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### Retreat from Nihilism

The main body of this short essay reconstructs a certain logic found in some of Flusser's writings on language and on photography. This "logic" pertains to freedom and the apparatus or, more precisely, to freedom within the constraints of the apparatus. I argue that Flusser develops freedom as creative resistance to the apparatus. This freedom is consequently not only narrow and partial by nature but also essentially negative, because it is found, by definition, in the response to the much more powerful order imposed by the apparatus. The question underlying the reconstruction here pertains to the nihilistic strains of thought found in Flusser's early writings, which I strongly believe, based on my intuition as a historian, to be connected to this logic of freedom. But it is not easy or straightforward to account for that relationship.

If nihilism is normally understood, in a very general sense, as the denial of the existence of truth and the rejection of the possibility of knowledge, or as the meaninglessness of life and/or the universe, Flusser cannot easily be viewed as a nihilist thinker, nor can he be understood as having fallen into the self-defeating trap of developing a *concept* of nihilism. What, then, does it mean to discuss Flusser in terms of nihilism? In my eyes, there are at least three ways of addressing Flusser in this respect. The first is to connect the nihilistic strains in his early writings to the interest he had at that time in Buddhism, which, according to some literature on nihilism, includes a nihilistic component. The second has to do with Flusser's mode as an author and as a creative thinker. When we look at his book *Vampyrotenhis Infernalis* (as well as his general affection for comparing diverse kinds of phenomena to kinds of animals), Flusser can be likened to a giant butterfly that moves from one flower to another, sucking the nectar and moving on, paying absolutely no respect to the fields of knowledge from which he draws and creating products that bear no clear mark of their traditions. Nihilism here, then, is a mode of creative action. But in the following I will put both of these kinds of nihilism aside — I do not know enough about Buddhism and I am not interested in the current context of Flusser's mode as a creative author. The third, and in a certain way the most straightforward, pertains to statements that can be understood as nihilistic in their orientation. I suggest that the logic of freedom should be read as related to these nihilistic strains of thought.

I base this suggestion that his logic of freedom is an answer to the question of nihilism on my impression as a reader of Flusser's earliest books, written while he was still in Brazil: *Language and Reality* (1963); *The History of the Devil* (1965 [the German version was finished in 1958]); and *On*

*Doubt* (1966).<sup>1</sup> My sense in reading these books (especially the first two) is that nihilistic strains are interlaced into them in diverse ways. While *The History of the Devil* and *Language and Reality* are stimulating, even a keen and willing reader cannot determine what they are *about*. Are they literature or pure thought? Do they contain a comprehensible idea or argument, or are they geared solely toward the reader's (aesthetic) experience (leaving aside the question of whether the author imagined a reader at all, which is itself unclear)? Do they wish to be taken as profoundly serious ruminations, or as a kind of mock philosophy, or even as just a joke? Their nihilism lies not only in the fact that they are mad, delirious texts that read like cryptic religious texts, written by mystics in a state of ecstasy (or under the influence of the drug of the same name). It also lies in the portrayal of the universe from a truly cosmic height and as devoid of sense, order, or reason: "Nothing has value in the world and nothing can be known, except our Will" (Flusser, *The History of the Devil*, 177). All is vain, illusory, and absurd. By the end of *The History of the Devil*, even the Devil is revealed as a mere illusion.

While the book's opaque literary style itself is an expression of the nihilistic element, *The History of the Devil* is also strewn with lines that suggest a nihilistic orientation. Flusser acknowledges early on that the book's program is "diabolic" in its theme and in the ethical confusion "characteristic of the present moment." (9) He asserts the "relativity of values within the realm of illusions that is the sensible world," a relativity "existentially limited by our human condition." (50) The nihilistic strain is indicated by the fact that virtually every statement made in the book is followed by its negation. It is suggested by the prominence of nothingness and annihilation in the book, illustrated with the quotation used on the back cover of the English edition: "Praise be to you, human Will, you, *creator* of art, you, inventor of the world, you, producer and annihilator of God and the Devil." But it is present not only in the terms used throughout the book but also in the way they are used, emphasizing arbitrariness and fluidity, as if there is no foundation, as if nothing can be fixed or stabilized.

