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For a Flusserian Method¹

"Etymologically, the word 'text' means fabric, and the word 'line', a thread of a linen fabric. Texts are, nevertheless, unfinished fabrics: they are made of threads (from the 'chain') and are not linked, like finished fabrics, by vertical threads (the 'network'). Literature (the universe of texts is a semi-finished product). It needs a finishing touch. Literature moves towards a receptor, which is called to complete it. A writer weaves threads that must be collected by the receptor in order to be weaved. Only then the text acquires meaning. Text has, thus, as many meanings as number of readers. [...] Therefore, text does not 'have' a destiny, it 'is' a destiny."

Vilém Flusser

A text: final product, materiality, the concreteness of the word, objective results of a fluid encounter between subjectivities, of a long process of comings and goings, of turns and overturns. A text is more than just a mere document, but its documental function retains a kind of a testimony, a register, a history that opens up the possibility for new deployments: it crystalizes the (off)roads of thought, the dancing movement of the words, its own marks in a particular time and space. To dive into the academic universe is also to be immersed in texts. From them it is possible to find a stronghold of words capable of producing frictions and destabilizations, transformations and crisis in what previously appeared to be banal and trite.

Because of this, we read. For this, we read.

Amidst the meanders of university readings, Vilém Flusser is currently considered to be a "not-entirely-academic", "sparse" or "almost unsystematic", with texts that end up being difficult to be "used" thanks to his peculiar relationship with writing and knowledge production. How to cite an author that does not cite or reference other authors? How to cite a thinker that does not apply a method such as a content or discourse analysis to his *corpus*? How to cite someone that investigates through essays? How to cite an author that keeps on playing with contradiction? The question that provoked the emergence of this article dialogues with the following problem: how to academically work with an author that escapes the academic stereotypes?

Against this 'unknown', this is first and foremost a metawriting: a writing about writing. This happens because, if to grasp an author necessarily means to address the way he/she operates

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his/her thought process, the documental character of the writing emerges like a fundamental testimony that helps us traverse the paths leading to the singularity of thinking. Is to this end that Flusser's writings will be here combed: paying attention to the subtleties, caring for the ruptures, looking for detours. A search that aims to see in the form of his writings the paths to which he conducts his intellectual journey as a course of experiences.

After years under the label of a "marginal" thinker, the impact of his words repositions Flusser in spheres of knowledge, which, much as Communication, find themselves obligated to deal with texts that internally implode the formal logic of what traditionally is understood as an academic text. However, if we consider method not as an external instance or a series of rigid stages that are 'applied' to the analysis of the *corpus*, but as a process, a walk that does not have a predetermined route since it is made during the very act of walking (Morin, 2005), could we find in this apparent "asystematization", so characteristic of Flusser, a method?

What could have been the tragic moment in which, with a gesture, humans saw themselves as a difference? The first animal leather converted into shelter for the skin? The first chipped stone? No longer a tree, an animal, a handful of sand, a breath of wind... but a human. A being capable of manipulating nature and his/her surroundings through gestures. A being with the ability to conjecture the present and modify the real. By tasting the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge meant that the Garden of Eden was gone, the paradise, the magic of being one and interconnected to the universe was lost. Only from this founding separation the "human" was able to emerge as a category of thought. Only in this broken condition knowledge became possible. Knowledge that, in the endless comings and goings of history, was legitimated through a word called "science". To produce science implies perceiving the world, all the time, as a concept susceptible to abstr The moment Descartes (1979) launches his Discourse on the method signals, not as origin, but as a historic rupture, the emergence of the methodological question as a problematizing question pertaining to the so-called "humanities sciences". Unhappy with the lack of rational foundation of the humanities and with the non-application of mathematical knowledge to real life problems, he searched for the truth of the concepts via physical and mathematical demonstrations - considered by him as the only indubitable truths. Updating the Pythagorean ideal of submitting the universe to numbers, Descartes postulated as methodological precept that only what is evident (clear and distinct) can be considered as true.

