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Unto the Third and Fourth Generation: The Experience of the Holocaust as Basis for Vilém Flusser's Theories

“Nazism is the goal of the Modern Era. In the Middle Ages, when mankind left the cathedral to enter the immanent world, it took the road to Nazism”

Vilém Flusser

1. Prologue

Personal experience as basis for a philosophical method is favoured both by Phenomenology and by its offspring, Existentialism. When Heidegger defended the human exceptionality in comparison to other beings, he did so under the assumption that only humans care for and consider the question of their Being. In Heidegger's terminology, that is called *Dasein*, or being-there. “Das Dasein hat vielmehr gemäss einer zu ihm gehörigen Seinsart die Tendenz, das eigene Sein aus dem Seienden her zu verstehen, zu dem es sich wesenhaft ständig und zunächst verhält, aus der ‘Welt’”. (Heidegger, 2006: p. 15) The human being understands himself through the world where he lives.

Hannah Arendt applied her mentor's philosophical existential method to the political sphere and coined the expression “an experience in thinking” (Arendt, 1963: p. 13). This kind of thinking is different from other mental processes such as, for example, deducing, inducing, or drawing conclusions whose logical rules can simply be learned once and then applied. “[...] and my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.” (Arendt, 1963: p. 14)

The philosophical principles found in Vilém Flusser's work follow the same path. In a text titled *Ensaïos* (Essays), written in Portuguese and published by the Brazilian newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* in 19/8/1967, the author distinguished between two basic kinds of philosophical style. He defined one as an academic style, and the other as a lively style; the first results in treatises, the latter in essays. “I can say that the choice between writing a treatise and writing an essay is *sensu stricto* an existential decision. It will determine my attitude towards my subject as well as towards my readers, “my others”. In the case of a treatise, I will think about my subject and discuss it with

others. In the case of an essay, I will experience my subject and have a dialogue with the others.” (Flusser, 1998: p. 94-5) ¹

Flusser was always faithful to a lively style, expressing his ideas in essays. “An essay isn’t an articulation of one single thought, but of a thought as a spearhead of a committed existence. An essay vibrates with the tension of the struggle between thought and life, and between life and death.” (Ibid: p. 96) ²

My brief essay intends to show that the experience that fundamentally determined Flusser’s thought was the Holocaust—in Hebrew, the *Shoah*, or the catastrophe. Although the philosopher lost all his closest relatives in concentration camps, he did not by any means paint himself in the role of a victim. “I was there and witnessed everything. I have no excuse.” (Flusser, unpublished: p.227)³ He wrote in *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, one of his very first texts, still unpublished: “We must not attempt to describe Nazism as if we were discussing Australian Aboriginal myths and traditions. We all share the responsibility for Nazism, as we are spirits informed by the same trends that informed the Nazis” (ibid.: p. 229). That monograph, which focuses on the Nazi issue as a complex problem of the Western civilisation, will be examined in more detail.

2. Background

Unto the Third and Fourth Generation is considered one of Flusser’s key texts for a number of reasons. Besides being his longest text, with 336 typed pages, its origins evoke the beginnings of his writing.

We find the very first substantial reference to the manuscript in the first issue, published in March 1965, of the *Cavalo Azul* journal, a project designed by the Brazilian poet Dora Ferreira da Silva. That issue includes the first two subchapters, *The School* and *The Alchemy*, of the first chapter, titled *The Cathedral*.⁴ The title used for the purposes of that publication, *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, comes with a footnote: “Working title of an unpublished book by Vilém Flusser; the present text is its first chapter.” We thus know that at the beginning of 1965 the book had already been concluded. In the second half of the 1960s, several publishers manifested their interest in the monograph. On 8 December 1967, the philosopher wrote to Professor Leônidas Hegenberg of the

¹ “Direi que a escolha entre fazer um tratado e um ensaio é uma decisão existencial no sentido estrito do termo. Marcará a minha atitude perante o meu assunto e perante os que lerão o meu trabalho, “os meus outros”. No caso do tratado, pensarei meu assunto e discutirei com os meus outros. No caso do ensaio, viverei meu assunto e dialogarei com os meus outros.”

