Introduction
Flusser's Modernity

In December 1980, Flusser sent a manuscript of his *Posthistory* to his friend, Sérgio Paulo Rouanet, with the hope that the eminent Brazilian essayist, literary critic, translator, and diplomat would provide feedback on the text. In his January 1981 response, Rouanet noted: "Your path is … of immanent critique. You become similar to your object of study" (Rouanet 1981: 1). As Rouanet sharply observes, Flusser in *Posthistory* analyzes the heterogeneous apparatuses of history by turning them against themselves, deploying the techniques of historical and conceptual negation that thereby exploding linear history into temporal fragments that demonstrate the implicit dangers of apparatus-thinking across time. In this instance, Flusser's critical commitment to immanence can be reframed, rephrased. For him, to critique from within is to imitate, which is, ultimately, to ridicule.

In his letter Rouanet compares Flusser's path of immanent critique to the one taken by Josef Švejk, the anti-hero of Jaroslav Hasek's unfinished modernist novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921-23). During World War I, Švejk joins the war effort as part of the Austro-Hungarian army. As a complete incompetent, Švejk undermines the military's efforts from within by working *for* them. Švejk's dubious commitment to the cause leads the reader to wonder: does Švejk poorly defend the army he supports, or is he in fact against the Austro-Hungarian army and deliberately subverts the war efforts through feigned incompetence? In this parallel, Rouanet suggests that Flusser uses and abuses systems of thinking with the goal to show their inconsistencies: "to break the spine of the existent, you imitate the existent" (Rouanet 1981: 2).

The comparison with Švejk suits Flusser beyond the meaning intended by Rouanet. Both are Czech, which places them in a liminal position on the margins of literary and philosophical history. From Prague to São Paulo, and then back to Europe, Flusser never attained the recognition among theoretical circles he so clearly desired. Since he never held a permanent academic position, he relied instead on provisional teaching posts stationed on the edges of the academy. Positioned on the boundaries of the modern world, then, Flusser, like Švejk, remained committed methodologically to the practice of immanent critique and its ability to help cultivate a thoroughgoing modernist aesthetic sensibility. Thinking with modernist experiments in the failure of linguistic transmission, reception, and processing, Flusser's many self-translations read like Dadaist simultaneous poetry. Yet other homologies

exist: His nomadic life exemplifies the modernist displacement caused by World Wars and intense globalization. Channeling Nietzsche's preference for the aphorism, his short essays also emulate the fragmentary nature of modern thought. His playful reinvention of nature and faux sciences updates the 'pataphysical experimentations of Alfred Jarry. And like Fernando Pessoa, Flusser has many *heteronyms*: Flusser the media thinker, Flusser the philosopher, Flusser the linguist, Flusser the translator, Flusser the nomad, Flusser the scientist, Flusser the artist, etc.[1] His oeuvre yields different approaches as it crosses disciplinary boundaries with the same ease it crosses national and linguistic ones.

Inspired by a lifelong and generative engagement with Modernist aesthetics, Flusser's work borders on the academic avant-garde and paints a theoretical picture of a modern world determined by chaos. The most 'pataphysical and avant-gardist part of Flusser's thought is his method of reasoning and his intentional appropriation of various intellectual systems and traditions. Camila Mozzini notices that Flusser's idiosyncratic method and style tend to pose the greatest challenge for his readers. At times playful, at times systematic, "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" (Mozzini 2015: 3). Writing takes center stage in Flusser's thought, albeit even the concept of writing is not immune to Flusser's critical method. As Mozzini describes, "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" (Mozzini 2015: 4). Not only does Flusser push back on the content of traditional thought, he also challenges the very method and language of thought. The Modernist influence here is clear: Cubist fragmentation, Dada paradox, Surrealist speculation, and 'Pataphysical exploit, gesture, and opinion. Through this playful, critical style, Flusser brings a self-reflexive and Modernist critical sensibility to bear on different forms of interdisciplinary thinking: philosophical, linguistic, biological, and more. Understanding Flusser's critique of modernity requires us to understand his Švejk-approach to thinking.