It is thanks to this philosophical-mathematical conundrum that disputes between hard sciences and the humanities keep on happening until today: how can one prove mathematically us-

ing variables that are non-measurable? How to produce clear and distinct evidence from subjective knowledge? And such disputes had long-lasting effects on the present: oftentimes, a good method is the one capable of proving the reality of what we are trying to prove in an impartial and impersonal way, without the "distraction of the senses", which Descartes viewed almost as a curse. For Feyerabend (2007), the idea of a method comprised of solid, immutable, and mandatory principles used to conduct scientific research gets a little bit tricky, to say the least, when we are confronted with a historic research. This happens because there is no rule, even if plausible and epistemologically solid, that cannot be violated at some point: "it is evident that such violations are not accidental events, are not the result of insufficient knowledge or of some lack of attention that could have being avoided. On the contrary, we see that they are necessary for progress to take place" (Feverabend 2007: 37).

As Michel Foucault (2010a; 2010b) pointed out throughout his life and work, knowledge not only tells about a particular theme but, more importantly, produces the real as it actualizes itself in the present: asylums were only possible because we formulated the category of "insane" as an abnormal; there are platforms to measure academic productivity only because an objective conception of the method as truth still predominates in our society. In this scenario, how do authors like Flusser, who were immersed in a peculiar existential condition and who were able to glimpse a different way of producing knowledge and, therefore, a different method, stand? Breaking away from patterns and molds that used to circumscribe, and still do, academic knowledge, Flusser invites the reader to a different gaze, to a different reading experience that, away from the threads of what has already been weaved, produces knowledge that invents itself in the act of writing. Each phrase creates the space for the following one. Each phrase is a new limit that, in order to be surpassed, dives into the abyss of poiesis, which is capable of transforming perceptions and affections into language. In Flusser, we have the experience of accompanying his thought "thinking," his writing "writing" itself.

Writing-action, thought-movement. Not quite academic? If we start from hegemonically established criteria, absolutely. However, if we understand method as a process, a walk that is made during the act of walking, there is in Flusser a passionate methodological singularity that works as an invitation – and this will be addressed in the present article. After a semester of studies in a doctorate discipline dedicated exclusively to Flusserian texts², after six months experiencing this form of writing that becomes writing-experience, a few elements were observed as characteristic of Flusser's path. Living up to his ambiguous and distinctive mysticism, we will list three proce-

² Said discipline, called "Vilém Flusser, Explorer of Abysses: Communication, Identity, and Culture in a Brazilian Prophet" was taught in January 2014, in the Communication Department (Graduate Program), at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), by Dr. Erick Felinto, a researcher who is currently focusing his work on Flusser's thought.

dures, a kind of 'methodological trinity' that, in its weak academicism, constitutes an exciting path to be investigated. Letting itself be inspired by the Herculean task from the authors of *Pistas do método da cartografia* (2010), who tried to systematize the so-called "non-systematic" cartographic method, the present article will embark on a journey, perhaps suicidal, of accompanying and panning, in the texts written by Flusser, his process of writing-thought as a method.

Let's cut to the chase?

To begin a text is always a challenge. The task of writing implies an inescapable act of addressing, of creating a public, whether it be real or imagined. It is necessary to seize the reader's attention: in journalism, there are the famous models of *lead* (What? Where? When? How? And Why?) and the inverted pyramid (to start the news from the most to the least important). Academic texts, in general, do not have the same pressure to capture the public's attention that journalism has: the academic public is more restrict and specific, less ample and generalizable. Usually, an academic text can afford to be a 'boring text' or 'little attractive'. In general, its reading is previously interested, meaning that the reader searches this or that article because this or that theme relates to his/her interests, because it dialogues (in)directly with his/her research subject. This preponderance of the content over the form creates a scenario in which creativity is not always a recurring attribute to academic writing: if to begin a text implies in the introduction of a context, many authors tend to limit this introduction to a standard procedure, to a formality that aims to place and identify other authors who are talking about the theme that will be developed throughout the text. To cite and to reference is necessary. But and in Flusser, how does this beginning work?

"Humanity prepares itself to abandon Earth and to wander through space."

(Flusser 2012).3

"The problem is clear, inescapable and this: philosophy could be, or not, in crisis pertaining to the message, but it is indubitably in crisis pertaining to the mediums it employs to communicate its message."

(Flusser 1976).

"To be able to work, it is necessary to suppose that the world is not how it should be, and that it is possible to change it."

