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Passage between Media

Vilém Flusser, the computer and the written word

This thesis treats the life and work of the philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991). Flusser made a name for himself during the 1980s as one of the German-speaking world's leading interpreters of the technological changes that had taken place in the media during his lifetime. In a series of essays that treated subjects such as the fate of man, culture and society in this age of breakthroughs in computer technology, he became a renowned philosopher of the media. He made countless appearances at conferences, symposiums, workshops and seminars. By the end of his life, he had attracted the attention of both the print and electronic media, which often accorded him the status of prophet and oracle.

One of the most prominent elements in Flusser's philosophy of the media is his claim in many contexts that the culture of the written word has come to an end and that a new age characterised by the dominance of the image has dawned. In Flusser's work there scarcely seems to be any doubt that humanity now finds itself in a situation where what Flusser called technical images – photographs, televised pictures, videos and above all computer generated images – are well on the way to transforming our very existence. To this idea, he links a wide range of different themes that are treated repeatedly in his texts: the end of history, the subject's transition to what he calls a project, humanity's altered relationship to what it experiences as reality. A significant number of his

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elaborations on similar themes are then linked to historical outlines in which Flusser advances several different but related models of media history to ground his conception of the contemporary world and its future.

By studying Flusser's philosophy of the media, we can gain insights into the ideas spawned by this tremendous social, cultural and technological transformation, a transformation that the sociologist Manuel Castells has described as the information-technological paradigm. However, in many ways Flusser's media-philosophical ideas, which come together in his texts from the 80s and which were so characteristic of their time, constitute only a part of his work. If we wish to reach a deeper understanding of these texts, Flusser's earlier writings and his biographical details must be a part of our enquiry. Flusser was born in Prague between the wars to an educated, upper-middle class Jewish family. It was there he first came into contact with intellectual matters. In Prague he was plunged into a turbulent intellectual climate, and his early exposure to the various strands of existential philosophy (the thought of Ortega y Gasset and Martin Buber for example) was particularly significant. As a nineteen-year-old, however, he was forced to flee Nazi-occupied Prague with his future wife, Edith Barth. After a short stay in England, he went to Brazil, where he worked in trade and industry, all the while continuing to cultivate his intellectual interests. In 1960 he published his first philosophical work. He eventually became a well-known philosopher in Brazil, and in the mid-sixties he became a professor of communication theory in Sao Paulo. In 1972, however, he left South America to re-establish himself in Europe, eventually settling in France. Throughout the 1970s, he wrote and lectured, but it was the German publication of his essay on photography entitled *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* that transformed him into one of the leading theoreticians of media and information technology of his day. Vilém Flusser died in a car accident in the Czech Republic in November 1991 only two days after giving his first and only lecture in his hometown of Prague.

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This thesis has two aims, both of which are outlined in the opening chapter, “I. Introduction”. The first of these two aims is the more important and is formulated in relation to the above biography. This is essential because the research on Flusser that has begun to take shape over the last few years still lacks studies that show the significance of the ideas that were in ascendancy at various stages of Flusser’s life and that had such an impact on his thought. The present thesis attempts to fill several important gaps in this area. This enquiry will hopefully shed light on the degree to which Flusser’s philosophy of the media from the 1980s was influenced by currents of ideas that Flusser came into contact with first in Prague as a young man and later in Brazil during the 1960s. The primary focus will be on the influence of existentialist philosophy, cybernetic theory and the debate on the historical significance of the writing for society and culture that erupted during the 1960s.