² “O ensaio não é a articulação de um pensamento apenas, mas de um pensamento como ponta de lança de uma existência empenhada. O ensaio vibra com a tensão daquela luta entre pensamento e vida, e entre vida e morte.”

³ “Estava lá e presenciei tudo. Não tenho desculpa.”

⁴ In Portuguese, respectively: *A Escola*, *A Alquimia*, and *A Sé*.

Department of Humanities at ITA⁵: “My book, *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* (a subjective history of the modern ontology), is going to be published by Grijalbo in the scope of the University Press [EDUSP]⁶.” And among Flusser’s personal documents, one can find his curriculum vitae, dated 31 March 1968, in which he listed the manuscript as being in press by EDUSP.

The expected publication has never occurred, perhaps because the text departs drastically from the playful, elegant style for which the author was popular at the time.

A brief examination of the manuscript in question already shows many peculiarities that are also present in Flusser’s first unpublished texts from the 1950s. The project of the first monograph on the history of the eighteenth-century thought (*Die Geistesgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, in German), on which the philosopher had been working in 1951, was aborted. However, there are references to it in the correspondence that Flusser exchanged with his cousin David Flusser, Alex Bloch, his intellectual peers, and some publishers. In a letter to Alex Bloch on the 2nd May 1951, Flusser talked about the method he applied to his book: “Um ihn metodisch zu planen, muss man sich einen beliebigen Ausschnitt aus der Geschichte wählen, zu Beispiel das 18. Jahrhundert, und versuchen, von diesem Angriffspunkt aus, das Sichtfeld zu erweitern.” (apud. Guldin, FS 20: p. 2). Around the same time, Flusser also wrote to Columbia University Press: “The eighteenth century seems to be at the same time the climax and the beginning of the decline of European civilisation and I am therefore planning a book on 18th century thought as seen from our present position [...]” (apud. Guldin, FS 20: p.3)

Flusser never concluded this project and moved on to others. It seems, though, that instead of abandoning it altogether, he left it to mature. A few years later, he started an extensive work, this time on a Portuguese manuscript. The central theme was his “old” search for the historical roots of the Western civilization’s decline. Flusser merely selected a different historic period to which he intended to expand his view of the process. The Age of Enlightenment as a starting point for the history of the eighteenth-century thought was replaced by the Renaissance, the age that saw the transition from medieval to modern structures. Hence, *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* was born.

In the Middle Ages, when mankind left the cathedral to enter the immanent world, it took the road to Nazism. In abandoning the cross that supported the Saviour who takes away the sin of the world, humankind inadvertently chose the gammadion cross that symbolizes the sin of the world.

⁵ Instituto Tecnológico de Aeronáutica (Technological Institute of Aeronautics), located in São José dos Campos, Brazil, where Flusser lectured in the 1960s.

⁶ Editora da Universidade de São Paulo.

It is with this subjective spirit charged with a sense of responsibility that we should consider Nazism. (Flusser, unpublished: p. 229)⁷

In the text, we can identify some similarities with another work conceived in the 1950s: *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert*, a long monograph in German, subtitled *Versuch einer subjektiven Synthese*—in English: *The Twentieth Century: in Search of a Subjective Synthesis*—the very first of Flusser’s concluded monographs, probably from 1957.⁸

Apart from the subtitle, analogous to the expression “a subjective history of the modern ontology”, with which the author connected *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* to Professor Hegenberg, the formal style of both works has several traits in common. Rainer Guldin describes the style of *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert* as a sort of laboratory, where the author experiments with several different forms of writing. (Guldin, FS 20: p. 24). In reading *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, we have a very similar impression: poetic passages of exuberant language and full of emotionally charged images are interspersed with objective analyses; pages filled with religious terms with a strong moral appeal are followed by philosophical reflections *sensu stricto*; the objective point of view gives way to a subjective perspective, etc.

