

**Rodrigo Martini****Vilém Flusser's Plantonic Philosophy****Into Flusser's Philosophical-Botanical Garden**

Reading Vilém Flusser is no walk in the park. His essays wind through philosophical debates, technological discussion of media apparatuses, and literary allusions particular to Czech, German, Brazilian, Latin American, and French literatures, often without much citation or references for the reader. In fact, reading Flusser resembles more a stroll through dense woods of language where towering trees of playfulness create an endless labyrinthine path that always circles back to itself. To read Flusser is to wander from linguistics to psychoanalysis, from history to literature, from philosophy to media theory, as his works dwell in different environments of theoretical engagement. This wandering stems from his literal wandering life as he theorizes his existence and philosophical practice from the perspective of a migrant, groundless and free.

The woodsy feel to Flusser's philosophy does not stop in our experience as readers, but flows through his writing in overt references to the plant world in general, and to trees more specifically. Especially in the later part of his life, Flusser uses the so-called "natural" world as a metaphorical way to think through culture – and question the very nature/culture divide. Alongside the figures of trees and plants, Flusser uses animals and ecology in general to question how science operated in the modern world, trekking alongside other thinkers of scientific knowledge such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Michel Serres. But, more specifically, trees appear in different works by Flusser, some as a main theme and some in passing mention, but all with distinct significance. In *Natural: Mind* (2013), he explores the figure of the Cedar in an Angevin park; in "On Branches and Sticks, or, What is Freedom Good For?" (2017), an essay accepted but ultimately unpublished in the art magazine *Artforum*, he uses the woods as fertile ground for thinking about art and technique; and in "Plant Life" (c. 1988), a short piece rejected from the *Leonardo* (See Schwendener 2016: 175 n616), Flusser uses the world of trees as a way to discuss media thinking.

Flusser uses plants to guide divergent paths in the woods of modernity. These essays show how the figure of trees and plants cut across the different facets of Flusser's corpus: from his employment of Husserlian phenomenology, to his retooling of Heidegger's metaphysics, to his views on media thinking and the apparatus. Understanding his engagement with the plant world can help us understand his modernist method of thinking and the importance of language as a mediating apparatus for thinking. For Flusser, the imagery of trees represents the intimate relationship between humans and nature (between culture and nature). Trees are seemingly natural entities, yet they have received so much interpretation in the most various disciplines. Botany might interpret trees as producers of oxygen, while ecology might see them as protectors of a habitat; biology and genealogy both see trees as a model for history. The negentropic value of trees make them an object of admiration. They represent a defiance of the second law of thermodynamics as their biological substratum creates new systems. The nomad who moves around and gathers no moss becomes a vanguard of the future, while the settled being becomes an impoverished shrub. Being rooted like a tree means being stuck in an ideological system and unable to evolve in the realm of ideas. Together, these ideas about trees offer a unique view into Flusser's thinking of media as a locus of innovation and resistance – two modernist concerns par excellence.

Flusser was not alone in exploring the woods as both metaphorical and literal influences in writing. His use of plants as a unit of thought participates in a philosophical tradition of Trees that marks the modernity of philosophy: Umberto Eco, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida are a few of modern philosophers who used the imagery of plants to rethink philosophy. As Michael Marder has argued, “on the fringes of Western philosophy and in its aftermath, surprisingly heterodox approaches to the vegetal world have germinated” (Marder 2013: 6). More recently, these approaches have grown into their own lines of research in a turn to plant-thinking as the humanities incorporates more hard-science knowledge into its philosophy.<sup>1</sup> In these sub-fields, trees represent the absolutely inhuman: natural, vegetal, Other. But they are also shrouded in significance. They are both inhuman and human at once.<sup>2</sup>

In the past decade, North-American scholars have started looking more seriously into Flusser's engagement with the inhuman, especially after the publication in English of his *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (2012). His encounter with nonhuman animals permeates several texts from the late 1980s, particularly

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<sup>1</sup> See Irigaray and Marder 2016, and Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Erick Felinto and Lucia Santaella have followed Flusser in this walk through the woods in search of the posthuman. See Felinto and Santaella 2012.

in his collaborations with Louis Bec and others associated with the fictional Institut de Recherche Paranaturaliste. For the ISRP, Flusser wrote an essay on an insect called *Bibliophagus convictus*, the treatise on the *Vampyroteuthis*, as well as several other essays on birds, cows, wolves, and other animals (some translated into English, some not). But Flusser's encounter with plant life has received much less attention, despite the emerging field of "plant studies" in recent Literary Theory following on the tracks of "the question of the animal" to interrogate the role of plants in philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Flusser's essays on plants need special attention as his writings on the so-called "natural" world delineate the limits of the human.