However, restricting the survey to the contexts in which Flusser happened to be operating risks reducing his texts to mere philosophical repositories that passively record the influence of external factors. To avoid this problem, I have chosen to study in depth two of his most pivotal media-philosophical works, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (1985) and *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (1987). Detailed analyses of these texts will make it possible to demonstrate how different currents of thought entered into a dynamic in Flusser’s work, and how they integrated with and juxtaposed themselves to one another. In this in depth study, the primary focus will be on how Flusser depicted the relationship between man and technology, for this relationship can be described as decisive in terms of showing how the interplay between various currents of thought was set in motion in his texts,

Central to this in depth study is an investigation into Flusser’s distinctive view of the essay as a written form and as an expression of thought, for Flusser permits the various currents of ideas he had absorbed to interact in a constant exchange of positions and perspectives, an interaction based on his own conceptions of what an essay ought to be. Furthermore, his distinctive conception

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of the process and goal of philosophical thought is an important aspect to take into account in any detailed study of his texts.

The other and secondary aim is to present Flusser in Swedish. Hitherto, very little has been written about him in this country, and only one of his longer texts has been published in Swedish (*En filosofi för fotografen*, 1988). In this regard, the situation in Sweden differs from that in Germany, Brazil and the USA. This thesis will hopefully result in a deeper knowledge of Flusser and his work in this country.

In the second chapter of the thesis, “II. Biography”, Flusser’s life and career is presented. This chapter is based to a large extent on archive material – letters, newspaper articles and unpublished manuscripts – held in trust by the Vilém Flusser Archive in Cologne. The account begins with a detailed description of Flusser’s childhood and adolescence in Prague. In this section, I show what a pivotal influence coming of age in Prague between the wars had on Flusser. The Jewish minority’s distinctive experience during this period is discussed in great depth. Above all, the discussion focuses on what Flusser calls “rootlessness”, *Bodenlosigkeit*, the motif that runs through all his work, and on how this motif has its origins in the environment that existed in Prague at the time. Here I also show how a whole range of tensions and impulses from various currents of ideas, such as existential philosophy, logical positivism and formalism, become established in Flusser’s work. Tensions between similar currents recur throughout Flusser’s writings, not least in his philosophy of the media from the 1980s.

This account of Flusser’s biographical details continues with a description of his years in Brazil. In this section, I describe Flusser’s intellectual development and his breakthrough as a writer in Brazil. Here I highlight his fundamentally ambivalent relationship with the academic institutions he came into contact with, while at the same time demonstrating how his interest in technology as an object of philosophical enquiry grew. Attention is also paid to a number of

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intellectual friendships that Flusser forged during this period, friendships that would be decisive for his future development.

The final section of the biographical chapter is devoted to an account of Flusser's work in Europe after 1972, the focus being on his intellectual endeavours and his activities as a philosopher of the media. By the time Flusser had his breakthrough in the 1980s, many of the central pillars of his thought had long been in place. What happened during the 80s was that this thought burst into public consciousness, above all in the German-speaking world, in a way that it never had before. Here I give an account of Flusser's conduct in various institutional contexts, and describe the basic tenants outlined in his core texts and their reception. The account ends with some reflections on Flusser's position at the beginning of the 90s.

Chapter three of the thesis is entitled "III. Thought". This chapter is divided into two sections. To begin with, Flusser's conception of the essay as a specific mode of expression is discussed. This section begins with a detailed account of how Flusser arrived at the essay as an ideal form. His close relationship Alex Bloch, a friendship that bloomed in the 1950s, is chronicled. The letters from Flusser to Bloch that have survived and been published form the basis for the account. Flusser's intellectual connection with Bloch typifies in many ways his later attitude as an essayist, and the letters also throw light on his intellectual interests.

The account continues with an outline of Flusser's essay "Essays" (1967), in which he develops his view of the essay. In this text, my point of departure is Flusser's position vis-à-vis a discussion of the essay that has its origins in Montaigne. His connection to German Romanticism and its conception of textual expression is treated further, as are the various stylistic devices Flusser uses in his aesthetic. The section ends with a discussion around the relationship between Theodor Adorno's view of the essay and that of Flusser. Here we find many points of contact, but also significant differences. Perhaps the most important difference is that Adorno distances himself from the idea of the essay

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as authentic expression and as an unmediated, subjective impression of an individual existence. For Flusser, on the other hand, this idea is central.