Although it is impossible to determine accurately when the monograph was written, there is substantial evidence that the conception of *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* started to take shape still during the first decade after the Second World War, in the 1950s. Therefore, as well as *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert*, it is part of the legacy of *The History of the Eighteenth-Century Thought* project.

3. Unto the Third and Fourth Generation

Let us put aside the historical context of the manuscript and focus on the book itself. The title of *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* comes from a Bible verse, Exodus 20:5,⁹ which Flusser quoted in the epigraph on the contents page: “Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me.” On the same page, we find another epigraph: “And yet it moves”, Galileo Galilei’s legendary quote, allegedly stated as he left the Inquisition tribunal, where he was forced to recant his scientific assertions in order to preserve his physical

⁷ “Quando a humanidade medieval abandonou a catedral para adentrar o mundo imanente, era em direção do nazismo que se dirigia. Ao ter abandonado a cruz que sustentava o Salvador que carregava os pecados do mundo, já escolheu a humanidade, sem sabê-lo, a cruz gamada que simboliza os pecados do mundo. É neste espírito subjetivo e carregado de sensação de responsabilidade que devemos tratar o nazismo.”

⁸ Carta a David Flusser, 12 July 1957

⁹ “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me [...]”

integrity. These two sentences introduce the essay's character and dynamics: the tension between religion and science—science understood as some sort of modern religion, devotion deprived of transcendence, arousing the jealousy of the biblical God, and all the consequences this brings to humankind. The paragraph introducing the book is very clear:

The messengers of the Lord enjoy the softness of His day. We, from the third and fourth generation, fear the thunder of His wrath. Its dull rumble pierces the air and our ears. *Presságia o dies irae*. The world will be reduced to ashes. What will we, the miserable ones, do? This book will not attempt to answer this question. It will try to formulate the question. It will try to make the indescribable horror describable. (Flusser, unpublished: p.1)¹⁰

As mentioned above, the essay's central theme is an attempt to comprehend the history of the transformation of Western civilisation's values, and of how they resulted, in their most drastic aspect, in the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi. The author attempted to identify the principles of the civilization process that erupted from a world dominated by technology and bureaucracy. Flusser detected the roots of this historical process in the Renaissance, when humankind turned their backs on the cathedral and started towards the immanent world. (Flusser, unpublished: ps. 32-35). In that period, he claimed, a gradual emptying of the transcendental dimension began, leading to a loss of the sense of reality. Since then, humankind has been searching for something with which to replace it. The structure of the book corresponds to the four historical stages of the search for the lost reality; the philosopher called those stages *generations*. Each generation has its own characteristic existential climate: the first generation matches the Renaissance; the second covers the Baroque and Romantic periods; the third begins in the Victorian era and ends with the Second World War; and the last one, the fourth generation, takes place during the post-war era. Due to the fact that this history is described as relinquishing human life's sacred dimension, Flusser names those four generations respectively as guilt, curse, punishment, and penance. A clear parallel can be noticed between the structures of this monograph and of another book by Flusser, *The History of the Devil*, in which the historical stages of social progress are named after the cardinal sins. They are meant to be understood as steps that lead humankind away from the lost paradise and, therefore, from God. It is important to point out that although *The History of the Devil* was published for the first time in Portuguese in 1965, its German manuscript was complete in 1959 and had already been offered to several foreign publishers.¹¹

As faith is slowly defeated by reason, the well-cemented dimension of sacredness is replaced

¹⁰ Os mensageiros do Senhor adoram a suavidade do Seu dia. Nós, os da terceira e da quarta geração, tememos o trovão de Sua ira. O seu surdo ressoar vibra nos ares e nos nossos ouvidos. *Presságia o dies irae*. O mundo será dissolvido em cinza. Que faremos, miseráveis? O presente livro não procurará formular respostas a esta pergunta. Procurará articular a pergunta. Tentará tornar dizível o terror indizível.

