

Introduction II

Vilém Flusser: A brief introduction to his media philosophy

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Vilém Flusser is a thinker who became very valuable for the discourse on the interrelationship between culture and technologies, especially technologies of communication. But this was not at all the only field in which he was working. His thinking was extremely rich and of a great variety. He wrote and argued on cultural history, philosophy of language and of religion, as well as on cultural critique, design, architecture, political economy, or ethical issues.

But indeed, after *Pós História*¹, *post history*, which was published in 1983, his philosophy of photography and other technical media became a focus of his work and his international reputation. Most of his monographs between 1983 and 1991 were circling around the central issue of communication under the conditions of advanced electronic technologies, including the already classical apparatuses (cinema, video) and the digital computer.

How does the universe of technical images look like which he constructed in such a distinguished way?

I.

Let us address a meta-level: Why has Flusser become so fascinating especially for young academics/ intellectuals/ artists/ designers all over the world?

Let me try a three-fold answer:

- His theoretical and methodological approach to the sphere of communication technologies was not encoded hard/ deterministic. It was neither apocalyptic nor was it naive utopian. His thinking was soft encoded, which means porous, elastic, pluricular. He was conceptualizing the complexity of cultural processes in terms of strong interdependencies, **dialectical** – in the true sense of the word. In one of his last interviews, with the German writer Florian Rötzer, he formulated this in a typical rhetoric figure: “Indeed we are actively generating our tools and through them we are generating the world, but it is also true that those tools are hitting back on us and are generating us.”²

- Flusser in principal and vehemently forwarded a relationship towards the world, which can be called *experimental*. For him technical media had been a pile, a treasure of possibilities (or perhaps better: *potentialities*), which permanently had to be explored, every day and every day new. His general attitude can be described best by a quote from a novel, which Flusser admired. In the first volume of his epic novel, *The Man without Qualities*, Robert Musil wrote at the beginning of Chapter 4: “To get through open doors successfully, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle, by which the old professor had always lived, is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. However, if there is a sense of reality – and no one doubts its justification for existing – then there must also be something we might call a sense of possibility. Whoever has it, does not say, for example, this or that has happened, will happen, or must happen here; instead, they invent: this or that might, could, or ought to happen in this case. If they are told that something is the way it is, they think: Well, it could just as well be otherwise. Thus, the sense of possibility can be defined as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.”³

- Closely connected with that is his historical-philosophical concept, definitely and deeply rooted in his own biographical experience and the collective experience of the Jewish people. In his self-biography he wrote:
“Zukunft ist ein sich-Verwirklichen, Vergangenheit ein Unwirklich-Gewordensein.”⁴
[Future is realizing yourself, whereas past is having become unreal.]

II.

To approach Flussers philosophy of media a bit more closely I would like to put something in the center of our attention, which he thematized again and again in his lectures and writings in different ways: his *anthropology of cultural techniques*. Regarding the capacities of cultural expression one can differentiate between five steps/ jumps/ epochs in cultural history:

4 D: spatial/temporal orientation in the real world of moving things/ objects

3 D: Architecture, sculpture, monuments, artifacts

2 D: image, Bild

+ classical, pictorial (imaginative)

+ technical image (theoretical, conceptual)

1 D: linear text, writing with the alphanumeric code

0 D: the zero-dimension, pure numbers, algorithms.

Flusser was conceptualizing this anthropological development in a two-fold modality. He thought it *synchronously*, that is all those dimensions coexist in history with different distributions of power and effectiveness. And he constructed his anthropology diachronically as a process of reduction from perceiving the complexity of reality in four dimensions to the zero-dimension of the binary code.

But in each evolutionary step man did not only lose something. Each step also includes new capacities and qualities. This is especially true for the zero-dimension, where he clearly distinguishes from apocalyptic concepts, for which 0 is a teleological fleeing point. For Flusser this 0-dimension is a passage for building up a relationship or an attitude towards the world in which an important shift of paradigms takes place: from *subjectivity* to *projectivity*. Flusser liked to take single terms serious and often discussed them etymologically. The roots of *projection* for him led back to the Latin verb *proicere*, meaning to throw out, down, or forward and denoting a constructive action. It also has the meaning of projecting in the sense of shaping and changing the form of something. A projector is not only a machine that throws images, but also a planner or designer. In the early modern age, which was again and again an important implicit reference for Flusser, these connotative nuances were most strongly expressed in the experimental practices of the alchemists. The highest stage of transmutation from base matter to the converted precious and shining metal was called *proiectio*.

III.

The transformation processes Flusser was mostly interested in, where those from the object(ive) world to the binary code. Let us exemplarily look closer on his arguments, step by step, referring to his lecture on the crisis of linearity⁵, given at the Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland, in March 1988.

1. From 4D/ 3D, the object (in movement) to the static image:

“You can hunt a pony more effectively, if you first make, produce an image of it”
(cave-painting).

To generate an image of something foremost is an act of creating a distance. You have to step back from the object, you need to push it away, in order to be able to see, paint or draw it. The image becomes an orientation (a plan) for future activity [Handeln], receives a pragmatic status. The chained, lined pictograms of hieroglyphic writing can be interpreted as a first logical step towards the linear text (loss of trust towards the images). On the other hand creating an image is a process of generating the world, but precisely a world of illusion/ Schein. As an

image “the world is not anymore an opposition/ resistance against which we strike, but it is becoming an appearance/ phenomenon [Erscheinung], which we look at”.

The skill or capacity which corresponds with that is imagination/ phantasy, as a force to make something clear, evident, vivid [anschaulich]. The image is thrown from inside into the outside world and as such becoming a phenomenon of *ex-sistence*.

