

Introduction

In 1989, Flusser first published *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge*, a series of philosophical fictions, altogether twenty-two scenarios in search of images from family life, political life, and politics. This book has been recently translated into English and published by the University of Minnesota Press under the title *What if?*¹. We deemed this an excellent occasion for a more detailed discussion of a book that has unfortunately not received the theoretical attention it deserves, probably also because it was obscured by the success of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Into the Universe of Technical Images*, and *Does Writing have a Future?*

Besides the German text, Flusser also worked on a Portuguese and an English version, which however were never completed. In a short note at the beginning, he addressed all of those whose imagination enabled them to recode in some way or another (photography, film, video) the ideas and concepts of the book in a series of scenarios, asking them to get in touch with the editor. But there is more to the making of this book. Among other earlier texts it contains one of Flussers first publications, the essay “A Vaca. Conto” (The Cow. Tale), that was published on December 12, 1961, in the Suplemento Literário of O Estado de São Paulo.² In *What if?* it is the “Eleventh Scenario: Mechanical Engineering”.³ In the early 1970s, Flusser published daily contributions under the heading “Posto Zero” in A Folha de São Paulo. Some of these short philosophical fictions – especially the three texts of the “Serie rigorosamente familiar”⁴ – can be considered as precursors of the later versions that appeared in *What if?* nearly twenty years later.

A common concern both Anke Finger and Kenneth Goldsmith share in their introduction and afterword to *What if?* is the inability of Flusser’s criticism to place the types of writing he assembled into a neat category. While his work on media thinking follows a neat and organized progression across multiple books, the essays in *What if?* remain largely disconnected. Goldsmith argues that these essays form a “bad” book⁵, because they do not conform properly to any convention of writing: “if it’s not literature, poetry, theory, or science fiction, what is this book? And beyond that, why?”⁶ But then this is exactly the point Flusser is making.

¹ V. Flusser, Vilém (2022). *What If? Twenty-two Scenarios in Search of Images*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London.

² For a comment on this text see Rainer Guldin in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

³ Flusser, *What if?*: 39-43.

⁴ See also the contribution of Rafael Alonso in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

⁵ For a critical comment on the status of this translation see the last section of the contribution by Rainer Guldin in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

⁶ Flusser, *What if?*: 90.

In “Perspectivation and (Cosmo)technical (Imaginative) Temporalities: The *Angenommen* Script as the Culmination of Flusserian Writing”, published in this issue of *Flusser Studies*, Gabriel Philipson goes as far as to describe *Angenommen* as the culmination of a specific side of Flusser’s writing: “It would not be too much to see in this book the culmination of his *quasi-poetic* philosophical style, equivocated and assembled from his most recent reflections on computers and films. From a *theoretical*-literary perspective, what is interesting here is to find the unfinished, the wandering culminations of the equivocations of his philosophical destinerrancy, the *style* or *method* of his *philosophy of exile*, from which the traces of his trajectory of escape, in their fugacity, can be glimpsed.”⁷

If we consider *Angenommen* a collection of satirical literary essays, on the border of different discourses⁸, the etymology of the word satire might provide a possible answer to Goldsmith’s question. Satire comes from the Latin *satur*, ‘full’, and *satura lanx*, ‘a dish full of various kinds of fruit’, such as were offered at Roman harvest festivals. Satirical could, thus, be used as an umbrella concept that embraces all the different texts in *Angenommen* without abolishing their fundamental difference. In this context, one should not forget that cumulating and contaminating, mixing and merging of different points of view and styles is also one of the main characteristics of Flusser’s writing. Wanting to classify Flusser’s texts in neat categories, thus, goes against the very grain of his philosophy. It is, furthermore, a reflection mainly motivated by editorial concerns. From the very beginning, editors, libraries, and book shops in Germany and elsewhere were at a loss where to place his different works as they fit into different slots at the same time. But then again, that is exactly the beauty of it all.

