Introduction

The sixth issue of Flusser Studies is the first in a series dedicated to theoretical convergences and divergences between Vilém Flusser's work and that of other communication theorists and philosophers, among them Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard. We begin with a dialogue between Vilém Flusser and Marshall McLuhan, two of the major, if not the most significant, media and communication theorists of the second half of the 20th century. The issue is also the result of a collaboration between the editors of Flusser Studies and several members of the Visible City Project (www.visiblecity.ca) at York University in Toronto. The VC project, very much inspired by a McLuhanesque framework (i.e., an aesthetic approach to social spaces), investigates how art practices function in specific contemporary urban contexts to educate about and transform the experience of urban dwelling in light of the changing technological, economic and cultural experiences of globalization. What is particularly exciting about engaging with theoretical and methodological problems in communication and culture through the writings of Flusser and McLuhan is that they were working in very different contexts -- at polar ends, in fact, of the Americas. Consequently, their views of technology, communication, media, and aesthetics are very much a product of these places and of the post-war period.

Both Flusser and McLuhan share a distinctive interdisciplinary style of writing that aligns them with a post-war generation of cultural theorists like Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. Their theories exceed academically defined norms of writing and disciplinary boundaries that have contributed to the richness and complexity of humanistic studies (which is not to say that science was beyond their purview). Each addresses the lived context of everyday culture, those things that make up ordinary perceptions and experiences, always placing their insights within an historical framework. In their writings, culture is something so familiar that it has ceased to be noticed: an environment, a whole way of life, a mythos. Yet, central to both theorists is the materiality of language – as it is connected to places, to bodies, to expressive subjectivities, and to networks of desire, and in very distinctive ways, both Flusser and McLuhan have helped to lay the foundations for a phenomenological approach to media studies. We can discern some common approaches: their views of the media in terms of translation, art and poetry (they share appreciation for Joyce, Pound, Eliot, concrete poetry, and a love for many other writers) as forms of knowledge; the need for experimental methodologies and new pedagogical approaches to the study of communication; interdisciplinary and intermedial explorations; and

they conceptualized their intellectual lives as a "searching"[1] or an "adventure" (McLuhan). Both thinkers experimented with an aesthetic approach to communication. Nonetheless, the two were also very different: while McLuhan was a mystic Catholic who believed in the possible unity of the world through the plurality of the media, Flusser spent his life "without religion and in search of religion,"[2] i.e., philosophy. Unlike Flusser, McLuhan's central objective was to develop a methodology rather than a theory of the media.

On many occasions, Flusser refers to McLuhan's work; and even if he does not quote any specific titles he most probably came across McLuhan's work over the course of the 1960s and early 1970s. In an interview with Daniela Kloock in Karlsruhe in November 1991, just shortly before Flusser's death, one of the subjects under discussion was the prosthetic nature of media. Kloock's remark on "Die Medien als Verlängerungen oder als Ersatz für den menschlichen Körper, das hat ja bereits McLuhan angedacht …" ("McLuhan already associated media with extensions of or a substitute for the human body…") prompts a quick and brisk reaction on Flusser's part. "Nennen Sie keine Namen"[3] ("Do not mention any names"). This surprising reaction could be interpreted in different ways. Is it an attempt to protect oneself against easy theoretical pigeonholing? Or is it, rather, a denial of the popular academic game of name dropping? Or is it still a protective gesture to stop further questioning that might lead to some deeper similarities between the work of the two authors (McLuhan had the aura of a charlatan in many academic circles) or possibly unveil some hidden theoretical debt in Flusser's work?

Interestingly enough, most direct references to McLuhan can be detected in Flusser's work on 'communicology' (as he called his version of a communication theory) during the early and mid 1970s, that is, during a period when Flusser was trying to position himself theoretically within communication theory at large. The references disappear altogether in the late 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with Flusser's formulation of an original theoretical position by formulating original concepts like techno-imagination and his telematic society. To anyone acquainted with McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, however, Flusser's early work on communication theory is very much reminiscent of the Canadian theorist. Thus, Flusser's defensive attitude might be explained by the fact that he composed his first draft of a consistent communication theory against the backdrop of McLuhan's very popular theoretical position at the time, perhaps as a reaction against it and, simultaneously, as an attempt to move in a different direction.

