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Towards no body – traces of Flusser’s psychology**Projections**

Reading Flusser can evoke the impression of browsing a dream diary loaded with the strangest scenes. There are houses without doors, windows, walls or roofs. In the depths of the human soul relentless waves symbolizing drives are splashing against the dyke of inhibition. Where grazing cattle should be eating grass, the grass digests the cattle. Masked vegetarian wolves turn out to be humans who like meat after all. This article is neither a ride through Flusser’s inner self nor through his dream images – although that would certainly be an extraordinary journey. The goal here is rather to explore Flusser’s concepts of psychology, which seem to be pivotal from early on in his writings and important for his media theory. Rooted in his first unpublished work *Das 20. Jahrhundert* [*The 20th Century*] (1957: 95ff.), unfolding in *Language and Reality* (2017 [1963]) and summarized in *The History of the Devil* (2015[1965]: 56ff.), Flusser’s thoughts on psychology meander from his early to his latest writings. In the two articles *Wahrnehmung* [*Perception*] (1990) and *Das Universum der Technik als Spiegel und/oder als Verschleierung menschlicher Absicht* [*The Universe of Technology as Mirror and/or Concealment of the Intention of Man*] (1987), both published in the journal *Praktische Psychologie*, and especially in *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (1989), Flusser underlines the need for a new anthropology of information as a consequence of the psychological dimension of a cybernetic society.

The idea of researching Flusser’s concept of psychology is grounded in my own studies in digitized psychiatry. How can a Flusserian perspective help us understand the meaning and perception in psychoanalytical video calls? I ask myself what is interesting about pills with sensors that send signals when taken so the therapist can track the patient’s adherence through technical images. How can human-computer interaction be categorized when every bit of information on a person’s device is used to provide a diagnosis and to evaluate the status of their mental health?

Information and psychology are at the core of these phenomena. I will revisit Flusser’s writings on psychology with this in mind. As I went through the finding aid at the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin, searching the lists for any mention of “psychology”, I came across a subchapter with this title in *The 20th Century*. The typewritten manuscript is a little more than 200 pages long and contains, amongst others, a broad variety of topics from culture and politics to religion and philosophy, science, art and technology. Almost every topic in the four-page paragraph on

psychology occurs later in Flusser's writings and points back to the original text, creating feedback. I follow the intertextual links, which are connected, to the paragraph, focusing on the texts mentioned above. In this article, I focus on how Flusser connects consciousness and subconsciousness with cybernetics and on the anthropological conclusion he draws based on these reflections.

Ants

Flusser begins by describing the green slime he often refers to, the matter which covered the earth, feeding living organisms that populate the planet: "Just recently protoplasm developed something on the peak of its wedge that could be translated into consciousness, spirit or soul. You can observe it in all so-called higher animals but especially in ants and people. There too life seems to have taken two different paths and the path of the ants seems to be inaccessible to us. The soul of the ant resonates in a way that is absolutely alien to us. We had better not talk about things we cannot sympathize with. Il ne faut pas rir des choses mais dans les choses." (Flusser 1957: 95-96, translation by the author)

This mention of the ant is intriguing but could easily be overlooked as Flusser does not make clear where he wants to go with the metaphor and leaves it. Only after a second or third read of these few lines I realised the incomplete ant metaphor that left me confused. Flusser goes on to talk about the "consciousness, spirit or soul" (Flusser 1957: 96) of people. Is the comparison of the souls of man and ant a provocation? If so, to what end? Digging deeper into Flusser's writing, I realise that there is a good chance of finding intertextual links: The ant is a recurring theme. More than twenty years after *The 20th Century* in the chapter "To Govern" of his paradigmatic book *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser picks up where he left off with his ant-metaphor. In this chapter Flusser discusses the relationship between cybernetics, ruling, power and government. One main argument is that cybernetic consciousness would suspend the pure execution of power because functions would conduct functions. According to Flusser, the human brain can serve as a model for this type of cybernetic rule. The brain model, he goes on, can be replaced by the anthill model. The anthill model stands for cybernetic rule. The anthill "superbrain" is composed of individual ant brains and the anthill corridors work like a nervous system – not only as a traffic system for ants but also a channel system for the exchange of information. The brain is its own purpose. "Just as everything in ants is concentrated on the brain and on the antennae and the rest of the body only forms a kind of appendix, in telematized people everything is concentrated on the brain and on the fingertips. And since everything is cerebral, it is characterized by an insatiable greed for new information, for new adventures." (Flusser 1989: 111, translation by the author).

