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**Flusser, media theory and I.
From the genealogy of thought**

1

I would like to treat this essay as a particular type of case study of a coincidence as well as a kind of *auto-da-fé*, keeping in mind the Portuguese (sic!) origin of the term. It is a “coincidence” understood as a random occurrence of events remarkable either for being simultaneous or for being connected in at least two ways, although probably more meanings of randomness could be found. Just like a sense is multiplied by individual production of meaning, for example, among image users, an operational usage of images transforms, as Vilém Flusser says, “people into designers of meaning in a participatory process” (Flusser 2002a: 74) in the area of new media. Designing is an activity, or perhaps “a gesture” in Flusser’s understanding of the notion, that is a special kind of “orienting ourselves in the circumstances in which we find ourselves with respect to things and people” (Flusser 2014a: 161). As a result of this orienting we design meanings. However, today this is achieved through media devices which are – literally understood – mediation sets. Designing understood as mediating and navigating in the field of surface meanings – this is a post-historical, non-linear post-word game because numbers and digits are more perfect than alphabetical constructions. In post-word times, but still working by means of words, we (I) struggle with the paradox of the inadequacy of discursive views of reality recorded and logically expressed in algorithmic – that is digital in nature – structures. The question “whether writing has a future?” (Flusser 2011a) can be reduced to the simplest, most banal but fundamental issues: “Why and for what reason do we write? The first answer is as follows: we write in order to process the information collected in memory in accordance with the rules of writing, and then to introduce information processed in such a way into a common dialogue. We extract something from our memory into the public sphere” (Flusser 1993: 102).

Really? What is this public sphere today when a common dialogue is drowned in an unbearable monologue in which no one listens and everyone wants to be listened to? So what is the reason for writing? “Publish or perish” is of course the academic “to be or not to be”. But do these hundreds, thousands, millions of texts actually have any meaning besides staving off perishing? This, of course, is also a question of memory which was once analogue, of this old way

of inscribing into one's own mental database important writings which can be packed in a suitcase or in a cache, a mobile library. Clearly – I add it just as a side note – this involves a huge risk which was described in a dramatic tone by Flusser when it turned out that the bag with his writings (some published but mostly unpublished) was stolen from his car parked near a hotel in Paris probably in 1990. “It was found again in a nearby street with the contents intact. The thief found no value in them. A discarded literary judgement” (Flusser 1998) - Flusser commented wryly.

This bag undoubtedly constituted a part of his memory. It contained texts categorized in a specific way, put into different file folders – about thirty unpublished essays in Portuguese, English and German on art and phenomenology. Another folder contained “texts published” in European periodicals after returning from Brazilian exile, yet another (entitled “New York”) included a manuscript of a speech on the future of television – it is probably the essay *Two Approaches to the Phenomenon “Television”* (Flusser 2019). And a lot of other texts, documents, manuscripts and notes. The bag – a habitat of memory – was found, and Flusser made it a metaphorical container for his “cache” memory. One can only ask what would have happened if the thief had not abandoned it? Would Flusser have lost, or would we – prospective readers of these texts – have lost them altogether? Would it have been a loss comparable to the one which could have happened if Max Brod had fulfilled Franz Kafka's testament and neither Flusser nor we would have read *Trial*, *Castle* or *Amerika*?

By the way, it all happened in the “pre-computer” era. Today, despite the possibilities of collecting data in cloud computing there are still smaller or larger tragedies related to “data loss”, which is probably connected with human privilege of remembering, but also of reminiscing. According to Flusser, it is a quality, which distinguishes us from other beings, something that constitutes our “human dignity”. It is now strengthened by systems of “electronic storage” but also of “electronic memories” which are “simulations of some of our brain functions” (Flusser 1999: 204). Electronic, or rather digital (Flusser is in fact a “pre-digital” thinker in the sense of chronology, in spirit, of course, he is a philosopher of the digital turn) memory machines caused deep transformations of information storage processes but also of our memory assisted by digital memory prostheses. Anticipating consequences of digital storage of information, the philosopher drew attention to the fact that, in accordance with the second principle of thermodynamics, all information in a closed system, such as a human society, must be destroyed in the course of time, but in fact the sum of all available cultural information is constantly growing. It is cultural memory that makes us anti-natural beings. “Within our own culture this reification of the capacity of memorizing has resulted in such concepts as the “soul”, the “mind” or the “self”, and by extension also the concept of “immortality” (Flusser 1988: 1).