To make the path of reading Flusser more difficult, he includes in his mode of thinking a particular kind of humor, usually without signaling whether his statements are to be taken with irony or at face value. Flusser's meandering trails in the forests of philosophy follow a path of language and linguistic questioning. In that sense, Flusser's thought is akin to Dada as a constant questioning of the possibility of escaping the traces of language. In the famous "Dada Manifesto" of 1916, Hugo Ball articulates this very dissatisfaction with "conventional language": "I don't want words that other people have invented," he complains of the "accursed language" that always frames his poetry (Ball 1996: 221). In a Dada move that announces and inaugurates Ball's poems without words, the German poet asks: "Why can't a tree be called Pluplusch, and Pluplubasch when it has been raining?" (Ball 1996: 221). Why do we have to use the words that along with conventional knowledge represent the "parrot of your self-evident limitedness" (Ball 1996: 221). Ball's choice of "tree" as the word against which to rally is deliberate because of the loaded meaning associate with trees in philosophy and modern culture. Likewise, Flusser's use of the imagery of trees in his essays echo this comic, Dadaist, and somewhat 'pataphysical form of writing and thinking that points to the problem of language as a mediator of ideas and the impossibility of a completely translucent medium.

## **La Belle Epoché**

Even though trees are natural entities, in culture they have historically represented a wide range of ideas and functioned as metaphorical units for cultural artifacts. In the chapter "The Cedar in the Park" in *Natural: Mind* (2013), Flusser acknowledges that trees are preferred models for systems of thinking

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<sup>3</sup> See Doyle 2011, Marder 2013, and Nealon 2016.

in the nineteenth century. As he notes, “There was a worldview and philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the ‘biologizing’ one), which conceived of the world as a process that tends to ramify according to a ‘principle’ that Schopenhauer called ‘*principium individuationis*’” (Flusser 2013: 36). The modern world developed a view of its society and history using the tree and its branches as model. The tree in Darwinian evolution stood as an opposite metaphor to Hegelian dialectic, for instance. Trees also represented the lungs of nature, as purifying natural filters, or shelters from a storm as a natural umbrella. These views of tree are “phantasms, ectoplasm, specters and ethereal bodies that hover around trees and make them inaccessible” (Flusser 2013: 36). Several other ideas attach to trees: the “specters of ‘fertility,’ of the ‘phallus,’ and of the ‘tree of life’” (Flusser 2013: 37). Trees are thus invisible as unique institutions because they are always shrouded in metaphorical value.

Precisely because “trees are almost invisible” (Flusser 2013: 35) and “laden with so much immemorial charge” (Flusser 2013: 37), Flusser finds his phenomenological experimentations the ideal mode to approach the modern imaginary surrounding trees. At first, these basic layers of meaning can be easily peeled away, but instead of revealing a tree-ness, they “reveal[] some even deeper prejudices that probably do not even have a name” (Flusser 2013: 37). These prejudices “refuse to be put within parentheses and temporarily removed” (Flusser 2013: 37), so Flusser’s experiments in thought sought not to peel them away, but rather to accept and play with the layers of meaning to garner a better understanding of thought itself.

