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6.1.   Vilém Flusser's Trans-Anthropocentrism and the Turn "from Subject to Project"

Before Flusser's thinking is laid out in view of our guiding theme, I would like to preface with some preliminary remarks, because I presume that there is a smaller degree of familiarity with his thought than with that of Augustine and Camus. Here we are primarily concerned with Flusser's mindset, or rather his style of thought, which differentiates itself from the rigor, clarity, and systematics that one largely expects of a philosopher.

Vilém Flusser is not a philosopher who operates with terminological precision and theoretical rigor, who therefore attempts to expound upon his thoughts as clearly and free of contradictions as possible. The opposite is the case.

Vilém Flusser is a *provocateur*. Frequently over-accentuated, largely stylized, playful, ironic, and mindful of effect, he puts forward his insights, theses and ideas.[1] For him it is not a matter of critical scrutiny, deliberation, or arbitration between two positions. For him it is about the propagation of an alleged fact that, when one examines it more closely, moves within the realm of conjecture. In this manner, Flusser's theory of the "End of History" becomes just as much a fact as the emergence of the new era, the so-called "Posthistory." The horizon of the possible and of the probable becomes an inevitable state of reality, it becomes truth and factual.[2]

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[1]Stefan Bollmann, the publisher of many of Flusser's writings, thus characterizes Flusser's style of thought as "that double-play of identification and distance (…), that today distinguishes good philosophy." Bollmann further writes: "In the final analysis, like the photographer, Flusser the philosopher does not identify himself with any of the positions he takes, rather he leaps from position to position, without even wanting to prove their interchangeability. Moreover, to observe Flusser in thought means watching the staccato-motion of methodic doubt, for which there can no longer be any final certainty. Flusser's thought is a radicalized thought of possibility and therefore always on the move [*immer auf dem Sprung*]." Foreword, 9. In: Vilém Flusser: *Media Culture*. Ed. by Stefan Bollmann. Frankfurt am Main. 1997, 7-18. Even if I were not to generalize this thesis with regard to Flusser, nevertheless he clings unyieldingly to certain views, there is some truth in this statement with reference to the open-endedness of his thought.

[2] In her seminal review of Flusser's book *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt. Menschwerdung*. Frauke Tomczak writes: "A new stylistic device pervades this work of Flusser's: the imperative of the allegedly factual. What is to be celebrated *is*, therefore, the displacement of the linear, the historical thought, oriented toward (by) the written word, by the digitally punctual and planar computation of buzzing points in nothingness, the displacement of the sense/values by pure function, the displacement of history by formalized systems – a rejoicing in the pathos of the 'movement of computation, of the synthesizing of worlds and men (human beings)'." "Der Biß des Porzellanhundes," 898. In: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 43, 1995/5, 897-900.

Flusser performs a "movement into irony".[3] He does not want to come as "near" as possible to things, circumstances and conditions with this mindset, 'getting at their roots'; rather he seeks to take an ironic posture that leads him away from these terms and conditions into a world situated above, just as if viewed with new eyes, therefore allowing him to take in the vast overview from a critical distance. When he opens himself up in this free range of the bottomless (groundless), he ascends into the heights of exasperation [*steigt er in die Empörung empor*], which are synonymous with the movement of emigration.[4] And here, analogous to the photographer, he discovers, "that it is not a matter of taking a preferred viewpoint, rather it is about realizing as many viewpoints as possible."[5] Just as Nietzsche before him had already demonstrated, he discovers that the multiperspectivity of human cognition involves the loss of belief in an absolute truth or an objectively valid criterion for truth. Truth expands in this aesthetic position, occupying the multiplicity of viewpoints, from which beauty becomes "the only acceptable criterion for truth": "The more beautiful the digital appearance is, the truer and more real the projected alternate worlds are."[6]

Vilém Flusser is also a *seismograph*. He is characterized by a sense for that which is about to come, or more cautiously expressed, for that which could come. As he said himself in an interview with Gerhard Johann Lischka on March 19, 1988 in the art museum in Bern: "I do not make suggestions, actually; rather, what I attempt to do is to map out contemporaneous tendencies a well as possible and project forward a little bit. I hope that nothing of what I say is utopian, but that everything I say is applied possibility."[7]

Emerging from this statement is Flusser's aim to philosophize contemporaneously and that means to detect developments in the here and now and to apply them to the future. Consequently, for Flusser, it is not a matter of fundamental philosophical topics or of a pedantic, fine-point problem of philosophy; more so, he takes up as his task the identification of tendencies in the intellectual situation of the time in order to anticipate and predict their future course.

Vilém Flusser is furthermore a gifted *creator of language*. He listens to the words of others, adds his own meanings to them, and does not allow himself to be manipulated by fixed meanings commonly bound to them. In this vein he gives the first chapter of his important book *Die Schrift*,

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[3] Vilém Flusser: Für eine Philosophie der Emigration. 31. In: Freiheit des Migranten. Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus. Hrsg. Von Stefan Bollmann. Bensheim/Düsseldorf 1994, 31-34; (Herv. K.3.) Engl: *The Freedom of the Migrant. Objections to Nationalism,* ed. Anke Finger, Urbana/Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

[4] Compare, ibid, 32 ff.