For Finger, the essays fit within the subcategory of science fiction named *slipstream*, or the attention to “estrangement; late capitalism; postmodernist (experimental) fiction; disruptive; contemporary realities; quasi-SF; uncanny; weird; counterrealism”.⁹ All of these characteristics spell a form of art that transgresses the boundaries of proper literature to ask the very question of what constitutes the proper? For Goldsmith, *What if?* stages a “self-reflexive exercise in the necessity of failure” (ibid.), which is essential as “an antidote to combat any expectations of success in a field in which success is notoriously hard to come by”.¹⁰

Whether as an exercise in failure or a successful attempt at Slipstream Sci-Fi, one thing is certain about the assortment of essays in *What if?*: Flusser’s writing is funny. The comedy here is not pointless, but a serious engagement with the humorous as a political act; humor as a resistance

⁷ G. S. Philipson, “Perspectivation and (Cosmo)technical (Imaginative) Temporalities: The *Angenommen* Script as the Culmination of Flusserian Writing”: 1.

⁸ See Rainer Guldin in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

⁹ Flusser, *What if*: xvii.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 91.

to the traditions of academia (which never found a proper place for his unusual way of thinking) and as a resistance to the absurdity of life after the Holocaust. Paul Feyerabend's monumental argument in *Against Method* posited that scientific knowledge demands unusual ideas, especially the anarchic ones, which promote scientific progress. As he suggests, "my thesis is that anarchism helps to achieve progress..."¹¹ Thinking creatively outside the established methods of scientific pursuit can expand the realm of possibilities in scientific knowledge. As Ian Hacking notes in the introduction to *Against Method*, Feyerabend would later relabel "anarchic thinking" as Dadaism, because of the Dadaist scepticism toward any form of serious thought: a Dadaist "smells a rat whenever people stop smiling"¹². Flusser's against-the-grain method of imaginary science fits well with the Dadaist model. Laughter is a way of questioning tradition and a way of rewriting history. This is also one of the main points of Rainer Guldin's contribution.¹³

In the history of science and knowledge, anarchic literary endeavours like Flusser's have a special, tangled relationship with science. In *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski presents a more granular inquiry into the value of literature in the production of knowledge, of all kinds of knowledge. Because the "worldly insights we glean from literary texts are not derivative or tautological, not stale, second-hand scraps of history or anthropology"¹⁴, they enable for a self-aware way of rethinking the production of knowledge through "distinctive repertoire of techniques, conventions, and aesthetic possibilities"¹⁵. Within the framework of aesthetics, literature of the kind that Flusser produces in *What if?* can be an effective way to understand the processes of meaning-making involved in language, and especially the world-building aspect of scientific knowledge – which also takes recourse in the multiplicity of linguistic techniques to describe and produce truths. Works of science fiction in general, and Flusser's playful method of faux science, place literary knowledge vis-à-vis scientific methodology and, thus, impose on science the textual scrutiny of literature, because "through their rendering of the subtleties of social interaction, their mimicry of linguistic idioms and cultural grammars, their unblinking attention to the materiality of things, texts draw us into imagined yet referentially salient worlds".¹⁶

We open the issue by republishing a series of texts that Flusser wrote as a preparation for and in connection with the book edition of *Angenommen*. The first text, "Angenommen (Vermutung jetzt!)", is a German translation of "Now suppose" with an introductory comment by William

¹¹ P. Feyerabend, (2010). *Against Method*. Fourth edition. Introduction by Ian Hacking. New York: Verso: 11

¹² *Ibid.*: xiv.

¹³ For a more extended answer to Anke Finger's and Kenneth Goldsmith's remarks on Flusser's *What if?* see Rodrigo Martini's contribution in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

¹⁴ R. Felski, (2008). *Uses of Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing: 104

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 104

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 104.

Hanff. It is one of the seeds from which the other texts originated and at the same time the initial spark for the idea of a special issue about Flusser's book *Angenommen*.

