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The Failure of the 1981/82 Robion Encounters: A Turning Point for Vilém Flusser?

At the beginning of 1981¹, Vilém Flusser and his wife Edith² moved from their rented house in Peypin d'Aigues, south of the Luberon in Provence, to a house³ they bought in Robion⁴, 45 kms away, also in the Vaucluse Department⁵. So far, they had owned only their São Paulo house, which they had bought in 1947, and, since they had left Brazil in 1972, they had been leading a somewhat nomadic life. So, finally, in 1981 they were ready to settle and have a home. Shortly after their moving in, on March 18, Vilém Flusser went to meet the Mayor of Robion (a town with about 3200 inhabitants then) in order to introduce himself as a good “Robionnais” and to make him a proposal, which he confirmed in a March 23 letter to the Mayor⁶. Charles Reboul (1919-2001), a farmer in his sixties, had been elected Mayor of Robion in 1977, and would be reelected in 1983 and in 1989; he was a member of the Socialist Party (whose leader, François Mitterrand, would be elected President of the Republic two months later), and, since 1978, was also a deputy to the local Representative for Vaucluse, Dominique Taddei (1938-), a national secretary of the Socialist Party (Reboul would later briefly replace Mr. Taddei at the National Assembly between September 1985 and March 1986). Although he was not a leading political figure, it seems that he was well-connected, and his reelection as Mayor twice would indicate that he was probably appreciated by his local electors.

The Proposal of an Encounter on “Analogies of Languages”

¹ This text was initially written as a contribution to the celebration planned in Robion in May 2020 by the Flusser Club (<http://flusser.club/fr/460-2/>) for the centennial of Flusser’s birth; since this celebration was cancelled because of the coronavirus epidemic, I thought interesting to explore another event cancelled in Robion in 1982. My initial title was: “This is not the first Flusser festival that was cancelled in Robion”. During my research, I realized that this cancellation was not purely anecdotal, but could be seen as a turning point in Flusser’s life, shifting his focus from Brazil and France to Germany.

² I would like to thank for their assistance Virginie Bec, daughter of Louis Bec, and Corinne Russo, present owner and inhabitant of Flusser’s house in Robion.

³ Le Refuge des Violettes, rue de la Caoune, Le Vieux Village, 84440 Robion.

⁴ It is noteworthy that, a few months later, on April 30, in a letter to Milton Vargas, Flusser qualified Robion as “paradise-hell” (“paraiso-inferno”). See the Archives file Cor_4_6-MV-3118_MILTON VARGAS 2 1978-31.05.1982 2 OF 2, page 12 in the Vilém Flusser Archives (<http://www.arquivovilemflusser.com.br/>; restricted access; page numbers refer to this site).

⁵ See Dirk-Michael Hennrich, “Flusser in Robion“, *Flusser Studies*, n°14, November 2012, online: <http://www.flusser-studies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hennrich-robion.pdf>

⁶ See the Archives file Cor_104_FRENCH(GENERAL), p. 86 & 88.

Flusser proposed to the Mayor to organize a major cultural event in Robion. After their meeting, he summarized their discussions in his letter of March 23. He first pointed out that in the Vaucluse, there were already several cultural events in the summer, music and theatre festivals mostly (among which the Avignon Theater Festival and the lyrical music Chorégies d'Orange, but also many others), and that Robion, centrally located, had a unique advantage: the existence of a natural site ideal for theater, with a cliff of the Luberon as stage wall⁷. This site had not been landscaped and was not much used, but it had a great visual and sound potential; it was close to the village, just down the road from Flusser's house, and was indeed later transformed into an open-air theater, where the Robion Festival⁸ now takes place every summer with concert and shows (except in 2020). Flusser then presented himself to the Mayor as a man knowing many artists and communication people, and having organized many such encounters, including one for the forthcoming São Paulo Bienal⁹ which would take place from October 16 until December 20 of the same year, concluding his letter with the sentence: "The opportunities offered by Robion are a challenge for me".

