

## Rainer Guldin

### Introduction



This issue is dedicated to the memory of Osmar Gonçalves dos Reis Filho (1980-2024) who was a member of the Advisory Board of *Flusser Studies* for several years. He worked as an associate professor at the Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC) in Brazil. His research areas were photography, and theory and aesthetics of audiovisual media. He was also in charge of the local *Laboratório de Estudos de Estética e Imagem*. In *Flusser Studies 15* (May 2013) he published the essay “Estética da Fotografia: um diálogo entre Benjamin e Flusser”<sup>1</sup>

The issue covers a wide array of subjects with contributions both in text and image format from eleven different countries: Brazil, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the USA. The subjects range from post-modernity, to feminism, exact fantasy, migration, the relation of text and picture, gestures, the apparatus, plastics and AI, Kafka, happiness, Indian Instagram, the online/offline distinction as well as the modern city and photography.

The first section begins with a French translation by Marin Schaffner of Flusser’s essay “On Sandwiches: A Post-Modern Reflection” and a Portuguese translation by Rafael Miguel Alonso Jr of “Orthonature Paranature”.<sup>2</sup> Flusser probably wrote “On Sandwiches: A Post-Modern reflection” in summer 1986. There exist three slightly different English variants and two German versions. The title of the first English version was “Sandwiches and Russian Dolls” that Flusser had written for *Artforum*. Along with the French translation we publish the corresponding German and English originals. On September 16, 1986, Flusser sent “On sandwiches” to Charles Miller, the managing editor of *Artforum*. “It is a subject”, he wrote in the accompanying letter, “that I am going to develop during the meeting on ‘the senses of science’ at the European Council in Strasbourg on September

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/osmar-goncalves-a-estetica.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See also <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/schwendener-le-not-orthonature-paranature-en.pdf>

30.” The essay was at first approved for publication (see the letter of September 25), but on September 29 Miller wrote: “we were not able to fit your last submission on “Sandwiches” into the November issue, simply because we did not have enough space when it came to the final layout. However, rest assured that we will keep it for an upcoming issue (it is always difficult to say exactly which issue an article will appear in before the issue itself has any shape.” However, the text was not mentioned any more in the ensuing correspondence. Neither by Flusser nor by Miller. The reason for not publishing the text is probably due to the fact that Flusser, impatient as ever when it came to publishing, kept sending the journal new texts at a very high speed in the following weeks. These kept piling up, as Miller points out in some of his letters, and, in the end, only some of them were finally published. On September 18, 1986, only two days after his first letter to *Artforum* Flusser sent the German version, “Vom Sandwich: Eine postmoderne Überlegung”, to Marianne Katz-Pross, the editor of the journal *Merkur*. In the accompanying letter he wrote: “It is a condensation of my speech (*Raffung meines Referats*) on the grey zones between science and art for the international meeting of the Society of History of Science in São Paulo in February 1987.” The journal sent the text back on October 1<sup>st</sup>. However, the text made it into *kultuRRevolution - zeitschrift für angewandte diskurstheorie* (p. 19–21) in May 1987.

Over the years, Flusser actively worked on the fictionalization of his persona, even on the creation of a personal mythology. Now, for the first time, he has been turned into a literary figure. Not much is known about Vilém Flusser’s childhood years in Prague, where he lived with his family and attended the *Deutsches Realgymnasium* in Zboroská street. One of his classmates and friends at the time was a young girl born in 1919. In the novel *Große Zeiten Kleines Glück* (Great Times Little Happiness) Gerold Tietz who met her eighty years later tells the story of her extraordinary life. The book sheds some light on Vilém Flusser who is called Jakob in the novel. Vilém is described as a very smart boy at school – who could even be a little intimidating to his classmates every now and then. He used to sit in the first row – and when Rita (the female protagonist) had to do a presentation in front of the class, she always felt particularly observed and critically challenged by his vigilant presence. Here we publish most of the excerpts directly referring to ‘Jakob’ both in the German original and in an English translation.

The second section begins with Marc Lenot’s “Flusser était-il féministe? / Was Flusser a Feminist?” that we publish both in a French and an English version. One would not spontaneously associate Flusser with feminism. While his personal behaviour could not be qualified as feminist, two of his texts, presented in Lenot’s essay, point to a very modern and even somewhat revolutionary view of the relationship between men and women. The first one is his contribution to a book about love, edited by his friend Alexandre Bonnier; the other is his critique of the work of the Greek

photographer Lizzie Calligas. Flusser acknowledged clearly that the adoption of a feminist point of view, respectful of women, is an intellectual and moral necessity: by subjecting women's bodies to their male bodies, men have criminally repressed women and prevented any dialogue in favour of a male monologue, thus making men and women strangers to each other, even though they may love each other.

