

The bag

(Vilem Flusser)

Omnia me mecum porto. In plain English: Everything that I've written and published in the last 18 months is kept in a bag. The bag was stolen recently from a car parked outside a Paris hotel. It was found again in a nearby street with the contents intact. The thief found no value in them. A discarded literary judgement.

The bag can be seen as a part of my *memory*. Whoever reads the papers it contains and the way they are ordered will recognise me, in a limited though intense way. I intend here to examine and analyse the bag. Not as if I myself were interesting but because the thief, if he had inspected the contents more carefully, would have found himself in the company of historians, archeologists, palaeontologists, psychoanalysts, and similar researchers.

What is at issue here is a yellow leather bag equipped with a zipper. It contains different coloured folders. One contains my correspondence from June 1972 until now, including copies of my letters and letters addressed to me. Some of my letters have remained unanswered, and some of those that I have received I have never replied to. The letters are ordered chronologically. Another folder is titled: "unpublished papers". It contains about 30 essays in Portuguese, English or German concerning art criticism and phenomenology, the originals of which were sent to newspapers. These papers are unordered. Another folder is titled "published papers". It contains about ten essays published during my stay in Europe. They are arranged according to their date published. A further folder is titled "La Force du Quotidien" and contains a book manuscript - fifteen essays about things in our environment - it will be released in December in Paris. Another is titled "Ca existe, la Nature?" and contains eight essays. Both folders are arranged according to their content. A further is titled "New York" and contains outlines for a lecture about the future of television that I plan to hold next year at the Museum of Modern Art. Another is titled "Rio" and contains essays that my publisher in Rio de Janeiro will bring out soon. Another is titled "Talks" and contains outlines for lectures that I have held and will hold in Europe. They are not ordered. Another is titled "Bodenlosigkeit" and contains 100 pages of an autobiography that I began and never completed. Another is titled "Biennial" and contains references to the "XII Bienal des Arts" in Sao Paulo. The last has the title "Documentatos" and contains 'self-referential' certificates from government offices, universities and other institutions. This is then the semantic and syntactical dimension of the bag. The folders are firstly arranged *syntactically*. They are arranged in three classes:

[A] Dialogues (the correspondence folder)

[B] Discourses to others (lectures and manuscripts)

[C] Discourses

about myself (documents) The first class would have given the thief a view into the structure of my relationships with others, what connects me to them, who rejects me, and who I reject. The second class would have allowed the thief to see me from "within", and how I try to make myself public. The third class would have allowed him to see me in the way the establishment does, my mask, via which I play my public role. The knowledge that the thief thus gains would be problematic for the following reasons: (1) The authenticity of

the papers would need to be checked (2) The authenticity of the documents contained therein would have to be checked. The thief would be required to make a close reading of the texts and of their contexts. The folders are also arranged semantically.

Again they are arranged into three classes:

- [A] Factual information (documents, sections of letters, lectures and manuscripts).
- [B] Interpretations of facts (lectures and manuscripts)
- [C] Expressions of emotion and value (letters, and beneath the surface in most manuscripts).

The first class would have offered the thief a view into my "objective-being-in-the-world". The second the way in which I maintain a distance therefrom. The third a view of my "subjective and intersubjective-being-in-the-world. From this he might have held the keys to the subjective and objective position we find ourselves in. All this, of course, cautiously. The facts could be misunderstood or misinterpreted, and the emotions and values expressed dishonestly, as much by me as by others. The thief would have to "decode" and "de-ideologise" the messages contained in the bag.

The folders are also arranged structurally. Again there are three classes:

- [A] Chronological arrangement
- [B] Logical arrangement
- [C] Disorder.

The first structure puts us in mind of geological and botanical formations. The second of encyclopaedia and computers . The third of genetic information. Together they reveal a picture of the structure of the human memory. What is missing however is a "formal structure" of the kind found in "alphabetical arrangement". Without this the thief might have concluded a defect in my way of thinking. The interaction of the ordered and disordered structures in the bag would have given the thief the opportunity to contribute to Jaques Monods problem "coincidence and necessity". The bag is a fertile hunting-ground for "structural analysis".

Finally the folders are arranged according to their relationship to the bag itself. Two classes result:

- [A] Folders that are in the bag so that they can be kept in mind.
- [B] Folders that are there to keep things that are not there in mind.

The letters, manuscripts, and essays belong to the first class, the unfinished autobiography to the second. This reveals two functions of the bag(and of memory): to keep things in the present and to bring things into the present. The real situation is nevertheless much more complex. Some papers in the bag point to the future (the "New York" folder and the unpublished manuscript); thus proving the function of memory, namely to construct designs for the future. The thief could have recognised all of this. Not, however, this: This article itself which the reader has before him is found in the bag in the folder titled

"published papers". The article is not only concerned with the bag, it is not just a "meta-bag" but a part which the thief could not have studied. The thief could never have recognised this aspect of the bag.

I always carry the bag with me. We all do this only my bag is more readily available. The question is: can our bags be stolen from us? Or would they always be found again a few blocks away, intact? Put differently; firstly: are we lighter and therefore progress more quickly into the future when our bags are lifted from us? And secondly; are these living or dead weights in our bags? The bag is too complicated to give a satisfactory answer to these questions. In any case it's good that from now on the questions themselves are kept safely in the bag.

[From Vilem Flusser, *Nachgeschichten*, Bollmann Verlag, Duesseldorf, 1990.
Translated from German 1998 by Michael Stapley for nettime-zkp5]

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