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Tim O'Riley

Chance and improbability

“‘Culture’ is a tool for the production, transmission and storage of information, and ‘information’ is an improbable situation, (the less a situation is probable, the more it is informative).

Vilém Flusser, *Between the probable and the impossible*¹

Accidental Journey is an artist's book, nominally about the moon and astronomy, which contains images, factual and fictional texts, documents of my own and others' research, travels, illustrations, scientific diagrams, and so on. However, it is as much concerned – reflexively – with the processes of speculation, compilation and research. On occasion the writings of Vilém Flusser are cited but his thinking pervades the book and my own thought processes and actions. The book was put together in tandem with a long animation of an orbit around the moon, illustrations of which feature on a page at the end of the publication. The animation is 118 minutes in duration and its length corresponds to the time taken by the Apollo command module to make a single lunar orbit. It was made using a computer with the tools familiar to those who work in the film and television industries. However, the environment in which it was made differed radically from such studios and workshops. It was modelled and rendered on a single computer in a small room that in a previous life had been used as a store room or broom cupboard, similar in size, as it happened, to the command module itself. The animation is made up of approximately 177,000 frames, with three passes per frame, with the entire rendering taking approximately one year. While the computer was labouring away frame by frame, it seemed appropriate to draw together some of the thinking, source material and research which led to the project in the first place.

Often with art it is not clear what goes into formulating and making a work. The research – and the thinking behind it – that feeds into the development of the work often remain crucial but are often undisclosed. The book in this sense was an attempt to enable these things to see the light of day. As well as being compiled in tandem with the anima-

¹ From an unpublished manuscript in the Vilém Flusser Archiv, number 2723, (date not known), p. 2.

tion – which in many respects was driven by a desire to make imagination tangible, constituting the projection and realisation of a model corresponding to what is usually referred to as ‘reality’ – the book acted as a repository for the unexpected, for those things that were significant but which did not feature elsewhere. Flusser’s thinking has been important not only towards developing a critical understanding and formulation of theory and a reflection on the practical processes at work, but also in terms of the nature of research itself: that is, the potentialities that proliferate through looking and searching, which hint at a realm of the possible as opposed to the probable. Serendipity, chance, and association are deeply formative processes that need to be acknowledged and if possible, shared. On reflection (a process that occurs constantly throughout research, writing and making), the search for improbability, as Flusser might say, is perhaps the *leitmotif*, a driving force behind work specifically – and existence, more generally.

The following is not intended to situate Flusser’s writing other than in terms of my own thinking and the processes that lead to making work, in whatever form that may take.

The Technical Image

The camera is an invention and the result of a train of thought that is conceptual, linear, and rational. A photographer takes a photograph but the camera determines his or her idea for this. That is, the photograph is a kind of image that the camera can produce (as opposed to one it cannot produce). Through this device, pictures are created, acting like windows onto the world. But the pictures are a product of the camera. One could argue that they are projected out from the camera onto the world.

Users begin to think and see in terms of these photographs and perform their functions as operators of this system. For Flusser the importance of making this observation was that as operators, as a matter of political and social necessity, one should attempt to work against the device – to program it rather than be programmed by it. The producer of such images should strive for the improbable as opposed to the probable.² “For an ap-

² “‘Probable’ and ‘improbable’ are concepts from informatics, in which information can be described as an improbable situation: the more improbable, the more informative.” (Flusser 2011: 17).

paratus is a human product, and a human being is an entity that actively opposes the implacable tendency of the universe toward disinformation.” (Flusser 2011: 18)

Chance occurrences are part of the fabric or ‘program’ of the universe. (Flusser 2011: 18) The complexity of matter and its interactions, being and its associated infinities, and consciousness and its potentials, mean that the likelihood of creating improbable situations increases with time. But the entropic principle – the tendency of things to become disorganised—signifies that over time matter and organisation will inevitably dissipate. There is a space, however, in which accidents can arise. A contradiction within the functioning of an apparatus – a camera or computer, for example – means that automatic or automated processes can lead to unanticipated outcomes. “Its programs are games in which possibilities occur randomly, programmed accidents.” (Flusser 2011: 19) In this space, from the perspective of a being endowed with intelligence, it is imperative that one attempts to assert this intelligence, an attendant sympathy with the world and one’s subjectivity.