2

Perhaps, as in the case of William Gibson – the creator of the cyberspace concept who did not use the web although he could – Flusser might have had a problem with electronic literacy. *The Bag* is a symbolic and practical interpretation of the fundamental *omnia mea mecum porto* principle. Flusser could have thought and documented his writings in pre-internet epoch in this way. His bag contained a compact version of everything that travelled with him in his nomadic wanderings around the world. When he returned from the exile lasting more than thirty years, he began to conquer the new (old) world with his innovative concepts, which, in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, could seem to be like futuristic philosophical speculations.

“Travelling Library” (“Reisebibliothek”) by Vilém Flusser is an interesting source of knowledge about his philosophical inspirations and intellectual borrowings. Even such an original thinker as Flusser was not, after all, an innate and fully independent philosopher, although he was reluctant to admit to his reading inspirations, consistently avoiding footnotes, citations or bibliographic references. This may be the task for a critical reader – to examine how “visionary” (hypo)theses or forerunners of thinking about media breakthroughs may be discovered in the realm of philosophical hunches emerging here and there (at that time). So, what was in the cache library hiding non-existent footnotes in Flusser’s texts? “If we take a closer look at the list of books in this private library, we recognize that the selection is widely ranged: one can find not only basic philosophical masterpieces (e.g. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, or Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*), or secondary literature on philosophy, but also important pieces of classical literature (e.g. *Doktor Faustus* by Thomas Mann, or the poetry collection, *Blanco* by Octavio Paz) and even informative literature such as Sokolski’s textbook about playing chess, *Lehrbuch der Schacheröffnungen* (1965). Therefore, this personal collection, which can be found in the Berlin archive only, is an important source of Flusser’s personal interests in different field” (Jóri, Schindler 2017: 4).

So – here I go back to the thread after a brief departure – I treat this case study of a coincidence in a way it can be understood in the area of, *inter alia*, the humanities. It is the use of a method of studying a specific, individual phenomenon, work, artist or artefact that can be, but does not need to be treated as a *pars pro toto* of a broader, comprehensive and universal phenomenon, if “universal” can still be used today. The explanatory value of the case study does not necessarily emerge from the possibilities of generalization on the basis of a specific, deep description of the case being analyzed. In Polish, my first language, the word “case” means “przypadek” which also has an alternative meaning. It is destiny, fate, *ananke*, inevitable necessity, a twist of fate, predestination, serendipity.

I can successfully refer both of these ranges of randomness to my encounter with the Czech philosopher, which was, to a large extent (although the size is another matter in this case), the result of a twist of fate or a coincidence. A coincidence is an important part of our existence, it is also often the beginning, the original accident – as Paul Virilio would say (although in the Polish translation of his book *L'accident orginél* (2005) the word meaning “first-born” was used (Virilio 2007)) – with far reaching consequences. Virilio, who is often quoted in the discussions on the philosophy of new media together with Flusser or Jean Baudrillard, uses the ambiguity of the term *accident*: in both French and English it can mean either “a coincidence” and “a catastrophe”. He is thinking in terms of a coincidence, and this imposes, or rather forecloses a specific strategy. He accepts lack of regularity and the need to describe reality in terms of paradox in the awareness that the negative (“accidental”) part of social development is just something inherently present in the dromosphere. “According to Albert Einstein, events do not happen, they are there and we merely encounter them in passing” (Virilio 2008: 70).

In the course of our life we encounter not only coincidences, but we accidentally cross paths with people, books or events that may significantly affect the personal, intellectual, research or scientific dimensions of our lives. For the purpose of this text I call these random and far-reaching coincidences primordial accidentalism, that is adventitious occurrence of certain phenomena which happen although they are not necessary. The only certainty emerging out of such coincidence is such contingency. This, as you know, even “a throw of the dice will never abolish **chance**,” as Stéphane Mallarmé claims in his brilliant poem (Mallarmé 1956).