The second section of the third chapter is devoted to Flusser's relationship to philosophy and philosophical institutions. Here I give a brief account of the principal tendencies in his reception by existential philosophers such as Heidegger, Husserl, Camus and others. At the same time, Flusser's particularly unusual way, at least for a 20th century philosopher, of moving between different intellectual arenas is emphasized. Briefer references are also made to Flusser's relationship with the Jewish intellectual tradition, as well as his links to Neo-Kantianism. It is also important to highlight the unique aspects of Flusser's thought. Thus, at the end of this section, somewhat more space has been devoted to reflections on this uniqueness, as well as to reflections on the reactions of other commentators to what is distinctive and specific to Flusser's philosophy.

The fourth chapter of this thesis, entitled "TV. Computers", is devoted to a detailed study of Flusser's essay *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*. In terms of its general tone, this text could be described as the most euphoric of Flusser's works on information technology. At the same time, it is typical of his philosophy of the media from the 1980s. In this essay, Flusser largely restricts himself to meditations on a technology that is foreign to him on a personal level, namely digital technology, which was becoming ever more prominent at the time he was writing.

The chapter begins with a detailed account of the content of Flusser's essay. An in depth analysis of the principal themes is presented, all of these themes being linked to the then contemporary situation, when technical images were becoming dominant. The essay also contains an incisive cultural critique, in which the dangers of appeals to the lowest common denominator, superficial mass culture and totalitarianism all figure prominently. At the same time, however, a recurring theme in Flusser's text is the idea that, thanks to technology, there is a way out of this threatening impasse. From a variety of perspectives,

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he develops his ideas about a dialogic sense of community that is flowering in the telematic network that the new technology has created.

In the second section of chapter four, I begin by demonstrating the prominent role played by cybernetic theory formation in the way Flusser constructs his arguments in *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*. In a detailed account devoted primarily to first wave cybernetic theory – which took shape during the 1950s – I point out how much Flusser’s reasoning has in common with that of several theoreticians of cybernetics, above all Norbert Wiener. I also show how Flusser’s text articulates a profound ambivalence towards the cybernetic perspective. Through an in depth comparison between Flusser and Wiener, I clarify how the cybernetic dissolution of boundaries between the human and the technological that their texts anticipate result in a counter-reaction. Thus, the question of the general relationship between man and technology is transformed into a question of the relationship between man and good and bad machines.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the many instances in Flusser’s text where cybernetic theory is abandoned in favour of other theoretical approaches. Particular attention is paid here to how what I see as Flusser’s fundamental orientation towards existential philosophy forces him to go beyond the boundaries of cybernetic theory. A variant of this transgression is found in those places where he allows man’s ultimate potential to negate what is bestowed upon him to get the upper hand. Here themes drawn not least from Heidegger is allowed to gain ascendancy. Another variation of boundary transgression occurs where Flusser tries to integrate the cybernetic perspective with that of Bubers existential philosophy.

The next chapter is entitled “V. Writing” and treats Flusser’s essay *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* In many ways, this text can be regarded as a counter weight to the preceding essay on technical images. The general tone is unrelentingly melancholic. Here Flusser is writing about the technique he knows best: writing. Furthermore, he is writing about a technique that he sees disap-

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pearing around him as humanity moves from a writing-based to an image-based society.

The chapter begins, as the preceding chapter did, with a detailed account of the content of Flusser's essay. Here I describe a number of the text's most important themes in depth. To begin with I highlight the introductory sections in which Flusser presents what could be called a general theory of writing. On the one hand, writing is presented as a technique through which humanity is perceived as striving to overcome the meaninglessness and existential finiteness that ultimately sets the boundaries in every sense. On the other, writing is regarded as a powerful media technique that basically structures the subject, society and culture. In the latter parts of the essay, Flusser moves on to a number of concrete reflections over the future he thinks a society without writing might bring.

