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Telepresence and the decay of private space

(in times of crisis)

“The distant vanishes not only by coming near, it becomes obsolete because we don’t have to leave our seats in front of the screen for future travelling.”¹ These are the concluding words of the concept paper for the exhibition ‘Vom Verschwinden der Ferne’ (On the vanishing of the distant) at Deutsches Postmuseum, Frankfurt (Main) (today Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt), curated by Edith Decker and Peter Weibel in collaboration with Kasper König. Historically quite early, between October 2, 1990 and January 13, 1991, the exhibition discussed the impact of tele-technology on the arts, including the still young technologies of telematics and virtual reality. Entangled in technological networks, the production, distribution and reception of tele-mediated artworks are no longer bound to a specific physical space, they become, in a way, dislocated: What used to be geographically distant, now can be experienced, at least in the visual and auditory domains, from anywhere in real time by anyone connected to the data flow. Thus, as the exhibition title claims, distance as a spatiotemporal category begins to disappear.

Vilém Flusser, well known by the curators for his work on network communication and digital aesthetics,² was invited to contribute to the exhibition catalogue.³ In fact, at the time Flusser had already developed similar assumptions on the collapse of space and time into the immediacy of global electronic communication.⁴ In 1985 Flusser, who lived in France at the time, emphasized the dialogical capacity of networked computer terminals, probably after observing the Minitel terminals at the nodes of the national ‘proto-internet’ which connected French households since 1982.⁵ At the time of the exhibition in Frankfurt, Flusser elaborated his optimistic assessment of the possibilities of dialogical networks into an existential philosophy, stressing the consequences of the vanishing distance, both geographical and interpersonal: By means of net-

¹ Exhibition concept paper for “Das Verschwinden der Ferne” (later retitled in “Vom Verschwinden der Ferne. Telekommunikation und Kunst”, Deutsches Postmuseum, Frankfurt/Main, curated by Edith Decker and Peter Weibel in collaboration with Kasper König (October 2, 1990–January 13, 1991); source: Vilém Flusser Archive, Berlin, document no. Corr. 114, 3.

² During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Flusser participated in a symposium series on the new digital or virtual aesthetics at the institute for new media, Städelschule Frankfurt/Main, also hosted by Peter Weibel, in cooperation with Florian Rötzer. The proceedings were published in several volumes, some including texts by Flusser; see e.g. *Strategien des Scheins. Kunst, Computer, Medien*, eds. Florian Rötzer and Peter Weibel (Munich: Boer, 1991).

³ Edith Decker and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Vom Verschwinden der Ferne. Telekommunikation und Kunst* (Cologne: DuMont, 1990).

⁴ Vilém Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1985), pp. 127–28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55; see p. 57 for a reference to the Minitel; for a later reference see Christian Doermer’s video interview “Philosophische Exkursionen. In Memoriam Vilém Flusser” (Cine Dokument Film, 1992).

work communication one is able to get in personal contact with, in principle, any human being with access to the network, no matter their location. According to Flusser, proxemics, the discipline investigating the role of spatial distance in human communication, replaces the old ethics of “watered down humanism”⁶. The abstract claim ‘love humanity’, proven useless by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, is overcome by a concrete closeness to the other, realized as a dialogue of mutual recognition. In a beautiful biographical circle Flusser returned here to the philosophy of Martin Buber that had a profound influence on his thinking after he visited one of Buber’s lectures in Prague in 1937:⁷ “I and Thou, above all, Thou”, Flusser stated in an interview in 1991, only a few weeks before his death – “Humanism is dead in the moment when one doesn’t say anymore, ‘I love humanity’ but when one says instead, ‘love thy neighbour’.”⁸ Flusser described the existential mode of the electronically mediated engagement with the other as “telepresence”, a term originally used in robotics to designate robotic remote control feedback systems, including early virtual reality applications. Especially in the late 1980s and 1990s the term was promoted by artists such as Eduardo Kac – with whom Flusser had exchanged several letters – in order to conceptualize artistic experiments with telematics, including tele-robotic systems and collaborations through networks. Kac’s description of the implications of telepresence bears an impetus similar to both, Flusser’s existential considerations and the curatorial motives of the Frankfurt exhibition: “At the end of the twentieth century new art forms use technology to suggest a new concept of human potential, one that expands the reach of human presence in real time beyond spatiotemporal barriers. [...] In this new reality, spatiotemporal distances become irrelevant [...]”¹⁰

Following the invitation by the exhibition curators, Flusser wrote an emphatic essay on the notion of *Nächstenliebe* (neighbourly love) in the age of modern science and tele-technology. Although Flusser’s contribution had already been copyedited by the editorial team, his text ultimately was not included into the exhibition catalogue, since, according to a letter by Edith Decker to Flusser, the overall page volume of the book had to be cut.¹¹ However, the essay was published

⁶ Vilém Flusser, interviewed by Florian Rötzer (October 1991), *Nächstenliebe im elektronischen Zeitalter*. Ein Gespräch mit Vilém Flusser. *Telepolis* (November 1, 1996), <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Nachstenliebe-im-elektronischen-Zeitalter-3412541.html>, access: April 11, 2020; quote translated from German by D.I.