These early books reflect Flusser's biography as a survivor and émigré, but they can also be studied in terms of a certain cultural and intellectual atmosphere. Flusser's early writings are a product of the existentialism of the late 1940s and the 1950s and what came to be known as "the theatre of the absurd" (as Martin Esslin<sup>2</sup> named it) of that same period. In these writings, the human situation, based mainly on ideas of existentialism, and human existence lack meaning and purpose; communication is largely broken and irrational. Both existentialist philosophy and the theater of the absurd contain a nihilist moment. They cannot be understood without the horrors and crisis

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<sup>1</sup> *Language and Reality* (Univocal: Minneapolis, 2018); *The History of the Devil* (Univocal: Minneapolis, 2014); and *On Doubt* (Univocal: Minneapolis, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Pelican, 1980 [1961]).

of the Second World War, which shattered the idea that history always moves toward progress, or even that it follows any kind of rational path.

One could easily show this with regard to Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." The play was written in 1948–1949 and first staged in French in 1953 and in English in 1955. (Several years ago, evidence surfaced that an early draft of the play revolved around two persecuted Jews trying to escape deportation, waiting on the border between France and Spain for a guide who was supposed to smuggle them across the border.) But one could also use the early plays of the English Jewish playwright Harold Pinter, which are even closer, in certain ways, to some of the sensitivities involved in Flusser's context. The similarities seem to involve not only the ideas or expressive qualities found in Flusser's early books but even elements of biography as well. I will illustrate this with one of Pinter's early plays. "The Birthday Party" (1957, first staged in 1959) features Stanley (who, as we can partially deduce, has fled from someone or something to a refuge or hiding place in a shabby bed and breakfast in a coastal city, possibly Brighton); the landowner, Meg, and her husband, Petey (who do not seem to grasp anything of what is taking place in their home); and Goldberg and McCann, a mobster and his muscleman (who, as we can again partially deduce, have tracked Stanley down and come to interrogate him and either punish him or capture and take him away). Actually, the viewer does not know whether Stanley has really committed any crime or even whether Goldberg and McCann know or believe that he has. The status of everything that takes place onstage is unclear. When Goldberg and McCann learn from Meg that it is Stanley's birthday (which may or may not actually be the case), they throw him a birthday party, in which, as part of the celebration, they interrogate, punish, and humiliate him. They inflict very little physical violence on Stanley (only breaking his glasses). But as viewers, we grasp the terror that they inflict on him, even while the reason for everything remains obscure through the end of the play. It is not clear whether Goldberg and McCann know that Stanley has any information they want him to disclose, or whether the interrogation gets them any closer to that goal, or whether the whole thing is just a sham. In addition, the dialogues make no sense at all. In a very subtle and indirect way, the situation portrayed in "The Birthday Party" echoes persecution by the Nazis or Stalin, in which someone can be interrogated, terrorized, and simply removed in a completely arbitrary way. I also want to note, because this will be echoed in my reading of Flusser, Pinter's mentions of art. The play includes hints that Stanley was a pianist (there is mention of a concert that he may have given or may have planned to give). Goldberg and McCann give him a tambourine and, as part of his birthday party, force him to play music. This seems to suggest that they knew he was a pianist. Giving him an instrument that he not only cannot play but also one that is grotesquely inferior to the piano appears to be specifically intended to humiliate him. While "The Birthday Party" and *The*

*History of the Devil* differ in style, they both portray a world that is arbitrary, and at the same time necessary, and devoid of sense or meaning. In “The Birthday Party,” we the viewers must create a picture of this world from fragmentary pieces that we can put together but that add up to very little. And the little to which they do add up is absurdly meaningless and cruel. And if we remain uncertain whether Flusser’s *The History of the Devil* is meant to be taken seriously or as a kind of joke, there is something similar in “The Birthday Party,” which, while portraying torture, is wickedly funny. Here is a short sequence of dialogues from the birthday party that Goldberg and McCann throw for Stanley. I have chosen this sequence because Goldberg refers directly to the logic—the upside-down, absurd logic — of the relationship between possibility and necessity:

“GOLDBERG.

