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Flusser and the Polish (photography) novels

I. Introduction

In the field of comparative literature, especially concentrating on the relation between photography and text, the difficult aspect is the choice of methodology. The theoretical issue of methodology in the literature is not unified; this paper aims to provide a new approach of analysis to intermediality. The choice among methodologies (or among the multitude of methodologies) to suit the purpose remains efficient usually *only* for analyzing a specific piece (a novel, poem, a picture, or an exhibition). The need for an appropriate method is critical.

Blake Stimson's essay, titled "A Photograph is Never Alone" (Stimson 2008), metaphorically describes the fact that a photograph is always read through other discourses. Several authors have noted that trend before (Sontag 2001, Burgin 1967, Stiegler 2006). The idea that "A Photograph is Never without its Story" coincides with Stiegler's and Sontag's approach – photography cannot be interpreted as a separate art, but must be understood within other disciplines, mainly sociology and anthropology. However, the challenge of methodological issues remains. Is the philosophy of photography a compromise for intermedial research? Mutual influences between literature and photography sustain two fields: literary criticism and visual arts criticism. Nonetheless, philosophy of photography indicates only one discipline and does not mention literature scholarship. Another related issue is whose or which philosophical approach to pursue. The question concerning Flusser is analogical - the dilemma involves whether Flusser's theory is sufficient for intermedial scholarship.

The focus of this essay is on the interpretation of Flusser's theory concerning two literary works. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* cannot assume the role of a standardized approach for text-and-image interpretations. However, this essay employs principal theories towards the "philosophy of photography" found in several Polish novels inspired by photography, comments on photography, including description along with pictures on their pages.

Intermedial dilemmas

The relationship between photography and literature is widely commented on by numerous scholars from different fields in the humanities and beyond, from aesthetics to literary criticism

(Bordieu, 1965; Metz 1985; Bal 1991 and 1997), Lippard (1996), Bate (1997), and Wagner (1993). The key issue with works on intermedial and interdisciplinary analysis remains methodology. Academic scholars examine the topic in terms of theory and focus on linguistics and the issues concerned with theories of pictorialism, pictorial description and terms of *ekphrasis* – defined in various ways (Rubins 2000). Alternatively, art historians, aestheticians and visual arts scholars concentrate less on the problems of what is written. Their analysis focuses on the object perceived, the ways it is perceived and what it means.

In the introduction of “Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on *Ekphrasis* and Intermediality” Peter Wagner emphasizes scholars such as Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal who successfully deal with the problem of intermediality. Wagner claims that Bal and Bryson come from the field of literature, however they “crossed disciplinary borders (Bryson from English literature to art history; and Bal from narratology to visual rhetoric)”. However, as Wagner claims later, even “Bal may not really deliver what she promises in the subtitle of her leviathan monograph”. The subtitle of Bal’s book explains the principal concern: “Beyond the Word-Image Opposition”. Wagner remarks that Bal’s concept “urges us to consider pictures as rhetoric or encoded signs that must and can be ‘read’ with the tools provided by narratology and post-structural theories, including feminism.” (Wagner 1993: 3) Wagner indicates that Bal has convinced us that the discussion on Word-Image opposition cannot be free from other discourses. In addition, it can never be a discourse in itself but, rather, has to be supported by other methods and theories. In general, the issue is whether intermediality is a self-insufficient discipline or whether it is only a literary theory at the onset of analysis?

Although Bal and Bryson attempt to find a compromise between text and word discourses, the problem of definition persists. That is, there exists no standardized theory on intermediality. Initial analysis involves general thoughts and assumptions as to what is textual and what is visual and how these two areas affect one another. This general introductory part is followed by examples: novels, poems, motion pictures, and photographs, which are examined separately as a particular embodiment of the very broad term “intermediality.” The choice of approach depends on what determines the analysis – memory, gender issues, social involvement or race.

The process of explanation seems to continue in the following way: after a long theoretical part, the authors immediately start focusing on a particular piece, without explaining what intermediality means to them and what this universal term says about what they want to examine. Analysis is not performed step by step but, rather, proceeds in a radical hermeneutic way: *pars pro toto* and *toto pro pars*. A portion of abstract divulgence on relations between arts comes first and is followed by a significant leap towards a peculiar sentence, phrase or a picture.

The consequence is serious. It is rare to find texts while searching for a more general statement, theory, or conclusion on relations between the text and the image. Either it is possible to find texts describing particular authors (Marcel Proust, W.H. Auden) or particular pieces of art. The main cause of such confusion is the method, or rather the lack of any method in writing about the intermedial between the two disciplines: visual and textual. Nonetheless, that is not the last or most decisive factor. One suggestion for how to solve the matter of intermedial analysis corresponds with prior attempts to deal with the topic: *Towards a philosophy of photography* is one answer, that is, a theoretical answer of interpreting the phenomenon. On the other hand, a reading of the term “intermedial” also depends on how a particular *oeuvre*, in this case a novel, is inspired by photography, how it depicts and is bounded, on different levels and in various stages of interdisciplinary dialogue, with the photographic image.