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[1] V. Flusser (2002). *Writings*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 202.
[2] Ibidem, p. 198.
[3] Proxemik: Vilém Flusser über das Zeitalter der Telematik im Gespräch mit Daniele Kloock, in: Medium 2/92, p. 65.

In *Les phénomènes de la communication*, a still unpublished lecture-series written in the mid 1970s, several passages refer implicitly or explicitly to McLuhan. In the chapter 'Les moyens de la communication', Flusser introduces his notion of the dialectical nature of all media – connecting and separating people at the same time. Even objects coming in between two or more people, like prison walls, can ultimately be used as means of communication. This shows, he adds, that "le moyen n'est pas le message […]. La structure du mur va interférer dans la structure du message tapé et le récepteur du message va recevoir le message du mur aussi bien que celui du prisonnier. C'est pourquoi McLuhan dit que le medium est le message."[4] ("The medium is not the message […]. The structure of the wall is going to interfere with the structure of the message beaten on it, and the receiver of the message is going to receive the message of the wall as well as that of the other prisoner.") It is significant that McLuhan would agree with this criticism and, indeed, the metaphor of the wall (Malraux's 'museum without walls') was important for his methodological conceptualization of media studies. In his guide to media literacy, *The City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media,*[5] he suggests a process of analysis and curriculum that takes the physical environment (which includes the media) into account. McLuhan, for example, asks questions with regard to the aesthetic distinctness of national cinemas which lead us to examine the different uses to which a certain technological device (a film camera) may be deployed and developed.

Not unlike Flusser, McLuhan theorizes a special function for art as a 'probe'. Artists, McLuhan believed, could transform things like language or technological media into 'anti-environments', making us aware of the way a medium of communication acts upon the content of what is communicated. While the 'medium is the message' is the foundation for the experimental pedagogy McLuhan was proposing, it was always also a starting point for engaging with technologies in complex historical ways. Thus, a second comment in Flusser's fifth lecture, 'Du discours scientifique à la démagogie', provides a direct link between Flusser's notion of amphitheatre and McLuhan's idea of a global village. Flusser is critical of McLuhan's 'global village' metaphor here: "Notre société est devenue un amphithéâtre cosmique, un cirque cosmique, et non un village cosmique comme le dit McLuhan."[6] ("Our society is derived from a cosmic amphitheater, a cosmic circus, and not from a cosmic village according to McLuhan.") He would have been sympathetic to McLuhan's preferred metaphor which was the 'global theatre' – a notion of mediation referring to what Canadians experienced daily from their southern neighbors: the spectacle of American media culture. For Flusser, however, the problem with McLuhan's

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[4] V. Flusser, Les phénomènes de la communication, 'Les moyens de la communication', p. 1.

[5] McLuhan, Marshall, Kathryn Huchon and Eric McLuhan (1977). *The City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media.* Agincourt, Ontario: The Book Society of Canada.

[6] Flusser, Les phénomènes de la communication, Du discours scientifique à la démagogie', p. 4.

notion of 'global village' or even global theatre, for that matter, is the fact that it implies a sort of harmonic unity and does not deal explicitly enough with the problem of unidirectional communication. In fact, amphitheatrical media do not allow for dialogical forms of reaction because they function, above all, as distributive communication devices.