Do you recognise an external force?

MCCANN.

That's the question!

GOLDBERG.

Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?

STANLEY.

It's late.

GOLDBERG.

Late! Late enough! When did you last pray?

MCCANN.

He's sweating!

GOLDBERG.

When did you last pray?

MCCANN.

He's sweating!

GOLDBERG.

Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY.

Neither.

GOLDBERG.

Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY.

Both.

GOLDBERG.

Wrong! It's necessary but not possible.

STANLEY.

Both.

GOLDBERG.

Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?

STANLEY.

Must be.

GOLDBERG.

Wrong! It's only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity.

MCCANN.

Right!

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GOLDBERG.

Right? Of course, right! We're right and you're wrong, Webber, all along the line.

MCCANN.

All along the line!

GOLDBERG.

Where is your lechery leading you?

MCCANN.

You'll pay for this.

GOLDBERG.

You stuff yourself with dry toast.

MCCANN.

You contaminate womankind.

GOLDBERG.

Why don't you pay the rent?

MCCANN.

Mother defiler!

GOLDBERG.

Why do you pick your nose?

MCCANN.

I demand justice!

GOLDBERG.

What's your trade?

MCCANN.

What about Ireland?

GOLDBERG.

What's your trade?

STANLEY.

I play the piano.

GOLDBERG.

How many fingers do you use?

STANLEY.

No hands!

GOLDBERG.

No society would touch you. Not even a building society.

MCCANN.

You're a traitor to the cloth.

GOLDBERG.

What do you use for pyjamas?

STANLEY.

Nothing.

GOLDBERG.

You verminate the sheet of your birth.

MCCANN.

What about the Albigensienist heresy?

GOLDBERG.

Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

MCCANN.

What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

GOLDBERG.

Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY.

He wanted to—he wanted to—he wanted to. ...

MCCANN.

He doesn't know!

GOLDBERG.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY.

He wanted to—he wanted to. ...

GOLDBERG.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY.

He wanted. ...

MCCANN.

He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

GOLDBERG.

Which came first?

MCCANN.

Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

GOLDBERG and MCCANN.

Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

STANLEY screams.

GOLDBERG.

He doesn't know. Do you know your own face?

MCCANN.

Wake him up. Stick a needle in his eye.

GOLDBERG.

You're a plague, Webber. You're an overthrow.

MCCANN.

You're what's left!

GOLDBERG.

But we've got the answer to you. We can sterilise you.”<sup>3</sup>

This dialogue, throwing together serious questions, logic, and lines from riddles and jokes, does not make any sense. Stanley does not know why he is being interrogated or how he is supposed to answer their questions. Most of those questions have nothing to do with anything and, in any case, whatever he answers is wrong. If Flusser, with pathos, contends that “Necessity is the logical condition of freedom” and, hence, “Freedom is the breaking of the unbreakable chains” (*History of the Devil*, 101), Goldberg the “logician” affirms that only the necessary is possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Pinter, “The Birthday Party,” *Plays One: The Birthday Party; The Room; The Dumb Waiter; A Slight Ache; The Hothouse; A Night Out; The Black and White; The Examination* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 44–46.

Flusser reached nihilism through considerations related to the multiplicity of languages and the groundlessness of being revealed in translation. Flusser's use of irony was tied to the destabilizing power of humor, which he understood could be serious and ridiculous at the same time. Heidegger, less famous for his humor, certainly touched on nihilism (from the Latin nihil, or "nothing") when he stated "das Nichts nichtet" ("the nothing itself nothings" would evolve into comedy only in the 1980s, with Seinfeld, as "a show about nothing."). Flusser would probably have endorsed the Israeli–Brazilian philosopher Marcelo Dascal, who, playing on the rhyming sounds of Hebrew and surely intending to embarrass his students as much as conveying Heidegger's idea, translated "the nothing noths" (*ba'ayn me'ayen*) and "the cock fucks" (*ba'zayen me'zayen*).

