in the fight against the absurdity of life and of animalesque death. It is hard, but it must be attempted. Not *with*, but *against* any anthropology.

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