³ Excerpts with less than three lines will be put in italic and separated from the body of the text because, more than citations, they work as a way to highlight, make more visible, and list the writing procedures that can be found in Flusser's thought.

(Flusser s/d).

These are the first three phrases taken out from the texts Seres de outro mundo, Como filosofar em cultura de massa and No além das máquinas. Three phrases that, right off the bat, launch the problem to be studied with all its metabolized hypothesis. There are no authors to cite. There are no books to reference. What would be paragraphs of introduction and contextualization in a traditional academic text, occupies the space of a few words. Sincere. Short. Direct. There is in Flusser a kind of affirmative writing that relies on the impact of clarity to create its own steps: contrary to being unpretentious, these phrases have several layers of implications. The first would be to dialogue with the readers in order to seize their attention. In many texts, Flusser (1998; 2010) reiterates the importance of the multiplicity of the modes of reading to the completeness of the text. In this relationship with the reader, and beyond "catchphrases", the author creates sentences with effect using this reference to a radical synthesis: the resonance of his affirmations provoke and challenge thought as if every word was a stone and each stone contained in itself the weight of a ton. It is not easy to assimilate the weight of his statements and the several implications that they bring to our mind. Flusser "cracks everything open". At a first glance, readers familiarize themselves with this language that, being so direct, creates an intimacy, an ambiance propitious to the necessary openness required if we want to dive into the text. Moreover, Flusser becomes closer and closer, he is near and, all of sudden, strikes without warning.

Another layer of implication of this peculiar *affirmative writing* is that there are already indications of elements that, in academic terms, we would call research question, method, and development. In the case of the three above-mentioned phrases, the research questions are explicit: the meaning of human life, in the first one; communication mediums, in the second one; and, finally, work. There is no such thing as a "runaround". Would there be a hastiness with the words so that the ideas do not escape? Or would it be not a hastiness, but a conciseness that expresses a particular relation with time and space? If the second option were plausible, from it we could infer that the dimensions of the page's space and the time reserved for its reading are rare resources, preciosities that are the result of working hard with the words (Flusser 2010). It is from this first phrase, this first paragraph that emerges as a rarity, as a non-banality, that the author will create the threads that will weave the paths of the text: the entire writing will exist as a *deployment*. A function of those first words that, in the case of the third citation, would be "work", "is", "should be" and "change".

"[...] Such presuppositions are problems: ontology deals with the problem of how the world is, deontology deals with the problem of how the world should

be, and technique deals with how the world can be changed. The problems are intertwined."

(Flusser s/d).

Thus, the strokes that outline the writing as a gesture are already set: just like a knitting process, Flusser weaves and inter-weaves a method that plays and, at the same time, challenges the word. It plays because it dances with the phonemes in a short and dry pace, but without losing its poetry and preciseness. It challenges because it is in the abyss of the sentences that the conditions for the emergence of new sentences appear. The word, as said before, is a limit – the proper fuel for those who need to skirt the emptiness necessary for creation. An economy of the word is converted into method: a game that, at all costs, aims to say the maximum using the minimum, the more using the less, poetry with synthesis. It is via this logic that goes "straight to the point" that, from the first phrase or, at least, from the first paragraph, the text develops and unwinds itself as an impactful and non-choreographed dance. A dance that slides and jumps, bends and stretches, shrinks and extends, falls and gets up simply by following the previous movement. There is an argumentative goal. Flusser knows where he wants to get. However, the way in which this crossing will be made is unpredictable since it tacks itself in the very act of materializing the thought in the linearity of writing. Flusser's writing does not begin with long and prolix introductions. From the beginning, it clearly stresses the anchor points that will serve as dance moves in this seducing game of writing. A writing that grows and balances itself with a rhythm at the same time vile and synchronized – and that conquers those who open themselves to the experience of reading.

Dissolving dichotomies in paradoxes

After a rumbling start, that plays, challenges and exposes the threads of what expects us, Flusser's writing seems to stop before a gorge, a giant abyss with two rims. Two sides in opposition, in collapse, locked in a battle. Two sides that emerge in the text because they constitute Flusser's thought: an author who positions himself *between* existentialism and cybernetics, *between* center and periphery, *between* languages. Irreconcilable oppositions? Life *in between*. Thought *in between*. Even before the cautions, uncertainties, and difficulties of mixing life and work, even knowing that many times our thoughts escape the life that possesses us, there is no way to explain in details this second methodological step of Flusser's writing without mentioning the dichotomies that created it.

