

Introduction

This special issue of *Flusser Studies* 38 approaches the topic of nihilism in Vilém Flusser’s thinking. It is inspired by the International Congress “Philosophy and Literature: Nihilism across boundaries” realized at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto (Portugal), in June 2023. Some of the papers presented there explicitly focused on Flusser’s view of nihilism. While the question of nihilism is not usually explicit in most of Flusser’s texts, it is, on the other hand, almost omnipresent as a starting point for his critique of contemporary thought and its consequences. In these articles, a number of established researchers in Flusserian studies show the various ways, in which Flusser dealt with this concept.

The question of nihilism in our issue is introduced by Flusser himself, through the short essays “Der Sisyphos des Camus oder die Ablehnung des Selbstmordes” (Camus Sisyphus or the Rejection of Suicide) and “Camus’ Myth of Sisyphus”, published in a Portuguese version in the cultural supplement of *Folha de São Paulo*, in the May 2008. The essay revolves around the main question inspired by Camus’ existentialist question: why don’t I just kill myself? which has unsettled generations of readers of his famous essay. This question is based on a profound feeling of the fundamental absurdity of life. In his short text, Flusser deals with the ethical dimension of suicide as a way out of the human condition, which can be reduced to the question: How can you be honest with your existence in the face of a meaningless life?

In his essay, “Entre Lúcifer e o Cristo {ou} Queda e Redenção” (Between Lucifer and Christ {or} Fall and Redemption) Wanderley Dias da Silva discusses nihilism in Flusser’s texts from various angles, starting with John Milbank’s concept of radical orthodoxy. What unites the two thinkers is the conviction that Cartesian doubt is one of the sources of nihilism. This is the main theme of Flusser’s monograph *On Doubt* written in the 1960s. Wanderley establishes various connections between Flusser’s notion of nihilism and that of other philosophers such as Hegel, Heidegger and William Desmond.

In the essay, “A caminho do nada: a questão do progresso da humanidade ocidental e do papel da língua nas reflexões de Heidegger, Benjamin e Flusser” (On the Road to nothingness: the Question of Progress of Western Society and the Role of Language in the Reflections of Heidegger, Benjamin and Flusser), Eva Batličková seeks to identify the influence of the two great German thinkers, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin in the formation of the thought of the young Vilém Flusser, focussing above all on his theory of language, in which the Flusser seeks to show the limits of the Western philosophy of his time. The concepts of progress and guilt are shown to

be fundamental in one of Flusser's first monographs *History of the Devil*, just as the power of *poiesis* shows the way out of the vicious circle of the logic of Western science in *Language and Reality* and *On Doubt*.

In the essay "On Flusser's Struggle with Nihilism", Andreas Ströhl connects Flusser's existential groundlessness to the experience of the atrocities of World War II as the starting point for creating strategies for the conquest of human freedom in a world in ruins. For Flusser, overcoming death and absurdity consists in recognising the other. In this sense, dialogical thinking allows Flusser to overcome human finitude through communication.

In his essay "Retreat from Nihilism", Amos Morris-Reich reflects on the echoes of nihilism in Flusser's early works, and his conception of freedom as a creative struggle against the restrictions of the apparatus. He argues that Flusser's thinking on freedom shows undeniable traces of nihilism because it is essentially negative, since it starts from a logic of resistance against the apparatus.¹ This logic that Morris-Reich identifies in Flusser's early works is present in all the works to come.

In "Vilém Flusser nas vizinhanças do niilismo e para além" (Vilém Flusser in the Neighbourhood of Nihilism and Beyond), Lúcia Santaella shows the link between Nietzsche's and Flusser's nihilism. Both philosophers relate this phenomenon to the loss of faith and its disastrous consequences in Western history. At the same time, they both recognise nihilism as a starting point for overcoming this situation. Santaella points out that Flusser's texts focus more on neighbouring concepts such as doubt and scepticism. One of the ways out of the nihilism that plagues contemporary thought is to be found in the playful creative capacity of men which materialises in the arts.

In his essay "Figures of Nihilism in Vilém Flusser's Philosophy", Rainer Guldin shows that although nihilism is not a central concept in Flusser's texts, it is important as a principle of creative negation and as such as a starting point for his thinking. Flusser manages to transform negativity and nihilism into a constructive creative force. Guldin discusses Flusser's nihilism in terms of Christopher Watkin's notion of figure of thought which allows for an encompassing vision of the different aspects of nihilism in the work of Vilém Flusser that includes related philosophical terms but also Mephistophelian people like Alex Bloch and Vicente Ferreira da Silva, as well as pictorial representations like Samson Flexor's portrait of Flusser.

In "Mundos Estranhos: Ecos do Niilismo e do Pessimismo na Imaginação Flusseriana" (Strange Worlds: Echoes of Nihilism and Pessimism in the Flusserian Imagination), Erick Felinto shows Flusser's concern with the nihilism in contemporary thought, which he unveils in the paradox of the excessive valorisation of the intellect and, at the same time, the disbelief in its power.

¹ See also R. Guldin, „Golem, „Roboter und andere Gebilde. Zu Vilém Flussers Apparatbegriff“ in *Flusser Studies* 9, November 2009 (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/guldin-golem-roboter.pdf>).

Flusser seeks to fight this radical scepticism with a type of knowledge based on imagination. This knowledge is conceived as articulation, as the creation of the world. This imaginative form of knowledge must lead to an exploration that is capable of opening up a door to the future.

In his text “Do nada, a *natureza* – língua e realidade em Vilém Flusser” (From Nothingness, *nature* - language and reality in Vilém Flusser), André Brayner connects Flusser’s concept of nature to the critique of scientific rationality and the consequent environmental crisis we are witnessing today. It shows how Flusser appeals to the need to recover a more intuitive, poetic thinking, so that the concept of nature becomes more experiential. In this context, André Brayner introduces Ailton Krenak’s vision of nature, one of the most important intellectual representatives of Brazil’s indigenous peoples. In order to overcome the current environmental crisis, it is essential to replace the narrowly scientific view of the world with re-enchantment, giving thought back its more sensitive and aesthetic capacity. Nature can thus be understood as an aesthetic experience, as a living experience, rather than a mere intellectual category.

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