3

So, where do our intellectual fascinations stem from? Why are we drawn to certain books or characters, remain uninterested in others, and treat still others as ephemera rather than durable features of our theoretical thought constructions? Can this be rationalized, explained, derived from (a) set(s) of readings, artistic or philosophical inspirations, even though they appear most often accidentally and may remain with us either for a long time (forever) or only for a moment stretched in time? Before I read Paul Feyerabend's autobiography *Killing Time* (1995) I had read many of his scientific works. *Against Method*, a manifesto of epistemological anarchism and a dadaistic manner of conducting philosophical reflection, confirmed my intuitions formulated while shaping my view on methodological inefficiency of paradigmatic canons which, until a certain (historical) moment, legitimated particular cognitive strategies in the spirit of an objective and rational cognitive pattern. In *Killing Time*, however, I discovered an image of an actual man – not only of a philosopher or thinker, scientist or intellectual, but, above all, a man who is very

close to me, with whom I could probably make friends. Simply “[N]either science nor in rationality are universal measures of excellence [to be found]. They are particular traditions, unaware of their historical grounding” (Feyerabend 1993: 7).

4

My story of an accidental meeting with Vilém Flusser’s thought confirms what I have written above: a coincidence, a surprising fortune, concurrence of circumstances, but also, as I want to believe, a kind of necessity arising from a convergence of thinking about the consequences of image proliferation and visual production emerging in various academic environments. First and foremost, however, this accidental meeting arises from reflection upon the expansion of technically produced images and from taking the images to be tools or means of describing the most important transformations occurring within post-historical civilization, in short, the effects of techno-cultural movements remodelling the entire “tectonics” of media-mediated culture.

In the early 1990s, the name of Flusser started to appear in the orbit of my interests, although I cannot actually recollect in what circumstances. Some echoes of his concepts, mainly from *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (1985) began to reach out to me, at first by means of other academics. Unfortunately, I did not know German, and an English translation did not yet exist (it appeared in 2011). I had therefore read two fragments of this book in Polish translation (Flusser 1994) only after reading *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* – in my view the most important of Flusser’s works then and perhaps in general. This book was created as a result of Flusser’s encounter with Andreas Müller-Pohle, then, at the turn of 1970s and 80s, an artist in his thirties, not very widely known, but who had already had a few individual exhibitions. Their first meeting took place in 1981 at a symposium in Düsseldorf. During the next ten years of their cooperation, their exchange of ideas and Müller-Pohle’s publishing initiatives resulted in remarkable texts, books and exhibitions. Moreover, soon became Müller-Pohle became an important figure in both practice and reflection upon the digital turn in photography and more broadly in visual arts. Under the term “visualismus” (see. Müller-Pohle 1980), the development was already visible in his statements as an artist, publisher and theorist. It is worth recalling because today hardly anyone remembers that without the inspiration coming from Andreas Müller-Pohle, neither of above mentioned works, that is *Towards a Philosophy...* and *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, may have developed as they did. This is supported by a declaration in the second publication: “Without Andreas Müller-Pohle, whose photographic and theoretical work has had a strong influence on me, this book would either not have been written at all or would have been written very differently” (Flusser 2011b: V).

I point this out because Flusser's meeting with Müller-Pohle, who in 1979 established European Photography photo magazine and publishing house, seems to be of ground-breaking importance for the development of the Flusser's thoughts on photography, media, technical images and cameras. At the moment of writing these words (March 2019) I am looking at the 104th issue of *European Photography* (from the previous year, with the guiding theme of *Travel – The Outside Perspective*). One of Flusser's first publication devoted to photography was an essay published in the catalogue of Müller-Pohle's works, entitled *Transformance*, in 1983 (Müller-Pohle 1983). The title of this very interesting project was formed as a neologism combining two concepts (transformation/performance). The project involved 10,000 thousand photographs taken on the move and without looking into the viewfinder. Once again in this text a motif of coincidence returns because the photos were in fact created accidentally. This short essay by Flusser was probably written shortly before *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, and although primarily a brilliant analysis of the photographic series by Andreas Müller-Pohle, the statements concerning the relationship between a photographer and a camera, a photographer's eye and hand (a matter of gesture), the role of a coincidence and necessity, or finally the world dominated by cameras and similar machines, and apparatuses – can be regarded as a harbinger of the philosopher's further reflections on the essence of photography.