¹¹ Letter to David Flusser, 5 March 1959.

by material, objective reality. The dawn of a second form of comprehending the world destroys the certainties about the first, as well as the certainties about the world itself. Reality becomes relative and flexible, and values become subject to manipulation. The medieval person is sheltered by their faith; the modern person, by their doubt. However, doubt as a reason for living is a suicidal path. (Flusser, unpublished: p. 67). Flusser developed this theme in yet another essay, *On Doubt*, a monograph written in the first half of the 1960s and published only after his death. In that text, he focused on the radical doubt born from the progressive intellectualization of thought, which leads humankind to an emptying of reality.

The author expressed through his terminology his disapproval of the material world to which humankind has surrendered. For example, he stated that people without faith turn their attention to objects that hold the promise of service; he called these “prostituted objects”. (Ibid: p. 60) The Renaissance person collected objects of their invention—instruments—and created a second-order world based on them. That led to the emergence of the technological world, the instrumentalised world of objects. The transformation of reality required the transformation of the human beings themselves. The new ideal became the working person, the functional person. The Renaissance inventor was an operator *in statu nascendi*. (Ibid: p. 63). We must stress that the term *operator*, a key term in Flusser’s texts from the 1980s, was already gaining clear contours in this period. The same applies to the concept of *apparatus*, as we will see later on.

The philosopher continued his analysis by applying it to the Baroque era. He considered that the religiosity of this period was so flooded by objects that it started being expressed through scientific discourse as well. The world began to be subordinate to reason, mathematics, and geometric shapes. The Baroque era created a rational society administered by reason. It worked automatically as a mechanism that attributed to each activity an amount of money that corresponded to the value of that activity. (Ibid: p. 102) Value became a matter for the profane level. For the author, the greatest responsibility of the Baroque era consisted of the denaturalization of life and the rationalization of instincts. However, the fact that nature and reason, *res extensae* and *res cogitans*, are merely fictions of the Cartesian thought went unnoticed. “The eighteenth-century civilization is as fictitious as the barbarism of the twentieth century, and the barbarism of the twentieth century is the inexorable consequence of the eighteenth-century civilization. They are two stages of the same curse that weights on our civilization since the Renaissance.” (Ibid: p. 113)¹²

In the Romantic period, the material world took over the Western civilization with full force. At the same time, it became clear that science was no longer a search for the being, but a method

¹² A civilização racional do século 18 é tão fictícia quanto o é a barbárie do século 20 e a barbárie do século 20 é a consequência inexorável da civilização do século 18. São duas fases da mesma maldição que pesa sobre nossa civilização desde o Renascimento.

to actualise virtual possibilities. According to Flusser, reality was replaced by actualisation. (Ibid: p. 122,123). In that period, another phenomenon surfaced to share the responsibility for the perversities of the twentieth century—the nationalism. For the author, the nationalism born during the nineteenth-century Romanticism became a sort of religion; political parties resembled different creeds of the Reformation. “The Romantic turnaround towards nationalism is one of the most nefarious forms of flight from the lost centre.” (Ibid: p. 139) ¹³

Flusser had already dedicated several pages to this theme in the monograph *The History of the Devil*, where he defined nationalism as lust elevated to the level of social reality, and nation as a concept without fundament, as deliberate fiction. (Flusser, 2005: p. 85)

The Bible cautions us that transgressions against God will be answered with divine punishment. In *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, Flusser asserted that punishment came in the form of the twentieth-century wars. The First World War was a prelude to the Second. The author called the Second World War the eternal return: the eternal return of the bestial core hidden inside the human being. “This can always happen because this is what always happens. It is an eternal return. It is the goal of progress.” (Flusser, unpublished: p.228) ¹⁴

At the very beginning of the chapter that discusses the year of 1940, Flusser announced the change in his method. He explained that until that moment he had used the comparative method in his analysis, seeking objectivity. In order to describe the Second World War, though, he felt this method failed him. For the philosopher, this historical moment was fully immersed in subjectivity, and the effort to be objective would have cost him his authenticity. (Ibid: p. 227) He inserted himself into the book structure as a representative of the penance generation.