Jew. Born in 1920 in Prague. Bachelor in Philosophy. Socialist militant during his youth. Rushed to Brazil due to the ascension of the Nazi regime in Europe. Intoxicated by Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kafka, Rilke, Wittgenstein, and Wiener. Fluent in German, French, English, Czech, and Portuguese. Life and work that weave and transfix each other just like in the Greek myth of Scylla and Charybdis, two sea monsters that dwelled the Messina Strait. Located between Sicily and Calabria, in Italy, the dangerous strait is inhabited by Scylla on one side, and by Charybdis on the other. On one margin there is Scylla and the constant danger of being eaten alive at the very moment in which she extends, with fury, her long arms towards the intrepid sailorman who happens to be passing there. Her ire and strength come from the solid volume of rock on which she rests. Scylla is dense, heavy, kills with ravenous and bloody violence. On the other side of the passage is Charybdis. Thirsty, she needs to drink water from the ocean in hopes of quenching her immense thirstiness for a long lost purity. Whoever approaches her will be swallowed by a melancholic maelstrom that sucks everything in and pulls you into the depths of the ocean. Her strength is the strength coming from the invisibility of the air, which moves, crosses, and conducts the marine currents. There is no way of running or escaping from what is there: to be "between Scylla and Charybdis" is to be between two dangers. To move away from one is to become closer to the other. To cross this fearsome strait is not only inevitable, it is also the very journey of living. This is the challenge Flusser has to face in his writing: a crossing that at every turn puts into play the dangers of dualities.

In this sense, Flusser's life and the way life has conducted him between places, between (dis)beliefs, between thinkers and between languages are materialized in his writing of the thought: his texts work as creators of dichotomies. Dichotomies between nature and culture, between human and non-human, between mass culture and telematics society, between technique as art and technique as calculus. His solid Marxist base brings to the text a dialectic that at every turn operates in the construction of the argument, using antithesis as a strategic tool for writing. But what does constitute an antithesis and how it is frequently utilized? An antithesis is an approximation of contrary directions, in opposition. In Hegelian dialectics, for instance, an antithesis would be the contraposition to an initial thesis that would result, from the clash between them, in the construction of an original synthesis presented to the thought. But beyond guiding the logical and philosophical reasoning, an antithesis could also represent a figure of speech from the comparison between two contrary concepts in one expression, creating thus a third.

Comparing the paths of Fuorn Pass, which unite Engadin Valley with the network of Alto-Adige valleys at the encounter between the borders of Italy, Austria, and Switzerland, and the menhirs of Carnac, in Britain, the text *Natural:mente* (2011), if we pay attention to its title, already indicates that it will put into play elements that, at a first glance, are positioned as contradictories:

nature and culture. How to differentiate between the ballasts that historically unite them? What would a work of nature and a work of culture be? This logical exercise of thought that faces dialectic thesis and antithesis is also present as procedure in the work of philosophical fiction *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. In it, Flusser and Bec (2011) create an imaginative exercise that aims to, verging the dichotomies that separate and approximate humans and the rare species of octopus from the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* genus, mirror the human existence using the perspective of this animal, which lives where we die and that dies precisely where we are allowed to live. A twisted mirror (BERNARDO, 2011). If one brings to the other the living image of its 'hell', of its annihilation, how, from this improbable encounter, can emerge a 'sky' that resists, a living that imposes itself, a permanence even if among the chaos?

Thus, after a first moment that differentiates and, just like a collector, seems to separate organic from non-organic trash, Flusser begins his crossing between Charybdis and Scylla and dives between the abysses that break up nature and culture, human and Vampyroteuthis, aiming at reuniting them later. It is time to recycle. The anguish of the writing is embodied in the words. After all, to unify what insists in disintegrating requires a mental and emotional effort characteristic of true artists. The art of the textual score unfolds in such a way that, here, a new stage of his writing begins. A stage in which the dichotomies that engaged in that dialectic dance are now perceived not as antithetical stances, but as paradoxical ones. There are no more dualities, only simultaneities. Comparisons between thesis and antithesis, nature and culture, human and nonhuman, mass culture and telematics society, technique as art and technique as calculus are diluted as they stablish themselves as immanent. This happens because, if the antithesis produces, through the clash between two opposing spheres, a synthesis liable of having existence in the real, with the paradox, we have the image of absurd. In it, there is not a comparison by contrast anymore, but an internal relation of contraries that allows for the sweet to be at the same time salty, for the rich to be at the same time poor, for the light to be at the same time heavy, for the immaculate to contain the evil:

"Therefore, anti-natural ways are not necessarily products of a more 'evolved' art and culture is not necessarily anti-nature."