In these short essays and opening chapters written in German, English, and Portuguese, title, subtitle, and content are constantly reshuffled and changed. Some of these texts already bear an epigraph by Isaac Newton – “Hypotheses non fingo” – some do not. The first two essays of the series are probably “Angenommen” and “Now suppose”. Two more German versions, “Angenommen. Einleitung” and “Angenommen. Einleitende Bedenken” followed along with two related English versions, “Suppose that. Preliminary doubts” and “Suppose that. Introductory considerations”, as well as a Portuguese variant, “Suponhamos. Dúvidas preliminaries”. Add to this the short essay “What if? A series of scenarios in search of images” and two other related texts “Randerscheinungen” and “Kurz und gut”.¹⁷

The first contribution by Carolina Marostica and Igor Oliveira Prado “Bibliophagus convictus – Report 313 on the incident ‘Caso Alegria’”, which is available both in Portuguese and in English, proposes a fictional narrative composed of text and images, based on the “Thirteenth Scenario: Chemical Industry”.¹⁸ Honouring Vilém Flusser's fictional endeavour the authors seek to expand the scenario originally created, respecting the data provided by the author but filling in some gaps left open in the original. Flusser had asked the photographer and friend Joan Fontcuberta to create a picture of the imaginary insect.¹⁹ However, this project was never realized. Here we have for the first time a visualization not only of the insect but of the narrative of the whole text. The pictures made from three-dimensional representations of the insect in its habitat illustrate its reproductive cycle, and the different stages of development of the organism. The literary component aims to reproduce a fictitious official and institutional communication between intelligence services in an autocratic, futuristic society with fascist characteristics. In *Flusser Studies* 13 (May 2012) we have already published an English version of “Bibliophagus convictus”.²⁰ In this issue, we have added the other still unpublished variants: a second English version, as well as a Portuguese and a German one.²¹

¹⁷ Published in “zeitmischrift. Journal für Ästhetik & Politik” 1990 (7/1): 16–22.

¹⁸ Flusser, What if: 47–49.

¹⁹ See the letter from Fontcuberta dated September 15, 1986 <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-fontcuberta-1984-88.pdf>. See also Andrea Soto Calderon – Rainer Guldin, “‘To document something which does not exist.’ Vilém Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta: A Collaboration”, in *Flusser Studies* 13, May 2012 (<http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/calderon-guldin-to-document.pdf>).

²⁰ See <http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/vilem-flusser-bibliophagus-convictus.pdf>.

²¹ For another response to the text see also Fiona Hanley, “Encountering Bibliophagus: An Aesthetics of Reading” (<http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hanley-encountering-bibliophagus-aesthetics-reading.pdf>).

The next two contributions, as well as the contribution by Rainer Guldin, deal with the presence of animal characters in Flusser's fables.

In "A Foray into the Worlds of Imaginary Animals and Humans", Rodrigo Martini places Flusser's short essays in *What if?* (2022), as well as his experiments with the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste (Scientific Institute of Paranaturalist Research – I.S.R.P.), in conversation with Joan Fontcuberta's *Fauna* exhibit (1985-89). Interpreting both Flusser's and Fontcuberta's experiments in the same line as the modernist obsession with fake sciences, especially the pataphysical work of Alfred Jarry, this essay argues that the strangeness in Flusser's *What if?* comes from a particular form of reversing the focus of scientific investigation, forcing readers to look inward, to the role of scientific writing, and the scientist, in framing the truths they claim to find.

Jonathan Garrett Wald's "Genocide and a Tapeworm. Flussers Post-Catastrophic Fabulism" examines Flusser's use of fables in *What If?* and *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* as a response to the groundlessness of catastrophic events such as the Holocaust. It begins with Flusser's seemingly grotesque joke about mass death in *What If?* as an opening to a discussion of Flusser's distinctive combination of brutal realism and playful creativity. By comparing Flusser's work with other scholars responding to the horrors of the twentieth century, such as Benjamin, Adorno, and Arendt, this article argues that Flusser's fabulist writing provides a form of writing and thinking that allows horror to viscerally impact its reader without offering a false sense of mastery or certainty. Drawing insight from *On Doubt* and *Groundless*, this article situates fables within Flusser's broader works. It distinguishes fables from the mythological approaches found in other Brazilian writings grappling with the limits of comprehension, such as Lévi-Strauss and Viveiros de Castro's (Post)Structuralist anthropologies and Ferreira da Silva's philosophy of mythology. Through these distinctions, Flusser's fabulist writings are portrayed as a unique endeavour to confront groundlessness with humility, seriousness, and creativity.