In connection with Lenot's essay, we publish Flusser's text "Altweibersommer" (Indian Summer) along with Vera Schwamborn's illuminating comment<sup>3</sup>, in the German original with an English, a Portuguese, and a French translation. These texts add a further dimension to Lenot's discussion of Flusser's feminism. Flusser wrote the essay "Altweibersommer" in connection with his last project *Menschwerdung* (Becoming human). The essay was first mentioned in a letter to his editor Stephan Bollmann on August 31, 1990. The German term 'Altweibersommer' is used for a specific phase of weather in autumn, often at the end of September and the beginning of October, which is characterized by a stable high-pressure area and a warm end to summer. It is comparable to the 'Indian Summer' in New England. The same term is used in French (*été indien*) and Portuguese (*veranico* or *verão indiano*). In the English and Portuguese translations of the title of Schwamborn's comment, an essential element is lost: *Weib* originally meant a woman who is busy, but nowadays it carries a derogatory and often even defamatory meaning, especially in the notion of *altes Weib*. Flusser provocatively reads this meaning against its grain by highlighting its double metaphorical and literal meaning. In his view, elderly women who are in the autumn of their lives should not be disregarded or even discarded members of society, because they represent the possibility of a freer existence liberated from the coercions of biology and the limiting expectations of society. Irmgard Zepf, a long-standing friend of Vilém and Edith Flusser, loved the text and tried to publish it, but without any success.<sup>4</sup> Possibly Flusser had her in mind when he wrote the text. In a letter he sent her from Robion on October 22, 1991, he commented: "If I may say so, you are an example of a lady (*Dame*) for me." In a letter to Jürgen Link from October 10, 1991, Zepf commented on some implications of Flusser's essay: "Many women have a difficult, poor, and lonely old age, especially now in the former GDR, where there is downright misery for women across all generations. ... I think it is very important that now also publicly educated men comment on the problem of feminism ... even outside the actual specialist areas of feminism. For me, these are approaches to a possible cultural dialogue that does not yet exist."

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<sup>3</sup> The German original by Vera Schwamborn was first published in *Flusseriana. An Intellectual Toolbox*, ed. by Siegfried Zielinski, Peter Weibel and Daniel Irrgang, Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015: 233-235. The text was also published in an English ("Indian Summer") and Portuguese ("Veranico") translation. The French translation was done by Rainer Guldin.

<sup>4</sup> The text was published posthumously in 1991 in *kultuRRévolution - zeitschrift für angewandte diskurstheorie* (26): 3-4.

In the following essay, “*Fantasia essata: Behind Flusser’s theory of imagination*”, Francesco Restuccia explores the concept of *fantasia essata*, exact imagination, that Flusser attributes to Leonardo da Vinci: a non-arbitrary use of imagination that dialogues with experience and reason by investigating improbable but possible scenarios. Leonardo never used this phrase: it was Goethe who first wrote of an *exakte sinnliche Phantasie*, an exact sensuous fantasy. Restuccia’s essay reconstructs the genealogy of the term *fantasia essata*, and investigates the affinity between this exact imagination and Flusser’s theory of *Einbildungskraft*. The expression *exakte Phantasie* was also used by Cassirer to explain Leonardo’s peculiar imaginative approach to science. Some other mid-20th century thinkers, such as Santillana and Ferreira da Silva, who are likely to be Flusser’s sources, used this concept to think of a productive and operational imagination that could bridge the gap between art and science.

In “‘Ein Mensch ist kein Baum’ Vilém Flussers Phänomenologie der Einwanderung“ (‘A man is not a tree’ Vilém Flusser’s Phenomenology of Immigration), Michael Hanke discusses a central issue in Flusser’s life and work. Flusser was not only a multiple emigrant himself, but also analysed this experience, which he ultimately saw as an integral part of human existence, theoretically, culturally and philosophically. In the critical reception of Flusser’s migration theory, little attention has been paid to an earlier, programmatic contribution from his Brazilian phase (perhaps because it was only published in Portuguese and has not yet been translated) written shortly before he returned to Europe: “Para uma fenomenologia da imigração”<sup>5</sup> (For a Phenomenology of Immigration) (1971)<sup>6</sup> which we have republished in this issue of *Flusser Studies*. With its counterpart, the “Für eine Philosophie der Emigration” (For a Philosophy of Emigration), it marks the beginning of a series of articles that deal with immigration and emigration as well as migration in general.

