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Perspectives on Flusser, Changing and Stable

I want to begin with the question what first attracted me in Flusser and what has changed in the last years. At the beginning of my career, not so much captivated by other theories, I had turned to phenomenology, namely the approach of Alfred Schutz, which, apart from its subjective approach due to phenomenology, offered also a gateway to the social sciences. When I later felt the necessity to consider media theory (which after all to me then turned out to be less interesting than I had imagined), in order to provide an access to the contemporary situation, I picked Flusser, because his approach appeared to me to be the closest, as many of his titles use the expression phenomenology. However, Flusser is not a phenomenologist (although his article on Husserl is quite competent); he is less interested in subjective perspectives than in objective analyses, be it history, language, or media change. So, he could perhaps be characterized as a philosopher of history, including all the problems which this implies. However, he is more a philosopher than a social scientist, which is why he chose the option, at the beginning of his career, to join the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy and not another institution. Even in his later development Flusser remained essentially a philosopher, also when he turned to communication, so he could be considered a philosopher of communication. But it is certainly a challenge to find a stable designation for his decades-long career with its dynamics of shifting interests within different countries and cultures – including academic cultures.

The second question regards the surprising accuracy of some of Flusser's predictions regarding human communication. This is not due to any supernatural gift but rather to the continuous close observation of social reality and the influence of authors that inspired him, like Heidegger (on the image, "Weltbild") and Hegel (on the public/private-dichotomy). Although he was not the first one to perceive this, Flusser detected the pictorial turn in communication, recognized the end of privacy in digital media culture, and declared the end of politics. Trumpism, Putinism, Bolsonarism: whatever they are, can no longer be called politics, at least not in the traditional

understanding of the term. Putin with bare upper body on horseback, Trump selling French fries at McDonalds a few days before Election Day, Bolsonaro on a motorcycle at a rally: these are messages that were transferred from text to image communication. Thereby they substitute what earlier had been politics with that which nowadays attracts people. The end of privacy, one of the two poles (the other one is public), is another reason why politics has become a completely empty domain that depends entirely on the public sphere. Add to this Flusser's claim that Western history operates as a dialectic between text and image. According to him, we cannot have one without the other. There is no image without text, and texts are a source for images. There are endless examples of this, from church history to political ideology.

The idea that I consider most significant for us nowadays is the end of reading culture. Flusser ends his book on writing with a sentimental comment that he would be the last author of a book, as after him there would be no more book writing. Well, there still were some books written since then, some also even on Flusser, and maybe book writing will not disappear entirely; but reading culture has vanished. And so, we face, additionally to traditional analphabetism, a new digital form of functional analphabetism, which causes a deep cultural rupture in education, culture and politics. In this perspective based on Weimar Classicism, ethics and ontology cannot be separated.

In times of crisis, it is advisable to reorient oneself in history, as the past offers a solid ground when one no longer has any. Flusser faced Nazism, communism, and military dictatorship, but overcame them all, and still managed to live a good life. He chose a place to live in the French Provence, which underlines his ability to make intelligent decisions. He was a faithful husband, and he cared for his children. Is there anything more a man can do? This is definitely a point worth thinking about.