Rewinding 20 years and daring to reformulate the quote from *The 20th Century*, we can see something else on the peak of the protoplasmic wedge. It could still be translated into consciousness, spirit or soul. Not only you can observe it in all so-called higher animals, especially in ants and people, but also in cybernetic ruling. Has Flusser unlocked the paths of the ants? Does the soul of the ant resonate in a way that is still absolutely alien to us? We need to be careful when we talk about things we cannot sympathize with. Flusser's reflections on the consciousness of the ant can be read as a bracket around the problem of cybernetics and behavior. In *The 20th Century* he continues: "According to our science, consciousness - or whatever you want to call processes that take place within humans but cannot be localized - is not something which exists in and for itself. It materializes in shapes, forms or patterns which conduct the body in given situations." (Flusser 1957: 96, translation by the author)

Bubbles

Further unfolding his psychology paragraph, Flusser switches perspectives. He introduces a psychoanalytic understanding of the consciousness and how it is influenced by the layers beneath: "On the ground of the soul" he says, "there are the drives which conduct the biological processes of the body. With these drives and through these drives human consciousness is connected with the collective consciousness of everything that lives." (Flusser 1957: 96) While the cybernetic perspective focuses on the consciousness, which conducts the behavior of the body as it is, the activities of the drives have biological effects, which go far beyond the individual human being: "(...) a broad stream of drives rolls over the protoplasm and (...) individual consciousness, just like bubbles in soda water, shoot from the Urstrom to the surface to burst there. But the bubbles themselves are complicated structures. They contain the dull and secret space with which the single human is positioned in the general human life in which the experiences of all former generations are stored." (Flusser 1957: 96)

Continuing, Flusser describes the repetition of phylogenesis in ontogenesis: "And as the body of a human in its development within its mother's body goes through all stages of history, so does the consciousness. The difference is that the body loses the embryonal reptile tail, while the consciousness saves all phenomena albeit in the underground." (1957: 97, translation by the author)

The images Flusser uses here are a reference to C. J. Jung's theory of the archetypes. It is exactly this analogy between the development and connectedness of the human body to its evolutionary history and the consciousness that is similarly connected to processes reaching back to the time before homo sapiens even entered the arena of life. According to Jung, one could say the "bubbles in the soda water" shooting from the Urstrom contain "collective images" which

form the “archetypes” and which can pop up in dreams (Jung 1964: 57-58). Jung calls the archetypes collective images or part of a collective unconsciousness because in their basic form they are shared by human beings all over the world regardless of their culture, nation or religious background. For Jung the existence of the archetypes and the collective unconsciousness is not a matter of interpretation but an empirical fact – not only proven by his dream interviews but also represented in myths and fairytales. Returning to *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser writes about the (un)consciousness of the cybernetic society, a society where the relationships between the single brains would be the inner dreams or fantasies of a cosmic superbrain: “The fact that we are hurrying to become a cybernetic society, that society is already about to become cybernetic, is obvious everywhere you look. There isn’t a doubt that the structure of this ascending society is becoming more and more similar to the structure of the brain. This suggests seeing technical images as some kind of secretion of a cosmic nervous system, as a kind of dream of a superbrain. And the secretion, the dreams, can be regarded as cybernetic governance of the brain functions. In short, the suspicion imposed here is one of a dreaming cosmic brain, cybernetically governed by technical images.” (Flusser 1989: 106-107, translation by the author)

Flusser introduces the idea of a telematic dream consciousness as the central artefact of the telematized society, which is the crux of the text. Until this point he has unfolded the path towards cybernetic ruling which leads through all stages of the creation of the technical image.