Flusser was optimistic about the most recent computer-based media and his writings on synthetic, computer-generated images suggest that these constructions are themselves primary objects of thought. Rather than immaterial, bodiless phantoms as is sometimes suggested, they are in fact materializing forms. Worlds are initiated, created and projected rather than received and processed. Here the emphasis shifts away from the processing of external visual data, in a more or less automatic (programmed) sense, towards the instigation and projection of alternative worlds, towards a ‘concretising gesture’. (Flusser 2002: 110-6) “The world of phenomena that we perceive with our senses is an amorphous stew behind which are concealed eternal, unchanging forms which we can perceive by means of the supersensory perspective of theory. The amorphous stew of phenomena (the ‘material world’) is an illusion, and reality, which can be discovered by means of theory, consists of the forms concealed behind this illusion (the ‘formal world’).” (Flusser 1999: 22-9)

I became interested in Flusser, initially at least, because I recognized something in his writing that reflected my practical experience as an artist working with media, specifically computer modelling and animation. In a discussion of the much-used example of a table seen from a philosophical point of view, he maintains: “the form of the table is real, and the content of the table (the wood) is only apparent.” (Flusser 1999:24) By trying to impose the idea or form on the material, the table-maker both ‘in-forms’ the wood and si-

multaneously deforms the idea of the table, with the resulting *material* table falling short of the *ideal* table. This is an issue for Flusser given the burgeoning development of computer-generated models and artificial images. There is a proliferation, a flood of forms emanating from computers that we fill with material, which we materialize. Here is Flusser again: “in the past, it was a matter of formalizing a world taken for granted, but now it is a matter of realizing the forms designed to produce alternative worlds.” (Flusser 1999: 28) Forms are no longer discoveries, extracted from the transitory flux of existence. Nor are they fictions. They are projections, models for a future world. I understand his sense of models here in a broad sense: they are models as instructions or descriptions, ideas, programs, or prototypes.

Having worked with computer modelling processes starting with the relatively simple programs available to the amateur back in 1990 to the increasingly complex systems of today, I recall having a sense of wonder and absorption when first encountering this new space. It was not a reflection of the world I found myself in, as was the case with a photograph or a piece of film, but an addition to it, a parallel space. The models made in such a way were more or less complex representations, perceived on a computer monitor, which could be removed from their digital environment and inserted into the world of things. As such, they were forms materialized as images. But they also had another presence that had as much to do with the internal machinations of my brain as with their status as objects and images, electronic or otherwise.

The model is embodied in digital code that also becomes the means through which it is made manifest. The visual representation (the appearance of the model) is a layer between the user/producer and the (digital) thing. It is a surface rendering of an object that exists in a highly tangible form, possessed of a peculiar reality; it is part of this world and yet somehow occupies another space. Looking at such images on a computer monitor, one can see the model as a projection of an idea, an externalised thought or mental image. Flusser himself remarked on such phenomena that “one can follow this sequence of images, just as if the imagination had become self-sufficient; or as if it had travelled from inside (let’s say from the cranium) to outside (into the computer); or as if one could observe one’s own dreams from the outside.”³

³ Such a concretising gesture, “neither abstracts, nor steps backwards; just the opposite, it concretises, it projects. Certainly, both gestures lead to the creation of images (and both can be therefore called imagina-

When imagining, we step back from the world into ourselves. The products of imagination – images, for example – intercede between the world and us or, at least, they contend with it for our attention. (see Flusser 1988) Flusser wrote extensively about writing and its relationship to imagination but his concept of the ‘technical image’, which draws upon this analysis of language, is useful when specifically addressing media. In this sense, media are spaces in which potentialities can be defined. They enable one to project or make imagination external and shareable. The product of this process is not so much an abstraction taken from the world as a projection of an internal world into an external, mediated (perhaps electronic) space. It also can be transposed onto other realms or activities. Perhaps one way of looking at this is to consider certain work and working processes as mediated, realised through media. In this sense, for example, thinking, speculating, or wondering could be seen as projective activities. What we call research could profitably occur in that space beyond what is known or understood. Discoveries can be both determined and accidental; objects can be tangible and speculative; one can put oneself in a position where a question seems worth asking. In the book, my aim – or perhaps more accurately, my work – was to inhabit and become lost in a realm of research, images, books, or information and to try to use my work as a way of making sense of this space or of creating markers that simply say in effect “I was here”.

tion) but then one is really dealing with different sorts of images. The images created by the traditional imagination are two-dimensional because they have been abstracted from a four-dimensional life world. In comparison, the images of the new imagination are two-dimensional, because they have been projected from zero-dimensional calculations. The first type images signify the life-world; the second type represents calculations. The vectors of meaning of both types of imagination point in opposite directions, so that the first type must be interpreted differently than the second type. This is the real reason why traditional image criticism misinterprets the new images.” ‘A New Imagination’ (Flusser 2002:114).