My understanding of the term “intermediality” shifts from Flusser’s philosophy of photography (the idea of images reinforcing Benjamin’s theory, role of the camera and figure of the photographer in contemporary society) toward the concept of an *oeuvre* created by Rosalind Krauss. The US theorist, investigating relations between images and text, described *oeuvre* as “a great aesthetic unity” (Krauss 1994). In the case of each photographic novel under discussion here, the unity combines photographs (fictional or real) and text (usually fiction). In that, the main goal (also according to Krauss) is to analyze mutual influences between word and image. However, those influences differ, depending on the particular *oeuvre* being analyzed.

Philosophy of Photography – Methodological Emergency

The well-established philosophy of photography is necessary as a theoretical, methodological, and often sociological basis for researchers representing different fields. The philosophy of photography serves as the link among disciplines. It has become a firm theoretical foundation for various analyses, while, on the other hand, the philosophy of photography remains itself a subject of multiple interpretations.

Vilém Flusser’s philosophy is one of several considered to be groundbreaking in the thought on photography. And as with most others, it is special and original. Vilém Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* was first published in Polish only a few years ago. Nevertheless, this specific essay has been well known among media researchers, philosophers, and theoreticians who analyze the art of “reproduced images.” One of the scholars who has frequently referred to Flusser’s concepts is Andrzej Gwóźdź, a Polish academic and leading new media analyst. Gwóźdź’s most significant work in this field is the text titled, *Po kłynie?...?*, which can be translated

as *After the cinema?*, a title that already tells us a lot about the direction and general rumination of the text's theoretical background. What comes next after cinema art, in an era when images are a dominant feature of our culture, and despite their cultural function, is that existence and form constantly reevaluated?

II. Methods: “Towards a philosophy of photography” as a Relevant Key for Understanding Photographic Novels

The appearance of Flusser's text itself, once translated into Polish, was the real breakthrough for Flusser's ideas for cultural studies in Poland. Obviously, I can assume that Flusser's concepts belong to some of the most important theories on photography, along with the theories of Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes. Flusser's essay still remains unknown, however, hidden in the shadow of its predecessors. Benjamin defines photography as a mechanical petrification of pictures lacking in aura – aura, which can only be an attribute of painting. Sontag interprets the distinctive features of photography through sociological meaning and using its social origin. Roland Barthes, however, defines photography as a form of expression, where the category of Death can be found in its allocation in the twentieth century, in the century that tried to marginalize the phenomenon of dying. References to the above-mentioned thinkers and their intuitions on photography are certainly one of the factors that enables us to treat Flusser's text as a unique methodological basis for the interpretation of a literary text and *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* refers to all of the thinkers mentioned above. The next subchapters specifically describe these relations and indicate those elements of dialogue between Flusser and the other writer on photography that are the most significant for the analysis of the two novels chosen for closer analysis.

1. The Power of Images – Flusser and Walter Benjamin

The similarity between Benjamin's and Flusser's concepts is mostly seen through a critical analysis of images' quality in the post-industrial era. Flusser derives two types of images: 1) an image as “a significant surface on which the elements of the image act in a magical fashion towards one another” and “a technical image” – “a technical or mechanical image created by an apparatus” which is as symbolic as a traditional image, but represents a completely different

ontological status. In other words, “a technical image” represents “post-historic” magic, an abstract magic excluded from the real world. This type of image supplies an order of symbols. This peculiar eradication of “technical images” is a highly advanced process, according to Flusser, and he claims that they are “metacodes of texts which, as is yet to be shown, signify texts, not the world out there” (Flusser 2007: 15)

The power and, at the same time, the danger of the “technical image” is its ability to be reproduced on a mass scale and, as a consequence, its ability to “swallow” traditional images. This negative incorporation of traditional images leads to their falsification. Traditional images, being recycled in that way, are degenerated and changed into an overcoded message – easily accessible, cheap and omnipresent. For example, a Czech-Brazilian philosopher mentions a poster, which underestimates the quality of the traditional image by its multiplication of the “original version.” Flusser elaborates that “technical images are surfaces that function in the same way as dams. Traditional images flow into them and become endlessly reproducible: They circulate within them (for example in the form of posters).” (Flusser 2007:19) Technological copy is also excluded from the magic of traditional images. Magic, as invoked by Flusser, might be understood in the same way as Walter Benjamin’s aura. Flusser claims that each kind of image has magical characteristics. However, a different type of magic might be associated with traditional and “technical images.” “The fascination that flows out of the television or cinema screen is a different fascination from the sort that we observe in cave paintings or the frescoes of Etruscan tombs. [...] The ancient magic is prehistoric, it is older than historical consciousness; the new magic is “post-historic”, it follows on after historical consciousness. The new enchantment is not designed to alter the world out there but our concepts in relation to the world. It is magic of the second order: conjuring tricks with abstractions.” (Flusser 2007: 17)

Flusser devotes several thoughts to magic and strictly classifies the two types of the magic according to the kind of images, clearly emphasizing which type is more valuable from an ethical as well as aesthetic point of view. This evidently signals an echo of Benjamin’s thoughts in Flusser’s text.