Whereas Flusser was notorious for not revealing his sources and for keeping his references to the history of thought to mysterious references, when it came to phenomenology, he openly employed its method of thinking and reflected on Edmund Husserl’s position in modern philosophy. In fact, as Andreas Ströhl notes, Flusser would have defined himself as a phenomenologist (Ströhl 2021: 77).<sup>4</sup> Among his publications, phenomenology appears as method for thinking about Brazil (“Brasilien, oder, die Suche nach dem neuen Menschen: Für eine Phänomenologie der Unterentwicklung” [“Brazilian, or, The Search for the New Man: For a Phenomenology of Underdevelopment”], Published posthumously in 1994); to describe the human body in the gestures of modern life (*Gestures*), to rethink Television within media-theoretical discourse (“Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television,” a lecture delivered at the Open Circuits conference, held at the MoMA in New York in 1974), among several other essays. Flusser admired Husserl for his impact on the history of modern philosophy. In

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<sup>4</sup> Ströhl writes: “When I interviewed Edith Flusser, Vilém’s late widow, a few years after Vilém had passed away, I asked her how he had thought of himself, how he would have defined himself. Without hesitation, Edith Flusser replied that Vilém had always considered himself a phenomenologist more than anything else” (Ströhl 2021: 77).

this essay “On Edmund Husserl” (1987), Flusser suggests that “with Husserl a radical revolution of our thought sets in, and that we can no longer see the world and ourselves in the same way in which those before Husserl did” (Flusser 2018: 1). Husserl is revolutionary because his phenomenology focuses on the method of thinking and inaugurates for Flusser a modern view of knowledge that takes the role of language seriously.

Alongside Wittgenstein, Husserl was for Flusser a distinctively modern philosopher because of his attention to language. Previous philosophers had considered the problem of epistemology to be the instability of knowledge, or the changing character of thought about an object. Thinkers such as Aristotle, Descartes, and Hegel articulated this problem focusing on explaining the process of thinking about an object and trying to standardize this thought-process. This tradition culminated in Hume, who concluded with a radical epistemology, which considered knowledge itself to be unknowable. Husserl changed this tradition by reformulating the problem and focusing instead on the object and the subject of knowledge, rather than knowledge itself. As Flusser summarizes, Husserl showed that it “is not knowledge, but the subject and the object of knowledge which are in need of an explanation” (Flusser 2018: 1). Phenomenology considers the phenomenon of knowledge to be stable, it takes it for granted. Exploring instead the changing attitudes by each subject, or each observer, and the differences in the objects observed. By focusing on the subject’s position as viewer and the object as a framed reality, phenomenology stabilizes the act of knowledge as a *viewing* and makes “explicit what is implicit in knowledge” (Flusser 2018: 2), i.e. the prejudices of the viewer and the instability of the object of study. In other words, Flusser admired Husserl’s media approach to philosophy, which saw language and the apparatus of knowledge production as a medium.

The world of trees serves Flusser’s view of phenomenology because plants are objects in the world that have steered how humans think about their own relationship with their environment. For instance, as Martha Schwendener analyzes, Flusser admired the works of Wen-Ying Tsai, who engineered “cybernetic sculptures” to resemble botanical entities and replicate the human relationship to nature within the controlled environment of the museum (Schwendener 2018). For Schwendener, these sculptures “feel, for Flusser, like phenomena culled from an Eastern tradition in which self and object – including the world of plants and animals – are not separated into subject and object” (Schwendener 2018: 23). In removing “plants” from the so-called natural world, Tsai’s sculptures illuminated how we view, theorize, and interpret the plant world – the focus is not so much on the plants

themselves but on our act of seeing plants. These sculptures offered a glimpse into what Flusser considered the phenomenological method: choosing a seemingly random object in the world, analyzing this object while acknowledging and trying to suspend one's judgement (*epoché*).

"The Cedar in the Park" continues from the primary acknowledgement that trees are shrouded with meaning into exploring more specifically the strangeness or foreignness of a cedar in an Angevin park. He begins by asking the tree questions about its position in this park: "First question: How do I know that the cedar is a stranger?" (Flusser 2013: 38). The question yields a biological answer, "cedars are native of Lebanon and are not from France" (Flusser 2013: 38), which is not an answer provided by the cedar itself but by textbooks about cedars. Thus, the phenomenologist-in-practice reformulates the question: "How does the cedar in the park tell me that it is a stranger?" (Flusser 2013: 38), which yields better answers about the cedar's characteristics and leads to a second question, again reformulated, which yields more answers from the cedar: "I am faithful in myself, ... in my 'Gestalt'" (Flusser 2013: 39), "I am the noise in the park that transforms its redundancy into meaningful information" (Flusser 2013: 39), and "I am in discord, and this dissonance is the nucleus of the park's music" (Flusser 2013: 39). The cedar finally speaks from its perspective and explains its position of stranger in relation to the park. But can this *epoché* really work? It's pretty to think so.