During the course of abstracting (1), imagining (2), concretizing (3), keys (4), imagining (5), meaning (6) trafficking (7), distributing (8), programming (9), consulting (10), playing (11), creating (12), preparing (13), deciding (14), the technical images get to the point that they rule (15). The ruling takes place through dreams. Adopting Flusser’s metaphor of the bursting soda bubbles, the surface as the place where the bursting happens in the pre-cybernetic society is different from the surface in the cybernetic society. The commitment to producing, channeling and using technical images and the attempt to help them make use of themselves more and more independently from human programming is an effort to generate and establish new archetypes.

Reading *The 20th Century* there is a suggestion of something bad to come. Drives and archetypes aren’t just free floating from the grounds of the souls through our dreams in our consciousness where they burst innocently; they are not just the fabric of our fairytales and myths where they congeal in our symbols. According to depth psychology there is potential for something very drastic to happen which in Flusser’s language reads like this: “[The drives] are violently held back by the censor, the inhibition, civilization, so the drives don’t break into the parlour, the consciousness. The censor only lets past what is well dressed, which means if it is sublime. But sometimes the censor, the caretaker, is overwhelmed and the drives enter the best rooms, dirty and lecherous as they are and that’s when they become obvious. That such a transgression equals

madness should be obvious to every reader who has the slightest idea of Vienna around the turn of the century.” (Flusser 1957: 97, translation by the author)

We will get back to the madness in a moment (Flusser unfolds this thought in *The History of the Devil*) but before that, here’s how Flusser finishes his psychology paragraph: “Other than that, the *Oberbewusstsein* is in order, it’s very lively and busy there. Perceptions enter at the door, are transformed into imaginations, are recognized by memories, judgements are attached and bonded to feelings and wishes. Our consciousness, our soul, consists of all these things, which are derivations of our perception, our senses in the end. In this sense our soul is a product of our nerves, indeed it’s a part of our nervous system, which, so to say is put between the sensory and the motor nerves.” (Flusser 1957: 97, translation by the author)

On the one hand, Flusser describes consciousness as the parlour which can become the habitat for madness if things run out of control. There’s a (potential) connection to the pure drives. On the other hand, the nice room is the place where perceptions, imaginations, memories, judgement, feelings and wishes are handled between sensory and motor nerves, strategically related through a soul, which seems to work similarly to an interface. This is significant because it connects elements of depth psychology and behaviorism. Without linking these two (broadly perceived as conflicting) psychological approaches together the dreaming superbrain would not make much sense. A question that occurs when we’re connecting the flawlessly functioning cybernetic superbrain with depth psychology and the concept of madness as a state that results from a lack of inhibition: Can the superbrain go mad, too? The question won’t be answered right away but I will come back to it.

Flusser discusses madness in *The History of the Devil*. The structure of the book is based on the seven sins: lust, wrath, gluttony, envy and greed, pride, sloth and the sadness of heart. Flusser says that the title of the book could also have been “Evolution”, “The History of History” or “The devil of the Devil”. According to Flusser, referring to the devil means focusing on the force that is connected to everything that has anything to do with time – life in other words. God, on the other hand, is behind everything that is eternal. The paragraph on *man* in the chapter *Lust* is a recapitulation of the archetype theory in which Flusser adds a dash of Freud. Here the reptile in the mother’s uterus is mirroring evolutionary history in its development from just a few cells into an unborn child. The central motif is that before its birth the unborn child has never experienced a situation where its needs are unfulfilled; a state which abruptly changes at birth. The newborn instantly turns into an angry worm: “Why frustrated and rebellious? Because at the moment of birth, a strange element to life, opposed to life, is introduced. When the umbilical cord is cut, and when the first bottle-feed is refused – midwife and nanny have served as an instrument to this strange element. We shall once again call this element “inhibition”, in order to keep our Freudian

mask on. This first inhibition starts a chain of causes and effects. This chain forms a wall within the child's head and thus separates the libidinous region of the mind from clear consciousness. It is thanks to this wall that the being that has just been born, shall be human in the ethical sense of the term. The wall is responsible for that whole misery called "existential anguish", for every madness, and all crimes. It is equally responsible for that type of anguish, madness, and crime called "human civilization". But it also produces that disease (from life's perspective) called "salvation of the soul." (Flusser 2015: 58).