If I try to comprehend the present time in its historical context, or in other words, if I project the present from one moment towards the past, I actually project the present from that moment towards the future. But where am I amidst this entire process? That is a disturbing question. Where do I find myself? This is what I believe to be the answer: I project the present from the current moment towards the past so I can find myself in the future. This last part of the book, more than the others, is a search for myself, motivated by the hope to find myself in the future. (Ibid: p. 256)

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Flusser characterized the penance generation as survivors of a “bloodbath”. (Ibid: p. 253). They are the ones who have to carry on the fundamental task of seeking meaning in what happened:

¹³ A reviravolta do Romantismo em direção ao nacionalismo é uma das formas mais nefastas de fuga do centro perdido.

¹⁴ Isto pode acontecer sempre porque é isto que sempre acontece. É o eterno retorno. É a meta do progresso.

¹⁵ Se procuro conceber a atualidade num contexto histórico, isto é, se a projeto do instante para o passado, estou com efeito projetando a atualidade do instante para o futuro. Mas onde estou nesse processo todo? Eis a pergunta perturbadora. Aonde me encontro? Pois a resposta me parece ser esta: projeto a atualidade do presente para o passado para encontrar-me a mim mesmo no futuro. Esta última parte do livro, mais que as demais, é uma procura de mim mesmo, movida pela esperança de encontrar-me a mim mesmo no futuro.

“We were all vomited by hell on the shores of the future. And it is our purpose in life to find out why that happened, so we can give meaning to the drama from which we escaped. We of the fourth generation are researchers of our punishment. We are students of the divine wrath. [...] We are all emigrants and immigrants. We are a defeated generation so we can become pioneers.” (Ibid: p. 253, 254)¹⁶

The author took on the role of witness with all its moral consequences. His book is a deliberate counterpoint to all kinds of objective analyses of that historical subject. It is an existential, philosophical testimony born out of the necessity to understand what happened. The loss of reality is not questioned in the ontological sense in Flusser’s text; it is understood as a fatal ethical problem. His theory is ethical, engaged, and pragmatic. His goal was to give humankind a warning. His message was a moral imperative: the duty of his generation, the penance generation, is to not allow a repeat of the “eternal returns”.

After making an admittedly subjective “diagnosis” of our historical situation, the author offered a solution. The key was a new language theory. Flusser’s language theory is closely related to the concept of apparatus. In the context of the book, the apparatus is considered one of the divine punishments, a punishment that consists of the embodiment of God in the apparatus. Since that moment, the progress of the Western civilization has ensued in the forms of Nazism and Stalinism; the humanist ideal has taken the form of Eichmann, the perfect operator; and the victory of immanence over transcendence was achieved by Zyklon B. (Ibid: p. 220). However, in Flusser’s opinion, there was a prophet who had predicted the consequences of the bureaucratic society. His name was Franz Kafka. “He was a prophet in the biblical sense. And as such, he agreed with a just punishment. The transformation of man into worm or into Death’s pimp, this ultimate dissolution of the human dignity, was something Kafka experienced daily. The camp where Kafka was digging his own grave was already the concentration camp of the Divine forces that swooped like birds of prey upon the blameful mankind.” (Ibid: p. 220, 221)¹⁷

Flusser’s linguistic reform in *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* is based on the assumption that our language no longer expresses reality and exists merely as a function of the apparatus; our language has become redundant and needs to be abandoned. (Ibid: p. 324) The counterpoint to this compromised language, in Flusser’s terminology, is the proper noun. The philosopher believed

¹⁶ “Fomos vomitados, todos nós, pelo inferno para as praias do futuro. E é nosso propósito na vida descobrir porque isto se deu, para darmos significado ao drama ao qual escapamos. Somos, nós da quarta geração, os pesquisadores do nosso castigo. Somos aprendizes da ira divina. [...] Somos todos emigrantes e imigrantes. Somos uma geração derrotada a fim de ser pioneira.”