⁷ Flusser describes Buber’s influence on his thinking in the autobiographical miniature “In Search of Meaning”, published in *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 198. Furthermore, in an interview in 1991 with Patrick Tschudin, Flusser described the experience at Buber’s lecture in Prague as a decisive moment where he learnt from Buber that, in line with Jewish iconoclasm, the engagement with the other, the act of *Nächstenliebe*, is the only way to engage with God. Vilém Flusser, *1967–1991*, ed. Klaus Sander (Göttingen: European Photography, 1996), p. 203.

⁸ Vilém Flusser, *Proxemic* (an interview by Daniela Kloock). *Medium 2* (1992), pp. 61–66, here p. 64; quote translated from German by D.I. Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).

⁹ Flusser in “Philosophische Exkursionen. In Memoriam Vilém Flusser”.

¹⁰ Eduardo Kac, “Ornitorrinco” and “Rara Avis”: Telepresence Art on the Internet. *Leonardo* 29/5 (1996), pp. 389–400, here pp. 390 and 392.

¹¹ See the correspondence between Edith Decker, Margret Baumann (Deutsches Postmuseum) and Flusser (August 7, August 10, October 18, 1990); Vilém Flusser Archive, document no. Cor 114, 4 and 6.

only a few months later in the renowned art journal *Kunstforum*.¹² Following Flusser's essay, the age of science is deeply characterized by tele-technology.¹³ It began with the telescope and the microscope, bringing closer what was invisible, and evolved with the telegraph, telephone, television and finally telematics to an age of global networks, bringing closer the distant other. In Flusser's rather utopian concept the new 'telematic society', which evolves in the wake of tele-technologies, may lead "us out of alienation and closer to the other"¹⁴. Thus, telepresence brings I and Thou in a state of togetherness, thereby recognizing oneself in the other¹⁵ – a Buberian trope.

From today's perspective Flusser's hope in telepresence appears naive. Or, in the best case, as an artefact of its time: After the liberating hopes in new network technologies and virtual spaces, which really gained momentum with the emergence of the internet in the 1990s, those narratives ultimately failed when those technologies were incorporated into the capitalist dispositif. With the collapse of the dot.com bubble in 2000 it became evident that cyberspace is by no means a space free of restrictions and influence by markets and governments. The non-hierarchical network, praised by Flusser and many thinkers, activists and artists, turned out to be a network where some nodes are simply way more powerful than others, which reintroduces yet another form of hierarchy, as Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker have pointed out already in 2007.¹⁶ With the Snowden revelations in 2013¹⁷ this shift of narrative was accelerated. It eventually found another climax in the scandal around Cambridge Analytica, the company that exploited personal profiles from Facebook for psychometric micro targeting during, but not limited to, the 2016 US presidential election¹⁸ – ultimately shattering the "rhetoric of democratizing communication"¹⁹ that came with Web 2.0 social media promises. Current academic and political narratives on internet use now underline the distressing implications of surveillance and platform

¹² Vilém Flusser, Nächstenliebe. *Kunstforum* 112 (March/April 1991), pp. 80–83. The essay was published again, in a shortened version, one year later, after Flusser's death, as "Vom Verschwinden der Ferne" in *Arch+* 111 (March 1992), pp. 31–32.

¹³ This hypothesis is in line with Peter Weibel's premise that the most important technological invention of the industrial revolution since the 19th century invoked deep ruptures of the perception of space and thus are, ultimately, tele-technologies. Peter Weibel, Vom Verschwinden der Ferne. Telekommunikation und Kunst, in: *Vom Verschwinden der Ferne*, eds. Decker and Weibel, pp.19–77. Cf. Weibel in conversation with Siegfried Zielinski, in: *Zur Genealogie des MedienDenkens*, eds. Daniel Irrgang and Florian Hadler (Berlin: Kadmos, 2017), pp. 61–91.

¹⁴ Flusser, Vom Verschwinden der Ferne, p. 31; quote translated from German by D.I.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Cf. Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit. A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Glenn Greenwald, NSA collecting phone records of millions of Verizon customers daily, *The Guardian* (June 6, 2013), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/nsa-phone-records-verizon-court-order>; access: April 13, 2020.

¹⁸ The revelations of another whistleblower, Christopher Wylie, former leading employee for data analytics at Cambridge Analytica or SCL Group, are most informative in both, detail and naivety: Wylie, *Mindsuck. Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America* (New York: Random House, 2019).