(Flusser 2011: 15).

"We are, both of us, variations of the same game played with the little stones of genetic information that programs all life on Earth. The same fundamental structure informs our two bodies. Its metabolism is ours. It occupies one of the tips of the phylogenetic tree of which we occupy the other tip. Our common ancestors dominated the primordial beaches for millions and millions of years.

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We got separated from them relatively late, when life divided itself into two branches to conquer dry land and the depths of the oceans. Our two destinies are co-implicated. Our two memories house the same date in their deep layers. We can recognize in it part of our own being-in-the-world."

(Flusser e Bec 2011b: 14).

Melted into one, the dichotomies cease. It is against this panorama that we can observe the emergence of a paradoxical thought-writing. A making that has in the dissolution of contradictories the condition of its own constitution: nature and culture, human and Vampyroteuthis now unify and integrate themselves into a paradox, something that necessarily stems from the one. It is in play a logic that unites everything, even the most improbable, in an inseparable unity. Different from the antithesis, which always is in a comparative relation to another instance of opposition, the paradox is established in the immanent, gathering in itself contradictions that, at a first glance, seem to be irreconcilable. To unify. Not even Flusser escaped from the mysteries of the romantic thought: amidst the dynamic fragmentation of living, universals that long for the overcoming of the dualities that constitute ourselves still resonate. It is from this visceral bonding with the world that transcending the human condition in favor of the creation of a total work of art becomes possible. Life as art, art as life. An art that could be, at the same time, life, a living that could be, simultaneously, scientific, a science that could be, concomitantly, fiction. Limits. If in this second methodological step, distinctions are promptly demarcated, this procedure, at the end, it is nothing but a didactic exercise that aims to, beyond the creation of oppositions, flake off the paradoxical existence of those who inhabit this complexity contemporaneity.

An aesthetic of writing as an aesthetic of existence

Finally, we have reached the third element that closes the cycle of this methodological trinity. If in the academic writing, especially in the so-called "Humanities", the method is currently understood as something that is *applied* to a certain empirical *corpus* aiming at, from there, obtaining analytical conclusions, in Flusser's writing the methodological role emerges in a different fashion: the method is above all else something that is *lived*. As it occurs with the cartographic method, "the challenge is to perform a reversion in the traditional meaning of method – no longer a walk to reach pre-fixed goals (*metá-hodos*), but the rule of a walking that delineates, in the course, its goals" (Passos & Barros 2010: 17). To comprehend is not enough, it is necessary to experience

the path. Through an essayistic course that is eminently non-objective, non-generalizable, and non-evident, Flusser undermines the foundations of the Cartesian structure since his truth does not aim to prove, but to dialogue with the improbable, with the other, with the singularity of the reader who receives him. Flusser transformed his writing into his own method and transformed his method into an incarnated testimony of his life, of his truth: he was a parrhesiast in all dimensions of the word.

Entitled *The courage of truth* (2011), the last course taught by Foucault, in 1984, emphasizes the problem of the courage of truth or parrhesia. In order for parrhesia to exist, it is necessary for the truth to be thought and also said, thus creating a relation of congruency between thinking and saying that, thanks to what is said, requires a certain amount of courage since the relationship with the other – and consequently with yourself – is put at risk. In general terms, the practice of parrhesia is analyzed by Foucault in its three forms: the first would be the political bravery or boldness, which consists in saying something different from what the Assembly thinks, thus putting your own life at risk; the second would be the Socratic irony, which aims at making people say things and then make them recognize that what they think they know, they actually do not know, thus introducing a form of truth that will lead them to take better care of themselves; the third would be the Cynic scandal and its constant refusal of the morally accepted principles, risking life not by just saying what is true, but also by the way in which one lives and exposes oneself to life while truth.