To the concept of (productive) madness Flusser adds another dimension. He states that the wall of inhibition can be broken down from two sides. Just as the drives can break into the parlour, the psychoanalyst can dive all the way down to the ground of the soul, prepared with heavy diving gear (unlike a Yogi who dives without tools). What makes it almost harmless to dive down to the ground of the sea of madness is the fact that it is the madness of the other, the madness of "you" not the madness of "I" (unlike the practice of the Yogi who takes the dangerous dive in his own madness). Unlike Yogis we "are not very meditative" – says Flusser. "Meditation, as I have said, is a form of pride. The West realizes its pride in other forms. And even when the West sets out to analyze the mind, as it has done recently, it prefers to do so in a non-meditative manner. It transfers the study from 'I' to 'you' and analyzes the patient" (2015: 61).

The relation between the "I" and the "you" and space in between is very important in Flusser's reflections on psychology and on society on its way towards its cybernetic organization.

Knotted relations

In this paragraph I would like to show how Flusser makes a case for new anthropology based on his reflections regarding the problem of perception. Earlier on I pointed out an intertextual link between his early writing about psychology and his late media philosophy. The argument is that this link is not random and that Flusser literally goes deeper than just acknowledging the obvious connection between cybernetics and behaviorism. He introduces his understanding of depth psychology into cybernetics, which means that a cybernetic superbrain is not beyond the drives because we channel archetypes in the form of technological images into the cybernetic superbrain, the anthill. Referring to *The History of the Devil*, I wrote that where there are drives, there is madness. In exploring madness, depth psychology uses a method that is absolutely essential in how Flusser conceptualizes networked information which we all are part of. This is where another important article he wrote offers insight. In 1990 Flusser published the article *Perception* in the German journal *Praktische Psychologie* in which he discusses the question "What can we perceive?" from an epistemological standpoint, explicitly not addressing matters of neurophysiology. Since Flusser's

article is in German it makes sense to translate the problem he starts with: The German word for “to perceive” is “wahrnehmen”, a composition of the adjective “wahr” which means “true” and “nehmen” meaning “to take”. Flusser uses the term to show a problem of perception. In the word “wahrnehmen” he identifies a contradiction: Unlike the word suggests, we don’t trust what we perceive to be true. Flusser utilizes the semantic paradox to hint at the general problem he’s addressing. If we do not trust what we perceive to be true, where do our categories come from - categories which serve to understand what we are actually perceiving? Flusser refers to Plato and Kant to show that the problem has at least two epistemological sides. According to Plato, he says, we are able to perceive truthfully because we have the ability to “watch theoretically”. This means that during the act of perception, we are comparing the ideal form with what we see or hear from the world. The classic idiot in this sense would not be capable of this sort of truthful perception since he is disconnected from the world of ideals. In opposition to this thinking, Flusser says, Kant sees the thing in itself (Das Ding an sich) as somewhat unthinkable. It’s impossible to see “behind” perception. “Reason” according to Kant means to process perception in a rational manner. This is how categories and synthesized judgements can be generated. Flusser’s argument is that Plato’s idealism and Kant’s categorial conceptualism link to a bigger anthropological problem: It’s like we are sitting between two worlds as if sitting between two chairs. There is the world we perceive (however we are doing that) and there is the other world that puts us in the position to criticize or categorize the former. Flusser rejects this position not only as “alienating” but “unacceptable”. He says that the indicated hard-core – meaning ourselves or our brains for that matter – turns out to be nonexistent: “What is so alienating about all these concepts of perception is that they rely on humans who are capable of pulling themselves out of the swamp just like Baron Münchhausen did on his own hair.” (Flusser 1990: 45, translation by the author) Flusser’s suggested way of leaving behind the paradoxes that arise from these perceptual concepts is to replace the term perception with acquired information, which he finds to be advantageous as information can be quantified. He names three aspects as central in this regard. Firstly, less likely equates to more informative. Secondly, most of the information people receive is understood through a cultural lens and no longer consists of natural codes. Thirdly and most importantly, information is structured like a network “in which information flows through channels (e.g. synapses or wires) and where it is knotted (e.g. as material things or brains)” (Flusser 1990: 47). To unfold the point he makes here, Flusser revisits the process of evolution, and the billions of years of the development of protoplasm. The reference is a specification of the psychology paragraph. He sees the biomass as a gigantic store of genetic information, of mutations and human consciousness as an effect of this process. The difference is that in the soda bubble sequence he talked of stored experience whereas now he uses the term information. To Flusser, evolution is a transmission error and the nervous