What would the proposed encounter be? A symposium on the (very flusserian) theme "Analogy [or Analogies] of Languages", with photographers, film makers, video artists, visual artists, urban planners, art critics, 'communicologists', mass media people, academics, etc. This would make Robion a laboratory for inter-media communication. Practically, the proposed symposium was intended to last a whole month, in August 1982. Thirty to fifty well-known artists would be invited, with their expenses paid; some of them could be among those already selected for the 1981 São Paulo Bienal. Three hundred people would be selected as special guests; and the symposium would be open to about 700 spectators, hence a total of one thousand people. This would cost much less than the other festivals in the vicinity, and the City of Robion would have practically nothing to pay. The funding would come from regional authorities, the governments of the countries where the participants would come from, supra-national organizations, and the mass media.

As a first step, Flusser proposed a prefiguration of the symposium during ten days in August 1981, since, during the summer, many important cultural personalities from all over the world were vacationing in Vaucluse and could be invited to exchange with the people in Robion on these and other issues.

⁷ Flusser was probably aware that the nearby village of Les Taillades had already converted its quarries into an open-air theater, the Théâtre des Carrières, with a classical music programming; other Luberon villages (Gordes, Lacoste, Gargas, ...) would soon also organize music or theater festivals in similar open-air theaters.

⁸ See <https://festivalderobion.com/>

⁹ As it is spelled in Portuguese.

We do not know precisely what the Mayor's reaction was to this grand scheme of things, but, on June 11, he met again with Flusser¹⁰ and two of his friends, Louis Bec (presented as from the "Ministry of Culture") and Jean Digne (of the "Regional Culture Council"). Louis Bec (1936-2018), a biologist and 'zoosystemician', and the founder and President of the Institut Scientifique de Recherches Paranaturalistes (ISRP), was an old and close friend of Flusser since 1972¹¹; they had been neighbors in the Pays d'Aigues between 1975 and 1978, and Bec now lived in Sorgues, 30 kms from Robion. They were going to write together the book *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* and, during all of Flusser's stay in Provence until his death, they met almost weekly to exchange ideas and talk about their work. Bec was indeed employed as an inspector of cultural creation by the French Ministry of Culture. Flusser had been in contact with Jean Digne (1943-) since he moved to Provence in 1975; Digne was based in Marseilles at the Culture Regional Office where he worked closely with Michel Pezet and Gaston Defferre, two leading members of the Socialist Party, and in 1982 he would be appointed Director of the Institut Français in Naples where he later invited Flusser. Digne does not seem to have been much involved in the project; he was maybe included to give a stronger air of official (and Socialist) respectability to the project. Mr. Reboul must have been busy then, since, as again deputy to Mr. Taddei, he was campaigning for the forthcoming legislative elections (they were reelected), but he found the time to receive Flusser and his two friends a few days before the voting dates (14 & 21 June) and, apparently, gave them the green light for the August 1981 preliminary event. Maybe the election of President Mitterrand, the importance given to culture in his presidential program, and the nomination of Jack Lang as Minister of Culture had some impact on his favorable decision.

Flusser then wrote a draft circular invitation letter for the August 1981 Encounter¹², which Bec modified and corrected, and, once finalized, it was photocopied in 50 copies and sent on June 21, 1981. The letter was signed by Flusser, Bec and the Mayor. The invitation letter stated that there were many intellectuals, artists, writers, scientists either living in Vaucluse or spending the summer there, and that this could allow for many fruitful encounters and exchanges. However, none of these encounters had so far included a thorough and deep reflection on the correspondences, pre-occupations and transformations affecting the various languages in use in the world of knowledge and of expression. This theme happened to be a central one in the São Paulo Bienal where Vilém Flusser had been tasked with overseeing and coordinating these reflections; having invited two

¹⁰ The Mayor also met on June 10 with Flusser and a young artist, Pat Le Villain, whom we have not been able to identify, thus not knowing if it had a relation with the project. The Mayor had also a meeting scheduled with Flusser for June 3, which maybe was postponed.

¹¹ See the article "Hommage à Louis Bec" in this issue.