2. Within the logic of modernity, of modern science, of modern art, this step is not sufficient for being able to formulate clear/ unequivocal rules for action. Images leave too much open space for interpretation. They constitute principally a magical relationship with the world. “Sie stellen sich vor die Gegenstände, anstatt sie vorzustellen.” [They put themselves in front of the objects instead of showing/ introducing them to you.]

So with modernity we are moving towards a process of *transcoding* the surface down to the line with the help of phonetical signs and their organisation in rows of letters. Text is motivated and generated through the critique of images. For Flusser text and linearity are the same thing. With the alphabet and its linear organisation as text “the objective world is not perceived any longer as a fact/ facts of a case, but as a bunch of linear processes”. The alphabetical critique of the images leads to something we learned to name *historical consciousness*.

3. With the scientific jump or switch to the cultural technique of the binary code (from 1-D to 0-D) both are falling into a crisis: the linear text as well as our consciousness and concept of history. Flusser is thinking this as a process of punctualisation, “Zerbröselung”/ fractalization, atomization. “While letters are rolling up the surface of the image to lines, numbers are breaking those surfaces to points and intervals.” Computation as thinking through numbers for him is “formal, completely abstract thinking” (furthest away from the objective world). “To process a code consisting of points and intervals one needs a kind of imagination/ phantasy, which never has existed before: “a programming imagination” (an imagination, which is able to program). To avoid misunderstandings, because Flusser was always speaking very enthusiastically about this kind of imagination, which he himself could only imagine within the traditional forms of imagination; he was not able to program (anything): With such a new kind of imagination he does not connect automatically something like a computed Nirvana. But he understands his arguments explicitly as a juxtaposition against cultural pessimism (Kulturpessimismus). Going through the zero-dimension we lose a lot, he says, almost anything which had been so valuable for us in the European tradition of enlightenment, of critical consciousness, nearly everything we are identifying with.

But potentially we win a lot, maybe even something we are not able to name yet. And

with the following he addresses (in 1989) the grandsons and granddaughters: “Behind the keyboard, on which they hit, is a swarm of particles. And this swarm is a field of possibilities, which can be realized. With each hit of a key, one can press a form into the absurd chaos of this coincidence made of 0s and 1s, on can *inform* ... One adventure after the other rises from chaos and appears on the screen, ... an high speed, permanently changing and *changeable*.” The latter is very important for Flusser’s anthropological concept. Here he suddenly becomes teleological (and his argument is very linear too): With the programming imagination (again as *Einbildungskraft* as a special mode of imagination) “people have reached the goal, which they were longing for right from the beginning: the digital code is the most perfect method to change the world however you like it (to hunt ponies perfectly).” Sometimes he would have added: Only the world which is projected, of course.

IV.

To characterize Flusser’s philosophy of the media as cultural optimism is too flat. But unlike other contemporary philosophers, who were deeply affected by the violence of the historical context, he definitely he was not a cultural pessimist. After the ontological experience of Auschwitz nothing could get worse for him. After witnessing what human beings were able to do, Flusser believed in the possibility that machines might be able to do better, at least not to do worse. His philosophy of the media like his whole thinking is deeply rooted in an ethical concept of responsibility for the other and in dialogue with those, who are not identical with us. This concept is familiar to us through the writings of other Jewish philosophers like Martin Buber or Emanuel Levinas. Flusser expanded their ideas of responsibility by integrating a very specific concept of proximity. “The closer somebody is related to me – in space, time, thematically – the more responsibility I carry for him/ her and for myself. Flusser takes the risk and uses the religious term of “Nächstenliebe” (*loving the next*) to name this attitude.

In a truley paradoxical consequence and in a typical juxtaposition he was adding an additional semantical vibration to the pre-fix in “tele-matics” or “tele–communication”, usually interpreted in the sense of creating a distance. Tele-matics, the combination of electronic communications over distances and connected machines and programmes for him are a possibility and a chance to bring the one and the other – divorced in reality - closer together through taking responsibility for the next, even if this next might live thousands of miles away and in a completely different cultural context. Though a pre-condition for building up such a new proximity with the help of technical instruments and systems for Flusser is that there is not a relation of ignorance, but a relation of *competence* for each other.

Recommended Readings:

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. 1923.

Vilém Flusser, *Bodenlos. Eine philosophische Biographie*. Mannheim: Bollmann, 1992. Vilém

Flusser, *Krise der Linearität*. Benteli, 1999.

(A complete bibliography of Flussers writings in chronological order as well as sorted by language can be found on <http://flusser.khm.de>)

Dietmar Kamper, *Körper-Abstraktionen. Das anthropologische Viereck von Raum, Fläche, Linie und Punkt. 1st International Flusser Lecture*. Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König, 1999.

Emanuel Levinas, *Entre nous. Thinking-of-the-other*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Nils Rölller und Silvia Wagnermaier (ed.), *Absolute Flusser*, Freiburg 2003.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, an annotated bibliography can be found at the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/w/wittgens.htm>

Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions. Cinema and television as entr'actes in history*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1999.

¹ Vilém Flusser, *Pós História. Vinte instântaneos e um modo de usar*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1983 und Nachgeschichte. Eine korrigierte Geschichtsschreibung. Bensheim und Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1993.

² Vilém Flusser, „München, 1991. Gespräch mit Florian Rötzer“. In: *Zwiegespräche. Interviews 1967-1991*. Ed. by Klaus Sander, Göttingen: European Photography, 1996, S. 225-242, for this quotation see p. 234.

³ Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, Reinbek: Rowohlt 1968(9), p. 16.

⁴ Vilém Flusser, *Bodenlos. Eine philosophische Autobiographie*. Mannheim, Bollmann, 1992.

⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Krise der Linearität*. Bern: Benteli, 1988.

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