The hunters – Flusser and Susan Sontag

What brings together *Towards a Philosophy* and the ideas of Susan Sontag then? The most significant motif for both thinkers relates to the essence of the term “camera.” This ‘plot’ I am going to describe and analyze thoroughly later, but at the moment I will point out the problems

most worthy of notice evolving from this term. In the Polish translation two terms are mentioned, camera and *apparatus* (aparat – apparatus is a literal translation of the Polish). Nonetheless, this is the second term originally used by Flusser, and it depicts in the best way his way of thinking about the whole problem created by the technology. The term *apparatus*, for Flusser, includes all devices, machines and technological equipment that have defeated post-modern humanity. Flusser claims that *apparatus* accounts for the most crucial category of contemporary life.

Andreas Müller-Pohle has emphasized this fact by writing that “the analysis of *apparatus* is a core of Flusser’s analysis of photography in general. The analysis of photography is a core of the analysis of all media. The analysis of communication media is a core of the analysis of the whole culture.” Describing the nature of a camera, Flusser uses specific “hunting” terminology, just as Sontag had earlier. Sontag repeatedly wrote about conquering and capturing in terms of aggression. The writer called the act of photography an act of brutalism, as well as a possessive attitude of the photographers. Flusser directly refers to Sontag’s basic assumption. In the chapter titled “The Gesture of Photography,” Flusser makes the following statement: “If one observes the movements of a human being in possession of a camera (or of a camera in possession of a human being), the impression given is of someone lying in wait. This is the ancient act of stalking which goes back to the paleolithic hunter in the tundra. Yet photographers are not pursuing their game in the open savanna but in the jungle of cultural objects, and their tracks can be traced through this artificial forest.” (Flusser 2007: 33)

Similar types of discourse often appear in Flusser’s text. Photographers, for example, “wish to snap their prey,” (Flusser 2007, 33) claims the author. Nevertheless, at the end of the text, the reader encounters the most serious accusation against photographers, and this entire segment of the text reveals the Czech-Brazilian thinker’s attitude: “Their acts are programmed by the camera; they play with symbols; they are active in the “tertiary sector”, interested in information; they create things without value. In spite of this, they consider their activity to be anything but absurd and think that they are acting freely.” (Flusser 2007: 80)

Flusser’s criticism here seems to be radical. He sees a need to create a philosophy of photography, “to question photographers about freedom, to probe their practice in the pursuit of freedom.” (Flusser 2007: 80) In other words, the origin and main reason for asking for a philosophy of photography is the matter of photographers’ *praxis*. This issue as well as how photographers’ *praxis* can be understood according to its relations to literary text will be described below in more detail.

Ultimately, Flusser’s critics can accuse the thinker of reusing old thoughts and concepts well-established in contemporary cultural anthropology. However, to a certain extent, Flusser takes a

significant step beyond earlier theories, including Susan Sontag's. Listed below are some of Flusser's ideas that specifically overcome the more traditional thinking of Sontag and Barthes. To start with an in-depth analysis, it is necessary to focus on Flusser's idea of *apparatus*, as mentioned before, but mainly in terms of its relations with Sontag's sociological theory. The Czech-Brazilian thinker, however, uses the idea of *apparatus* in a more advanced way than any other thinker before him. According to Flusser's opinion, "hunting" connotations arise already from the etymology of the word *apparatus*. "The Latin word *apparatus* is derived from the verb *apparare* meaning 'to prepare'. Alongside this, there exists in Latin the verb *praeparare*, likewise meaning 'to prepare'." (Flusser 2007: 21) This linguistic claim provides a point of departure for further, more sociological conclusions. Flusser writes about cameras in the following way: "The photographic apparatus lies in wait for photography; it sharpens its teeth in readiness. This readiness to spring into action on the part of apparatuses, their similarity to wild animals, is something to grasp hold of in the attempt to define the term etymologically." (Flusser 2007: 21) Are cameras predators then? Anthropological theories prior to Flusser have compared a photographer with playing the role of a hunter. The camera was a weapon. The act of taking a snapshot was compared to the act of pulling the trigger, however, the camera itself was only a tool in the photographer-hunter's hands.

Flusser claims, though, that the apparatus becomes the subject of an action on its own. It is the camera that both captures and attacks. Not only does the camera attack the object of snapshots, but it also captures the photographer, who is taking a shot and seems to be the subject of the situation. That is why Flusser writes later that a photographer is somehow used by the camera. This issue requires a deeper evaluation. A person using photographic technology is described by Flusser as *homo ludens*. This claim derives from the fact that photographic equipment remains a toy rather than a tool for the worship of truth. However, the relation between human being and apparatus can be perceived as anything but a game. This relation resembles a system of captivity. Flusser claims that a person who benefits from the camera's values, becomes its servant or functionary. The photographer and the camera "merge into a unity." (Flusser 2007: 27) These statements depict, above all, unprofessional users, less resistant to being steered by their machine. In this regard, the phenomenon of the "competence of the camera has to be greater than that of its functionaries" (Flusser 2007: 27) is emphasized and becomes noticeable.