¹² See the Archives file Cor_104_FRENCH(GENERAL), p. 77, 78 & 80. Two very similar versions of the letter (but including Hervé Fischer as a signatory) can be found in the Archives file "Fragments without Reference" p. 279-280 & p. 293-294. However, we could not find in the Archives a copy of the final letter as it was actually sent.

French artists to that year's Bienal, Hervé Fischer and Louis Bec, Flusser was eager to deal with these issues of languages in order to understand better the way they could affect the mutations in our time. The objective was to set up an experimental laboratory to construct the foundations of such reflection, with the support and the help of the City of Robion. It would take place every other (non-Bienal) year, a bit remotely from the cultural hustle and bustle in the months of July and August.

The letter already proposed a preliminary informal encounter during the first week of August 1981, in order to assess the theoretical and practical viability of such a project. The main themes for discussion were listed:

- Relationship between text and image
- Relationship between image, volume and space
- Relationship between these three codes and the codes of the techno-images
- Role of other codes such as music, theater, body, etc.
- Problems of the natural and cultural environments as a support of these codes
- Interactions between the region, the State and the international community with respect to coding
- Relationship between the cultural model of the West and the one of the Third World.

The authors of the invitation letter said that they could offer to the participants not only an intellectual challenge, but also a wonderful landscape at the foot of the Luberon, but unfortunately no financial stipend (but housing and food were cheap in Robion, they said). They added that a documentation bureau would be set up in Robion, with books, photos, or art pieces provided by the participants. An answer would be appreciated by July 15.

The 1981 Encounter

Unfortunately, we do not have the list of the addressees, and do not know how many letters were actually sent. Searching through the Flusser Archives, in a thorough but probably non-exhaustive manner, we have found very few answers:

- Guy Hörlin du Houx, who had been Flusser's landlord in Peypin d'Aigues, and was active in associations helping refugees, declined because he would not be in France then¹³;

¹³ See the Archives file Cor_105_FRENCH(GENERAL), p. 125.

- René Poelmans, a Belgian living in Aix-en-Provence, who had done some translation work for Flusser, accepted the invitation.

- Hervé Fischer, the “sociological artist” whom Flusser had invited to the Bienal, was invited and expected; he first did not answer, but Flusser wrote him that his presence was compulsory, since his name was on the invitation¹⁴.

- Andreas Müller-Pohle, Flusser’s future publisher, whom he had met in February at the Schloß Mickeln Encounters, was sorry not to come since he had to go to the Arles Encounters between July 26 and August 1st (where he will meet Flusser again) and must urgently go back to Germany afterwards¹⁵.

- Dr. Pierre Haour, a physician from Lyons with a summer house in Beaumes-de-Venise in Vaucluse, regretted belatedly not being able to attend, and asked if there would be a report on the Encounter¹⁶.

It is also likely that, in addition to Louis Bec, Flusser invited his friend, neighbor and chess partner, the philosophy teacher Abbas Zerdoumi. We have not found in the Archives traces of invitations to other French friends of Flusser such as Abraham & Elisabeth Moles, Fred Forest, or Alexandre Bonnier & Jeanne Gatard.

On July 17, Flusser wrote to Poelmans¹⁷, explaining that the Encounter would start on August 2nd, with, every day, an informal session between 4 and 7 pm, a joint dinner, and a more structured discussion after 9 pm, and that he was expecting about 25 people. He suggested that Poelmans could talk about his linguistic or radiophonic experience. In response, Poelmans sent a six-page handwritten document as his contribution¹⁸, where he analyzed the transformations of written and oral languages in the 20th century.

On July 14, Louis Bec left a little note at Flusser’s house in his absence, asking, somewhat worryingly, what the status of the Encounter was.

On August 2nd, in his opening speech (in French) to the Encounter¹⁹, Flusser talked first about the political and social context in the world: Russian expansion, new socialist power in France, shorter workweek, substitution of men by machines, information becoming more important than objects, etc. As a result of these changes, he said, the issue of information coding, and therefore of the analogies of languages, would become central. As an example, the substitution of

¹⁴ See the Archives file Cor_157_FRENCH PUBLISHERS_3 OF 3, p. 25 & 30. See his interview by Rainer Guldin in this issue.