Flusser is also a harbinger of another modernity: the late modernity of computation, digitization, and speculation, a thorough understanding of which only highlights Flusser's prescience. For example, Flusser's distinction between dialogic and discursive forms of cultural and communicative transmission/reception implicitly theorizes, via creative etymological analyses, the hierarchical structures of media apparatuses, with the function of television as a one-to-many stream of information

---

[1] Pessoa called his various imaginary personas *heteronyms*. Unlike a pen-name, a *heteronym* is a fully developed character, with an imaginary biography, and a specific style and voice.

demonstrating the inherently "bundled" nature of fascistic structures of communication. He then imagines a new world of media where the spectator would take active part in shaping the modes of production of culture. Seemingly distant from World War I and the earlier accounts of modernity, Flusser's modernity does not begin nor end; it continues. His invitation to think of technical images as the horizon of modernity and historical consciousness--and computation as the limit of this writing and narrative diachronicity—reshapes the historical boundaries of the twentieth century and permits us to think of modernity as an expression of deep time. In the same way that Friedrich Kittler reframed history around discourse networks, Flusser's work rethinks disciplinary and linguistic boundaries across diachronic time.[2]

This issue on Flusser's modernity continues the work we started in the volume *Understanding Flusser, Understanding Modernism* (Bloomsbury 2021)[3] by asking contributors to creatively reinterpret modernity and Modernism in light of Flusser's theories. This issue of Flusser studies does not consolidate the noisy chaos of the Flusserian thought and the fragmentary nature of modernity into a monolithic message, a whole authoritative version of Flusser and Modernism. Rather, these contributions think of Flusser creatively and trace parallels between his works and the many facets of a modernity both past and future.

We begin our examination of Flusser's modernity with Aaron Jaffe's "Flusser's Planet: A Habitable Zone for Criticism?" At a time when criticism is shrinking – even in academic circles – Jaffe finds inspiration in Flusser's modern existence, *bodenlos* and fragmented, as well as his interdisciplinary defiance of academic constraints, to propose a search for a new home for critical interrogations. In this zone, we can retool the traditional questions of critique into new and more creative problems: instead of focusing on the "so-called correlationist controversy" of being and knowing, Jaffe sees in Flusser a creative way to redefine this problem into a more productive difference between "here and there, now and then" (Jaffe 2021: 2). The opposite of ontology is not epistemology but methodology.

---

[2] See Erich Hörl's *Sacred Channels* (2018[2002]), Lisa Gittelman's *Always Already New* (2007), Siegfried Zielinski's *[…After the Media]* (2013), and Jussi Parikka's *Geology of Media* (2015) for just a few of the many works in the burgeoning field of media thinking that shed light on the need to expand the concept of modernity vis-à-vis the proliferation of media machines.

[3] Edited by Aaron Jaffe, Rodrigo Martini and Michael F. Miller who is Visiting Lecturer in the Department of English Language and Culture at the University of Amsterdam, USA. His work has appeared in Contemporary Literature, Arizona Quarterly, symplokē, boundary 2 online, Modernism/modernity print+, and The Journal of Film and Video, among others. He is currently completing a book, titled Proximity by Proxy: Contemporary Literature in the Age of Social Media. (m.f.miller@uva.nl). For further bio-biographical information about Aaron Jaffe and Rodrigo Martini see their respective CVs in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

The modernity of Flusser's thought surfaces here in his creative reconceptualization of classical onto-logical problems as problems of contingency: where and when? From whence does one speak, and what are the implications of the subject's position vis-à-vis knowledge? Since Kantian modernity, we are tempted to say, these questions of contingency and embodiment have not been resolved.

Finding a place for criticism in Flusser's modernity, Cristina Iuli, Polona Tratnik, and Rodrigo Martini analyze the nature/culture divide in Flusser's engagement with the natural world (animals and plants) to better understand the problem of mediation offered by a modernity that has re-framed (or enframed) humans in a technocratic regime. Cristina Iuli analyzes how Flusser's playful discussions of the nature/culture divide in *Gestures* and *Natural:Mind* speak to current discussions about Affect The-ory. For Flusser, affect is not pre-processed human feeling run through the mill of cognition, but is understood instead as the automatization of culturally-located habits, rituals, and gestures that the sub-ject internalizes (and which also might be said to constitute the subject as such). As Iuli shows, the modern world of algorithms thus streamlines affects that control, constrain, and shape the forms of expression available to individuals. For Iuli, Flusser's version of affect theory – especially in his play with nature/culture divide – destroys the fantasy of the individual human and indicates how humans do not exist in essence; only determined by the cultural programs imposed on them by an automated modernity. Flusser's twisted humanism reveals its very flaws and opens the space possibility for a Flusser-inspired critical post-humanism to emerge as a locus of hopeful defiance.