The same criticism recurs in *Vorlesungen zur Kommunikologe:* "McLuhan irrt, wenn er meint, amphitheatrische Medien wie Presse oder Fernsehen könnten die Menschheit in ein kosmisches Dorf verwandeln: sie verwandeln sie in einen kosmischen Zirkus."[7] ("McLuhan is wrong when he assumes that amphitheatrical media such as the press or TV could turn humankind into a cosmic village: they turn it into a cosmic circus.") And later on he argues more explicitly: "Das afrikanische Tamtam ist strukturell nicht nur mit dem Radio, sondern auch mit der Presse identisch […] und gleichermaßen mit dem römischen Zirkus […]. Nur darf man bei der Anwendung des Modells nicht vergessen, daß hinter dem amphitheatralisch funkenden Sender nicht irgendein mythisches Prinzip steht – wie uns manche Kommunikologen, die die Massenmedien autonomisieren, glauben machen möchten. Vielmehr steht hinter dem Sender die Absicht, durch Irradiation der Botschaft auf alle erreichbaren Empfänger, ein bestimmtes Verhalten zu provozieren."[8] ("African drum telegraphy is structurally identical not only to the radio but also to the press […] and also to the Roman circus […]. However, when using this model one must remember that there is not some mythical principle hidden behind the station broadcasting amphitheatrically – as some communicologists who are autonomizing mass media will have us believe. Rather, the intention behind the broadcasting station is to provoke a particular behavior via irradiation of the message to all accessible recipients.")

In his conclusive remarks to *Les phénomènes de la communication* Flusser refers to what is one of the fundamental tenets of his media-history. The invention of writing introduces a radical rupture comparable to the one brought about by present-day mass-media, that is, cinema, television and photography, "des codes d'images mouvantes et sonores." Referring to the importance McLuhan attributed to the invention of the printing-press, Flusser continues: "[…] je ne crois pas que l'invention de l'imprimerie […] soit exactement du même ordre de la rupture présente." [9] ("I don't think that the invention of the printing press should be put into the same order of the current rupture.")

As Carrillo shows in his contribution, the main theoretical difference between McLuhan and Flusser lies in determining the moment for social and cultural change: for McLuhan it is the evolution of media, for Flusser, on the other hand, it is the seminal importance of the dominant code. In *Vorlesungen zur Kommunikologe* we can find several passages critically referring to McLu-

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[7] V. Flusser (1996). *Kommunikologie*, Mannheim: Bollmann, p. 275.
[8] Ibidem, p. 284.
[9] Flusser, Les phénomènes de la communication, 'Conclusions', p. 2.

han. During his discussion of the prosthetic nature of media, Flusser writes: "Diese Analyse ist zweifellos richtig, und […] verlangt danach, den Prozeß der Simulation genau zu untersuchen. Aber sie erfaßt nicht […], worum es sich im Wesentlichen handelt."[10] ("This analysis is undoubtedly correct and [...] demands a precise investigation of the process of simulation. But it does not grasp […] what lies at the core.") The change of codes is, however, far more important than the invention of new media: "Der *Umsturz der Codes*, welcher durch die Nervensimulationen wie TV, Computer und Video hervorgerufen wird, ist mindestens ebenso gewaltig wie der von der Dampfmaschine verursachte Umsturz."[11] ("The revolution of the codes, triggered by nerve simulations such as TV, computer, and video, is at least as powerful as that triggered by the steam engine.") And in another more explicit passage, again targeting McLuhan's often quoted the 'medium is the message': "Also hängt die Funktion von Codes nicht von einem metaphysischen Eidos des Mediums ab (wie McLuhan zu meinen geneigt ist), sondern davon, wie man das Medium handhabt."[12] ("Therefore, the function of codes is not dependent on a metaphysical 'eidos' of the medium (as McLuhan is inclined to believe), but on how the medium is handled.") Although different media tend to invite a more democratic (dialogical) rather than repressive (discursive) use by their very nature, all media are capable of both, depending on their social and cultural contextualization. At the very end of *Vorlesungen zur Kommunikologe* Flusser returns once more to McLuhan's notion of the medium, explaining its theoretical importance as an effect of mass-media themselves. „Die Tatsache, daß die Sender an ihre eigene Sendung rückgekoppelt sind, daß sie also von ihrem eigenen Programm rückprogrammiert werden, ist im Begriff, einen viziösen Zirkel aus Konsummodellen herzustellen, welche durch die Massenmedien laufen. Es ist dieser Zirkel, welcher die Mythisierung der Medien durch McLuhan erklärt, denn in einem solchen Zirkel erscheinen die Medien tatsächlich als die Botschaft."[13] ("The fact that the senders are connected to their message, in the sense that they are re-programmed by their own program, is slowly creating a vicious circle out of the consumer models that is running its course through the mass-media. It is this very circle that explains the mythologizing tendencies in McLuhan. In such circles the media do indeed appear as the message.") This notion of the feedback effect of the media is perhaps the most explicit and in a way most radical criticism of McLuhan's formalist position and one that Flusser's writings can help us consider in a more nuanced way, as we will see in the present issue. Such criticism takes on a different meaning when we contemplate it in relation to McLuhan's strategic periodization of communication media.