From the reflection on Müller-Pohle's works to *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (1983), to *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (1985), Flusser developed distinctions among three essential types of images with reference to history: prehistoric, historical and posthistorical images, with photography representing the last, posthistorical type (Flusser 2002b: 126). However, equally important is the concept of transition from alphanumeric society to numeric society, which was brilliantly presented in an extremely important essay *Alphanumeric society* (Flusser: 1995). This is another area in which Flusser predicted many of the consequences of the digital revolution he did not live to see. Recently I have written more on this topic in my other text (Zawojski 2018: 14-21) stressing that the digital revolution did not actually begin with the invention and expansion of digital machines, but with the concepts by Descartes and Leibniz who were first to recognize the primacy of numeric over alphabetic thinking, and to understand that any reasoning can be essentially reduced to calculations using digits and numbers. Today computational procedures have become a universal way of understanding reality by replacing linear reading of the writing and texts, therefore, those who read and write "alphabetically" and not "numerically" paradoxically lose and at the same time gain their importance. In fact, their exclusiveness is an expression of increasingly rare and marginalized skills, which once again can seem paradoxical at a time when "everybody writes" – books, for example, which are nowadays written especially by

celebrities and not even the “intellectual” ones: by actors, athletes, musicians, politicians, chefs, television presenters, even by children.

My first encounters with Vilém Flusser’s thought in the mid-1980s were formed as a kind of response to impulses and incentives from Andreas Müller-Pohle and substantiated after reading a synthetic text published in a prestigious journal *Leonardo*. I read it probably at the turn of 1980s and 90s. It was like a revelation: simplicity combined with intellectual refinement. It provided a natural context for my own research, a framework for thinking further about a not yet quite conscious “phase” transition within the scope of image culture and media culture *en général*. I was particularly fascinated by a bibliographical note in which, contrary to the rules in force in the journal, bibliographic references to texts and authors quoted in the article were not listed, there was only a laconic note: “This paper is based on four essays, two of which I published in Brazil, „Natural: mente” and „Post-historia”, in Portuguese; and two in Germany, “Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie” and “Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder”, in German. It also contains elements of an essay on the future of writing which is in progress” (Flusser 1986: 331).

Additional explanations included information about a few inspirations – Heidegger’s analysis of “Ding” and “Zeug”, Abraham Moles’s theory, Adorno’s criticism of the Marxist dialectic, reflection upon Roland Barthes’s arguments against certain concepts of Walter Benjamin concerning the subject, as well as the use of philosophical intuition of Adam Schaff and Ernst Bloch. This is not all, however, because it turns out that both Martin Buber’s analysis of intersubjective existence and a discussion between the author and Jean Baudrillard on German television in 1986 influenced the final shape of the discussed text. Perhaps neither before nor after did Flusser so minutely “confess” his own inspirations; it seems, moreover, that his overwhelming desire to present himself as a thoroughly original philosopher made him very reluctant in disclosing his connections in an open and explicit manner. Is it, however, of any importance today except for the psychological feature of this outstanding figure who, as one may guess, was not excessively modest? It is, of course, only a speculation, building an image of such an extremely complex figure who is not amenable to simple assessments.