Tim O'Riley, Dunsink Observatory (Ireland 2005)

PREAMBLE

[*Accidental Journey* is a book] ostensibly about the moon, the closest thing to earth within the immensities of space. It is a tangible measure of scale, an index of distance as well as a familiar companion or object of scrutiny. For most of us, distances beyond it become unthinkable in everyday terms.

As a child the Apollo missions were a backdrop to all the possibilities the world seemed to offer. I am not sure if I actually watched the momentous event on television when Armstrong first set foot on the moon on 20th July 1969 but in any case, growing up it seemed that this event presaged an almost tangible future. Things like this would happen again. Many years later, thoughts of Apollo and the U.S. and Soviet space race barely surfaced amid the everyday banalities and excitements of life. I had not thought of these events save for the occasional reference in a newspaper or on television, or in snatched moments of distraction when idly gazing up at the sky. Still, there was a residual persistence of interest together with a vague sense of the passing of what had been called the ‘future’. Although there have been a number of recent missions to survey the moon with a view to possible manned exploration, people have not set foot on it since the last Apollo astronauts left in December 1972.⁴

So it was with some surprise that I found myself in Dublin in 2005 holding an object linked with the Apollo 11 mission flown by Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins. This short-lived encounter set me on a meandering journey of discovery out of which the book emerged. More of the object later but as time went by and my journey progressed, I found myself stumbling upon similarly unexpected things, which led in turn to further speculative searches and impromptu connections. The book is an attempt to share some of these things. An elliptical amalgamation of texts and images, it was formed as much through digression and serendipity as through certitude and design.⁵ Words ar-

⁴ Recent and future lunar missions include: SMART-1, European Space Agency, 2003; Chang’e 1, China, 2007; Kaguya (Selene), Japan, 2007; Chandrayaan-1, India, 2008; Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, USA, 2009.

⁵ The word ‘serendipity’ was coined by Horace Walpole in 1754. It finds its origins in the title of an ‘oriental tale’ he had recently come across known as *The Peregrinaggio of the Three Princes of Serendip*. As the story goes, the King of Serendip, having spared nothing as far as his sons’ upbringing and education were concerned, sent the three Princes away from his kingdom so that they might gain in worldly knowledge. In a series of adventures, the Princes were ‘always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things

ranged in sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and so on, are remarkably efficient at communicating, or at a more fundamental level, determining thought - characteristic of what the philosopher Vilém Flusser called a historical consciousness – whereas pictures perhaps offer more open spaces for conjecture. (see Flusser 2000)

The images [in the book] are intended to have as much weight as the words, but however it is approached, I hope the reader feels at liberty to find their own way through [the book]. It is less a linear narrative or academic study than a collection of associations – images, quotations, stories, assorted scholarship, facts and ephemera – driven by my musings on sense and nonsense, fact and fiction, and on the possible in relation to the probable. It is also the record of an obsessive journey, which at times seemed almost hallucinatory.⁶

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which they were not in quest of, demonstrating through their powers of observation and inference, a talent for solving seemingly irresolvable problems and a remarkable insight into the order of things. In Walpole's words, 'you must observe that no discovery of a thing you are looking for, comes under this description.' Horace Walpole, Letter to Sir Horace Mann, Arlington Street, 28th January 1754, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, (Ed. Lord Dover), Volume 3, London: Richard Bentley, 1833, pp59-64, p61. In his study of serendipity, Theodore G. Remer quotes Justice Benjamin W. Cardozo: 'Like many of the finest things in life, like happiness and tranquillity and fame, the gain that was most precious was not the... thing sought but one that came of itself in the search for something else.' Theodore G. Remer (ed.), *Serendipity and the Three Princes: From the Peregrinaggio of 1557*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1965, p8-11. The Three Princes was first published in Venice by Michele Tramezzino in 1557 under the pseudonym, Christoforo Armeno. Serendip is apparently an old Persian name for what is now Sri Lanka.

⁶ As Flann O'Brien succinctly puts it, "Of all the many striking statements made by de Selby, I do not think that any of them can rival his assertion that 'a journey is an hallucination.'" (Flann O'Brien 2007: 52).