Kafka embodied the *Zeitgeist*—a word that in the last generation has become taboo among historians—after the Second World War. Both Pinter and Samuel Beckett, like Flusser, were admirers of Kafka. Pinter's mode as a playwright was very different from Flusser's as a creative writer, however. Flusser reached the groundlessness of being via translation among the various languages in which he was proficient. Pinter, on the other hand, had an extraordinarily sensitive ear for human communication. His stage dialogues mirrored elements of human communication just as they appear in reality—broken, unfinished sentences; silences; repetitions; discrepancies between semantic meaning and actual meaning; absurd responses; and the inherent violence built into practically every human exchange. While they are different from each other in virtually any aspect we can think of, it nonetheless appears to me that Flusser's early writings and Pinter's early plays belong to the same variety or, in Wittgenstein's term, bear a "family resemblance." Through the characters (who are by no means heroes) and the plots (of which there is very little, in the customary sense of "plot"), Pinter brings home to us the senselessness, absurdity, and meaninglessness of life. In a more philosophical register, this is also what *Language and Reality* and *The History of the Devil* do. And when they do this, they do not offer any "positive" alternative: no ground, no foundation, no path forward; not even a partial, limited, or constrained one.

## **The Apparatus and the Logic of Freedom**

The nucleus of the "logic of freedom" that I will now reconstruct, which I suggest should be read as a retreat from nihilism, is already found in *The History of the Devil*. Flusser elaborates this logic in the context of his discussion of sexuality in chapter 3, "Lust." The main difference between this discussion and its later elaboration in several other contexts is its general orientation. Here freedom is aligned with "earthly paradise" (65), "paradise on earth" (67) and "free love" (67). However, we also read that "an earthly paradise is hell" (66), "realized freedom is slavery" (67), and "free love"



is a contradiction in terms” (67). The change, therefore, is more a shift in orientation from freedom as a complete impossibility to a narrow, partial, limited, and essentially negative freedom.

Flusser’s apparatus/freedom complex can be seen as both a rejection of and an answer to Kant. If Kant’s Enlightenment deliberations on freedom were future-oriented and contained, in hindsight, a utopian element, Flusser’s are weighted down by the past and dystopian. If in Kant freedom consists in self-legislation, in Flusser this is turned upside-down: law is imposed from without and the apparatus in which humans find themselves is the opposite of self-legislation. The only elements of freedom one can hope to achieve rest on the ability to resist the apparatus.<sup>4</sup> This resistance can be likened to a partisan fighter fighting the enemy’s organized army in areas held by the enemy, a poet whose poetry resists language, or a photographer operating within photography. The most they can hope for is to temporarily disturb and destabilize the much mightier force that they resist.

If Kant posited that he who gives the law to himself is free, in Flusser’s apparatus there is randomness, irrationality, chance, and arbitrariness; and the freedom that one can hope to achieve is related to the apparatus because it can only be achieved by resistance to the apparatus. We should keep this negative-Kantian context in mind as we proceed with our analysis of Flusser’s conceptualization.

Flusser’s logic of freedom also stands in close relationship to the notion of language he developed in his early books and to the apparatuses, models, and designs of his later publications. This complicates any attempt to claim that there are two separate or unrelated Flussers. Freedom can be understood through its opposite; according to Flusser, that opposite is chaos and chance or, more precisely, the circumstances in which the outcome of a decision or choice is unpredictable: “The absence of laws excludes freedom.” (Flusser, *The History of the devil*, 100) “Lack of rules, far from representing freedom, represents the chaos of chance, in which all free choice is forbidden by the impossibility of predicting the consequences of choice. Therefore, the productive activity of

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<sup>4</sup> On Flusser’s notions of “anti-apparatus” and “apparatus,” see Melody Jue, “Anti-Apparatus,” and Aaron Jaffe, “Apparatus,” both in Aaron Jaffe, Michael F. Miller, and Rodrigo Martini (eds.), *Understanding Flusser, Understanding Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 269–72 and 272–73 respectively. See also Andreas Stroehl, “Introduction,” in Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl and tr. Erik Eisel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xii. For an elucidation of the term “apparatus” in Flusser and in several contemporary philosophers including Foucault, Althusser, and Agamben, see Martha Schwendener, “The Photographic Universe: Vilém Flusser’s Theories of Photography, Media, and Digital Culture” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2016), 114. Agamben traces Foucault’s *dispositif* (in English “apparatus”) to Jean Hyppolite’s interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of Christianity, in the context of history, and to Heidegger’s *Gestell*, in the context of technology. According to Agamben, an apparatus is “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings.” (14) As a result, according to Agamben, the subject is between “the apparatus” and “human beings” (13) and, consequently, an apparatus always implies a process of subjectification (13). As individuals differ from one another, in our context of photography and subjectivity the notion of apparatus only sharpens subjectivity as a question. See Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1–24.