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[10] Flusser, Kommunikologie, p. 235.
[11] Ibidem, p. 236.
[12] Ibidem, p. 272.
[13] Ibidem, p. 329.

In Flusser's *Mutation in Human Relations?* only one short implicit reference to McLuhan can be found at the very beginning: "Die Form wird vom Inhalt bedingt und umgekehrt (wenngleich nicht notwendigerweise ‚the medium the message' sein muß)."[14] ("Form is conditioned by content and vice versa (even if this does not necessarily imply that 'the medium is the message.'") Even if, after this point, McLuhan is not mentioned any further, his persisting influence resurfaces once again in the early 1980s when Flusser starts developing his evolutionist narrative of media-history. As the short quote on McLuhan's choice of the printing-press for western society's entry into the radically new stage of the Gutenberg galaxy shows, the kernel of Flusser's alternative narrative was already in existence.

Additionally, McLuhan's periodization of communication is deeply indebted to another Canadian, Harold Innis, whose two seminal works *Empire and Communication* (1950) and *Bias of Communication* (1951) examined structures of power (the control of space) in terms of how media privilege time or space. Based on Innis, McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* focuses on the differences between ear and eye and on the shift from orality to literacy that he distinguishes in terms of tribal orality, literacy (scripture), the printing press, and a second orality introduced by the electric age. McLuhan's periodization is focused around the gradual disappearance of the human body from the processes of knowledge production. This is why, for him, the electric age marked by spatio-temporal acoustics holds the promise for a radical reconfiguration of Western modernity's monological culture via the creation of anti-Cartesian epistemologies grounded in sensorial experiences. Despite entertaining such utopian ideas, McLuhan was also a realist in terms of recognizing the commodification of the new media: "we have leased our central nervous systems to various corporations."[15] Thus, for him, there was an urgent need for media pedagogy as a form of resistance and transformation.

Flusser takes an altogether different track towards periodizing the media and starts from the presumed opposition of image and text. In *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* he develops a first version consisting of three main stages, each dominated by a code: images – texts – techno-images. In *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* Flusser offers a new expanded variant of five stages capturing this development in a downward series of numbers, as a sort of ironic countdown: 4 – 3 – 2 – 1 – 0. The numbers indicate spatial dimensions and are linked to specific codes as well as parts of the body, determining our interaction with reality. On the first, four-dimensional level, the moment of concrete experience, man, who is not really man yet, is completely surrounded by an environment in which he bathes. The next and three-dimensional level is marked by the hands that grab things and change them. The eyes that are linked to the birth of two-dimensional pictures deter-

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[14] Ibidem, p. 19.
[15] McLuhan, Marshall (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 68.

mine the pictorial stage. The fingers are associated with the one-dimensional linear universe of texts. And, finally, the fingertips belong to the zero-dimensional world of calculated and computed techno-images, a world of discreet numbers, dots, bits, and pixels.

The present issue is structured to help interlink Flusser and McLuhan in an attempt at uncovering significant thematic and theoretical patterns common to both authors, as well as identifying points of divergence. The difficulty in trying to create an interface between the two thinkers is that Flusser's reading of McLuhan often serves to further differentiate his own media theories, and therefore the similarities are sometimes obscured. Nevertheless, both thinkers offer up metaphors, methodologies, and theoretical paradigms that, while not always commensurate, may well be complimentary—opening up and expanding different aspects of the same problem of language, subjectivity, meaning, communication, and media.