system an effect of nature's failure to pass on information without glitches. Flusser describes these glitches, which cause mutations, as negative entropic (as opposed to the general entropic tendency of information): "Hence our nervous system can be viewed as doubly negative entropic. Like biomass in general, it negates entropy because it contradicts the second rule (thermodynamics / note EG), according to which recorded information is not passed on from organism to organism. This double negation of the rules of the universe (the fact that we are, however, an ephemeral and flawed genetic and cultural memory) can be the starting point for every future anthropology." (Flusser 1990: 48, translation by the author)

As so often, Flusser pleads for a radical change of perspective and says that the relationships within the network are concrete in the world. Everything that appears as an object is an abstraction that needs to be solved. In Flusser's worldview, we humans are knotted relationships – knotted with one another and with the world. This argument is tied to Flusser's observations of insanity mentioned in the previous paragraph and to his psychoanalytic approach: "The anthropology which results from this – according to which we have to regard ourselves rather as overlapping fields of relation than autonomous beings – becomes more and more inevitable. Analytical psychology, for example, portrays the individual psyche as the peak of an iceberg of collective psychological processes that exceed our species by far. The existential analysis shows that we can only identify ourselves as functions of other human beings, as functions of relations to other people. The bare "I" turns out to be a nothing." (Flusser 1990: 49, translation by the author)

We can find this anthropological view throughout *Into the Universe of Technological Images*. Flusser says that the sociology of the future has to decenter the human. This is especially true when looking at human dignity and freedom (1989: 45, translation by the author), as there is nothing in the center, neither humans nor transmitters. "Each I," he writes, "is a unique node in the network and differs from everyone else only because of its own position" (Flusser 1990: 78, translation by the author). Flusser contrasts this anthropology with "the Jewish-Christian anthropology" for which it must be "disgusting" to think of the core of the human as empty or nonexistent. Again, he calls the "I" as "Nothing". He calls the ego an abstract hook on which relationships hang. Talking about freedom and identity in this sense means to talk about the relation between "I" and "you" (Flusser 1990: 79, translation by the author). To return to his article *Perception*, Flusser points out that this anthropology, which gives up the old concept of the subject has to readjust its own concept of truth and therefore of perception: "Never mind how received stimuli (which seem to have a digital structure) are processed, natural sciences are not sufficient to reveal it. It is of the essence to take into account the creative intention of information, a negative entropic tendency. To put it differently: if one analyzes the act of processing stimuli to perception backwards, one can state the content of truth. It's about synthesized bits of stimuli but that's the most uninteresting

part about perception. What is interesting about it: Perceptions are not true, quite the opposite, they attribute meaning to the absurdity of truth. The interesting thing about perception is the fictional (...) An anthropology recognizes the double negative entropy as concretely human, throwing a web of unlikeliness over nature, not superior to nature, which is rather an unlikely aspect of nature. Anthropology has to develop a new idea of truth. Truth becomes one of the poles to which processes tend and falsity becomes the other. Both are borderline situations, unreachable extrapolations and everything in between is more or less likely. This new anthropology will certainly regard the probability calculation as the adequate mathesis. What is concretely human will then appear as a tendency, as commitment, which tends to ever more unlikeliness, ever more adventurous fictions. What is human will be equated with what is art. Our perception will then be regarded as the processing of bits into fiction, simply into information.” (Flusser 1990: 51, translation by the author)

Flusser identifies this position as a necessary paradigmatic shift in terms of how we understand what the object is and what the subject is, what objectivity is and what subjectivity is. The problem of perception helps us see this paradigmatic shift and the new anthropology points to a new concept which needs to be employed: the concept of “intersubjective creativity”.