As a thinker of media, Flusser understood that the media could never be erased but always produced their object as they were framed. Despite the attempt to use a natural object such as trees to suspend judgement and view the human's relation to nature, Flusser's phenomenological practices ultimately fails in completely suspending judgement: instead we have a highly specialized discourse on the cedar. Flusser admits that these answers "come formulated within discourses, the origin of which I know well. These are the discourses of existential philosophy, informatics and musicology" (Flusser 2013: 39). Instead of learning about cedars or foreignness, we have learned about philosophy, informatics, and musicology. This experiment provokes a third set of questions, which lead to a surprising answer: "...the cedar is not nature, but Angevin culture. It is culture, because it affirms itself, is faithful to itself, and gives sense to the whole park" (Flusser 2013: 41). The answer does not explain the cedar, nor the nature of trees, but rather redefines the concepts of "nature" and "culture" as that which blends into its environment (nature) versus that which differentiates from the environment (culture). Even Flusser admits the surprise answer: "(I must confess that it surprised me for having been formulated in the course of this essay. I did not expect it.)" (Flusser 2013: 41).

Phenomenology for Flusser was an experiment that, while worthwhile, was not without problems. As he mentioned in his essay on the São Paulo Art Biennial (1967), the main process of phenomenology, *epoché*, was “a dangerous strip-tease” (Flusser 1967: 5).<sup>5</sup> Andreas Ströhl’s argument about Flusser and phenomenology follows Lambert Wiesing in suggesting that Flusser should be seen as a *phenomenographer*, or someone who is not interested in the phenomenon of objects themselves (as a phenomenologist would), but in the “brilliant, descriptive analyses of objects and gestures and their functionality and relationality” (Ströhl 2021: 79). Thus, Flusser believed phenomenology was not a way to transcend our human perspective via transcendental reduction but a way to view the apparatus of knowledge at work in the *descriptions* of phenomena.

The phenomenological descriptions of the cedar in the Angevin park result in a renewed view of culture and nature – something not necessarily related to the concept of trees nor to the park, but about the approach to identifying a tree as a natural object. Flusser’s essay humorously uses and abuses of *epoché*, leading us not to an unimpeded view of the cedar in the park, but to the layers of signification created by the act of speaking to the cedar.

## Framed Nature

Even though trees have populated philosophy since time immemorial, during the early twentieth century they stood in opposition to the burgeoning technology of modernity. While big cities displayed a more eclectic variety of media technologies, the Black Forest stood where it had been for centuries, untouched by the mechanical arms of capitalism. For philosophy, trees represent this immemorial relationship between humans and the natural world, until modernity increased the wedge between nature and culture. Luce Irigaray notes that the vegetal world “is more and more considered to represent the memory of a primitive and wild life that our culture has permitted us to overcome” (Irigaray 2017: 126). Irigaray suggests that the use of language and logos created an unbridgeable abyss between us and the vegetal world, and, by extension, between us and the “what ‘to be’ means” (Irigaray 2017: 126). Flusser’s conversation with the Angevin cedar corroborates this vision of language as an unbridgeable abyss between humans and trees. If the cedar speaks a human language and operates within

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<sup>5</sup> Translation mine: “O strip tease perigoso que tenho em mente chama-se *epoché* na filosofia que o recomenda.”

human discourse networks, it is not a cedar but a reflection of the human. Even when we turn to the cedar we only find ourselves; there is no escape.