Philippe Willemart’s “L’image dilacérée par les calculs et les lettres / A imagem dilacerada por cálculos e letras” (The Image Dilacerated by Calculations and Letters) frate starts out from Flusser’s theory on the contrast between images and writing from the second narrative of creation in the Bible and proceeds in three successive movements of writing: in the first movement, science and literature come together, in the second they are separated from each other and in the third a series of equations are constructed which allow researchers to predict the future. The action of the robot, although endowed with a powerful memory, is unable to fit into these movements and thus does not belong to the community of human beings.

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<sup>5</sup> Published in *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia*. Órgão oficial do Instituto Brasileiro de Filosofia, São Paulo, Vol. 21, Nr. 82, April/May/June 1971, p. 170–178.

<sup>6</sup> See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

The third section brings together a series of texts accompanied by images. Fernando Quesada's "Tertium non datur. El tercero excluido" (*Tertium non datur*: the Excluded Third) retraces the relationship between Louis Bec's work for the Bienal de São Paulo *Sulfanogrades* (1981) and his book with Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (1987). Looking back at the first three exhibitions of the *Sulfanogrades* in France in 1976, and the subsequent text produced by Flusser on this subject, *Ortho-nature. Paranature*<sup>7</sup>, it is clear that a large part of the vocabulary and many of the ideas contained in the later *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, first published in German in 19867, had already been formulated by 1976, due to the close and regular intellectual exchanges between Bec and Flusser. In Bec's and Flusser's oeuvre the distinction between art and science, nature and culture, animal and human, or truth and fable, is defied and exposed as the wrong way out of the old dilemma of the excluded third, or *tertium non datur*. Both spheres overlap, rather than being mutually exclusive, and the space of overlapping is no other than that of epistemology itself. If the *Sulfanogrades* remove agency from both the human subject and the animal object, ultimately giving all subjective agency to biology, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* exposes a theory of the human as an inverse vampire: a new model for contemporary artists.

Mario Cascardo's "Gesto das Pedras: da fenomenologia flusseriana às coisas de Wanda Pimentel" (The Gestures of Stones: On the Flusserian Phenomenology of things of Wanda Pimentel) explores the enigma of gestures through the works of Vilém Flusser and the Brazilian painter Wanda Pimentel by starting from the paradoxical assumption that a rock can also perform a gesture. Some paintings from Pimentel's series *Envolvimentos* (Entanglements) and *Montanhas do Rio* (Mountains of Rio) reveal a sort of ambiguous expressiveness of legs, rocks, windows, clothes, and other objects. They seem to be endowed with that which Flusser called the "artificiality" of gestures.

Kaue Nogueira de Carvalho Mariano's phenomenological essay, "Desaparelho: do protótipo ao conceito / Disapparatus: From Prototype to Concept" – published here, both in Portuguese and English translation –, based on Flusser's philosophy, is about a photographic prototype created by the author called *Disapparatus* which problematizes the very gesture of photography. Technically, the *Disapparatus* is an optical gadget that, when coupled with a photographic apparatus, produces an overlay of three distinct images. Although initially the interaction with the *Disapparatus* is similar to that with a normal camera, a more serious engagement reveals a program that does not operate according to traditional photography, such as hunting for viewpoints. This new game questions the traditional meaning of representation, object, space, and the self. And in this respect, it resembles, to a certain degree, the classical phenomenological game itself.

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<sup>7</sup> See also the Portuguese translation published in this issue.

In “Devir em direção ao perecer”: Flusser, Plásticos, Rodas, e Inteligências Artificiais” (Becoming towards Perishing”: Flusser, Plastics, Wheels, and Artificial Intelligence), Carolina Marostica and Igor Oliveira Prado propose a digression on the permanence and impermanence, the visibility and invisibility of synthetic polymers (also known as plastics) and the role of AI, starting out from an interpretation proposed by Vilém Flusser in his essays “Forma e material” and “Rodas”. The essay explores the boundaries between form and matter, organic and synthetic, natural and artificial, art and science. The text also includes a reflection proposed by Roland Barthes regarding synthetic polymers in his essay “Le plastique”, from his work “Mythologies”. The pro-teism of plastics could be interpreted as a utopia of total information.