[5] Flusser: Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie. 35. Engl: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography.* London: Reaktion Books, 2000.

[6] Vilém Flusser: "Digitaler Schein," 158. In: Florian Rötzer (Hrsg.): *Digitaler Schein. Ästhetik der elektronischen Medien.* Frankfurt am Main 1991, 147-159.

[7] Flusser: Bern, 1988, 34.

the subtitle, "Überschrift," characterizing not the title, as one would be quick to think, but rather the "rumination and writing about the craft of writing,"[8] thus that which one can cognitively grasp about the craft of writing. And in order to adequately bring the new phenomena that he seizes upon in the moment into the spoken word, he forms neologisms. Thus, for example, he speaks of "telematics" as the movement of bringing nearer those things that lie at a distance.

If one overlooks the foremost characteristic of Flusser's style of thought, one could get the impression that Flusser depends less upon content than upon effect. However, this impression would be wrong since, from his perspective, content and effect are inseparable; the content can only 'arrive' at the recipient if it 'affects' and enables its meaning to unfold. That is: Flusser certainly made use of many rhetorical devices in order to put his thoughts in a position of greatest public effect; nevertheless, the charge that he was exclusively concerned with effect is untenable.

Moreover, in my critical sympathy for his thought in light of setting the task for the present work, I consider peeling his thoughts out of this rhetorical context and to scrutinize them critically as the primary task.

If Flusser's thought is interpreted as a virtually ideal representation of a trans-anthropocentrism, then this occurs in opposition to his own formulations, which sooner present him as a representative of an anthropological model. As he writes:

The new civilization should no longer identify the human as an individual in and with masks; rather, thanks to creative agglomeration, it should, in essence and finally, project the specifically human from within interpersonal relations. One can therefore speak of the 'death' of the economy, politics, and of the human subject, but only in that sense in which one can speak of a butterfly as the death of the larva. A city modeled in this way is that place in which the upright human being breaks forth from the Subject.[9]

The object here is not to interpret this quote; it is more important to point out the statement that "the new civilization … should project the specifically human from within interpersonal relations interpersonal relations." If one takes this out of context, Flusser appears to promote the anthropomorphizing of the human being in the sense of a humanization. However, this assumption is false since, for Flusser, the biological constraints and conditions of humankind are unacceptable because they restrict and subjugate him, i.e., functionally impoverish and intellectually denigrate him. Instead, an escape from the game of nature must be sought: humankind must deliberately engage it and must project in order be able to free itself from its subjugation. The limits that nature has placed

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[8] Flusser: *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* 4. Ed. Göttingen 1992, 9.
[9] Flusser: *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt*, 59.

on humankind will not be removed in this way, in order to expand its latitude, humankind should rather free itself from its natural-biological bonds which suppress it, so that it can stand upright.

If one attempts to articulate these limits briefly and concisely, one could say: in the place of nature, blood, necessity, material, and body there must enter art, choice, freedom and intellect.

I am not of the view that, as a result, the specifically human first becomes visible and "humanizing" becomes concrete.[10] To the contrary. I go so far as to maintain: Flusser does not understand himself what he is saying. The human being, who pulls himself upright as a Project(ion), virtually dissolves the human aspects of the human being and disappears in the Net, as will be shown. The human being models himself according to the design he would like to be, indeed, as independent as possible from all of the natural conditions that have, until now, inevitably bound him. He becomes an 'intellectual factor,' i.e., a "nodal point" in a relational structure who is unable to identify himself as an "I," but rather nullifies himself in the "We."[11]

This step from the human to the trans-anthropological super-human is the turn "From Subject to Project," which can be confirmed today, according to Flusser: "A new, post-humanistic, 'post-modern' anthropology is in emergence. After we have explained ourselves [*uns … aufgeklärt*] as a nothing in nothing, as a node of networked relationships that are connected by nothing, then only now can we hope to begin to negate this nothingness. A negative anthropology of this kind (‚neg-anthropology') is not only a theoretical philosophical prospect (a negative belief), but above all a practice."[12]

As will be shown below, according to Flusser, in his belief in the solidity of the human being and the material world and in his search for a basis [*einem Grund*], the human being, on the side of the Object as well as of the Subject, has encountered nothing.[13] For both sides have come to nothing, more specifically, in accordance with the entropic tendencies of reality, which Flusser believes he recognizes in them in applying the second law of thermodynamics to cultural situations, they have been disintegrated into relational fields, just as the line relates to the point, which is ultimately a nothingness. And here in this null-dimensionality, it is possible either to collapse into paralyzing apathy or creatively engage with these points, to step up to action and to recompose human beings and the world from these points according to one's own conceptions.

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[10] Compare ibid, 95.
[11] Compare to this ibid, 126.
[12] Ibid 18.
[13] Compare to this ibid., 16-17.

In order to examine this process more closely, the following guiding questions shall be answered in the next sections. Why should the human being rise up from a Subject to a Project? What does projecting mean? What is projected? Who is that person who projects?