Polona Tratnik reads biopolitical resonances in Flusser's attention to the natural world of the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. Whereas technocratic modernity is predetermined by a biopolitical program, framed by what Heidegger calls instrumentalization, Flusser finds in the Vampire Squid the potential to defy the program. Paying attention to the abyss between the Vampyroteuthis and the human, Trat-nik outlines the Vampyroteuthic sublime: the modern acknowledgement of the precipice that lies be-tween the human and the Other.

Rodrigo Martini sees the abyss between humans and otherness as manifested in the imagery of trees in Flusser's thought, which also trace Flusser's relationship with phenomenology, metaphysics, and media thinking. In his works, trees represent the natural world only insofar as they stand in for the human illusion of unmediated nature. Flusser contests this belief by trying to shed away the layers of signification surrounding trees – an act that does not reveal an essence of tree but only more layers. Flusser's modernity sees the forest for the trees when it comes to media apparatuses, which obscure the world even as they try to enlighten it, and instead theorizes the possible, creative reconfigurations that modern media can make of the world.

Of course, one cannot ask these questions – nor understand the challenges of modernity – without thinking through the problems of language and understanding. Rodrigo Duarte and Daniel Raschke both explore the importance of refining the Flusserian theoretical discourse with an exploration of language. Duarte offers a productive archaeology of Auschwitz in Flusser's thought. Through an extensive excursion into Theodor Adorno's discussion of Auschwitz, Duarte outlines the influence of Adorno's thought in refining Flusser's own use of Auschwitz as a conceptual device in his philosophical apparatus. For Flusser, as for Adorno, Auschwitz is the apex of a dreadful, technocratic modernity. However, both philosophers see Nazi tyranny not as a glitch in the fabric of progress but precisely as a programmed event in a logic of domination. Daniel Raschke's "Flusser-on-the-Fly" investigates the later work of Flusser in his lectures at Bochum University. Still unavailable in English, the lectures shed light on Flusser's late thought and the late modern condition of a world enframed by burgeoning digital computation, programming, and the algorithmicization of culture and politics – a world where computation creates Auschwitz. Raschke both analyzes and digests this strand of Flusser's thought, and he reflects on his own practice as a translator undertaking the work of translating the Bochum lectures into English. As Raschke describes them, the Bochum lectures are "the textual reality of a hybrid, synthetic assemblage that is synchronously steeped in an actual recorded voice and a posthumous, retroactive patchwork of audio files, notes, archival traces" (Raschke 2021: 3). The process of translating this assemblage reaffirms modern problems and solutions: instead of the lack of stable meaning in language, Flusser embraces polysemy and play as constitutive parts of the translation process. Instead of providing direct access to meaning or even sense, language appears in Flusser's thought as part of a broader epistemological concern over the framing of knowledge. For Flusser, these gaps between languages are not problems. They are instead the engines of creativity and critical nuance.

Finally, tangential to the problem of language in modernity, Annie Goh analyzes Flusser's modernity from the perspective of sound studies. In this essay, Goh focuses on the work of sound as a modernist resistance to the supremacy of visual knowledge in pre-modern times, and she productively turns to his notion of "communicology." Considering two lectures given in São Paulo in 1965, "On Music" and "On Modern Music, and analyzing them in relation to his "communicology," Goh examines Flusser's conceptualization of a sonic modernity as "groundless," unlike the grounded world of images and writing. Contrary to a McLuhanesque media theory of the auditive, Flusser's theorization of sound finds a potential in the auditory, which has the potential effect of destabilizing the inherent liberal subject of Western humanism. In Goh's essay we clearly see a desire in Flusser to find liberatory hope in the redescription of the modern world.

Despite analyzing modernity as a dreadful technocratic period where human beings become subjected to apparatuses, the essays collected in this issue outline a more optimistic and hopeful look at Flusser, who finds in art, philosophy, and media-thinking a Švejk-like opening for resistance.

Rodrigo Martini (Athens, GA, USA)

References

Hörl, Erich. 2018 [2002]. *Sacred Channels*: The Archaic Illusion on Communication. Trans. Nils F. Schott. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Gittelman, Lisa. 2007. *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mozzini, Camila. 2015. "For a Flusserian Method." *Flusser Studies* 20.

Parikka, Jussi. 2015. *Geology of Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Rouanet, Sérgio Paulo. 1981. Letter from January 28th. Vilém Flusser Archive: Cor_21_6-ROUAN_3140_SERGIO ROUANET 1980-1990. Rouanet 21_2013-01-23. pp. 65-67.

Zielinski, Siegfried. 2013. *[...After the Media]: News from the Slow-Fading Twentieth Century*. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.