The main aim of Andrea Pócsik’s essay “ACTIVE – ARCHIVE – RESEARCH” is to sum up the preliminary conceptions and the results of an archival research and research lab which was conducted and organized by the author at Artpool Art Research Center, Budapest (in the autumn of 2023), and supported by the Museum of Fine Arts with the participation of seven young researchers. Artpool – this unique artist-archive, presently art research center – also called “active – archive – research”, using Galántai’s term invented in 1979, was founded by him, his wife and the fellow artist Júlia Klaniczay. Their personal presence in the lab’s research work, “the thought-exchange” – as Galántai understands teaching/learning – provided an opportunity to develop a new research method based on Michael Polanyi’s personal knowledge theory. The essay also highlights the possibilities of exploring parallels between Vilém Flusser’s and György Galántai’s thinking and opens up new perspectives for further research.

The fourth and last section begins with a contribution by Yannis Mitróu. In “The construction of happiness in the world of technical images: from Aristotelian “*ευδαιμονία* (eudaimonia)” to the image-synthesis of Vilém Flusser” the author explores the concept of happiness in modern times through the lens of Vilém Flusser’s technical image comparing it to the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*. According to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the supreme good to which human beings should dedicate their life. The process of finding *eudaimonia* is an extremely difficult journey. Is this concept still valid in the age of technical images that compose the reality around us? What does happiness mean in this situation? How can we give any meaning to it? An answer to these questions can be found in Vilém Flusser’s thought.

Marcus Bastos’ “Flusser e Kafka: diálogos em torno de aparelhos, funcionários e programas / Flusser and Kafka: Dialogues on Apparatuses, Functionaries and Programs” of which we also publish a Portuguese and an English version, explores the dialogue between Flusser and Kafka around the concepts of apparatus, functionary, and program. Starting out from the understanding of Prague as a city that builds bridges, the text understands Flusser’s thought as a bridge between

past and future, referring to its genealogical beginnings in Prague's literature. In a cross-reading of texts by the two authors, the concepts of apparatus, functionary and program emerge in their different aspects. The dialog with Kafka reveals an important source of Flusser's thinking.

Neethu Mary Tomy's "Subverting the Spectacle: Flusserian Tactics for Body Politics on Indian Instagram" is the very first Indian publication. We hope it is not the last one. The paper delves into the complex landscape of Instagram in India, employing Vilém Flusser's philosophy of visual communication as an analytical lens. It explores how users construct and negotiate individual and collective identities on the platform, while grappling with the interplay of power, representation, and algorithmic curation. The analysis argues that Instagram, with its focus on visual storytelling, aligns with Flusser's notion of the "technological image" shaping our understanding of the world. However, it cautions against the potential pitfalls of algorithmic mimicry, which can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and limit exposure to diverse perspectives. The paper acknowledges the influence of Western beauty standards on Indian users, potentially leading to self-doubt and distorted self-perception. However, it empowers users by highlighting their agency in employing strategies like body positivity movements and celebrating cultural authenticity to challenge these dominant narratives. In conclusion, the research advocates for a critical approach to Instagram, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the constructed nature of online content and fostering a more inclusive and representative online space.

In "The Online/Offline Distinction Will Dissolve", Tiernan Hart argues that the internet typifies an ongoing restructuring of the social understanding of space and time, with regard to telecommunication grounds, the offline/online distinction, and the mis/information distinction. Bernard Stiegler's foundational concept of technics (re)frames the humanity-technology relationship as that which constitutes time via externalization of memory. This reframing initiates an investigation into how new age internet technologies recalibrate spatiotemporal relations. Concepts such as 'hybrid space' go to show how space as a physical phenomenon begins to follow digital programming, as seen with the case of locationally aware cell phones that organize and inform one's approach to space. In Flusser's notion of 'technical image' the linear historical time is supplanted by circular time. The last part of the paper is dedicated to Marxian in view of Romeo Alquati's notion of 'valorizing information' as a measurable economic exchange between human and machine that is objectified in the commodity.

Finally, Piotr Dobrowksi's "Camera: Modern City and Photography" deals with the connection between modern city and photography. Looking into the sphere created by this unusual conceptual pair reveals significant traits of contemporary culture. The article undertakes this task by referring to the notion of a camera – an apparatus used to take pictures, but also an idea carrying

connotations that originated long before the invention of the device. These characteristics are discussed through Vilém Flusser's approach to the philosophy of photography.

Lugano, May 2024