Irigaray's diagnosis of modernity as a time when humans increasingly lose touch with nature draws on Martin Heidegger's analysis on the role of technology in modern thought. For Heidegger, the work of philosophy is like a walk through the woods (*Holzwege*), where human beings find their essence (*Wesen*) in open clearings (*Lichtung*, *freie*). Philosophy is a contingent position within the world (as suggested by the concept of *Da-sein*) and works as a search for freedom in the open. In "The Question Concerning Technology" (1977), the German philosopher summarizes this search by using the essence of tree as an example: "When we are seeking the essence of 'tree,' we have to become aware that That which pervades every tree, as tree, is not itself a tree that can be encountered among all the other trees" (Heidegger 1977: 4). Not able to see the forest for the trees, the philosopher must progress through the act of questioning to encounter the essence of "tree." This search encounters a problem at the height of modernity in the problem of technology. For Heidegger, modern technology "enframes" the world, which means everyone who interprets the world within our technological age sees the world through the frames of technology. Enframing (*Gestell*) presents itself as a way of revealing, or *destining* (*Geschick*). For instance, History (*Geschichte*) is a form of enframing: one already interprets it through a specific frame. Going back to the woods, Heidegger explains this point through the figure of a forester who can only see the tree for its timber: "The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not" (Heidegger 1977: 18). In that sense, humans are not free to experience tree (free to encounter the open), but rather find themselves alienated in the production of paper.

Enframing thus creates the danger that everything in the world becomes susceptible of falling prey to this specific way of seeing the world. All of our natural resources have now become what Heidegger calls a "standing reserve" (*Bestand*), or a raw material that can only enter our life enframed by modern technology. For instance, the Rhine river is not just a natural phenomenon to be experienced by man, but rather a link in a larger economy of power: "Even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command" (Heidegger 1977: 16). The majestic river, which used to be celebrated in the poetry of Hölderlin as revealing the world (through *poiesis*), now, in modern times, has become synonymous with a power plant, a standing reserve. As he notes, "And certainly a sawmill in a secluded valley of the Black Forest is a primitive means compared with the hydroelectric plant in the Rhine River" (Heidegger 1977: 5). Modern technology as enframing disrupts the relationship of man and nature,

“Enframing, in a way characteristic of a destining, blocks *poiesis*” (Heidegger 1977: 30). For Heidegger, the system surrounding modern technology prevents humans from experiencing the world through freedom.

To take Heidegger to task, Flusser travels to the Rhine river in Strasbourg, France, right next to the Black Forest. In a short unpublished essay in Portuguese, “Da Floresta” (On the Forest – 1970), Flusser narrates a car ride from Zurich to Strasbourg, describing his experiences in the Black Forest.<sup>6</sup> As the speed of the car shortens the distance between Switzerland and France (with Germany in the middle) to less than three hours, this experience becomes an ideal situation to explore the differences between the Germanic and Latin worlds (of the Black Forest and the Rhine in Strasbourg). Contradicting Heidegger, Flusser opens the essay celebrating modern technology: “In Europe, the car has a function that we [in Brazil] don’t know. It is the function of condensing time and space” (Flusser 1970: 1). Through the car that brings the Latin world of France closer to the Germanic world of the Black Forest, Flusser sees a potential in modern technology of placing different philosophical traditions in conversation. From the car, Flusser begins a quasi-phenomenological reading of the forest, understanding how it has been encroached upon by Hellenic interpretations. He quickly sees the projection of Greek philosophy as a problem: “How wrong was Heidegger, in the nearby Freiburg, to want to establish a parallel between the Hellenic woods and this forest” (Flusser 1970: 1). Heidegger’s attempt at using Greek philosophy to explain the human experience in the Black Forest deflects the experience of the forest itself.

Heidegger’s metaphysics then sees in the Romantic poetry of Hölderlin a “saving power” to challenge enframing. Romantic art can promote revealing through poetics (poetic revealing) as opposed to the revealing of enframing. Art can challenge this enframing as long as it remains committed to truth. As Heidegger summarizes, “reflection on art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth after which we are questioning” (Heidegger 1977: 35). Heidegger’s philosophy of art is both Romantic and Realist. Following truth, poetic revealing can also bring the philosopher to the open (*freie*) and to freedom. To which Flusser retorts: “What is Freedom Good For?” (Flusser 2017: 307). In “On Branches and Sticks” (2017), Flusser uses the metaphor of a human walking through a forest to reconsider the role of art in a technological world. A man walking through the forest finds a branch and turns it into a stick to open a path through the forest. The stick is a work of art, which helps this human navigate the world. But soon, this human becomes so involved in stick-making that

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<sup>6</sup> The essay appears with a note to Décio de Almeida Prado, Flusser’s editor of *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper. This text was probably intended for publication in Literary Supplement of the newspaper, but ultimately remained unpublished.