Flusser underlines once again the independence of the apparatus, an independence from its users. However, the camera's discipline or control over its functionaries cannot be limited only to amateur shooting at family events or vacations. Flusser proceeds with a much more gloomy story about mankind that is captured by these devices. This facilitates certain conclusions in other parts of his text: "Functionaries control a game over which they have no competence. The world of

Kafka, in fact.” (Flusser 2007: 28) The apparatus has reached the status of totally self-controlling beings, but they are still an invention of mankind. They were invented for the needs and expectations of people. Moreover, their shape was designed in a way to satisfy human anatomy. Flusser continues that “apparatuses now function as an end in themselves, ‘automatically’ as it were, with the single aim of maintaining and improving themselves.” (Flusser 2007: 75) This pessimistic opinion of Flusser’s is not as radical as his “humanistic” criticism of media in general. However, the Czech-Brazilian thinker’s focus on photography is detailed when writing about the values of an apparatus, or rather about the lack of its values.

Apocalypse now and then – Flusser and Roland Barthes

Another theory must be mentioned before undertaking a more thorough analysis of adopting Flusser’s thoughts in literary criticism and literary comparative studies. In reference to Flusser, Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* is critical to the analysis. Both *Towards a Philosophy* and *Camera Lucida* were written in the early 1980s. One primary feature of comparison is the apocalyptic vision of contemporary, reproducible culture. This negative point of view and lack of hope emerges not only from the deep analysis of the apparatus (as apocalyptic conclusions were made on that topic by Flusser), but on the produced images themselves. “Nothing can resist the force of this current of technical images – there is no artistic, scientific or political activity which is not aimed at. [...] The universe of technical images, emerging all around us, represents the fulfillment of the ages, in which action and agony go endlessly round in circles.” (Flusser 2007: 20)

In a way, Flusser’s thought recalls modern or rather post-modern *memento mori*, so strongly emphasized earlier by Roland Barthes. What must be repeated here is that both concepts do not concern photography in general, or a photographing individual, or a camera, but the image itself. Barthes and Flusser are pessimistic primarily when writing about the images and their place in culture, their manipulative character legitimated by their omnipresence, which people, in fact, desire. The message of the memory of the bereaved, of passing and of the unavoidable end was transvalued in the twentieth century. In a bitter reflection on the condition of contemporary culture, Barthes touches on the problems of foreclosure of the traditional ritual form of human activity. To replace such forms, the human being has invented photography – to apply a load, or rather, a heavy burden of “memory” to it.

Photography was supposed to compensate for the loss of a natural, pre-technological duty of memory. Flusser’s approach toward the new role of photography is similar. He writes about a play, a game, ritual and magic. Unfortunately, that cannot be anything more than a game because

society nowadays can only simulate on a level of symbolic multiplication. Flusser, in opposition to Barthes, does not wind his deliberations tightly around Thanatos. Flusser does not actually follow Barthes' intuitions about the problem of Death. The main point bringing them together is a matter of commercialization and an attitude toward an image's power of mass destruction. A critic of the images is a critic of society. As Barthes writes: "What characterizes so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs; they are therefore more liberal, less fanatical, but also more "false" (less "authentic") - something we translate, in ordinary consciousness, by the avowal of an impression of nauseated boredom, as if the universalized image were producing a world that is without difference (indifferent) [...]." (Barthes 1982: 118)

The quotation above expresses another important relation between images and societies. Modern, post-modern and ancient societies vary among each other in several cultural aspects, but their approach toward images, their use of them and their meaning in society is one of the most important aspects. Images are in a crucial category that have distinctive features of different cultures in their respective spheres. Flusser radicalizes this concept. The question of analyzing photography through the analysis of the images again appears in his thought. The discourse can, therefore, be directed back to the departure point for Flusser's entire framework: "Images are surfaces above which the eye circles only to return again and again to the starting point." (Flusser 2007: 77)

2. Devil's Diaries, Memories and... Flusser



Towards a Philosophy of Photography describes the character of the predators-cameras: vulgar, aggressive, and always ready to hunt. But the tool never functions on its own. It needs a human being who knows how to use it. The human decides about the subject of the photography and its aesthetic values. An artist who wants to publish or exhibit a photograph often chooses the right one from hundreds of similar snapshots.

The ongoing problem appears to be the status of the photographer. A distinction appears in both documentary and "artistic" photography. In documentary photography the role of the author seems to appear in a marginal position. In artistic photography the person or artist represents the traditional status of all artists in the Western meaning of art. The press photography case is more complicated. The reader does not demand

such high competence from the photographer. Only the subject matters and its ability to engage in the “mass destruction” effect. Nonetheless, nowadays, this *status quo* often equates with the tendency to shock the public at large with outrageous images.

When the limit of ‘good taste’ is transgressed or the limit of what is allowed to be photographed is irrelevant, then other questions arise concerning ethics. Irek Grin’s book *Devil’s notebook* (*Pamiętnik diabła*) includes a dialogue that addresses the issues mentioned above. The dialogue essentially asks where the border is, that is, the border between photographic ethics and aesthetics. What is pivotal is that the book provides a clear answer as well. The principal concern, significant for the past two centuries, is evoked within a narrative that can be classified as a criminal novel, with elements also typical for an adventure story. Irek Grin is a writer mainly known for his crime novels: *Szerokiej drogi* (*Have a Good Journey*), *Anat, Ze złości* (*With Anger*), *Szkarłatny habit* (*Crimson*). The author, born in 1946, lives in Cracow. Grin denies that his book typifies the genre and claims that, concerning the content, he successfully overcame the genre’s limitations. Regardless of the author’s personal claims, his book is inspired by various themes and genres that, according to the title, are often slightly demonic.