poetry, by imposing new rules and new concepts on language, is an activity that creates freedom.” (Flusser, *Language and Reality*, 119–20)

Rules, laws, and necessity are preconditions for freedom: “Necessity is the logical condition for freedom. . . . Freedom is the breaking of the unbreakable chains. Therein lies its absurdity.” (Flusser, *The History of the Devil*, 101) Without rules there can be no freedom, whether in the case of a language, such as English, or of an apparatus, such as photography. In a situation governed or regulated by systems, laws, and rules, freedom is closely related to the ability to choose. Freedom is the ability to have a degree of control over the outcome of the choice: “freedom is the act of choice. Choice presupposes aims and methods. Aims are objects, and methods are the laws that govern objects” (100). In a situation in which I have freedom, if I choose option *a*, the outcome will be *x*, and if I choose option *b*, the outcome will be *y*; thus, freedom is the ability to have control in advance over the outcome of the choice. We can thus see how both languages (regulated by the grammar and other rules of the respective language) and technical apparatuses such as cameras and computers (regulated by their respective algorithmic programs) are at the heart of Flusser’s logic of freedom.

Flusser conceptualizes freedom as interactive, in that it pertains to interactions between apparatus and operator. Calling it a “complex” signifies “that there is no substantial reason for differentiating between the apparatus and the operator of the apparatus. . . . The apparatus functions only in terms of the function of the operator, just as the operator functions only in terms of the function of the apparatus. Both exist only through their relationship to each other. Each makes the other’s existence possible, and each defines the other.” (Flusser, *Vilém Flusser Writings*, xii.)

English enables the speaker of English to express herself in English; photography enables her to photograph with a camera. English and photography contribute to the constitution of reality. Reality is constituted in the interaction between operator (the user or speaker of English, the user of photography or the photographer) and apparatus (the English language, photography). Within their *order*, a degree of freedom is tenable.

At this point, Flusser introduces a characteristic inversion. He states that after they come into being, “laws,” “rules,” or “apparatuses” become naturalized, part of reality, given, and so self-evident that they become invisible: “The near perfection of English syntax tends to make it invisible, just as the perfect apparatus becomes invisible, which creates the illusion of freedom. In other words: apparently everything is allowed in English, precisely because in reality everything is

almost perfectly organized. To subvert the English language means, therefore, to reveal its hidden rules.”<sup>5</sup>

Language, apparatuses, codes, and rules become second nature, and their artificiality recedes into the invisible: “After learning a code, we have a tendency to forget its artificiality. If one has learned the code of gestures, then one no longer recognizes that head nodding signifies “yes” only to those who make use of this code. Codes (and the symbols that make them) become second nature, and the codified world in which we live—the world of significant phenomena, such as head nodding, traffic signs, and furniture—makes us forget the world of “first nature” (the signified world). In the last analysis, the purpose of the codified world is to make us forget that it is an artificial texture that imbues our essentially meaningless context in which we are completely alone and incommunicado, that is, the world in which we are condemned to solitary confinement and death: the world of “nature.”<sup>6</sup>

But freedom is tied not only to the invisibility of the apparatus but also to the capacity to lie. Flusser explicates this in *Gestures*: “For when I observe someone else’s arm movement, I cannot be sure of deciphering his innerness, his freedom, directly. Freedom, rather, possesses the strange capacity to hide itself in the gesture that expresses it. Freedom has the capacity to lie. Because this capacity to lie appears to stand at the center of the phenomenon of gesture, it—and in connection with it the method of discovering the lie—must also be the center of a general theory of gestures.” (164)

In Flusser’s writing, two things, closely related but in a certain way opposing each other, result from this conceptualization of freedom. First, and Flusser develops this idea in numerous contexts, pursuing freedom creates manipulations within or of a system in a way that plays the system against itself, destabilizing and subverting it. This is the standard for original resistance to language or photography, because an original poem or photograph is one that is not contained by and not allowed in its program. Such a poem or photograph can only be achieved on the basis of meticulous knowledge of its respective system (whether language or photography) and is the only way in which the linguistic or photographic world can be expanded.

