

Introduction

In a short text entitled „My Atlas“ Vilém Flusser recounts conversations with his more or less fictitious grandfather concerning the grandfather’s treasured atlases: „The first atlas served him to localize an event to be described. The second served to acquire an overview of all events. In that sense, and thanks to these two atlases, he could simultaneously dive into the world and surface again.” But a crisis of orientation ensued, creating a plethora of atlases. This overwhelming variety undermined the atlases’ very purpose of providing reliable direction because, according to Flusser, they exploded “in different directions at the same time: in one they obtained colors [...] in another the atlases began to zoom [...] A third direction of this explosion was the overlapping of maps [...] In yet another direction history exploded into geography and there were historical atlases.” This crisis presented a considerable challenge for the grandfather: “He leafed through these atlases and he noticed how history became skimmable (*blätterbar*) rather than to flow. History now looked like a badly projected film: Events began to disintegrate in terms of scenes that leaped.” For the grandfather, this new colorful landscape of atlases became an imaginative play with history; but it also plunged him into abysmal chaos. In the end, to find his bearings within all these wonderful but confusing possibilities of mapping the world he purposefully returned to his own old and outdated atlases.

Prague and European Modernism in its urban expression presented a first atlas for the young Vilém Flusser – Prague was the center of his world, his gauge for geopolitical and socio-historical dimensions, and his instrument for learning languages and their cultures. Flusser and his family experienced Prague at a time when not only the city and the first Czech Republic took new shapes; Central and Western Europe, too, coexisted within constellations that stood for redefined borders and new beginnings amongst the destruction and turmoil. There was a new world, a new atlas, surrounding this new Republic. Not one envisioned by the Germans; one that, in 1919, brought forth the League of Nations and that began to challenge the power structures between colonial powers and colonies, between empires and vassal countries. At the time of Flusser’s birth, on May 12, 1920, the Republic was barely one and a half years old. The new president, Thomas G. Masaryk, had embarked on his transatlantic journey from New York to London, moved on to France and Italy, and declared on December 22nd 1918 in Prague, as documented in his autobiography from 1927, *Die Weltrevolution*: “We have built our state.”

These external and internal (socio- and geopolitical) redefinitions of borders present the basis for our focus in this issue: Flusser within the context of Prague. Because for the young

Flusser Prague was home, it was multiplicity, it was inclusion, it was borderless in its wholeness, it was Flusser's introduction to modernity and modernism. But Prague, so soon, turned into the opposite of home, it was division, exclusion, it was an introduction to fascist modernity and modernism; Prague fell apart. The literal and metaphorical border-crossings Flusser was forced to experience beginning in 1939 are closely intertwined with his realization that this seemingly intact universe of Prague, this artwork of the past would never reemerge as one. In Flusser's mind and memory it became incomplete and fragmented. Flusser's work mirrors such fragmentation: his biography and his essays are marked by incompleteness and border-crossings. And although the essays as a whole create the network of his ideas, we should also read them as fragments in the modern sense: as piecemeal, as a constant endeavor, and as his occasionally desperate resistance to boundaries, totality, and totalitarianism.

The fifth issue of *Flusser Studies* contains two sections. The first one is dedicated to Flusser's early years in Prague before migrating to Brazil via London. With the second part – and for the first time – we have offered a platform for present day Czech and Slovakian Flusser scholars.

The issue begins with a letter exchange between Vilém Flusser and Alex Bloch, who were both from Prague, of Jewish origin and forced to migrate to Brazil after the Nazi invasion in early 1939. In their letters they recount this experience, trying to assess and reassess the meaning of their cultural background. Alex Bloch's letter is taken from a considerable collection of his unpublished correspondence, housed at the Flusser Archive in Berlin. We would like to thank Andreas Müller-Pohle for the rights to republish Flusser's letter here.

In her Interview (Part I) with Edith Flusser Anke Finger concentrates on Edith Barth's early years: her parents, her childhood in Prague, her first encounters with Vilém Flusser, her family's prescience about their likely fate in a Nazi-occupied Prague, their escape to England, and their wait for a visa. In 2007 Edith Flusser is 87 years old; she recounts her life reluctantly, but her youthful spirit and her considerable memory bring forth stories, people, and events that have heretofore been unknown to the public. Nonetheless, and as Aleida Assmann has pointed out by referring to Margaret Atwood, the person who experienced the events and encountered the people described has not remained and could not have remained the same. We do need to read Edith Flusser's memories accordingly: as images and mosaics (some of them incomplete) that have formed over a considerable stretch of time. We hope to publish Part II (on life in Brazil and back in Europe) within the next year.

The interview is followed by Ines Koeltzsch's essay dedicated to Vilém Flusser's father Gustav. Koeltzsch argues that Vilém Flusser's memories do not just follow the common

narrative of Prague as a city of three peoples, but that they refer to his father's life in many significant ways. Gustav Flusser, in fact, had taken on numerous tasks in the new republic: he was a teacher of mathematics and of Czech language at Prague's German Business School, he was a member of the Jewish order B'nai B'rith and the Toynbee Hall, a translator of political pamphlets and a contributor to the Prague German journal *Die Wahrheit*. In all these functions, he tried hard to facilitate dialogues between people of different cultural, religious and political orientations, just like his son during his thirty-two years in Brazil.

The guest editors of the second section are Jirí Bystrický and Katerina Krtilova - who also receives credit for translating nearly all of the different Czech texts into German.

In their joint introduction Bystrický and Krtilova focus on the interests and questions guiding contemporary Czech and Slovakian readings of Vilém Flusser's work. Flusser is considered, above all, a philosopher and much less a media and communication theorist. His thinking about language, the new media, and communication processes in general should therefore be reformulated and reassessed in philosophical terms. What is, in fact, Flusser's connection with philosophers like Plato, Hegel, Wittgenstein or Derrida? Another essential question regards the relationship between history and media. Writing can be considered from two interlinked points of view: we can write a history of the medium of writing; but writing itself is also the very medium with which history articulates itself.

The two letters written by Vilém Flusser in Czech in 1949 and 1951 - some of the very few texts Flusser ever wrote in this language - focus on the problems of migration.

Jirí Bystrický's paper addresses the way(s) the subject constructs what s/he perceives. The presuppositions of this construction, however, shift out of view, into the 'background', as Bystrický puts it. Because of this, the subject does not dispose of any possibility of transferring other heterogeneous settings into a unique target format within which the world of objects is constructed. To achieve this s/he needs a determinate interactive interface, that is, mediation. By combining different settings, mediation helps us to reach an adequate understanding of the role of the subject in the world, in which the subject is not only mechanically constructed but above all mediated.

In his contribution Stanislav Hubik compares Wittgenstein and Flusser by contemplating a pivotal question: how are media possible? Besides some fundamental similarities between the two thinkers, there also exist some essential differences which makes it possible to read Wittgenstein's theory of logical form from the point of view of Flusser's concept of the techno-image and to interpret Flusser's notion of medium from the point of view articulated in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

Katerina Krtilova focuses on Flusser's theory of mediation as proposing forms of knowledge, perception and communication. With his theories of a hierarchy of codes and society as a network, Flusser suggests certain theoretical models that could help to explain questions of today's multifarious processes and their interaction in culture, communication, society, and technology.

Miroslav Marcelli, finally, interprets Flusser's concept of circular dialogue and net dialogue from a metaphysical point of view. Circular dialogues are characterized by an ascending metaphysics akin to Platonism and net dialogue a descending metaphysics that originates from a context of Jewish philosophy.

Rainer Guldin / Anke Finge

Lugano (CH) and Storrs CT (USA), November 2007