¹⁷ “Era profeta no sentido bíblico do termo. E como tal concordava com a justiça do castigo. A transformação do homem em verme ou em cafetão da morte, essa derradeira dissolução da dignidade humana, Kafka vivenciava diariamente. O campo no qual Kafka cavava sua cova, já era o campo da concentração das forças Divinas que se abatem, qual aves rapinas, sobre a humanidade culposa.”

that the proper noun emerges from a creative act through which the founding reality expresses itself. “The proper noun is an astonished scream that allows that which is obscure to uncover itself. The proper noun is the act by which the unexpressed virtuality establishes itself as reality.” (Ibid: p. 326)¹⁸

In this context, the author distinguished between two kinds of languages: the apparatus’s inauthentic language, which needs to be rejected, and the poetic language, which is authentic and born from human creative activity. Actual languages are far from being any kind of Greek *alétheia*, an instrument of revelation; on the contrary, they tend to obscure the reality that is the paradox of thought itself. However, we must not leave them under the power of the apparatus: “I feel that there is within me a pre-linguistic opening through which I commune with the inarticulable—an opening that the Modern Age attempted to close and that the current apparatus is closing, but which remains open, as long as it is sought. I feel that the doors of the “Law” are open, as Kafka told us, and that the history of thought is more than a collection of wounds received as we threw ourselves against the language barrier, as Wittgenstein wants his readers to believe.” (Ibid: p.327)¹⁹

The fight against the apparatus consists of the development of the language’s poetic potential. Therefore, the operator of the apparatus is understood as someone closed against the poetic vibration. The operators’ language is composed of substantives supplied by the apparatus. (Ibid: p. 328). It is essential that we rid ourselves of the apparatus by stopping the use of the words it imposes us. Flusser’s conclusion was that it is imperative to pass through the turf of a linguistic theory so the concrete reality can be rescued again. “This is the only path I have glimpsed. I see the apparatus as a linguistic system that encloses me, and I see a new linguistic theory as an opening through which I can escape from the siege.” (Ibid: p.329)²⁰

According to the philosopher, the most crucial problem faced by mankind in the post-war era is its alienation from the foundation based on our “ontological dignity of thoroughly unconditioned beings.” (Ibid: p. 335) If nothing is done, we will become completely conditioned by the apparatus. We will turn into operators, living at the mercy of the apparatus. Flusser believed this kind of human condition was death within life. (Ibid.)

4. Much more than a theory

¹⁸ “O nome próprio é um grito espantado pelo qual o encoberto se descobre a si mesmo. O nome próprio é o ato pelo qual a virtualidade inarticulada se estabelece em realidade.”

¹⁹ “Sinto que há em mim uma abertura pré-linguística, pela qual comungo com o inarticulado. Uma abertura que a Idade Moderna procurou fechar, e que o aparelho atual está fechando, mas que ainda persiste, desde que a procure. Que as portas da ‘Lei’ estão abertas, como nos diz Kafka, e que a história do pensamento é mais que uma coleção de feridas adquiridas ao lançarmo-nos contra a parede da língua, como Wittgenstein quer fazer crer seus leitores.”

²⁰ “Para mim é a única passagem que eu vislumbro. Vejo o aparelho como sistema linguístico a fechar-me e vejo uma nova teoria da língua como a abertura pela qual posso escapar do cerco.”

One of the strongest characteristics of Flusser's writing was his search for alternative discourses to that of Western science, which confines the examined themes to a limited point of view. The fact that he opted for a religious discourse in *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* is not coincidental, since the atrocities of the Second World War created a severe moral problem for modern society as a whole. However, the moral dimension is precisely one of those which are deliberately suppressed *sensu stricto* by the scientific discourse.