Second, when the structure of choice and outcome breaks down, we find ourselves in the sphere of the irrational, the chaotic, and the absurd, from which Flusser’s ideas about groundlessness ensue. Flusser articulates this point in the context of his biographical discussion of the situation in Czechoslovakia following the Nazi invasion: “Reasonable considerations are worthless in absurd situations.” (Flusser, *Groundlessness*, 38) We can here see how strong the

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<sup>5</sup> Flusser, *Groundless* (Metaflux: Milton Keynes, 2017), 103.

<sup>6</sup> Flusser, *Vilém Flusser Writings* (University of Minnesota Press: London, 2002), 3–4.

positive correlation is between order and freedom, on the one hand, and chaos and subjection, on the other. The dissolution of order, the loss of freedom, groundlessness, and the disintegration of reality all belong together.<sup>7</sup>

Here we encounter another of Flusser's inversions, this time with regard to the play of this "logic" in the process of historical time. On expulsion, he writes: "Such a discovery represents a dialectical transformation in the relationship between the expelled and the expeller. Before that discovery, the expeller is the active pole; the expelled, the passive. Afterward the expeller becomes the victim and the expelled, the perpetrator. It is the discovery that history is made not by the expellers but by the expelled. The Jews are not a part of Nazi history. To the contrary, the Nazis are part of Jewish history. Our grandparents are not a part of our life story, but our grandchildren are. We are not a part of the history of automatic apparatuses; they are part of our history. The more radically driven into exile by the Nazis, our grandchildren, or apparatuses, the more history we make, the more we transcend."<sup>8</sup>

The logic of freedom is clearly related to reason, rationality, and history, and the events of the late 1930s reveal the fragility of reason.<sup>9</sup> But, as part of a more general pattern of thought, the deliberations of freedom take place not in the political sphere or in the sphere of knowledge, but in the sphere of aesthetics. Flusser elaborates on what could be termed a "negative" or "responsive," as well as "aesthetic," notion of freedom. We note the absence in Flusser of key features of Kant's characterization of art and aesthetics: objects of art as "purposive without purpose"; the association of art with harmony or beauty; and the issue of the perception of works of art (Flusser seems to show no interest in the perception of art—only the producing artist). But art is nonetheless at the core of Flusser's move. Recall, in this context, the lines quoted on the cover of *The History of the Devil*, "Praise be to you, human Will, you, creator of *art*, you, inventor of the world, you, producer and annihilator of God and the Devil" (emphasis added). While mainly negative, meaning not "knowledge" nor "morality," "aesthetics" is nonetheless the core of Flusser's orientation.

Freedom is negative, or responsive, because it is created in response to a given or existing apparatus or coercive order. It is aesthetic because, ultimately, it is modeled on the individual-cum-artist. It is also aesthetic because, for Flusser, the sphere in which that relative freedom can be achieved is, ultimately, art.

The most famous context in which Flusser develops his ideas about freedom and the apparatus is that of photography. The idea is this: freedom, in the context of the apparatus, can

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<sup>7</sup> "Then the Germans came, which was unbelievable, but anticipated. . . . One had imagined that their presence would represent, in itself, the end of reality" (Flusser, *Groundless*, 36; emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana: 2003), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Groundless*, 131.

only be achieved by way of resistance to the apparatus. The photographer plays the photographic apparatus against itself and extracts out of it something new or original, a combination that was not originally included in the program. One cannot opt out of the apparatus, but one can fight it, and achieve a degree of transcendence, by playing it against itself; one can “fight against the apparatus in its subhuman stupidity. However, since apparatuses are unavoidable, we can only overcome them . . . to change the game, thereby destabilizing the apparatus.”<sup>10</sup> The law, or the apparatus, is stupid, but unavoidable. The best that one can hope to achieve is a kind of momentary subversion and destabilization.