¹⁵ See the Archives file Cor_70_6_MUEPOH_3127_MUELLER_POHLE_1_OF_4, p. 20-26

¹⁶ See the Archives file Cor_105_FRENCH(GENERAL), p. 88-89.

¹⁷ See the Archives file Cor_107_FRENCH(GENERAL), p. 12-14 & 22.

¹⁸ Same file, p. 25-35.

¹⁹ See the Archives file SP BIENAL_CONFERENCE ESSAYS, p. 3.

the written and spoken language by computer language and by technical images would have historical and societal consequences; the linear, historical, conceptual thinking of the languages would be replaced by the mosaic-like, combinatory thinking of computer language and by the *imaginistic*, magical thinking of the technical images. Therefore, the issue of the analogies of languages would no longer be just an intellectual entertainment for scientists, artists, and critics, but would become a concrete every-day problem for everybody. This immediate future was a threat, but also a source of opportunities. Those are ideas that we can easily recognize, since Flusser would later develop them, especially in his book on technical images²⁰.

The Encounter is mentioned both in Flusser-Quellen²¹, and in Flusser's biography²². From what we can ascertain from the Archives documents, it seems that few people came and that it was not a huge success. Among the present (not necessarily all on the same day) were Louis Bec, Hervé Fischer, René Poelmans, François Bazzoli (art historian, then professor at the École des Beaux-arts in Toulon, Vice-President of the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste), Christian Tobias (visual artist, professor at the École des Beaux-arts in Lyons), Jean-Claude Gallotta (choreographer, dancer, director of Groupe Émile Dubois, a dance company in Grenoble), and René Richier (visual artist, professor at the École des Beaux-arts in Marseilles)²³.

Flusser apparently did not mention the Encounter anymore in his later letters to Bec, Fischer or Poelmans, nor to anyone else²⁴, and he apparently did not write a report on the Encounter, as requested by Haour.

Flusser's only publication about the Robion Encounter, as far as we could find in the Archives, was a short article in the Jewish Brazilian review *Shalom* in October 1981²⁵, where he explained that the Robion Encounter had had two objectives, to suggest themes to be discussed during the São Paulo Bienal and to study the possibility of future similar Encounters on even years

²⁰ Flusser wrote two somewhat different versions of this book: in German, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, Göttingen, European Photography, 1985; and in Portuguese, *O Universo das Imagens técnicas. Elogio da superficialidade*, Anna Blume, São Paulo, 2008.

²¹ Klaus Sander, *Flusser-Quellen. Eine kommentierte Bibliografie Vilém Flussers von 1960-2002*, [European Photography, Göttingen, 2002, unpublished], p. 24; accessible here: <http://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/1485097/d85714e287d539db39da46f0e5198b20.pdf>

²² Gustavo Bernardo & Rainer Guldin, *O Homem sem Chão. A Biografia de Vilém Flusser*, Anna Blume, São Paulo, 2017, p. 247. The book also exists in German: *Vilém Flusser (1920-1991): Ein Leben in der Bodenlosigkeit. Biographie*, transcript, Bielefeld, 2017.

²³ I wish to thank François Bazzoli for this information (mail of January 12, 2021).

²⁴ He sent however the draft of his Shalom article to Milton Vargas on September 30, asking him to pass it to the Director of the Bienal (complaining that Zanini doesn't read what Flusser sends to him), and saying that he would translate it in English (we couldn't find an English translation in the Archives). See the Archives file Cor_4_6-MV-3118_MILTON VARGAS 2 1978- 31.05.1982 2 OF 2, p. 40.

²⁵ « Analogias de Linguagem. Uma reflexão sobre o futuro da linguagem falada no mundo dos computadores », *Shalom*, October 1981, p. 10-11. See the Archives file M6_ITA_415_PAU BRASIL_416_RIOART_417_SHALOM_418, file M6-SHALOM-10_207_ANALOGIAS DE LINGUAGEM, p. 100-101. A draft typescript of this article, with only minor variations, can be found in the Archives file SP BIENAL_CONFERENCE ESSAYS, p. 4-5; it is dated "Robion, August 1981".

as a workshop of theoretical support for the Bienals on the following odd year. He then quoted his opening speech at the Robion Encounter, mentioned above, but did not say anything else about the Encounter itself, its attendance, and the other contributions and discussions.