In the second part of the chapter, I describe Flusser's relationship to those theories of writing that took shape during the 1960s in the work of theoreticians such as Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Special attention is paid to influences from and references to McLuhan, which occur in *Die Schrift* and in other texts and letters. At the same time, I show how Flusser's views and those of McLuhan diverge in important respects. The ideas on writing that he expresses in the essay are more in line with other theories that were in circulation during the 1960s.

My discussion continues with a closer reading of certain passages in *Die Schrift*, where I show how Flusser develops what might be described as a double perspective with regard to the relationship between man and technology. On the one hand, he perceives writing in accordance with the basic thought patterns of existentialist philosophy, that is to say as something external that the subject uses to express an existence that already existed internally before the act of writing took place. On the other, there are in Flusser's text a number of theoretical influences apparent in his reflections on writing that have their origins in the idea that technology always structures the subject who engages in

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the act of writing, and thus this technology is already internalised in the writing itself.

However, when the perspectives of existential philosophy and writing theory must coexist side by side in *Die Schrift*, what comes through is not only duality. The text also contains a number of passages where a more profound ambivalence vis-à-vis the medium of writing reveals itself. This becomes especially clear when Flusser reflects over his own writing practice. Taking certain aspects of Jacques Derrida's thought as my starting point, I show how Flusser can be described as being caught in a double-bind relationship with writing. The relationship between man and technology simply becomes tense when Flusser approaches the question of his own relationship with technology. In these passages, the ascendancy of the existential philosophical perspective in his reasoning becomes clear. In line with his theory on essay writing, Flusser sees writing as a means of expressing what subjectively exists within himself, his own existence. At the same time, however, he becomes aware that writing as a means of communication is incapable of expressing existence in an undistorted, authentic way. Writing always lives its own life in some sense, beyond the writer's control, and the possibility of failing to communicate is always an inevitable feature of textual expression. Through a close reading of a couple of passages from *Die Schrift*, I demonstrate how Flusser comes to perceive writing and the writer as tragic when he contemplates his own writing practice.

In the final chapter of the thesis, entitled "VI. Conclusion," Flusser's relationship to what is usually called Postmodernism is addressed. In the light of the preceding outline of early influences such as existential philosophy, cybernetic theory and writing theory, it is possible to discuss in more detail Flusser's position in the idea-historical context in which his philosophy of the media from the 1980s took shape. The presentation begins with a general discussion of the concept of Postmodernism, a discussion in which the scope of this concept is significantly restricted in comparison to how it is used in many other discussions. Thereafter, some of the central elements of the theories of Post-

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modernism that were developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard during the 1980s are discussed.

Using Lyotard's and Baudrillard's conceptions of a postmodern condition as my starting point, I comment on Flusser's philosophy of the media. Flusser stands out in many ways as a typical representative of the discussion surrounding science, history and media that raged during the 80s. At the same time, however, it becomes apparent that in several respects he can be described as a highly distinctive thinker, a thinker who combines postmodern ideas with conceptions that are firmly opposed to those expressed by, for example, Lyotard and Baudrillard. This opposition becomes particularly apparent when Flusser's fundamental orientation to existential philosophy is taken into account.

The thesis ends with some remarks concerning Flusser's thought in relation to what Manuel Castells has called "the information-technological paradigm". Here I point out the fact that Flusser's philosophy of the media and his activities during the 1980s can be regarded as portents of the dissolution of interdisciplinary and institutional boundaries that is the hallmark of the information age. In one sense, he allows his thought to be understood as an expression of the tendency to abandon established contexts and frameworks. At the same time, however, it becomes obvious that Flusser and his media-philosophical self were in many ways transformed into media spectacle. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, the fact remains that Flusser's life and work has a relevance that transcends his time. As pivotal testimony from a century that saw the computer born and man declared dead, Flusser's thought is an important and fertile terminus for questions that are still crucial thirteen years after his death. He did not provide any hard and fast solutions, but he did identify in an original way a great number of important problems.