The first part of this issue is dedicated to a series of lectures on communication and media theory Flusser presented in Aix-en-Provence after finally having moved to France. This text has not received any critical attention so far, although it represents the first attempt on Flusser's part to summarize his theoretical position on communicology.

In his editorial comments[16] on Flusser's *Kommunikologie*, first published in 1996, Stefan Bollmann offers a chronology of Flusser's three major texts on communication theory written over the course of the 1970's. *Umbruch der menschlichen Beziehungen?* – Transformation in Human Relations? –, was written in three different versions (German, English, and French) around 1973-74. The lectures on communicology, *Vorlesungen zur Kommunikologie* – written in German and French – were delivered at the Ecole d'Art et d'Architecture at the University of Marseilles-Luminy in 1977. And finally, there is a third, English and French version, *The phenomenon of communication*, a series of twelve lectures delivered at the *Théâtre du Centre* in Aix-en-Provence in 1986-7. This last elaboration of Flusser's communication theory, according to Bollmann, does not provide any new perspectives and it is the reason why it was not included in the volume.

A first glimpse at the French version – *Les phénomènes de la communication* – particularly at some of the titles of the different lectures ('La mode de la Bible a Bardot', 'L'art: le beau et le joli', 'L'avant garde et la communication') make it difficult to believe that this text was actually written in the late 1980's, after *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* and *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, that is, at a time when Flusser was already moving in a completely different direction. A closer inspection of the text, in fact, quickly confirms this first impression. Bollmann's erroneous chronology might have been caused by a mistake that is also apparent in the computer data-bank created by a

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[16] Flusser, Kommunikologie, p. 353-55.

series of friends shortly after Flusser's death in late 1991. This data-bank that has been housed in the 'Vilém Flusser Archive'[17] all these years contains lists of every available Flusser text along with lists of the different versions and the chapters of single works books?. The files dedicated to the two versions of *Les phénomènes de la communication / The phenomenon of communication* not only show that in the English text a chapter, "Aliénation et stereotype," and the conclusion are missing. The individual lectures of the French version have also been dated beginning on 6th November 1986 and ending on 26th February 1987. Bollmann possibly consulted the data bank while editing the book.

If one compares Bollmann's chronology with that established in the still unpublished volume *Quellen,[18]* originally intended to be part of the 'Edition Flusser' published by Andreas Müller-Pohle, and, too, with some biographical remarks by Silvia Wagnermaier in *absolute Vilém Flusser[19]* a completely different picture emerges. The lecture series *The phenomenon of communication* was held at the *Théâtre du Centre* in Aix-en-Provence from autumn 1975 to spring 1976, followed by 'Cours de la théorie de la communication' – *Vorlesungen zur Kommunikologie* – at the Ecole d'Art et d'Architecture at the University of Marseilles-Luminy between 1976 and 1977; and finally *Transformation in Human Relations?* was written in 1977-78 as a book, summarizing the results of the first two lectures and developing some new theoretical insights into what?. A closer reading of *Les phénomènes de la communication,* in view of the developments to be detected in *Vorlesungen zur Kommunikologie* and *Umbruch der mesnchlichen Beziehungen?,* shows, on the one hand, that some notions were abandoned or dealt with in separate texts, for instance the theory of gestures, while others were expanded and integrated into a more elaborate and consistent interpretation.

In view of Bollmann's incorrect chronology and in order to call attention to a text that has been gravely overlooked so far,[20] this issue includes the general plan of the lecture series – 'Théorie der la communication. Programme' – along with three selected chapters: 'Du discours scientifique à la démagogie', 'Du dialogue familial au téléphone' and 'L'art: le beau et le joli',[21] one of the very few texts dealing explicitly and at some length with aesthetic phenomena. This latter text, especially, proves the importance that Flusser has always attributed to the arts as a specific interpretation of the world that is to be discussed on the same level as the natural sciences and ethics.

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[17] At present it can be consulted at the new site of the archive at the Universität der Künste in Berlin.