After reading this article I already knew that I had to acquire at least one of the texts which had been published in English. I thought most of all about *Für eine Philosophie...* and actually its first English edition; I acquired this small book with help from my friends in Germany. It is worth remembering that this was happening in a “pre-Amazon” era (the company was founded a few years later in 1994). Therefore, the easiest way to get the publication was to go to a university library in Germany or Switzerland, or to ask friends to order the desired book in a German bookstore. In short, in such a way one day I was able to open a parcel containing *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (not to mention the fact that it was the first European

Photography edition from 1984) including information that “the editor of the English edition” was Derek Bennett. Actually up till now I do not know whether Flusser controlled the English version of the text which he had written in German; moreover, I have never actually got to know in which language the book was originally written, although it is commonly believed to be created in German; but perhaps one day somebody will find manuscripts proving that Flusser wrote it in English, or that he simultaneously wrote it in two languages, or maybe there is another story connected with it. It is common knowledge that after a few years another version of the translation of this text was published in the London publishing house Reaktion Books (Flusser 2000), which I mention anticipating facts concerning a Polish translation of this book.

After these intricacies of historical cases and coincidences I would like to emphasise one more time – perhaps if not for the invitation and encouragement from the young German artist, Andreas Müller-Pohle, photography might not have become the main motif of Flusser’s philosophical reflection immersed in research on the role of media apparatuses in culture. This is the way the original philosophy of media was being born, and in the future Müller-Pohle himself was to initialize the first German edition of the ten-volume collection of the Czech philosopher’s writings within the framework of Edition Flusser that was published by European Photography. As is widely known, to this day many publishing initiatives both in German and English have caused considerable mess in subsequent editions of Flusser’s works – those pulled from archives as well as those already published. But this is a completely different story.

5

When I eventually could read *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* I was delighted by the simplicity of language and the depth of philosophical reflection on the essence of photography. Flusser’s reflection became the starting point for creation of a universal interpretation of technical images and, more broadly, an innovative theory/philosophy of media. I translated this book for my own purposes, bearing in mind that the editorial note includes the information that the text “was originally published in German”. By then I was convinced that the book should be published in the Polish language, I was also wondering about a possible publisher. After a few unsuccessful attempts to engage academic publishing houses in the publication of the book I found out – again accidentally – that the publishing house of the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice was very interested in making such a book available. One more time it turned out that artists are definitely closer to Flusser’s concepts than academic thinkers.

So, I had my translation of the English version and the memory of the original German-language version. And there another coincidence occurred which I once wrote about (Zawojski

2009: 55–58). After one of my lectures discussing Flusser, Jacek Maniecki, one of my students at the time, said that he had translated (from German) the Flusser’s book some time earlier. Eventually I edited the text, taking into account my translation from English and prepared it for print (Flusser 2004). I also wrote quite an extensive introduction which was one of the first broader discussions of Vilém Flusser’s ideas in Poland. The book itself was met with a certain response from reviewers, commentators and researchers, although I have to add that the reception took place in a relatively narrow circle of intellectuals (Zawojski 2016: 195–198). Neither the book nor its author gained such recognition or popularity in Poland as great (and fashionable at the time) intellectual “celebrities” such as Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Richard Rorty, Zygmunt Bauman, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, to name only a few. To complete the image it is worth mentioning that *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* had a second Polish edition (2015) which was significantly changed. I want to believe that it was simply improved compared to the first version of the translation.

My concepts of (new) media theory, especially with regard to artistic practice, which I formulated in the subsequent books written during the past two decades, are undoubtedly deeply rooted in the inspirations I took from reading Vilém Flusser’s texts. This circle has been constantly expanding which is related to numerous publications in English and Polish, inter alia, *Kultura pisma. Z filozofii słowa i obrazu* (2018) prepared by Przemysław Wiatr, containing many texts which had not been published previously. It is a pity that only a few of the articles include additional bibliographic notes such as date of creation, place of publication or a lack of it or information concerning the purpose of writing a given article and connection with a particular lecture or event. The readers only learn that all texts were translated from English and had been originally written in the 1970s and 80s. From my, and probably not only my, point of view it is a significant fault of this otherwise very interesting selection of essays – and the first one in Poland – presenting in a cross-section of Flusser’s philosophical, theoretical, aesthetic and media interests.