The only other mentions we could find of the Robion Encounter in the Flusser Archives are related to the São Paulo Bienal, and to its possible financing of the 1982 planned Encounter. It seemed that the São Paulo Bienal initially welcomed this development. In a July 16, 1981 letter²⁶ to Walter Zanini, the Director of the Bienal, Flusser, while explaining the Robion Encounter wrote: “If it works out, I hope you can attend it in following years”. On August 3 (the second day of the Encounter), he wrote to Zanini²⁷: “The encounters are developing in a very animated fashion, and I would like to organize a round table in São Paulo on this subject”. While at the Bienal in the autumn, Flusser gave conferences on the same seven topics that he had listed as the Robion issues. On December 18, back in France from his stay in São Paulo, Flusser was interviewed by France Culture and reiterated his project to transform Provence into a global cultural center on even years, alternating with the São Paulo Bienal in odd years, and he wrote Zanini about his radio interview²⁸. But at the same time, Flusser was extremely disappointed with the Bienal management, its lack of funding and its broken promises. He wrote to Louis Bec on October 30: “I ask you to forgive me for having invited you to São Paulo. This Bienal is a shame, the worst and the most insignificant ever. Nobody understood your work. I would like to hide under the ground out of shame²⁹”. Although one of the presidential assistants of the Bienal wrote at the beginning of 1982³⁰ that she found such a perspective fascinating and that establishing a cooperation between São Paulo and Provence for such international cultural events was a wonderful dream, which she hoped would come true, nothing came out of it. Finally, on April 30, 1982, Luis Villares, the President of the Bienal, wrote to Flusser saying that he did not know if it would be possible to organize the Encounter in Robion in the summer of 1982. On June 1st, Flusser answered³¹ very dryly that, having learnt from experience, if there was no financial commitment by the Bienal, it would not work, and he would rather not think about it anymore.

In July and August 1982, Flusser was in Brazil (from June 26 until August 29), not in Robion. There would be no Robion Encounters.

²⁶ See the Archives file SP BIENAL_FOLDER 6 OF 7, p. 39; he annexed the invitation letter to the Encounter

²⁷ Same file, p. 44; he annexed an article, which is probably his draft article for Shalom.

²⁸ Same file, p. 80.

²⁹ See the Archives file Cor_104_FRENCH(GENERAL), p. 92.

³⁰ See the Archives file SP BIENAL_FOLDER 6 OF 7, p. 11. This letter is erroneously dated January 4, 1981, since it mentions the recent death of Luigi Carluccio, of the Venice Biennale, who died December 12, 1981.

³¹ See the Archives file SP BIENAL_FOLDER 7 OF 7, p. 15-17.

A turning point for Flusser?

We suggest here that this Encounter that did not take place was a turning point for Flusser as far as his relationship with Brazil and with France were concerned. First, he was thoroughly disappointed with the lack of engagement of the Bienal, as is obvious from many of his letters, especially the one to Louis Bec on October 30, 1981. Although, since his departure in 1972, he had clearly been more and more distant from Brazil's cultural and intellectual scene, this lack of engagement by the Bienal could be seen as the moment when he realized that the page was completely turned.

Regarding France, one can assume that Flusser, having again a fixed abode, was hoping to recreate a sort of cultural community around Robion similar to the one he had enjoyed in São Paulo, with intellectuals, scholars and students, such as the 'terrace encounters' in his house in the 1960s: "an island of meditation and creativity"³². Although he had already been living in France for six years and spoke and wrote French well (albeit with a few mistakes), he had not yet been able to make much progress in being accepted by the French intellectual community³³; he had published only one "real" book³⁴ in France, but the publishing house had gone bankrupt two years later. He was not publishing many articles in French reviews³⁵ and, despite all his efforts, he was not receiving many invitations to give conferences in prestigious French institutions³⁶. He had some solid intellectual partners, such as the philosopher Alexandre Moles and his wife Elisabeth Rohmer-Moles, the artists Alexandre Bonnier and Jeanne Gatard (until they split with Flusser in 1979), the artist Fred Forest, but after 1981, his closest friend in France was Louis Bec, who lived nearby and whom he met without fail every Saturday to exchange ideas and talk about the work they had done during the week³⁷. While this relationship was extremely important for him, it was the only such one. While he had left Brazil for its lack of cultural challenge, hoping for a better intellectual environment in Europe, Flusser realized then that he would not find it in Robion. One can assume that his project of Encounters in Robion had been an attempt to generate more intellectual stimulation and to organize there a group of thinkers with whom he could exchange, but it failed.

