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**Fiktions des Wissenschaft – Is Science Fiction Translatable? or is
Translation a Science Fiction?**

Two of the more compelling theoretical ideas that Vilém Flusser made across his career are: the idea of translation is a practical form of philosophy, and the relationship of science to fiction and vice versa. These two practices are related, and the connection between multi-lingual translation and retranslation, and science fiction as an object of study is a deeply intriguing and potentially profitable area to explore. While Flusser read widely, the exact influences upon his thought and philosophical connections are occasionally difficult to determine. However, as Finger, Guldin and Bernardo (2011) have implied in “Science as Fiction, Fiction as Science”, the fictionalism of Hans Vaihinger and the phenomenology of Friedrich Nietzsche played an important role in Flusser’s formation of his ideas on fictions, science and science fiction. These ideas around science-as-fictions and science fiction being related to the practice translation can be seen in the “object codes” in Flusser’s *Kommunikologie*, where one code is swallowed into another in translation and re-translation. “In the case of retranslation, the original relationship of the two codes is reversed: the object-code becomes now a metacode. In other words: after the French code has swallowed part of the (...) English one, it is in turn swallowed by English code, (...) so to speak with the English in its belly.” (Flusser 1998: 343 – translated from the German by the author of this paper)

Flusser’s ideas of codes and metacodes of translation can provide a link between his concepts of multi-lingual translation and science fiction as an object of study. The use of codes and metacodes can also compare to Don Ihde’s ideas of technological relations in his postphenomenology and philosophy of science. His *embodiment relations* and *alterity relations* can also be used to provide a parallel understanding to Flusser’s thought.

Undertaking the task of translating Vilém Flusser’s 1988 short essay *Science Fiction* from German into English was a complex job of translation, and of reevaluating the process of translation. In this essay, Flusser explains two strategies of science and “fiction as science”, and he provides clues to his life-long process of translating and retranslating his own work. Flusser attempts to show two different epistemologies or praxes that lead to an essential paradox. In *Science Fiction*, Flusser states: “Nothing

can go about arriving at truth, but instead approach truth more and more, by applying two complementary strategies. One is that all probable, ostensible ([but still] fictional) statements made appear progressively, so that they are always more and more probable and less and less improbable. This can be called the strategy of “falsification”. (Flusser 2015: 2)

This is the approach of rationalism, the scientific method and even literary criticism. Flusser then contrasts this with: “The other strategy is to be able to accurately measure possible degree of improbability of any statement (their ‘margin of error’), (...) in order to be able to work with the imprecision (‘fuzziness’) as precise as possible.” (Flusser 2015: 2)

For Flusser, Science Fiction is a *Technik* in the truest sense of the word, and therefore his theory and praxis of science fiction can be applied to his use of translation. While he allows for an inexactitude in science, science fiction, and translation – an *Ungenauigkeit* that allows a space for exploration – he still engaged in translation, using this practice throughout his career. In *Zweigespräche. Interviews 1967-1991* Flusser declared: “The communication [or ‘translation’] works, though I doubt the sense. The criterion for a translation is therefore existential and not formal, and it is even possible that a translation is not formalizable.” (Flusser 1996: 10 – translated from the German by the author of this paper). Also: “Perhaps everything I do is an attempt to is an attempt to elaborate a theory of translation. But I am not going to live long enough for that. (...) I am very concerned with the problem of metaphor. Metaphor is another word for translation. In everything, I am trying to fulfill this translation or metaphor. The ‘transportation’, the ‘moving of being’. How should I say that?” (Flusser 1996: 149 – translated from the German by the author of this paper)

Flusser himself admitted to the problems translating the meaning of translation. And formalizable or not, he continued using it as a means of checking and re-checking his ideas. It is odd then, that he did not take the time to translate and reevaluate his 1988 lecture *Science Fiction*.

One possible way to address this problem may be found in Don Ihde’s phenomenology of embodiment vs. alterity relations in the technological mediation of perceptions. In embodiment relations, “human beings take technological artifacts into their experiencing, and thereby broaden the area of sensitivity of their bodies to the world” (Verbeek 2001: 127). Using these embodied, transparent mediating technologies, we can increasingly “measure possible degree of improbability”, in our perceptions because they have become part of our system of perception. Because, “[t]he most important characteristic of embodied technologies is that they possess a certain transparency. The call attention not to themselves, but to (aspects of) the world given through them” (Verbeek 2001: 128).

This contrasts with Ihde's alterity relations where "humans are not related, as in mediating relations, via a technology to the world; rather they are related to or with a technology. The role played by technologies in this set of relations can be characterized as that of 'quasi-other'" (Verbeek 2001: 131). And, in these alterity relations, the mediating technology remains uncanny, *but* allow for more of what Flusser, in his essay *Science Fiction* (1980), called an ability to "accurately measure possible degree of improbability" because of the fact that these technologies are outside of regular perception, and their alterity/otherness allows for measurement of improbability. "The reason that technologies in alterity relations are experienced as quasi-other is that technologies on the one hand possess a kind of independence and on the other hand can give rise to an 'interaction' between humans and technologies" (Verbeek 2001: 131). The ability for a mediating technology to make a perception falsifiable or improbable is vitally important for the creation of scientific fictions.