Anton Szandor LaVey, a founder of the satanic church, published his *opus magnum* in 1968: *The Satanic Bible* called the ‘The Black Bible’. The book, a peculiar ethical codex (or rather anti-codex) became a doctrinal foundation for a new religious group. This infamous text was not the last one written by the satanists’ guru. One of LaVey’s text is particularly worth mentioning: *Devil’s Notebook*, in Polish: *Pamiętnik Diabła* (LaVey 1992). Similarities between LaVey’s and Grin’s texts are noticeable, obviously, via the titles. Grin’s novel corresponds directly with satanist motives, but only superficially. Anton LaVey’s name even appears in the narrative. Grin’s intertextual games with other “demonic” texts is a challenge for the reader. In the background, readers can find references to pieces by De Sade’ or to the “Faust Symphony” by Franz Liszt. The most important in Grin’s book is the main character, a photographer, sadistic reporter, and embodiment of evil itself. The third-person narrator describes him in the following way: “He tended some, as I would say, fascination for the religious phenomena. He used to say that he would like to photograph a legion of demons leaving the body of an exorcising miserable man. ‘You know, such one in motion, not sharp at all’. He said once, with a sense of humor funny only for himself, that we all live in the age of the devil.” (Grin 2002: 32)

The character, a photographer with the meaningful last name Adrian Fichmann (the similarity with the Nazi war-criminal Adolf Eichmann is not accidental) resembles Woland, the figure from *Master and Margarita* (Bulgakov, 2006). However, in Bulgakov’s novel, the devil, even when given human features, never produces more harm than an actual, flesh-and-bone human being. The *Devil’s notebook* by Grin is written as the memoir of August, Fichmann’s assistant

(narrator). After the death of a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter, August finds Fichmann's diary written over many long years, which affects the novel's form of narrative. August's first-person story intertwines with quotations from the photographer's diary. Adrian Fichmann, a bright star in the world of press photography, perfectionist, present in all endangered places (Chechnya, Israel, Sierra Leone, Uganda), is an author of the most horrifying images. This character is a perfect literary representation of photographic brutality: "[...] when he created a photograph in his mind, he was provoking its perfect environment and had never backed up himself, he always shot only once. Somebody has called him a sharpshooter." (Grin 2002: 28) Fichmann used his camera as a weapon, just as an ideal (fictional) embodiment of both Sontag's and Flusser's concept. He was carefully seizing the topic, waiting long for the accurate moment, aiming and scoring the first time. His role was not only to register dramatic events such as an armed attack on a train by *securitate* troops in Romania (Grin 2002: 74) or an IRA execution. (Grin 2002: 30) Adrian Fichmann worked as a well-informed (and sometimes in a very mysterious way) photo-reporter. But he was directing the shots by himself, arranging and directing the events.

Fichmann's attitude might have been inspired by an actual situation from the 1970s. Director Gualtiero Jacopetti who created the controversial documentary *Mondo cane* was evicted from the movie-making profession because of abuses during the war in Vietnam. It was revealed that scenes of authentic executions were shot at the time and were requested by him. Jacopetti explained that he needed a special light for his pictures. The photographer from Grin's novel drives the setting, he tries to manipulate the perceivers of his cruel images. When the photo from Vietnam is published in a Chinese daily newspaper, August mentions that "Fichmann is desperate, he desired, as I see that, a completely different interpretation of his work." (Grin 2002: 49) The aim of this paper is not to provide an overview of Irek Grin's story, or an analysis of the psychological and criminal plots in *Devil's notebook*. At the beginning of the subchapter, the problem of moral responsibility is discussed, in relation to the photographer's work. Grin also raises this issue in his book. Adrian Fichmann can be interpreted as an embodiment of Susan Sontag's photographer-hunter, as well as Flusser's photographer persona, who is dominated by his ruthless weapon, the apparatus. As explained above in the second chapter, the comparison between Sontag and Flusser depends mainly on their reflections on the moral issues concerned with the photography profession. Barbara Ching, writing a review about the exhibition "On Photography: A Tribute to Susan Sontag," organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2004, also remarked on the ethical concerns of Flusser and Grin. Ching claims that Susan Sontag "raises questions not only about the value of photography as an aesthetic experience but especially about the moral values and ethical obligations of looking." (Ching 2007: 159) Flusser's concerns, and later on Grin's, can be depicted in a similar way. On the other hand though,

Fichmann, as a literary character, can be described as a specific type of the *flâneur*. His natural milieu expands from the area of the city toward the area of the Third World. Moreover, Fichmann as the *flâneur* is inclined towards a radical arena. His profession transposes from the *flâneur*-detective into the *flâneur*-photographer, which allows him even more scrutinized observation. Conceptualization of the character of Fichmann echoes the summation of Martina Lauster regarding Benjamin's concept of the *flâneur*: "Satanic drive towards knowing and exposing becomes 'useful' ('utile') in modern society because the observer is himself part of the crowd culture he observes." (Lauster 2007: 150) The motif of the *flâneur* definitely can be deeply and critically evaluated, although that is not the main point of this discourse. However, based on the statement of Martina Lauster we can direct the subject of the analysis back to Flusser's concepts of society and the photographer who is part of it.