6

Vilém Flusser stubbornly hid his inspirations or sources in specific readings, texts and authors, yet one should keep in mind that he could afford this while functioning outside the academy and requirements of “scientific publications”. I decided to combine two strategies in this text – to refer to the form of an essay as it was practiced by the Czech philosopher, but, at the same time, to precisely locate my borrowings, quotes and references. How has Flusser shaped my research,

primarily in new media theory? I do not want to delve into details in here. I rather think about what might be called a methodology determining research strategies and tactics. And what unexpectedly appears in this point is ... *pilpul*. I encountered it quite late in Flusser's writings (see: Flusser 2014b), after reading most of his basic texts. It seemed to be *post factum* – even if not a literal (as, in brief, a method of studying Talmudic texts), then certainly a metaphorical way of conducting reflection, “talmudizing”, “Talmudic thinking”, that is, devoting oneself to misleading fantasies, playing, thinking about what should not be thought about, disregarding orthodoxy, abandoning abivalent logic in favour of multivalent logic. *Pilpul* is a method of thinking and reasoning “around” a certain issue, just like comments on the pages of Talmud circle around a central sentence, which constitutes a semantic axis entangled by a net of comments. Today we would call it a hypertextual or rhizomatic structure; although particular parts of the rhizome focus around a central axis, further elements simultaneously discredit or even deconstruct this axis, and always enter complex semantic and spatial relations. The book page loses its linear form in favour of a non-linear movement – sometimes circular, at other times not resembling any regular figures. It is simply rhizomatic, fractal-like but only in the sense that it has a ragged and billowy appearance. Yes, *pilpul* is definitely a method of thinking/writing, which is close to me in a special way, and in a metaphysical way, it probably brings me closer to Flusser.

7

Finally, I will explain the title of this text, which had actually been created before the text itself and it, was supposed to refer to something a bit different. Instead of “I” it was to include “we,” referring to those not very numerous Polish humanists who study, not to say follow, Flusser's thought. However, as it often happens in the process of writing, that is while arduously typing letters their linear rows, I began to head in a little different direction, not exactly the one I had intended; the letters began to rule by imposing their internal rhythm on the final shape of the text. This exactly is the logic of the letter, but also the logic of writing. The title is a reference to the acclaimed article by Sergei Eisenstein entitled “Dickens, Griffith and we,” which was first published in 1944 (Eisenstein 1959). In brief, it referred to inspirations of Soviet filmmakers in the time of creating foundations of *avant-garde* cinema in the 1920s. They learned from the experience of the American director David Wark Griffith, who in turn had based his formal and stylistic experiments on Charles Dickens' prose.

What connection does it have with Flusser? Apparently none. Yet for me the first moment of recognizing the way in which Flusser's thought determined, or built, foundations of my thinking about new media is of a fundamental value. It should be added that the English version

of the title of Eisenstein's text was arbitrarily changed to *Dickens, Griffith, and The Film Today* (Eisenstein 1977). My old theoretical film study roots make me point out the fact that in the past I left, maybe only seemingly, film theory and entered the world of new media theory. However, I ask myself whether the knowledge of film (and its theory) wasn't a kind of gate I could go through in order to conduct the theory of new media. Whether successfully or not – that is another thing. It is not up to me to assess.

This type of circulation of thoughts, like certain intermedia (literature – film) transactions, is also a type of idea migration, which sometimes contributes to creating specific “schools” in art, science and knowledge. A strong thought, regardless of the discipline, has a nomadic nature, which in the case of Flusser was of particular importance, also in terms of his individual fate – he was a bit of a wanderer, vagrant and nomad. Nor is nomadism chaotic or random travelling to already known places and territories – because nomads return to places they have already visited with astonishing consistency – I regularly go back to Flusser's writings, constantly drawing inspiration, pure pleasure and often also delight from them (in the spirit of Barthes's reading texts which invite the readers to their own independent thinking). Perhaps this is one of the basic ways Flusser's thought seduces. An invitation to dialogue, an attempt to deal with often very problematic concepts, but also a feeling that a dialogic discourse conducted across paved thought paths should look exactly like this – somewhere aside from trendy mainstream reflections, in strange appendices to debates important for us now

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