he has forgotten the original role of the stick: “I no longer make sticks in order to open up pathways (freedom), but in order to make even more perfect sticks” (Flusser 2017: 310). Art has turned into itself and the value is not on the world it depicts but on the technique of its depiction. When technology enters the conversation, the artist will “no longer need to tear a branch from a tree and turn it around to become a stick: a robot will do this” (Flusser 2017: 312). A camera automates technique and now a robot can create an image. Making art now becomes more than technique, which results in two possibilities: on the one hand, art can become “art pour l’art” (Flusser 2017: 314), or, on the other, “the business of an art set free from objective resistance is to create meaning (*Sinngebung*)” (Flusser 2017: 314). Whereas Heidegger sees in the technology a detachment from the world of art and freedom, Flusser sees technology in art as a potential for more freedom.

Flusser finally concludes that “this whole utopian vision of an art, set free to create meaning, may be seen as a symptom of decadence” (Flusser 2017: 315). Art cannot be freed from technological apparatuses because the view of a pre-technological art as a saving-grace of humanity is in itself an enframing – and technological on its own. “On Branches and Sticks” concludes by pointing out that the process of producing knowledge enframes the human being in relation to knowledge. The creation of an object of study in turn creates the subject observing that object. Thus, “Not being subject to objects, man is no longer a subject” (Flusser 2017: 316). Without enframing, humans are not subjects. Flusser reverses Heidegger’s idea of the modern condition as alienated from the world and instead proposes that this condition of alienation was always present – and that actually modernity offers a different form of freedom to question more through an attention to the medium.

## **The Mirror of Nature**

Modern culture changed its perception of the natural world with the development of what Michael Taussig calls “mimetically capacious machines ... in the second half of the nineteenth century” (Taussig 1993: xiv). As Walter Benjamin argued, the highly technological environment of the late nineteenth century transformed art, which now could lose its aura as it was mechanically reproduced (Benjamin 2008). Speaking of a photograph by David Octavius Hill, which depicted a fishwife looking off-camera while holding a straw basket, Benjamin famously suggested that photography had the power of awakening our “optical unconscious,” or of depicting details in the image that are not intentionally staged by the photographer (Benjamin 1972). Whereas a painter needs to calculate every detail that

goes into an image, the photographer records several details unconsciously – and other details that the spectator would not notice on a daily basis, but would at the careful examination of a still image. For instance, a photograph enables the spectator to analyze the minutia in the very gestures of a person as they “start to walk,” focusing on nuances that escape the conscious mind when observing real-life walking.

The ability of photography to awaken the optical unconscious creates an illusion that the hand of the photographer is not present and that the final product is a manifestation of nature. Benjamin uses the plant metaphor to explain how nature comes through the media in film: “The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, and the vision of immediate reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology” (Benjamin 2008: 35). On the one hand, the choice of the Blue Flower represents the unattainable object of desire for the German Romantics, on the other hand, it represents a natural object that has never been touched by the hand of the artist – natural art, the manifestation of nature as pure and pristine. For that reason, André Bazin argues that photography satisfies our “obsession with realism” (Bazin 1960: 7). Because of its automatic character, “Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty” (Bazin 1960: 7). For Bazin, photography tricks the viewer into believing the final product duplicates nature, as if reality bloomed on paper like a flower. Bazin’s metaphor emphasizes the representation of nature and insinuates that photography could work as a scientific exhibit because it could take artifice away from the work of representation. The scientist would not need to rely on an artist to depict natural objects but rather could use an apparatus that mechanically “captured” the natural world.

Like Benjamin and Bazin, Flusser uses the plant world to sketch a view of media thinking. In the short and playful essay “Plant Life,” Flusser tried to apply the work of speculative philosophy to the vegetal world. The essay argues that with the death of humanism, we should employ non-human points of view such as Vegetarianism: “the term means here not ‘devouring plants,’ but ‘plant perspective’” (Flusser c.1988: 1). “Why should we not try to ‘permit the phenomenon “plant” to speak for itself?’” he asks, phenomenologically. The first method for achieving this speculative ideal is the use of media technologies in the form of “accelerated films of plant life” (Flusser c.1988: 1). Now popular staples of National Geographic or Discovery Channel, these videos represented for Flusser the possibility of stabilizing the axes of sound and vision, while manipulating the axis of time. In other words, these videos change the scale of time to show us the slow world of plants in our own pace. We can witness slow flowers as they follow the sun during the day, or trees blooming their leaves in the Spring,

or mushrooms spewing out spores into the air. Film cameras enable us to see the world from the seeming perspective of trees.