Modern society or crowd culture has to be observed. As mentioned above in the first chapter, according to Flusser, observation is mostly based on the folkloristic and rustic functions of entertainment (with the photographer as *homo ludens*). Even the observation of the most outrageous human catastrophes emerges as a cruel amusement. Nonetheless, as long as the glance is an individual act, the entertainment remains an attribute of the observer, respecting the object-subject order. The situation differs, however, when the camera assists in the act of perception. Observation through the camera lens and then the reproduction of the images are the next steps toward involvement of the masses in the disadvantages of crowd culture.

Fichmann is a good example of Flusser's criticisms of media representatives, or, better and more precisely, media functionaries (Flusser 2007: 27). Paraphrasing Flusser's words, the world has accepted history as a register of glamorous events. Nevertheless, a glamorous world cannot exactly evoke positive connotations. Adrian Fichmann, the main character in Grin's text, has decided to dazzle the audience with the violence presented through the press images, in order to gain doubtful respect. The *Devil's Notebook* reinforces the assertions of Vilém Flusser about mass culture and the role of the photographer. It gives the impression that the story about Fichmann is a fictional version of Flusser's theory, especially opposite to Sontag's later statements in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and it does not leave even marginal hope for educational (ethical) impact of violence in the media. Jonathan Guy Allen described *Regarding the Pain of Others* in the following way: "Sontag assesses the hope that the reproduction of images, especially photographic images, of violence and atrocity might help to abolish war, or at least to play a role in combating genocide." (Allen 2007: 100) In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, we do not encounter any similarly positive approach. On the contrary, scholars such as Peter Geimer emphasize the pessimism emanating from Flusser's text: "Damit ist das Nachdenken über die Fotografie in eine

globale, gar 'apokalyptische' Dimension gerückt." (Geimer 2009: 160) Hope is replaced by an apocalyptic vision.

The messengers of the Apocalypse are the photographers. Photographers are also the characters and the products of the twentieth century who, when searching for wicked stimulators and escalation of media cruelty, did not outrage the audience anymore. Fichmann, guilty of transgressing moral borders, was producing what was expected (by the "crowd culture") to be shown – Flusserian technical images. The photographer is rewarded, respected, and surrounded by a spectacular, albeit gloomy, fame. Irek Grin, the author (and a photographer himself), when asked if Fichmann's character was based on a real person, answered that without a doubt there are plenty of people like him.

Fichmann lacks all positive emotions. For the outer world he always has a ready explanation when someone calls him "a maniac who can shoot such terrible things in cold blood" (Grin 2002: 108) or when he was accused once that "first he took care of a shocking picture, then he informed the government." (Grin 2002: 36) Fichmann used to say that if "he cannot fight against omnipotent evil, so he would sacrifice his salvation (and the life of others, what was known only by a few people) and by capturing the tragedy he tried to move peoples' conscience." (Grin 2002: 85)

The real problem hides in the reality, though. Flusser's reflections are based on the observation of the role of media in the contemporary (twentieth-century) world. The most sublime (even in their horrible brutality) photographic ideas from the *Devil's Notebook* function as a record of authentic world events. The narrator names the places where macabre images have taken place: "Addis Ababa, the end of the seventies (1977?), one of the many streets in the city. The twilight. On both sides of the road are piles of children's dead bodies. Hundreds of twisted legs, heads broken at the backbones, eyes wide open. As stones prepared for the repairing of the road leading to nowhere. Somewhere in North Korea. Color photo. A forest. A track in a field. A couple of armed men are pushing teenage boys wearing torn shirts into a black truck (they used to call it 'a crow', nobody ever knew where all the people hidden inside were disappearing to). [...]." (Grin 2002: 122)

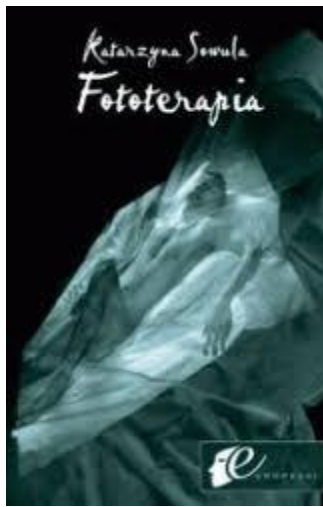
Scenes like these are familiarized through widespread global media as people are constantly being invaded by the images of human tragedy. The images' watchers "are hunting" reality in the form of a technical image (using Flusser's metaphor), reproduced and multiplied.

A radical egocentric person with a twisted sense of reality, a deviant lacking in ethical rules – this is how the figure of a photographer might be presented here. However, Fichmann pretends to be an embodiment of contemporary media, in Flusser's sense. Theoretically, the photographer provides the audience with the proof of human disasters, shows the historical truth as it is –

ruthless and bloody. At the same time, however, he crosses the limits of morality and privacy and his main goal is “to sell” tragedy.