¹⁹ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 53.

capitalism for privacy, when “extracting and controlling immense amounts of data”²⁰ becomes the new *modus operandi* of neo-liberalism. Finally, another negation of the 1990s internet optimism becomes painfully clear with the appropriation of left-wing net activist tactics by movements like the web-savvy Alt-right and its digitally amplified hate speech – which in fact point into a direction Jean-François Lyotard had already described in his 1979 study on the postmodern society: Information and communication technologies (ICT) and its distribution of knowledge and dialogue may rather support dissonance (with both productive and destructive outcomes) than lead to a somewhat harmonic interpersonal consensus.²¹

But even if one may criticize Flusser’s strangely optimistic technological determinism – statements such as “humans will probably get worse, but technology will get better”²² certainly invite such a critique –, dismissing his thought on telepresence as naive or obsolete would be ill-advised. Flusser was well aware that, as all technology, also “telematics [...] can be misused”²³. Although he didn’t really specify the potential misuse, he did discuss, as early as 1974, matters of privacy in connection with mass media as a rupture of private space, where “private dwellings become linked closely to the public sphere and lose their privacy”²⁴. Thus, the old dialectics of private and public space manifested in the Greek agora, which consolidated the possibility of politics in the first place, dissolves. Flusser would frequently revisit this line of thought many years later, often in context of his reflections on telepresence.²⁵ And even if we don’t need to follow his claim that politics is vanishing in the information society, we should acknowledge his insight that telepresence, or network communication for that matter, often comes with a disruption of private space. Even if this disruption today, in the age of surveillance or platform capitalism, where “the suppression of privacy is at the heart of business models”²⁶, probably reaches far beyond of what Flusser could have ever imagined.

Be that as it may, Flusser’s reflections on rather positive existential effects of telepresence might help us during another current crisis that demonstrates a new, largely unexpected effect of today’s global interconnectedness and its fast ways of transportation: the rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2020 resulting in a pandemic in less than three months. The effects of the social distancing and quarantine restrictions which many countries have put into place as a result

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6; Cf. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

²¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Das Postmoderne Wissen* (Vienna: Passagen, 2009), pp. 37–41.

²² Flusser, *Proxemik*, p. 65; quote translated from German by D.I.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Vilém Flusser, Two Approaches to the Phenomenon “Television” [1974], in: *The New Television: A Public/Private Art*, eds. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 1977), pp. 234–47, here p. 235. See also: Vilém Flusser, *Private und öffentliche Räume* (lecture manuscript, 1979); Vilém Flusser Archive, document no. 3198.

²⁵ Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, p. 29; Flusser, *Proxemik*, p. 63; Flusser in “Philosophische Exkursionen”.

²⁶ Srincek, *Platform Capitalism*, p. 101.

emphasize the relevance of telepresence for interpersonal communication. Although we must not forget that the now often cited ‘home office’ solutions only apply for certain parts of a population, the so-called white collar jobs, it is certainly true that video (conference) calls enable people to stay in a somewhat face to face contact, beyond borders of space, time, nation states and, now, the own four walls. While US-American suicide hotlines spiked to over 1.000 calls by the end of March 2020,²⁷ telepresence in the Flusserian sense could play a role in easing the effects of social isolation during crises. This may especially be true for the risk group of elderly adults, which will probably be affected by isolation measures longer than other parts of the population. In fact, a study published in *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* in 2019 has shown that senior citizens using video chat solutions such as Skype to maintain social relationships, thus counteracting social isolation, are less likely to suffer from depression.²⁸ Of course, this immediately raises questions of access to ICT, the ability to use it and to integrate it beneficially into ones lifeworld.²⁹ But those who use technologies of telepresence may, as Flusser believed, “develop friendships, but also enmities, which are existentially valuable. And thanks to telematics one can weave the net much wider than without telematics.”³⁰ Keeping Flusser’s enthusiastic assessment of telepresence in mind – while keeping an open mind for matters of privacy, which are especially at stake when it comes to video chats³¹ – may be a fruitful way to benefit from some optimistic Flusserian thoughts as guidance in this time of distance and uncertainty.

²⁷ Josh Kovensky, COVID-19 Spikes Calls to Suicide Hotlines Nationwide. *Talking Points Memo* (March 25, 2020); access: April 14, 2020.

²⁸ Alan R. Teo, Using Skype to Beat the Blues: Longitudinal Data from a National Representative Sample. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 27/3 (2019), pp. 254–62.

²⁹ Alexander J. A. M. Van Deursen and Ellen J. Helsper, The Third-Level Digital Divide: Who Benefits Most from Being Online? *Communication and Information Technologies Annual. Studies in Media and Communications* 10 (2015), pp. 29–52.

³⁰ Flusser, *Proxemik*, p. 65.

³¹ Micah Lee, Zoom’s encryption is “not suited for secrets” and has surprising links to China, researchers discover. *The Intercept* (April 3, 2020), <https://theintercept.com/2020/04/03/zooms-encryption-is-not-suited-for-secrets-and-has-surprising-links-to-china-researchers-discover/>; access: April 15, 2020.