Conversely, there are some scientists who look at the theme of the Holocaust and modern society in its entire complexity within the boundaries of the scientific discourse. One of most important figures in this field is indubitably Hannah Arendt, who analysed the Nazi issue in the light of political philosophy. Her philosophical report about Adolf Eichmann's case in Jerusalem, which she subtitled *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, caused a storm of controversy in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, it was precisely this work that played a key role in expanding the context of the Holocaust phenomena and its consolidation as a problem that needs to be treated in the context of Western society dynamics.

Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist of Jewish descent born in Poland in 1925, published in 1989 the book titled *Modernity and the Holocaust*. In addressing the issue of modern-society morality, he expressed viewpoints that were similar to those conveyed by Arendt in her report about the banality of evil. With 25 years between the two publications, Bauman's book not only did not meet any significant resistance, but it was also awarded the 1989 European Amalfi Prize for Sociology and Social Sciences. Let us see how the Polish sociologist described the trend of suppressing life's moral dimension in a culture dominated by science, technology, and bureaucracy.

The significance—and danger—of moral indifference becomes particularly acute in our modern, rationalized, industrial, technologically proficient society because in such a society human action can be effective at a distance, and at a distance constantly growing with the progress of science, technology and bureaucracy. In such a society, the effects of human action reach far beyond the 'vanishing point' of moral visibility. (Bauman, 2000: p. 193)

What Flusser called the alienation of unconditioned beings and their conditioning by the apparatus was associated by Bauman to the blinding of people's perception to the consequences of their own acts, a measure that facilitated their manipulation.

The sociologist cited as example the case of the German technician Willy Just, who during the Second World War worked on improving the gas vans, which displayed a number of problems on the bumpy Russian roads. The report produced by the technical expert contained terms such as "cargo", "operation", "thin fluids" and "thicker fluids", although it was clear that the cargo were "people about to be murdered and losing control over their bodies [...]" (Bauman, 2000: p. 197)

Bauman illustrated how the technical language and the bureaucratic approach allowed a man, who in all likelihood had no sort of psychological pathology, to participate in a mass murder plan without any moral remorse. The German technician was merely an example of how modern society dynamics, closely allied with functional language and communication, are able to deprive people of the moral responsibility for their acts—a fact that can trigger great tragedies anywhere in the world.

In 1983, six years before the publication of Bauman's book, Flusser published in Brazil the essay collection *Post-History*. In the first text, titled *The Ground We Tread*, we find a very similar assertion: "Auschwitz is not a transgression of Western behavioural models; it is, on the contrary, *the result of applying* such models. In Auschwitz, our civilisation dropped its mystifying mask and showed its true face—the face of the monster that turns people into objects. Our civilisation has shown that it must be rejected *in toto*, if we recognise that the purpose of every civilisation is to allow the coexistence of people that acknowledge one another as subjects." (Flusser, 2011b: p. 23)²¹

There are personal documents as well—letters exchanged with friends—that show that the Holocaust experience was not only the starting point of Flusser's theories, but also a constant concern that pervaded most of his works more or less explicitly. One of those letters was posted at the end of 1989. In November of that year, Vilém Flusser suffered a severe asthma attack. Right before Christmas, on 23 December, while recovering at a clinic in Davos, in the Rhaetian Alps, Switzerland, he wrote a letter to Milton Vargas. Flusser described his experience with clinical death and mentioned his decision to write a "Jewish book":

"Why a Jewish book after a death experience? Because human dignity is an attempt to overcome conditions into which we were thrown without being consulted, and because Judaism is one of those conditions to be overcome. However, there is Auschwitz (something insurmountable). When I regained consciousness after four days of being clinically dead, I experienced this incredible shock: how could Auschwitz have happened, and why? I ask you: what is the meaning of it? The book I have in mind is, among other things, an acknowledgement of this lack of meaning (for He hideth His face)."²²