Acts of resistance by the poet within language or by the photographer within photography can potentially solidify, realizing a new possibility. And in that process, freedom can be realized within a certain space, such as the universe of language or the universe of photography, thereby expanding those spaces. In this sense, Flusser’s resistance apparatus is not only negative. Flusser is most famous for developing this logic with regard to photography. But it is also present in his writings on the media of expression. In what may be his most impressive book, *Gestures*,<sup>11</sup> Flusser develops the idea of freedom as inherently related to the medium of expression. The human body is one such medium of expression. For this reason, human freedom is inherently connected to the human body, to voluntary gestures, such as those that humans express with their hands, in the same way that the freedom of other creatures (such as the ones that Flusser explores in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*) is equally connected to their own bodies as their own medium of expression: “To this extent, the concept of “gesture” may be defined as a movement that expresses a freedom. The gesture, as the movement it is, is in fact determined, as are all other movements, and in this sense completely explainable. But what makes it unique is that, untouched by any of this, it expresses a subjectivity that we are forced to call “freedom.” Accordingly, the competence of a general theory of gestures would be the study and ordering of acts of expressions of freedom.” (Flusser, *Gestures*, 163)

Whether with regards to gestures, photography, or language, Flusser’s thought about freedom is essentially negative and responsive. This is true even of the revolution, the destabilizing of the existing order, a response to and change of the existing order, which is ultimately what freedom is about: “The suggestion of a general theory of gestures came from such feelings: of gestures, because they concern the concrete phenomenon of our active being-in-the-world, and of revolution, because a revolution is always, in the end, about freedom.” (176)

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<sup>10</sup> Rainer Guldin and Gustavo Bernardo, Vilém Flusser (1920–1991): Ein Leben in Der Bodenlosigkeit (Transcript: Bielefeld, 2017), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Gestures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

The careful reader will have noticed that there is one major issue that is very tightly involved in the above but that I have not touched on directly here. That issue is the relationship of Flusser's thought (his early nihilism and his later logic of resistance to the apparatus) to political history and thought. Because this essay was written during the war between Israel and "The Axis of Resistance" that started following the October 7th attack, it is difficult not to connect Flusser's notion of resistance with that of *muqawama*, or "the doctrine of resistance," in the Middle East. I cannot claim to speak with any authority about Muslim, Arab, or Iranian political thought, and I do not want to suggest that I know what (if anything) can be concluded about Flusser's thought from this analogy. I would, however, like to note the curious fact that in the Arab world, too, the doctrine of resistance only emerged after the failure of and disappointment with *existentialist* notions of liberation.<sup>12</sup> Here too, resistance was conceived as the only viable route left to the essentially powerless facing Western technological superiority. A further similarity is that this current resistance, too, contains the negative and responsive aspect, being necessarily shaped by the overwhelming thing that it is resisting. But there, it appears, the similarities end.

In the second and main part of this essay, I attempted to elaborate Flusser's logic of freedom. I suggested that he conceptualizes freedom as partial and narrow, responsive, and negative. Freedom is only possible within, with regard to, and in opposition to the "apparatus" or a coercive order. Where there is chaos (of the kind found in *The History of the Devil*), there can be no order. Where there is no order, there can be no freedom. In the first part of this essay, I suggested that Flusser's logic appears as both an answer to and a retreat from the nihilistic strains found in his earliest books and especially *The History of the Devil*. Flusser's early books arise not only from his own biographical background but, more generally, from a cultural and intellectual atmosphere that grew out of the horrors of the Second World War. The universe is purposeless; life is meaningless; and everything is devoid of reason, order, or sense. I showed that elements of his later logic can already be found in Flusser's earliest writings. Therefore, that logic cannot be seen as completely separate from his earlier writings, with its nihilistic strains of thought. Thus understood, the "logic of freedom" forms a retreat from nihilism. Narrow, partial, responsive, and essentially negative as it is, it nonetheless marks a sort of progression, or a kind of path forward.

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<sup>12</sup> Yoav Di Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).