In March 1972, Flusser published in his column "Posto Zero" in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* a series of five related texts: "Bichos I – V" (Beasts I – V). Each of these short quick-witted texts focuses on a specific imaginary and metaphoric animal to reflect on such diverse subjects as science fiction, logic, aliens, post-humanism, and anthropocentrism. We republish them here for the first time in their original Portuguese version together with an English translation by Jessé Antunes Torres²² ("Beasts I – V") and a German translation by Edith Flusser and Vera

²² Jessé Antunes Torres is a Ph.D. candidate in Language Sciences at the Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina (UNISUL), under the advisership of Prof. Ana Carolina Cernicchiaro. The focus of his research is science fiction in the work of Vilém Flusser. He was granted a doctoral scholarship by the Comissão de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES). Torres holds a Master of Arts degree in Language Sciences (UNISUL), with a dissertation on Flusser's philosophical fiction, as well as a bachelor's degree in journalism from the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC). He was awarded the prize Rumos Jornalismo Cultural 2009-2010 from the Instituto Itaú Cultural. He lives in Santa Catarina, Brazil.

Schwamborn (“Tiere I – V”).²³ These texts, like the already mentioned “Serie rigorosamente familiar”, can be considered precursors of some of the scenarios in *Angenommen*, which is also one of the reasons for making them available to the reader here.

The first text, “Ants,” deals with human loneliness on Earth and our attempt to communicate with other beings in the universe. The idea of the second text, “Chimps”, is that a chimpanzee caged in a zoo could be seen as both an image of our animal past and of our post-human future. The third, “Unicorns” discusses the incapacity of logic to deal with an imaginary animal like the unicorn.²⁴ The fourth, “The Seven-Headed Beast,” which in Brazilian means a difficult problem, is used by Flusser a strategy which good science fiction should adopt: to pursue the unlikely, yet possible. The final text, “People,” approaches the theme of anthropocentrism, arguing that we only see ourselves as different from other animals because we separate anthropology from zoology.

The starting point of Rainer Guldin’s essay “A Modest Proposal for the Saponification of Fats: On the Role of Satire in Vilém Flusser’s Work” is an interview with Andreas Müller-Pohle and Volker Rapsch in August 1988, in which Flusser defined his writing style as satirical and *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* as a satirical text. In the interview, he also speaks of academic seriousness as a role to be played, questioning simple notions of authorial objectivity. What were Flusser’s intentions? Was he trying to influence the reception of his new book *Angenommen* that would be published only one year later, or did he want to reorient the way his books were being read in Germany at the time? Flusser’s short comment has far reaching consequences for the interpretation of other writings and raises a series of questions that would have to be pursued in a wider context: Is there, for instance, an ironical fabulatory undertone in all his writings even those considered to be straightforward comments on communication and media theory? The first part of the essay discusses some elements of Flusser’s use of satire and compares the short satirical text “Verseifung von Fetten” (Saponification) with Jonathan Swift’s “Modest Proposal”. The second part of the essay deals with Flusser’s satirical use of animal characters in his philosophical fables and their relationship to the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*.

We have published three different versions of the text discussed in Guldin’s contribution, the German “Verseifung von Fetten”²⁵, the Portuguese “Sabonetes”²⁶ and the still unpublished

²³ These texts along with the remaining ones from the “Posto Zero” series (all translated into German by Edith Flusser and Vera Schwamborn) were to be included in *Das Märchen von der Wahrheit. Glossen und Philosophiefiktionen* (The Fairy Tale of Truth: Glosses and Philosophical Fictions), the projected ninth volume of the Schriften Edition published by Stephan Bollmann and Edith Flusser.

²⁴ See also Rainer Guldin in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

²⁵ See V. Flusser (2000), *Briefe an Alex Bloch*, European Photography, Göttingen: 160-163.

²⁶ See V. Flusser (1998), “Sabonetes”, in *Ficções Filosóficas*, Editora USP, São Paulo: 149-152. See also this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

French “Saponification des graisses”, which are followed by an English translation – “Saponification” – by Rainer Guldin.

