

Amos Morris-Reich, "Nazi Fantasy" Vilém Flusser and History as Site of Experiment, New York and London: Routledge, 2025. ISBN 978-1-032-89332-7. 138 pages, hardback, 175 €.

"Whether I am a Zionist I don't know, I am sitting here among my people."

David Flusser to Vilém Flusser in a letter from May 12, 1958

Amos Morris-Reich, a history professor at Tel Aviv University, has published a groundbreaking and fascinating book that deals with aspects of Vilém Flusser's thinking and writing, which have not been explored to this extent and connected to each other in this way before: Flusser's relationship with Judaism, Zionism and the state of Israel, as well as his view of Nazism and its use of biological theories for political purposes. Morris-Reich's book comes at a very particular historical and cultural juncture that has emerged after the massacres perpetrated by Hamas terrorists on October 7, 2023. In the last few years, this has led to a highly problematic global return of virulent forms of antisemitism and to seemingly irreconcilable confrontational stances on the issues of Zionism and the legitimacy of the state of Israel. By discussing Flusser's own ambivalences with regard to these issues, the book provides a complex basis for a more differentiated approach based on a renewed dialogue.

The book, which is profoundly Flusserian in its premises and in its argumentative execution, is a boundary-pushing "intellectual experiment" (9), as the author calls it. It is an attempt to "contend with Nazism by trying to grasp it on its own terms", that is, as a destructive ideology "rooted in a scientific, biological outlook." Flusser's "disturbing suggestion is that it was Nazism's breaking of taboos that paved the way for the new technological genetic era in which we live." (1) Biology was, thus, at the very basis of the Jewish catastrophe of the Holocaust. This idea complements and expands Flusser's notion that Auschwitz was an implementation of the apparatus. "Flusser opens a crack in history through which biology can be questioned as an intellectual, ontological, metaphysical, and political subject following Nazism. The goal of this book is to widen the crack." Another of the aims of the book is to introduce Flusser's personal experience and interpretation of Judaism within the Jewish history of the 20th century where he is still practically unknown. The book makes "a twofold move: illuminating Flusser by integrating him into Jewish history and, at the same time, illuminating Jewish history by integrating Flusser into it."

(2)

The book consists of three interlinked parts. The first part, “Reality as a Possibility”, lays the conceptual groundwork for the following analysis. Flusser’s “central notions” (15) developed over the years – language, model, code, program, apparatus and design – all emphasize the coexistence of necessity and chance. They are the expression of a reality that was not necessary but could have always been different. In his later work, Flusser called this virtuality, “the potentialities built into something ... before the actual course.” (8) In a way, the notion of virtuality goes against the forces of oblivion and destruction: the inevitable personal death and the entropic tendency of the universe. Flusser opens a crack of possible futures between what is and what might have been. Freedom is an “as operation within constraints.” (16) Morris-Reich points out that even though in Flusser’s view design, also means fate, “design itself is not a matter of necessity” as another “design could have been realized rather than the one actually was.” Right under the very “surface of necessity, the accidental, chance, the unnecessary” (17) abide.

This conflation of terms, which is necessary for the following two chapters and for the intellectual experiment to continue, contradicts some aspects of Flusser’s philosophy, for instance the fact that he repeatedly stressed the inner dialectical logic of the evolution of codes that moves unwaveringly from image to text and from text to technical image, from an original concreteness through different modes of abstraction to a concreteness of the second degree. Every attempt to break free from the models through which one sees the world leads to a new form of subjection. So, there always is a certain inescapability that goes hand in hand with the notion of potential freedom. Add to this that language is not an apparatus, and poems are not photographs. The book, thus, requires a sort of theoretical suspension of disbelief which is, however, rewarded in the following chapters when the intellectual experiment fully develops its potentialities of interpretation.

The second part, “The Human-Animal Interface as a Horizon of Interpretation”, focuses on the connection between German Nazism and biological reductionism. In this context, Flusser’s *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* that the author compares to similar works by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem (1921-2006) plays a major role. In Flusser’s view, Nazism cannot simply be interpreted as an irrational collective psychosis but has to be seen as a rational view of the world based on a scientific biological outlook, which Flusser categorizes as a right-wing science. As early as *Language and reality* Flusser identified a deep-seated biological tendency in the German language (34) and in *The History of the Devil*, he defines every form of progress, even those achieved in medicine as inspired by the devil. “Destruction is inherently built into evolution. Another recurring theme in Flusser’s writings pertains to the absurd logic of Darwinian evolution.” (37) His interest in biology is “entwined with the ontology and logic of shapes and forms ... elaborated in the first chapter” (38) of the book. In this wider context, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* can be understood as a “Nazi fantasy” – as Milton Vargas

called in a letter to Flusser –, which is related to other “Nazi fantasies with biological aspects of a possible superhuman” (39), that is, the Aryan *Herrenrasse*. At the same time, the abyssal squid is also a famous antisemitic symbol for global conspiracy. In both cases it is a biologization of power and order. In a certain sense, the devilish cruel and cannibalistic Vampyreuteuthis is the other side of the well-functioning scientifically organized destruction factories of the concentration camps.