No body

What are the consequences of the intersubjective space which is in the process of its creation? What would be the major task of the new anthropology Flusser suggests?

With regards to the intersubjective space, there is the problem that humans are about to produce a paradox. In *Language and Reality* Flusser writes: “Our era is characterized by the mania of statistics. Tables, curves, and accounts invade the scientific and para-scientific literatures proof that we are a generation of accountants committed to compiling an inventory of the world: data are being compiled and compared in order to be computed. We are a generation of accountants who are in the process of becoming a line of computers. The goal appears to be an electronic superbrain that devours data and excretes statistics.” (Flusser 2018: 9)

Already in his early book *Língua e realidade* (1963) (*Language and Reality*), Flusser observes that humans took the path of interlinking themselves with computer technology. “Technology is the gesture of the unconditionally willing mind.” – Flusser writes in *The Universe of Technology as Mirror and/or Concealment of the Intention of Man* (1987: 11). The consequence of technological development is “the permanent recreation of man” (Flusser 1987: 14). In this sense the electronic superbrain is not to be seen as something that lies outside of the human, but that absolutely belongs to being human. And here is the paradox: While working on a new interconnected mind, spirit,

soul or psychology for that matter, humans still perceive themselves as individual or even isolated beings.

In one of his last unfinished writings *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt (From Subject to Project)* (1994), Flusser explicitly stresses this argument: “We can no longer perceive ourselves as individuals since we know of the divisibility of all existential phenomena, especially of perception.” (Flusser 1994: 62-63, translation by the author) This is highly problematic because with regards to psychology we cannot benefit from the new intersubjectivity we are about to create. While the human engagement for the technological image is an effort to pass on information which is the raw material for a new cybernetic consciousness as well as subconsciousness, this process lacks reflection and intention. Flusser sees the human body experience as a reason for the failure to consequently leave individualistic self-conceptions behind. This is why – another bracket in his writing – in one of his last written texts he comes back to protoplasm once again. He arranges human life in the course of evolution and again uses a strong metaphor. In terms of their bodies, he says, humans are like balloons or wormlike. The pressure inside has to work against the pressure from the outside so the balloon does not collapse. Life is streaming through humans. It enters through our mouths and leaves through our excretory organs (Flusser 1994: 93-94). We tend to confuse the extraordinarily complex “body movements (that behavior) of so many crossing and overlapping force fields – electromagnetic, chemical, mental, social, cultural” with freedom. “[W]e have to speak of overdetermination. This overdetermination is sometimes called ‘freedom.’” (Flusser 1994: 93, translation by the author) The difference between the worm and the human is that the human body serves the nervous system. Therefore, there is almost a tendency of separating information and body. Externalizing information, storing and processing it electronically is like a continuation of internal processes of the human body. At the same time, the direction of the information leads away from the body. In *Becoming Human* Flusser writes: “If “the human” is a result of becoming human and not defined as an animal which is becoming human, everything we called “the human” so far is a semi-finished product. The increasingly immaterial processing systems of information are then more human than the humans, who created these systems. The question then is not (as Schöngelster [The aesthetes] want) to what extent such systems endanger human existence because they simulate it mechanically, rather on the contrary: To what extent can the half-baked beast-men simulate these systems so as to move a tiny bit towards “human”. (1994: 180, translation by the author)

The effort of new anthropology would have to be to overcome concepts that glue the individual to an understanding of an isolated self with its own isolated psyche. Flusser unfolds a symbiotic concept of psychology of a great cybernetic network, including its consciousness as well

as its subconsciousness. For its perception, spirit consciousness and soul it needs everybody - and no body.

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