Gabriel Salvi Philipson’s “Perspectivation and (Cosmo)technical (Imaginative) Temporalities: The *Angenommen* Script as the Culmination of Flusserian Writing”, also available in a Portuguese version (“Perspectivação e temporalidades (cosmo)técnicas (imaginativas): o livro-roteiro *Angenommen* como a culminação da escritura flusseriana”), analyses key passages of *Angenommen* from the point of view of the function of writing. The essay discusses the entire corpus of Flusser’s philosophy of exile and *Angenommen* as a fundamental contribution to the problem of the destiny of philosophy. *Angenommen* institutes a circularity, a potential “eternal return” right where history is being made, in the singular events that break with the circularity of past and future history. The apparent quasi-dialectical movement of the book turns out to be a hellish circle from which there is no way out. The paradox at the heart of the book is that the freedom of imagination of (un)probable heterochronotopic scenarios is constrained by the instinctual repetition of anti-entropic principles. The (im)probably (im)possible phantasmagories repeat, as philosophictions, the real as trauma.

Rafael Alonso’s “Suponhamos: cenários para uma ética flusseriana”, also available in an English version (“Suppose that: Scenarios for a Flusserian Ethics”), proposes to reflect on the formal aspects of *Angenommen*. The first part is an outline of its overall structure. The second part situates it in relation to other projects, both authorial (in particular, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*) and collaborative (Joan Fontcuberta’s plants, Louis Bec’s sulfanogrados and Guimarães Rosa’s *garças*). The third part proposes a reading of the book that goes beyond the explicit definition Flusser gave of it, introducing the fundamental notion of *engagement*, that is the ethical disposition that accompanies all of Flusser’s writings. Flusser’s focus, in *Angenommen* and other works, is on the improbability of love, or, as he points out in a letter to Mira Schendel, on *aisthesis* as a method of political criticism. Flusser’s ethics have not yet reached the present.

In “The Fantastic & Fictionalism in Flusser’s ‘Now Suppose’”, William Hanff discusses two methods that Flusser proposes in “Now Suppose” which can be used to anticipate future events: an analogue approach of “standing-on-tip-toes” to evaluate broader trends and possibilities, and a digital approach of “finger-tips-at-terminals” utilizing probabilistic technology for future prediction. This essay explores the use of different technologies, such as scientific lab equipment, big-data algorithms, and digital production tools, as examples of these ‘Futurizing Instruments.’ Flusser’s concept is related to Hans Vaihinger’s fictionalism and Tzvetan Todorov’s study of the fantastic, as both provide insights into the role of imagination and uncertainty in anticipating future events. Connected to Flusser’s philosophy of photography and the concept of the technical apparatus this essay proposes a history of media technologies in ancient ritual, art, theater, cinema, and

computer media, back into Magic/Ritual – and their potential for both entertainment and future anticipation. Incorporating ideas from Flusser’s other two essays “The Novel Called ‘Science’” and its parallel with the movement through the fantastic by way of fictionalism, and “Gestures on Videotape (for Fred Forest)” describing the validity of using video (and possibly even some fantastical or science fiction elements) to reinforce the material and theoretical concepts – portions of *Now Suppose* are reimagined and presented as video and film scripts, particularly his concept of a ‘terrorist jumping from a monitor’. Flusser explores the use of video as a medium to communicate concrete phenomena and theoretical concepts. This approach requires a balance between scientific fictionalism and literary fantasy.

We close the issue with a German and English version of another still unpublished essay by Vilém Flusser that is thematically related to the main subject of this issue, the relationship of science and fiction²⁷, literature and academic discourse, art and science: “Der Roman der Wissenschaft” and “The Novel of ‘Science’”.

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²⁷ See also W. Hanff, “Fiktions des Wissenschaft – Is Science Fiction Translatable? or is Translation a Science Fiction?” (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hanff-translating-science-fiction.pdf>) as well as his translation of “Science fiction” (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hanff-science-fiction-en.pdf>). For texts on the relationship of scientific and artistic creation in see Flusser’s “La création scientifique et artistique” (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/la-creation-scientifique-et-artistique.pdf>), the video “On Human History as Television Drama” (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/person/vil%C3%A9m-flusser?page=2>) and “Menschheitsgeschichte als Fernseh-drama” (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-1991-menschheitsgeschichte-als-fernseh-drama-vfa-dok-2463.pdf>).