Beyond this, Flusser's two strategies of scientific fictions or fiction-in-science as a means for approaching truth (*Wahrheit*) in science (*Wissenschaft*) are analogous to Hans Vaihinger's two categories of fictions: *figments* as imaginary fantasy, and *fictions* as falsifiable conjecture. "I would suggest that in the future we call scientific fictions—fictions, and the other, the mythological, æsthetic, etc. figments. For instance, Pegasus is a figment, atom, a fiction. This would certainly facilitate distinctions. The opponents of the fiction misrepresent it in so far as they regard it as a mere figment. "Fictio" in legal terminology, has already acquired the secondary meaning of practical utility." (Vaihinger & Ogden 2009: 81) This double-edged practice is baked into how narrative and scientific method's dialectic have evolved and replicated across history particularly through translations.

Nietzsche's essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* addresses many of the same notions of essential truth and un-truth. And explains why, in the same way that truth can be approached from two different directions, as Flusser suggests in *Science Fiction*, it can ultimately never be pinned down in languages, because if it could, there would be considerably fewer human languages, and pure truth would be very easily accessible to anyone creating any language or new words. Nietzsche remarks: "The different languages, set side by side, show that what matters with words is never the truth, never an adequate expression; else there would not be so many languages. The 'thing in itself' (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for." (Nietzsche 2012: 25)

Vilém Flusser's overall questions of how language and science set upon perception through technological mediation explains his approaches to translation and science fictions in his other works. What Flusser explored in apparatus theory, Ihde explores in his instrumental realism and embodiment

relations. He explains: “(...) simultaneous recognition of what I have called the *technological embodiment* of science, which occurs through the instruments and within experimental situations; and of the larger role of praxis and perception through such technologies. It is that focus that located the positive side of the instrumental consensus and which is ultimately more important than the negative critique of extant philosophy of science.” (Ihde 1991: 99)

What makes Flusser’s ideas in his essay *Science Fiction* compelling is that he maintains a link between the philosophy of science and philosophy of fiction by taking the idea of *fantasia essata* (an exacting fantasy) to the limits when he compared what types of languages could be contrived. He explored this in greater depth (pun intended) in his *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. In fact, Flusser points out that many scientific texts show far more imagination than what is frequently called science fiction. Beyond “scientific fictions” and narrative fictions, there is yet another type of fiction that Vaihinger named, and Flusser used in *Science Fiction* and his other writings. The idea of aesthetic fiction has its roots in the study of mythology.

Mythology, insofar as it may be regarded as the common mother of religion, poetry, art and science, shows us the first expression in free constructive activity of the inventive faculty, of imagination and of phantasy. It is here we first find products of phantasy which do not correspond to reality. On the other hand, the psychological genesis of fictions is the same in all fields of inquiry. (Vaihinger & Ogden 2009: 81)

Vaihinger’s approach idea of æsthetic fictions from his *Philosophy of ‘As-If’* formed in the late 18th century, around the same time as the early coalescence of the literary genre of “science fiction” in the form of mass-produced novels by Mary Shelley, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, from the earlier fantastical poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Vaihinger explains that fictions exist in many different formats, but likely in a continuum, where at one end: “The primary meaning of fiction = mythological entity, is thus distinguished from the scientific fiction, and this covers all the specifically religious fictions. On the other hand, we saw above that definite theological fictions could be of value for the scientific study of fiction. Here too, we have a gradual transition from poetry to science.” (Vaihinger & Ogden 2009: 82)

Flusser believes that in both scientific fictions, like those described by Vaihinger, and in science fiction, like (fantastical) literature in general, we can find an approach to beauty and an aesthetic linguistic philosophy. Again, in *Science Fiction* he states: “If we imagine such a “science fiction”, as a text whose statements become more and more improbable without ever completely losing sight of the truth, then

we see beauty in the genuine sense of the term. Because apparition and beauty (deceit and art) are the two sides of the same coin. The decisive factor here is that such a “science fiction” as a counter-science would need to obey the same exact discipline as those of the scientific texts.” (Flusser 2015: 2)

While explaining and expanding Flusser’s ideas of *science as fiction, fiction as science*, Finger et al. (2011) posit that this is an aspect of language, and by extension likely to be part of the process of translation. The process does not descend into relativism, but that individual readers are responsible for their own interpretations of truth inside of fictions and science fiction (and literature): “In other words, truth and fiction are primarily phenomena of language. However, this does not imply that nothing cannot be true anymore; on the contrary, we, as (re)searchers are responsible for all truths we produce. (...)