The third part, “The Rationality of Biology and the Stupidity of Nazism”, explores Flusser’s paradoxical contention that German Nazism was both an expression of scientific rationality based on a biological outlook and of human stupidity. In Flusser’s view, Nazism is “no less scientific than Marxism” it is the “result of ... two processes: it comprises an immanent, materialist, and specifically biologic outlook on the world, and it is undergirded by a manipulative understanding of science – science that intervenes in the world, molding it to approach a specific biological model.” (95) The same way that Marxism can be interpreted as a trivialized form of economic theory, Nazism can be considered a vulgarized and deformed version of biology. Both are committed to the modification of the world. One could describe this as one side of the profound stupidity of Nazism or as a criticism of any kind of rationality that gets out of hand, and in this sense also as a criticism of the rationality of modern science as such. But Nazism is more than that, it is bestial, or as Flusser puts it, “too stupid to be discussed seriously” as a theoretical statement with a praxis that is “too disgusting to be analyzed dispassionately” (98). In further pursuing the question why Flusser called Nazism stupid Morris-Reich includes in his analysis Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Theodor W. Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and Martin Heidegger’s criticism of technology. This particularly dense and engaging section on the notion of evil, the relationship of natural evil and moral evil, the apparatus and the importance of an aesthetic point of view is one of the best parts of the book.

In the conclusion, the author explores three interconnected threads repeatedly crisscrossing each other in the three chapters of the book: the notion of the parasite, the role of memory in Jewish history and what Morris-Reich calls the political crisis of the Anti-Zionist Jewish intellectual. I will discuss this specific part, which leads us back to the beginning of this review, in more detail. Flusser’s personal experience as a survivor of the Holocaust, an exile and a philosopher of media theory is profoundly interwoven with his views of Judaism, Zionism and the state of Israel. Flusser “rejected Zionism ... because he saw it as standing in contradiction to the ideal of Judaism to which he felt committed. His double rejection of Zionism (both as nationalism and as specifically Jewish nationalism) and thereby also of Israel had the effect of making his criticism of Zionism and Israel more violent than his criticism of Czech, Brazilian, German, or Arab nationalism ... The rejection of Zionism and/or Israel based on a specific notion of Judaism, Jewish history, or religious Jewish

ethics situates Flusser in a specifically intellectual Jewish context that reaches from Herman Cohen to Shlomo Sand.” (121-122)

Flusser grew up in the Czechoslovakia of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk that pursued an inclusive non-chauvinistic form of nationalism, which led to a renaissance of Jewish culture and Hebrew language and the creation of Zionist socialist settlements in Palestine. “Czechoslovak Jews were ... quite naturally Zionists, in a very vague and general way ...” Flusser’s own anti-nationalism and anti-Zionism were, thus, not inspired by the cultural and political situation, in which he was born. They “go back to his father’s generation and forward to the post-Holocaust world.” Flusser’s situation was characterized by a contradiction he was incapable of addressing: “he was both a victim of one nationalism (German) and saved by a different one (Brazilian). ... his ideas strangely echo the anti-Zionism of the earliest Zionist movement ... It is based on this echo that I speculate that Flusser’s anti-Zionism is drawn from his father.” (123) His rejection of Zionism was first and foremost based on his general rejection of nationalism, not on any specific Jewish problem and it was “not related to the conflict with or occupation of the Palestinians”. (124)

His first visit to Israel in 1980 changed the equation by confronting his ideologically and philosophically motivated opposition to Israel with his actual experience. “Flusser was electrified ... by encountering people of a similar background to his on kibbutzim ... where people worked hard, lived an intense intellectual life, and were content with their existence. In the encounters with them there was no hint of the ideology that Flusser opposed, as if the Zionism that he opposed and the Israeli realities that he met with somehow belonged to two unrelated levels of reality ...” (123-124) In Israel, Flusser met with the socialist if not Marxist Zionism he had encountered in his youth in Prague: “humanist, curious, tolerant and open.” The life of Vilém Flusser who spent his life outside Israel and other major Jewish intellectual centers, throw a light on “Jewish history from the margins, adding and additional configuration to the rich theoretical and practical picture of Jewish intellectual opposition to Zionism and Israel in the second half of the twentieth century.” (124)

This inspiring and thought-provoking book is a must not only for readers of Vilém Flusser’s work, but also for all those who are interested in the Jewish history of the 20th century, the relationship between Nazi ideology and biology, and the link between Judaism, Zionism and the state of Israel.

Rainer Guldin, Lugano, May 2025