Flusser never completed his "Jewish book". All that is left is an introduction he titled *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, with the subtitle: *The Mohicans*. The philosopher wrote it in German and translated it to Portuguese to send it to his Brazilian friend on the 1st January 1990. "In order to

²¹ "Auschwitz não é infração de modelos de comportamento ocidental, é, pelo contrário, *resultado da aplicação* de tais modelos. A nossa cultura deixou cair sua máscara mistificadora em Auschwitz, e mostrou seu verdadeiro rosto. Rosto de monstro objetivador do homem. A nossa cultura mostrou que deve ser rejeitada *in toto*, se admitirmos que o propósito de toda cultura é permitir a convivência de homens que se reconhecem mutuamente enquanto sujeitos."

²² "Por que o livro judeu depois da experiência da morte? Porque a dignidade humana é a tentativa de superar as condições dentro das quais fomos lançados sem termos sido consultados, e porque o judaísmo é uma de tais condições a serem ultrapassadas. Mas há Auschwitz (coisa insuperável). Quando cheguei a mim depois de 4 dias de morte clínica, vivenciei a surpresa indigestível: como e por quê Auschwitz? Para falar contigo: qual o sentido disto? O livro projetado é, entre outras coisas, confissão de tal sem sentido (que Ele escondeu Sua face)."

deny one's current condition, one must acknowledge it first. If we don't acknowledge that we are mammals and insist instead that we wish to be birds, we will never fly. [...] This text will attempt to consider the condition of being a Jew in Prague. [...] It will try to fully endorse this condition, before trying to overcome it. [...] this text is not meant to be an autobiography. Being a Jew from Prague should not be a matter to be examined introspectively. The text should flow from the author to the few survivors and the numerous dead in order to take on the problem inter-subjectively."²³

Flusser's work had come full circle. The theme of "the few survivors and the numerous dead" remained alive, along with the biblical title that expressed terror and the fatal tragedy of those who survived the "bloodbath". During his forty-year career as an essayist, the issue became more ramified, acquired a variety of formats, and resulted in countless texts. However, most of his essays do not address the *Shoah* explicitly. The experience turned into a backdrop from which an indefatigable engagement arose in defence of the human dignity and the liberty of thought.

In Flusser's essays we can clearly identify an important movement against post-war historiography that served the victorious parties of the largest military conflict of the twentieth century—a historiography that tended to reduce the Holocaust to perverse German Nazi on the one side and the Jewish victims on the other. However, Flusser refused to accept the imposed role of victim, both for himself and for his generation. By taking responsibility in the culture in which the so-called victims participate, they abandon their passive role and recover their active potential, not only in regards to history, but mainly to the future. Putting into perspective the good or evil of the people involved in that atrocity, the passivity of the victims, and the activity of the executioners, helps to expose the destructive power of our cultural dynamics to which the Western civilization surrendered centuries ago. It becomes clear that the matters of Nazism and the Holocaust were not definitely solved at the courts in Nuremberg. Those issues remain as intrinsic elements of our culture, as evidenced by the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japanese cities and by the Gulags, Soviet forced-labour camps, during and after the war, as well as by the "peacekeeping missions" in recent history, which left thousands of dead and entire regions with their structures in shambles, susceptible to enormous genocides.

²³ "Para poder negar sua condição é necessário primeiro admiti-la. Se não admitirmos sermos mamíferos e insistirmos querer ser aves, jamais voaremos. [...] O presente texto procurará considerar a condição de ser judeu praguense. [...] Deverá procurar assumir plenamente tal condição, antes de tentar superá-la. [...] o texto não deve ser autobiografia. Ser judeu de Praga não deve ser problema a ser analisado introspectivamente. O texto deve partir do seu autor em direção dos poucos sobreviventes e numerosos mortos, a fim de assumir o problema intersubjetivamente."

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Unpublished material:

Flusser, V. – Até a terceira e a quarta geração.

Vilém Flusser’s correspondence with David Flusser, Leônidas Hegenberg and Milton Vargas.