In the figure of plants, which for Benjamin and Bazin represent the unimpeded access to the thing itself, Flusser found the potential for viewing the apparatus of representation – to think about media in a practical application of his Heideggerian and Husserlian methods. Flusser’s long analysis of media as a distancing device begins in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) and continues into *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985). Media apparatuses extend the separation between humans and their world because of the unbridgeable problem of language. In his essay on photography, he articulates the problem as: “the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible” (Flusser 2000: 9). But they suffer the ironic problem of all media as they interfere and stand in between the very interlocutors they are trying to bridge. “They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens” (Flusser 2000: 10), Flusser continues. As if still trapped in Plato’s cave, humans forget that images are projections created for the very purpose of navigating the world and begin to live “as a function of the images they create” (Flusser 2000: 10). Using the camera as a synecdoche to human semiotic experience, Flusser outlines his version of the Husserlian and Heideggerian “problems” with technology in the height of modernity: humans forget their own existence by enframing the world around them into a standing reserve.

However, in the accelerated films of “Plant Life,” just like in the accelerated speed of the car in his trip through the Black Forest, Flusser finds a way out of the problem with standing reserve: to accept the playful nature of media, to accept enframing as *sine qua non* of language, and to explore its potential to reconfigure, and reframe the world via creative speculations. In “Counter-vision” (n.d.a), a “sketch of an essay in collaboration with [Andreas] Müller-Pohle and [Joan] Fontcuberta” (Flusser n.d.a: 1), Flusser proposed a new way of seeing the world through media, what he called a counter-vision. Media machines should function as a counter-vision of the world: not a vision that goes against the established vision, but rather a “vision of vision” (Flusser n.d.a: 1). Instead of looking at objects in the world, the counter-vision turns its gaze toward the camera, it looks inward at the apparatus we invented for creating vision and turns the camera inside out like a glove revealing its inside. By looking at the way an apparatus produces images, the counter-vision analyzes the process of image production, the “symbolisation of vision” (Flusser n.d.a: 2), and discovers the “various meanings which vision gives the world, and thus, by implication, [] discover[s] other possible meanings to give the world” (Flusser n.d.a: 2).

In the spirit of speculation, Flusser participated in the creation of the the *Institute Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste* (Scientific Institute for Paranaturalist Research – ISRP), in collaboration with Louis Bec, François Bazzoli, and Abraham Moles. As philosophical counselor, Flusser articulated the two main goals of the institute in an unpublished reflection on the ISRP, “Paranatures” (Paranatures): “(a.) to criticize nature as it was proposed by the creator, (for example, to show the flaws and inconsistencies in the construction of galaxies or the ears of mammals), and (b.) to propose the construction of different natures than that of the creator, that is: propose the construction of paranatures” (Flusser n.d.b: 1). In *Orthonature/Paranature*, a foundational text of the ISRP, Flusser articulates the first point in more detail. We should study “the incapability of living beings to understand their own existence” (Flusser 1978: 5). His work on Husserl’s phenomenology and his critique of Heidegger’s philosophy suggests that humans create philosophical apparatuses to try and understand themselves, but ultimately fail at that understanding. Because we are so intent on observing the world, we forget to observe our own observation.<sup>7</sup>

If we are to observe our own vision of the world, then the next step requires us to outline our “creator” in Flusser’s second proposition, a figure who, he claims, has become of an “unbearable academicism” (Flusser n.d.b: 2). For Flusser, “this creator and inventor, in the old days identified as ‘God,’ is the Renaissance bourgeois man. Before him there was no nature in the sense employed by us” (Flusser n.d.b: 2). Following this line, the ISRP understands that nature is a product of culture, and not the opposite. If culture produces nature, then a change in culture could produce different forms of nature. Flusser further suggests that we push forward one more step, and that criticizing nature in itself is not as interesting as proposing new natures. As he urges: “It is absolutely ridiculous today to try and orient ourselves through only one nature when (a.) we know how this nature was created; (b.) we don’t feel well in it; (c.) we’re starting to pollute it, both materially and epistemologically; and (d.) we are capable of producing better natures” (Flusser n.d.b: 3). Flusser’s use of trees as an object of reflection plays into the concept of nature – this seemingly natural object is everything but natural. The acknowledgement that trees are unnaturally loaded with meaning from philosophy, science, history, and more enables us to rethink our relationship with nature and navigate a world not anchored in the fantasy of an ontology of things, but playing within the systems framing modern life.