The world of representations is not a straightforward reflection of reality; it is an instrument that helps to simplify our orientation in the world.” (Finger et al. 2011: 115)

Or as Finger et al. (2011: 110) point out, “[t]he virtual does not stand in opposition to reality, but to an ideal of truth.” This agrees with Nietzsche’s idea that: “He abuses the fixed conventions by arbitrary changes or even reversals of the names. When he does this in a self-serving way damaging to others, then society will no longer trust him but exclude him. Thereby, men do not flee from being deceived as much as from being damaged by deception: what they hate at this stage is basically not the deception but the bad, hostile consequences of certain kinds of deceptions.” (Nietzsche 2012: 23)

Vaihinger’s philosophy of As-If helps to explain why all languages have so many different types of “fictions” in them including these literary fantasies, figments and scientific fictions. His “Law of Preponderance of the Means over the End” is constantly recurring where any praxis becomes an end in itself. Especially in language, poetry and science, he sees evidence that an original means working towards a definite end has the tendency to acquire independence and become an end itself. Vaihinger states: “Thought, which originally serves the purposes of the will and only gradually becomes an end in itself was the most obvious case of a universal law of Nature that manifests itself in new forms always and everywhere, in all organic life, in the processes of the mind, in economic life and in history.” (Vaihinger & Ogden 2009: xxx)

Which returns to the idea of a language as a form of technology, and translation as a possible meta-technology which must address the ideas of fictions axiomatically. Nietzsche points out that in his quote above. And Flusser seems to agree in his essay *Science Fiction* regarding the transactions of translation and distinguishing among and between fictions. “However on closer examination, what’s just been said, turns out to be a description of the creative act. Creative acts [and transactions] always

have a strict passion for the improbable, or (as Leonardo [da Vinci] said) a “fantasia essata”. [an exacting fantasy] What we can expect of “science fiction” would be the same creative powers which manifest themselves in science, only in the opposite direction, in the direction of the beautiful.” (Flusser 2015: 3)

This use of aesthetics and art preventing science from being captured within *the apparatus* as Flusser explained in *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* (1984) can be applied to fictions and figments and language, as Flusser explained in *Does Writing Have a Future* (2011 [1987]). But Flusser takes these ideas about where these transactions and “exacting fantasies” can take place – not so much in the written word, or in images, but in a blending of them. “This does probably not exist in literature, and probably cannot exist. But therefore it is possible in computer codes. Is it possible that the synthetic images, based on the equations of science, are the first actual “science fiction” based on the intended meaning of that word?” (Flusser 2015: 3)

In this same way, Flusser believes that some type of *Computercodes* (from his original German) being code-based synthetic images, both CGI for contemporary early 21st century science fiction fantasies, *and* contemporary scientific/medical/military imaging will become increasingly possible, and even become ubiquitous. This is equally applicable to how he would have envisioned the future of translation; becoming largely a function of code-based machine translation that creates the linguistic equivalent of synthetic images in a new form of synthetic inter-penetrating languages. Ihde also sees an opportunity for multi-lingual approaches to the philosophy of technology. In “Instrumental Realism” (1991) he wrote of: “(...) the emergence of what could be called a *praxis* philosophies of science. A healthy development here has the rise of the sociology to its current sophistication. Equally healthy is the emergence of a new generation of bilingual philosophers of science, trained in both Anglo- and Euro- American traditions who break the old citation gaps earlier referred to.” (Ihde 1991: 99)

As Flusser traveled and gave presentations, he frequently re-worked his essays in the language of (or best suited to) the audience for the event. Another of Flusser’s later essays *On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)* also began as a presentation. This particular presentation, *Science Fiction* was not published and remained untranslated, but reveals several insights into Flusser’s creative thinking on the translation as well. As a praxis of building on this philosophy, it is imperative that scholars continue to translate, and retranslate Flusser’s work. By extension, it might prove practical and profitable to and translate some of Ihde’s work on instrumental realism and Vaihinger’s works on metaphysics and Nietzsche.

Finger et al. (2011) reinforce the practice of recurrent translation being linked to an interdisciplinary approach to both media and philosophy as a “basically endless open-ended enterprise”. “The

translator is forced to move on continuously, striving at the same time to get back to the origin, only to discover that there is no such possibility. Meaning is homeless and itinerant. Translation, then, is always a twofold process: an evolutive, forward movement, cumulating different points of view, and contradicted completely by retranslation, an involutive, backward motion.” (Finger et al. 2011: 50)

As stated earlier, this “two-fold process” of translation can be seen as analogous is to the two ways that science finds knowledge both knowing-by-becoming increasingly less ambiguous (falsification) and more and more accurately measuring the possible degree of improbability from Flusser’s essay *Science Fiction*.

In conclusion, the answer to the question “Is science fiction translatable?”, from Flusser’s perspective, from both his essay *Science Fiction* and *Zweigespräche*, is that it *is*—both as a scientific fictions and as an æsthetic fictions. Vaihinger’s addition of *Figments* as the fantastical, and narrative side of scientific fictions, implies that media narratives in the genre of science fiction, as a practice of exploring science are also translatable. In fact, many examples from the history of literature and cinema support this assertion. Lastly, the answer to the question, “Is translation a science fiction?”, again from Flusser’s perspective, from his essay *On Fiction* and others, translation appears to be a form of *Technik* for exploring the inexactitude of language similar to Ihde’s instrumental realism, and a form of phenomenology shared between the two thinkers. As such, translation *can*, and frequently does, serve as a form of scientific fiction within language as a means of knowing.

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