3. “Phototherapy” – An Image of Society

Phototherapy (“Fototerapia”) by Katarzyna Sowula resembles Grin’s novel mainly because of the conceptualization of the characters who work as professional photographers like Adrian Fichmann. This is true despite the fact that Sowula’s story depicts different problems deriving from photography.



“Glamour” definitely cannot be a word representing the characters populating *Phototherapy*. They are neither demonic nor arrogant. They treat photography as art rather than as a picture-hunting mission. However, facing daily Polish reality (as opposed to a “bloody, larger than life” reality), it is hard to exist as a creative artist. When confronting life’s routine, artistic aspiration fails – especially for those at the very beginning of their careers. In Sowula’s novel, the two main characters study photography as their academic subject. Jose was born with talent for photography, but was never familiar with the technological issues. “Jose has been a lucky one since the day he was born. He just touches his complicated camera and already: ‘art’, ‘fantastic pictures’, genius child, a hope, artist-stipendist. (Sowula 2004: 13) Łucja, Jose’s flat mate, represents a different type of photographer. She tries to attract the attention of academic supervisors through hard work. Her fairly original artistic concepts are mostly ignored. However, both young photographers are forced to cope with universal realities: financial obstacles, submitting essays, and final exams. Moreover, an academic discipline such as photography requires sacrifices because deadlines are ruthless and work is necessary to survive. To find a solution, there are only two ways: working beyond one’s abilities or resignation from the priorities.

Readers become familiar with the character of Łucja through her daily routine connected with her profession: the hours spent in the darkroom, mixing the liquids. Meticulously, Sowula depicts the technical processes apparent in a photographic workshop for the development of the imagery: “Łucja hated making samples or choosing parameters. She was tearing off the expensive paper and placing it under the lamp. Then she was throwing them on separately and she was waiting for the result. She was a real perfectionist and before she considered it satisfactory, a lot of time had to pass.” (Sowula 2004: 38) Łucja reveals the details of the development of the

pictures, but she personifies, too, the negative aspects of this profession: “Long hours of sitting in the dark space filled with odors causing constant headaches and sore throats, the only sound you could hear there was just the click of turning the zoom on and off.” (Sowula 2004: 37) These photographers do not confront the world’s catastrophes and disasters the way it happens in *Devil’s Notebook*.

Sowula’s novel describes the photograph’s, the image’s, life. *Phototherapy* demythologizes photographers as artists who see more, as in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up*. Sowula’s novel does not include any murder motif. She does not even pretend to glorify photographers as people who have gained a special position in society thanks to their “focused look.” Those photography myths were already denied by Vilém Flusser, as shown in the analysis above. Sowula’s critique does not go as far as Flusser’s. Her reflections on photography are not as complex or sophisticated. Rather, the author creates the characters of the photographers as young professionals, trying to survive among all the problems facing young Poles today. Studying, and working at a photo-agency, are not the only issues, though, and Sowula conjures up another plot which is situated somehow on the opposite side of the image-production routine.

Phototherapy refers to an official and social sphere, captured by a professional camera, either digital or analog. A camera is a tool for academic projects and for money making, at weddings, birthday parties, and other public events. However, what is official and public is clearly contrasted with the private, personal, or even intimate. Łucja constructs a pinhole camera in the bathroom so that she can observe Jose. Thanks to a hidden camera, she is able to capture images of her flat mate taking a bath. What is pinhole photography for her? The novel’s narrator answers this question: “Did you happen to take photographs with the camera made by yourself? A pinhole camera construction is a cheap and easy task, but to take a good photo with that is a challenge. To make it, you only need a lightproof item, photo paper or slide – placed in that item. In this way you can photograph with the use of a perfectly closed shoe box or perfume pack, or even with the shoes themselves. Or with the use of a thousand other items. Theoretically, you only need to put inside a piece of slide or the proper paper, close it properly, and then, with a needle or with a very thin wire, drill a micro hole. [...] Łucja has decided to install such a small camera in the bathroom. She thought, however, that since Jose seems to be attractive to her and many other women, maybe he has some complexes related with his appearance, which destroy his life and prevent him from a serious attitude toward love and eroticism. Without beating about the bush – she just wanted to have a beautiful man’s nude photograph [...]” (Sowula 2004: 55-56)

Has Łucja become a secret voyeur? The voyeur hunting for a man’s nude image? Or maybe a hidden manipulator secretly building her miniature *panopticum* to control the private sphere of

Jose's life. The problem evoked in *Phototherapy* has serious consequences. The nude portrait can be an icon, or a fetish. Use of the pinhole camera instead of a digital one indicates anthropological and cultural meanings – a denial of the *apparatus*. Pinhole photography, or rather the image created by such “primitive technology,” proves that Walter Benjamin's prognosis about the disappearance of aura can be rejected. Benjamin claims that a photograph, as a technically reproduced image, has lost its tradition of painting features. It has lost its aura, its *sacrum*. Marianna Michałowska, following such theoreticians as Gottfried Jäger is convinced that pinhole photography denies that photography is only a form of technological reproduction. Consequently, pinhole photography preserves aura (Michałowska 2004, 65): “Współczesna pinhole [...] podważa powszechność panowania fotografii jako medium z gruntu nowoczesnego. Przypomina zatem o tym, że fotografia nie jest jednorodna, że w jej obszarze znajdują się także takie przestrzenie, w których śledzenie śladów aury nadal jest żywe. Jest to postępowanie zarówno „poza programem kamery”, jak i przemyślenie zasad systemu reprezentacji, który spełniałby wymagania post-fotografii.” (Michałowska 2004: 65)