In this sense, Flusser was very courageous. Going down the threads that permeate his thought and, through the distressful question "who am I?" (Flusser 2002: 198), he transposed the barriers of the incommunicable when he took the word as the exteriority that gives shapes and materializes its own living. Through his writing, Flusser created an aesthetic of existence. An aesthetic, that is, a field of experimentation for the subjectivity where art is perceived as an expression of the forms of resistance and creation. This dimension refers itself, thus, to the values which constitute our actions in the world (the way we conduct ourselves and inhabit the world) and the permanent recreation of our own existence as a work of art. The act of transforming yourself becomes a path for which there is no return: to live is also to carve yourself through voluntary practices in which the living "not only create rules of conduct, but also aim at transforming and modifying themselves in their singular being and to make of their lives a work that could be the carrier of certain aesthetic values and that answers to certain criteria of style" (Foucault 2010c: 17-18). And why changing yourself is so important? Why does this urge to change never stop?

"To live is to accept oneself in order to chance oneself. He who does not assumes himself does not live his own life, but the life of people. He who assumes himself and accepts himself without at least trying to change does not live actively, but just functions in the function of what determines him. Because the attempt to change myself implies the attempt to change the surroundings in which I find myself. In short, to live is to discover who I am and to try and start from there in order to 'be better' (or 'more'), thus changing not merely oneself but also the world" (Flusser 2002: 197).

Changing yourself is a process that implies carrying along the environment that surrounds you. If I change, the world around me changes as well. From the individual to the social, the search for your own transformation creates meaning because, from it, the world in which we are immersed collapses in order for something new and unexpected to appear. It is necessary *poiesis* to change. To create your own self as a work of art requires a courage to dive into the emptiness, into the incompleteness of oneself that, through the openness to the other and the environment, makes the transformation possible. It is in the territory of the sensitive that the tiny movements of deautomatization of living that put ourselves in check germinate: what is your vital course to create potency, difference? In a direct tone, Flusser's texts prophesize because they poetize. They invent possible scenarios via a writing that allows a fictionalization of philosophy precisely because the living is nothing but a constant exercise of fabulation. Asystematic? Perhaps. But if that is the case, this is a productive asystematicity that carries in itself a positivity: contrary to a mere neglect or perdition, it is through this awake disorientation (Flusser 1998) that Flusser overthrows automatisms and constitutes himself as his own mold. It is in this writing as handicraft that he made and reinvented himself existentially through the production of the word: "I love language. I love its beauty, its richness, its mystery, and its charm. I am truly myself only when I speak or write or read or when it murmurs within myself to be articulated. But also because it is symbolic form, the dwelling of being that veils and reveals, the channel that links me to others, the field of immortality aere perennius, the matter and instrument of art. It is my repertoire and my structure, the game I play, the model of all my models. It is open and opens up the unutterable. It is my commitment, in it I become real, and through it I float toward its horizon and its foundation, which is the silence of the unspeakable. It is the form of my religiosity. And possibly the form of my perdition (Flusser 2002: 201).

If words were just words... an injunction of letters that creates something semantically comprehensible to the alphabetized of a particular territorial region. If a text was only a writing... a

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group of letters, words, and phrases that organize a beginning, a middle, and an end in the physical holders of matter. If reading was only a read... a linearity of phrases that are collected by the vision and transformed into images, codified and decoded, emitted and received. But no. There is in words, texts, and readings, this "little something", which can emerge when words go beyond their function as linguistic unities, when texts go beyond their use as recorders of words, and when readings can be more than a cluster of data to be cognitively assimilated. And it is in this sense that Vilém Flusser created a quite peculiar relation of method and of writing: at the same time in which he denotes, essays; in which he describes, poetizes; in which he registers, fictionalizes; in which he diagnoses, prophesizes. At the same time he writes, experiences. An aesthetic of existence that invents itself using the art of writing. To the sensitives, it is necessary more than just understanding: it is necessary to be affected. From inside, infiltrating the solemn universe of academic rituals, Flusser established in his writing a kind of method that injects, in little homeopathic doses, the elixir of anti-academicism. That these cracks and crevices serve us and guide us like a lighthouse amidst the grey and institutionalized scenario of knowing.

Amen!

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