

## Hana Yoo's Post-Historical Cows By Martha Schwendener

Hana Yoo's video *Splendour in the grass* (2020) starts with a sunny, anodyne view of a digitally rendered mountain scene, with snow-capped mountains in the distance and white bubbles rising in the foreground, as if the landscape is literally effervescing. The scene is accompanied by Mozart's 'Flute Concerto in D Major No. 2 (K. 314)' from 1778, an upbeat work of exceptional clarity and verve. The scene then cuts to that of a young psychoanalyst listening to a description of strawberries that sounds like a page ripped from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), complete with childhood memories, images of milk, and thoughts about the berry's tiny seeds lodged in the speaker's skin.

Strawberries and milk: "pure" things. But Hana Yoo's vision quickly turns dark: the video itself is inspired by an experiment performed on a Russian dairy farm in which cows were outfitted with virtual reality headsets lined with images of a pastoral landscape. The results of the experiment showed that the images reduced the cows' anxiety and increased milk production.

Cows have served as the subject in a number of recent literary works. Ariana Reines *The Cow* (2006) borrows from Gertrude Stein, William Burroughs, Kristeva, and industrial food manuals, such as *Carcass Disposal: A Comprehensive Review*, to create a disturbing and disturbed portrait of the cow as sacred, "ruminant", and a colonized lump of meat. Lydia Davis' *The Cows* (2011), on the other hand, is a more personal meditation on the cows that lived across the road from the author in Upstate New York, one of which refused to enter a vehicle to be taken away for slaughter.

Hana Yoo and I met in the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin, which is how I came to write this essay. Flusser, too, wrote about cows. His essay "Cows," written in the 1970s, was published in various languages and publications, including the U.S. art magazine *Artforum* and *Natural: Mind* (1979), a book that considered different forms nature (birds, rain, grass, the moon, meadows, wind, fog) and how they have been affected by culture and technology – or where nature and culture have converged, not just in the modern period, but all the way back to our ancient ancestors using animal trails as walking paths, and ultimately motorways.

Flusser's "Cows" proposes, somewhat satirically, that bovine animals are efficient, self-reproducing biological machines for transforming grass into milk; their bodies are "hardware" that can be consumed as meat or leather and they serve as prototypes for Western notions of progress.<sup>1</sup> Comparing their elegant design to artworks by Alexander Calder and Pablo Picasso, Flusser argued that cows "could be considered as prototypes of future machines that will be designed by advanced technology and informed by ecology. In effect, we may state that, as of now, cows are the triumph of a technology that points to the future."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vilém Flusser, "Cows," *Artforum* (September 2013): pp. 374-377; the essay was also reprinted in *Philosophy of Photography* 2, no. 2 (July 2012): pp. 244-247.

<sup>2</sup> Flusser, *Natural: Mind*, p. 44. Translator Rodrigo Maltez Novaes notes, however, "This essay was written during the late 1970s, therefore data regarding the polluting effects of the methane gas emitted by the world's bovine herd was not yet available or taken into consideration."

For Hana Yoo, the cow is not a prototype, but an apparatus – a term that Flusser developed in his technical images in the 1980s. The cow is also *connected to* apparatuses, whether these are virtual reality headsets or the more common milking machines that appear in *Splendour in the grass*. The cow also becomes a stand-in, a fable for human life. “We are all programmed in some way,” the young psychoanalyst says to her patient, who wears a cow mask: our thoughts, feelings, gestures.

Flusser identified how industrial processes have affected nature – but also different “natures”: his book, written in the verdant foothills of the Tyrolean Alps, in Merano, Italy – a spa town where his literary ancestor Kafka once traveled, in vain, to cure his tuberculosis – was also a way of bridging different philosophical approaches to nature, from the idealist European one Flusser encountered as a teenager in Prague, to the repressive approaches to tropical vegetation he discovered as an adult émigré and refugee from the holocaust in Brazil. (Flusser jokingly described *Natural: Mind* as a “tourist guide” for Brazilians, “as long as ‘tourism’ is understood as an updated synonym of the term ‘theory.’”)<sup>3</sup>

However, as Hana Yoo’s video suggests, we are all increasingly subject to the same nature/culture systems, as climate change and food systems, pandemics, conflict, migration, and technology bolster our interconnectedness. We are like the anthropomorphic grass in Hana Yoo’s video, a collective under siege from predators that range from natural (cows) to cultural (lawnmowers). Moreover, we may be coming from divergent traditions, but our future survival depends on post-historical thinking – for instance, developing a global theory of climate or technology, what Yuk Hui calls a *cosmotronics* that goes beyond Western ideological imperialism or Cartesian thought.<sup>4</sup>

Flusser identified art as one of the places for imagining new futures. In *Splendour in the grass*, Hana Yoo treats these problems both philosophically and playfully, using fables and children’s stories as models. As in stories, there are subjects. And yet, as she points out, the subject-object relations between humans and cows – using technology as an interface or apparatus of control – is mirrored in the way other humans treat other humans. The images presented to Russian cows to assuage their anxiety and coax them to produce milk is analogous to Flusser’s “universe of technical images” in which mass media turn consumers into laborers who produce increasingly more data.

“We are all programmed in some way,” the young psychoanalyst says before the video ends with another rousing bit of Mozart flute. The poignancy of this is multiple: not only was Mozart one of Flusser’s favorite composers, but Mozart himself was programmable. Mozart detested the flute. (“You know that I become quite powerless whenever I am obliged to write for an instrument which I cannot bear,” he wrote to his father in an oft-quoted September 1778 letter). Mozart transposed his concerto, originally written for oboe, into a concerto for flute, for a commission he greatly needed to survive. Similarly, “I hate milk,” the cow-masked character

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<sup>3</sup> Flusser, *Natural: Mind*, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotronics* (Oxford: Urbanomic, 2018) and *Art and Cosmotronics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, e-flux, 2021).

confides to the psychoanalyst in Hana Yoo's video. Moreover, she feels trapped by the idea of an unconscious itself: an invented concept that makes the human both exploiter and exploited. How to find our way out of the allegorical "room" alluded to in *Splendour in the grass*, a place of oppression and confinement? Perhaps in our sympathy and compassion for the cow, or Mozart.

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This text is written with support of Goldrausch Künstlerinnen. The project 'Goldrausch Künstlerinnenprojekt' is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Berlin Senate Department for Health, Long-Term Care and Gender Equality.