Moreover, according to Flusser's theory, a picture taken with a pinhole camera cannot be categorized as a “technical image”. Ordinary pictures produced by Łucja and her camera emerge from the sphere of oblivious media. Such pictures can show omni-present machines regulating social life. A pinhole camera is not, however, an *apparatus*, and an image created in such a way keeps its magical character. What consequence does this theory have for the analysis of the photographer as a figure in Sowula's novel? Łucja uses the pinhole camera for a special purpose – to seize an image which has a special, intimate meaning. From the perceptive point of view this picture represents the art of painting rather than photography on account of its aura. The different roles of photographers depicted by Sowula (ordinary people framed by their professional attributes, hunters of intimacy) do not only concern the art of photography. On the cover of *Phototherapy* readers can see this sentence: “Phototherapy' is a story about perception.” Problems with perception appear in the narrative regularly, albeit in different ways. The most meaningful are all motifs related to photography as a specific form of perception, speaking through Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 2002).

Photography becomes not only a profession or an academic discipline for the characters, but, at a certain point, a way of life. Galago, Łucja's and Jose's flat mate, protests suddenly against such *status quo*: “That's fucking photopathology! – Galago yelled – You are all photopathological!” (Sowula 2004: 93) However, the presence of photographic perception cannot be analyzed just on the fictional level. The famous Hungarian master of photography, André Kertész, (Sowula 2004: 23) evokes the thoughts of *camera obscura* (Sowula 2004: 33) and the problems inherent to the cruelty of press photography. (Sowula 2004: 84) What is more

fascinating and meaningful are the segments about perception in their physiological and even medical aspects. Konrad, another character in the novel, is fascinated by the construction and function of the eye, as well as by sight disorders: the eye's color defines personality and it is the most important feature of a person's appearance. Moreover, Konrad is interested in everything related to the structure of the iris's shape, with monochromatism and astigmatism.

Each photo-disease needs therapy: photo-therapy. Rosy Martin and Jo Spencer are the authors of a well-recognized essay titled "Photo-Therapy" which depicts problems of 'gazes': "It has been argued by such differing theoreticians as Winnicott and Foucault that there are various 'gazes' which help to control, objectify, define, and mirror identities to us. Sometimes these gazes are loving or benevolent, but often they are more intrusive." (Martin 2010: 402) Nonetheless, perhaps the gaze that is a combination of affection and surveillance is the most complex, and in terms of "therapy," the most complicated to be healed. The authors of the essay emphasize that the idea of "photo-therapy" derives from the principal need of being seen and heard, a sentiment developed by each human being in childhood. However, in case the need for being a victim (an observed object) evolves into a need of being a threat (as the essay claims), the gaze radically changes. What does the pinhole voyeurism mean in terms of such reversed "photo-therapy"? The main assumption might be the same as in Martin and Spence's experiment: "to engage work on identity to redefine yourself. You then become the active subject of your own dissonant history." (Martin, Spence 2010: 404) Seeing or being seen constitutes redefinition as a part of the community of others, where one is not excluded from that community anymore. Sowula's novel tries to convince us that the use of the pinhole technique and the radical refusal of technical images (in Flusser's sense) reinforces the chances of recurring identity.

On the other hand, "photo-therapy" can be analyzed not only on the level of the narrative, but also externally, evaluating the book as an autonomous being consisting of textual and visual layers. "Phototherapy" includes reproductions of real photographs – pictures taken by Malgorzata Salyga. Sowula met the female photographer in Paris and they decided to launch a joint project. In seven pictures by Salyga, some parts directly correspond to the narrative and some parts are just more metaphorical in relation to the narrative. For instance, the second picture evokes the sentence: "She felt imprisoned in a broken pale color of the bed linen, touched by someone else's presence." (Sowula 2004: 48) The text and photos can exist as two independent qualities. Photographic focus in "Phototherapy" lies, above all, in the text and in the story, in the description of the characters and in the portrayal of their world. Sometimes the mind's images are far more suggestive than any real ones – as Sowula's novel has shown.

To close, in this essay I tried to demonstrate that the philosophy of photography by Vilém Flusser might be used for literary analysis. As a case study, two Polish novels were chosen for

analysis where the main characters are photographers, specifically Irek Grin's *Devil's Notebook* (2002) Katarzyna Sowula's *Phototherapy* (2004). Both novels are concerned with the problematic of the role of photography in the contemporary world, and its ethical and aesthetical values are presented by the main characters.

Problems with methodology in research connected to intermediality remain as difficult as they were decades ago. Flusser's theory, because of its universal character and its reference to all-important predecessors, has become one of the most useful and analytical bases for text-image research. This essay described in detail how theory and fictional texts can be related and how the fictional realm can illuminate Flusser's idea of the technical image.

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