At the same moment, Flusser was turning his attention to Germany: he had met in February 1981 the photographer and publisher Andreas Müller-Pohle in a symposium on photography in

³² Bernardo & Guldin, *O Homem sem chão*, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

³³ See in this issue my essay in French « Rendez-vous manqués. Flusser, la France et la Photographie ».

³⁴ *La Force du Quotidien*, Paris, Mame, 1973. The text of two of his conferences had also been published: *Le Monde Codifié*, Paris, Institut de l'Environnement, 1974 (48 pages), and *Orthonature / Paranature*, Sorgues, Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste, 1978 (6 pages).

³⁵ *Flusser-Quellen*, *op.cit.*, p. 211-216 mentions only 30 articles published in French before his death.

³⁶ The Archives have only 4 files of conferences in French, as opposed to 18 in German.

³⁷ See Chapter 13 of his biography Bernardo & Guldin, *O Homem sem Chão*, *op. cit.*. See also Louis Bec "Jeden Samstag...", *Kunstforum*, n°117, 1991, p. 80-81 (translated in German by Florian Rötzer). See also Louis Bec "Vilém Flusser, 1920/1991", *Flusser Studies*, n°4, May 2007 (in French), online: http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/louis_bec_vilem.pdf

Schloß Mickeln near Düsseldorf (and he tried, unsuccessfully, to have him invited by the Bienal in São Paulo³⁸). Müller-Pohle was extremely interested by Flusser's ideas on photography and encouraged him to write about it. Flusser had been initially a bit ambivalent about writing in German³⁹: although it had been his mother tongue, it was also the language of those who had exterminated his family and his community, "die Mördersprache"; actually, his Brazilian friend Alex Bloch never forgave him for writing in German⁴⁰. His first book in German, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, was published by European Photography, Müller-Pohle's publishing house, in 1983, and became rapidly an important success, reprinted and translated many times⁴¹. Müller-Pohle became then the main promoter of Flusser's writing, not sparing his efforts to publish his new books and to sell foreign rights, and European Photography is still today the most important publisher of Flusser's books. Before 1982, Flusser had published four books in Portuguese and, as mentioned, one in French (plus two conferences). From 1982 until his death in 1991, Flusser published seven original books in German (plus an interview book and two computer disks complementing one of his books), plus one original book in English (also published by European Photography), versus only two original books in Portuguese and none in French. After 1982, the center of gravity of Flusser's intellectual and editorial life was in Germany, and no longer in Brazil, nor in France, where he nevertheless continued to be based (his wife Edith not wishing to live in Germany⁴²).

While one should not give an excessive importance to the failure of the Robion Encounters, it can nevertheless be seen as a symptomatic sign of this turning point in Flusser's life and interests.

³⁸ See the Archives file SP BIENAL_FOLDER 6 OF 7, p. 44 & 47.

³⁹ In his first (still unpublished) book, *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert* (1957), Flusser calls Germany "the Land of horizontal Barbarians"

⁴⁰ See Bernardo & Guldin, *O Homem sem Chão*, *op. cit.*, p. 76 & 106.

⁴¹ See my article in *Flusser Studies* n°30 "Für eine Philosophie of Caixa Preta".

⁴² "Edith says that the German are less pleasant and polite than the French", Letter to Alex Bloch, December 8, 1985, File Cor_77_6_BLOCH_3121_ALEX_BLOCH_4_OF_4, page 86.