[18] This book was to contain an exhaustive list of all texts published by Vilém Flusser, but, unfortunately, it has not been published yet (Klaus Sander, Flusser-Quellen. Eine kommentierte Bibliographie Vilém Flussers von 1960-200, European Photography, Göttingen, p. 20-1).

[19] S. Wagnermaier / N. Röller, (2003), Absolute Vilém Flusser, orange press, Freiburg, p. 117-8.

[20] In the volume *Kommunikologie* that has been republished in 1998 as an identical paperback edition by Fischer Verlag in Frankfurt am Main the chronology has been inverted. This is particularly unfortunate considering that it is one of the very few texts by Flusser still available on the internet.

[21] The four texts have been made available in a pdf-format based on carbon-copies of Flusser's texts written on a typewriter. Unfortunately, at some points these are not perfectly readable. We apologize for this inconvenience.

In her opening essay, Janine Marchessault explores McLuhan's aesthetic approach in terms of a methodology that he developed to critically discern the ubiquity of communications media. As the world is increasingly imploding, McLuhan sees an urgent need to create a new curriculum devoted to media studies. She argues that all of McLuhan's works can be read in terms of the development of a new experimental pedagogy.

The following five essays discuss convergences and divergences in the work and methodologies of McLuhan and Flusser. Kalina Kukielko and Barbara Rauch discuss McLuhan's and Flusser's common interest for the artistic endeavor and its connection with epistemological concerns, creating, thus, a double thematic link to Marchessault's considerations and Flusser's lecture 'L'art: le beau et le joli'. McLuhan and Flusser became interested in the role of the artist in the new digital society, delving into collaborative projects with artists, and producing films and other artistic output over their lifetimes. Kukielko and Rauch highlight this particular interest by focusing on the role of the artist and different modes of artistic perception.

Rainer Guldin focuses on the possible relevance of eschatological and messianic perspectives in Vilém Flusser's and Marshall McLuhan's media theory. Both authors, in fact, postulate a first stage from which media evolution sets out and a last stage to be reached with the development of the new media of television, film, and photography. Even if secularized, this three-stage evolution has to be situated within a Judeo-Christian context.

Alberto Carillo's text aims at reconstructing and comparing McLuhan's and Flusser's common notion of the mind as a product of media-evolution. Whereas McLuhan tends to stress media in general, Flusser focuses on communication-codes. Despite this fundamental difference, however, their theories show striking similarities, especially in view of their history of media-evolution.

Michael Darroch sets out from Vilém Flusser's writings on translation and city space, extending his reading to the metaphorics of translation employed by Marshall McLuhan in developing his media-theory and to Jacques Derrida's specific approach to translation and linguistic variability.

In her reading of Flusser's *Die Stadt als Wellental in der Bilderflut* Yara Guasque focuses on convergences between McLuhan's and Flusser's view of the fluid and complex topology of cities made possible by new communicative structures. In this new vision of urbanity, the location of being has been superseded by a vocation for connectivity. In the present issue this text has been published in a Portuguese and English and version.

Scott Weiss, finally, discusses Flusser and McLuhan as electronic age versions of classical rhetorical theorists. Both believed that the communication process is an adjunct to human expe-

rience; one which nonetheless has the ability to shape the self-constructing perceptions of our consciousness and construct meaning in the world.

The last two texts are dedicated to the work of McLuhan but could also be read in view of Vilém Flusser. Kate Wells explores McLuhan in the light of Derrida's *Archive Fever*, linking McLuhan's exploration of typographical and electronic communication systems to Derrida's deconstruction of the archive as a technology of exteriorization. Conversely, Derrida's 'archive of the future' is theorized in terms of McLuhan's sense of acoustic space, that is, of a sound based paradigm endemic to the new media.

Vinicius Pereira, finally, explores some classic concepts in the field of communication studies such as medium, content, and message, all inspired by Marshall McLuhan's thought. He focuses on the idea that each technology of communication must be understood as a kind of grammar capable of creating and shaping new modes of communication.

Janine Marchessault / Rainer Guldin
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