Ultimately, the essay on “Plant Life” argues for the use of media apparatuses – such as the works of the ISRP – to rethink the human perspective and find a way beyond humanism. While the

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<sup>7</sup> This point echoes Niklas Luhmann’s description of modernity as the time of second-order observation. See Luhmann 1994.

slow movement of trees become normal-paced in the videos, the fast-paced life of animals appears to trees “like we perceive particles in a Wilson chamber” (Flusser c.1988: 1). These technologies creatively reconfigure the realm of possibilities of modern life. He concludes, “Vegetarianism, as an alternative to Humanism, has the advantage that it permits us to see ourselves from a distance” (Flusser c.1988: 2). Media machines can be mirrors of nature and mirrors *in* nature.

## Flusser Among the Moderns

Flusser’s work on trees exposes the limitations of human knowledge through the mirror of nature. As a professed follower of Wittgenstein,<sup>8</sup> Flusser thought of philosophy as a series of language games that, when applied to trees and forests, revealed more about culture and language than nature itself. However, linguistic play was not a nihilistic act to bracket off the problems of knowledge, but rather a pragmatic engagement with the problems of the world and a direct investigation into how language and the (post-)humanist apparatuses of media (en)frame knowledge. His playful method as a failed phenomenology and overtly naïve metaphysics set out to analyze trees and forests in their essence, but instead they get lost in the trails of language and arrive instead at a vision (Husserl’s “Schau”) which reveals no essences but make “explicit what is implicit in knowledge” (Flusser 2018: 2).

Flusser’s foray into the world of plants is a response to the modern impetus to invent new sciences and to explore the limits of human knowledge. Flusser admired Joan Fontcuberta’s photographs of invented plants precisely because of their ability to question the operations of scientific knowledge. The influence of Modernist Alfred Jarry and his invented science of ‘pataphysics seems present here: Fontcuberta’s own imaginary partner “Pere Formiguera” in *Fauna* (1987) reads as an homage to Jarry’s own Pere Ubu; the institute’s focus on “para-”natures echoes the “pata-” of Jarry’s work. Flusser and the ISRP also speculated about the lives of animals in the figures of the *Vampyroteuthis*, the *Bibliophagus*, the *Sulfanogrades*, and more, following the modern impetus to limn the human in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* (1933), in Franz Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy” (1917) and *Metamorphosis* (1915), and HG Wells’s beast folk in *Dr. Moreau* (1896), and others. In the modernist spirit, Flusser used and abused of different methodologies but always with a critical distance because, as he notes,

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<sup>8</sup> In *Bodenlos*, Flusser says of Wittgenstein: “Amused and terrified at the same time, I recognized in the author of the *Tractatus* a comrade in fate, but a comrade who had lived a generation before and could therefore not draw his own conclusions” (Flusser 2007: 51).

“every paranature needs to be underpinned by irony, a dangerous but questioning attitude” (Flusser 1978: 11).

In his play on the theme of plants, Flusser made explicit how the heavily technological media ecology of early twentieth century framed (and enframed) nature in the modernist imaginary in both philosophy and the arts. His turn to film and photographs of plant life sought to understand the apparatuses of media and how they produce sensory data about the world. However, following his phenomenological and metaphysical method, we find instead that media apparatuses serve to delineate the limits of human knowledge as bound to our sensory perception. Most importantly, we find that our senses in this highly mediated world tend to privilege visual sensory data over the other senses. In that regard, Flusser was right that, as moderns, we “can no longer *see* the world and ourselves in the same way in which those before Husserl did” (emphasis mine – Flusser 2018: 1).

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