

## Siegfried Zielinski

### Afterword to a Birthday Lecture

#### I.

On 12 May 2025, Marcel René Marburger gathered a small group of thinkers in Robion to celebrate Vilém Flusser's 105th birthday. Peter Zhang and William Guschwan, who had flown in especially from the USA, Marc Lenot, Nicolas Giraud, Véronique Souben from France, and the artists KAI (with Ceren Oykut) from Berlin and lom-of-LaMa from Dortmund. Corinne Russo hosted us most generously and warmly in the small house with its beautifully overgrown garden, where Vilém Flusser and his wife Edith had lived during the last years of their life. Corinne Russo later acquired it, not least because of her affection for the Flussers and Louis Bec.

Provence showed itself from its best side. Everything was blooming in lush splendour, and it smelled wonderful as I took one of the walks during the day that the cultural anthropologist from Prague liked to take on the edge of the small village into the forest, including the *Spaziergang* Michael Bielicky, also from Prague, used for his video-portrait "Flussers Fluß" (1994). This exercise was the best intellectual preparation for my lecture the next day in Arles at the *École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie (ENSP)*, where Flusser enjoyed presenting his thoughts time and again. Marcel Marburger had organised the one-day symposium "Playing against the Apparatus — Vilém Flusser and the Arts" there for 13 May. The potential of Flusser's speeches and writings to challenge or even transgress the functioning of technical media had already been of central interest to both of us when we worked together at the university-oriented art colleges in Cologne and Berlin to manage Flusser's estate.<sup>1</sup>

With the gesture of prospective archaeology, I attempted to link the arrows of time pointing to the past and the future in my contribution. I linked my revisiting of Flusser's *philosophy of photography* with thoughts on the current discussion about the power-hungry tech giants among the Large Learning Models (LLMs), which are naively and industry-affinely called "artificial intelligence". In my contribution, photography was to be addressed from the perspective of its unlimited technical capacity to generate visual material.

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<sup>1</sup> At universities, a research-oriented archive like the Flusser Archive have always been and continue to be under financial pressure, as it is currently the case again at the Berlin University of the Arts. This situation, which was entirely to be expected for a media archaeologist, was a key factor in my decision in the late 1990s to place Flusser's complete 27-metre-long textual estate in the Cologne City Archive, which reproduced all manuscripts and correspondence sheet by sheet and preserves them as research objects for as long as human eternity allows.

While writing my contribution, critical thoughts about the text-machines that have developed into mass media increasingly intruded on my re-reading of Flusser. In intensive night-time email correspondence with the artist Marcello Mercado<sup>2</sup>, who runs his deceased parents' clinic in Argentina during the day, I exchanged relevant experiences with various applications of the LLMs. Mercado is one of those artists who are programming at a high level. Our exchange of ideas ultimately resulted in a short manifesto on *artificial intelligences*, which has since been published as both an e-book and in print version. It furnished an essential part of my presentation in Arles.<sup>3</sup>

In the short text for *Flusser Studies*, to which Rainer Guldin kindly invited me, I focus on the introduction to the manifesto, which is not included in the ArtistsPress publication. I took the motto for my presentation from the lyrics of a rock song I had written for the musician and composer FM Einheit and his project FM *Module*, which ran on the Music Aeterna internet platform in St. Petersburg from 2020 to 2022: "Before machines became human, humans had become machines."<sup>4</sup>

## II.

*Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie (Towards a Philosophy of Photography)* was Flusser's first book publication for a German-speaking readership in 1983. Over the past four decades, it has been read in very different ways, translated into various cultural contexts and interpreted, especially by artists. That is why I assume it makes sense to begin by emphasising some of the essay's ideas relevant to media theory and aesthetics, while of course taking into account my own contemporary epistemic interests.

Vilém Flusser sees the camera primarily as an apparatus. "All apparatuses (and not just computers) are calculating machines and, in this sense, 'artificial intelligences', including the camera," he writes. (29)<sup>5</sup> As artefacts generated from scientific language, cameras are, in principle, "black boxes that simulate thinking in the sense of a combination game with number-like

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015, for the exhibition "Bodenlos – Flusser und die Künste" (Without Ground – Flusser and the Arts) at the ZKM and the Academy of Arts, Mercado made a wonderful material encounter between Flusser and McLuhan possible by packing worm-composted images of both as energetic mixtures into small transparent bags, converting texts by both into QR codes and portraits into sound files. See the Berlin exhibition catalogue edited by Daniel Irrgang and myself, Berlin: Academy of Arts, 2015, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Artificial Excellence/Artificial Intelligence – A Short Manifesto in Virtual Dialogue with Marcello Mercado and Diced Algorithms* by Tom Fecht, Berlin, Geneva: ArtistsPress and Cologne: Walter & Franz König, 2024

<sup>4</sup> This and a wealth of other lyrics can be found in the book *Man ist zu viele, man ist zu laut, man ist einfach da – FM EINHEIT im Dialog mit Siegfried Zielinski*, edited by SZ with Daniel Irrgang, Leipzig: Spector Books, forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> The page numbers in brackets refer to the book edition of the German original, published by Andreas Müller-Pohle at European Photography (here the fourth revised edition of 1989); translations by SZ.

symbols, thereby mechanising this thinking in such a way that humans will become less and less competent at it in the future and will have to leave it more and more to the apparatuses." (30) This opens a clear track to the media realities of the 21st century, which I pursue further in my manifesto.

What photographic apparatuses generate Flusser bluntly calls "technical images," a special variant of "significant surfaces." He explains: "Ontologically, traditional images signify phenomena, while technical images signify concepts." (13) Technical images "absorb all history and form an eternally rotating memory of society." (18) I also elaborated on this idea of the archive and our future existence in the archive in my manifesto.

Crucial to a possible art produced by photographic processes is Flusser's argumentative connection between the apparatus as *a black box*, its programming, and the possibility of its use by *homo ludens*, the *playing* human, as opposed to the *functioning* artefact. "The coding of technical images takes place (...) inside this black box, and consequently any criticism of technical images must be directed at illuminating their interior. As long as we do not have such a critique at our disposal, we remain illiterate when it comes to technical images." (15) For Flusser, illuminating the interior of the apparatus is an absolute prerequisite for continually varying photography as *cultura experimentalis* and thus gaining aesthetic added value from it.

The question of the significance of apparatuses in the context of art has become more complicated rather than simpler over the last four decades. There are two reasons for this: firstly, technical systems and artefacts have become far more synthetic and closed, and thus even less accessible than analogue media technology in the 20th century. Secondly, the concept of apparatus has been considerably expanded. It now functions – far beyond the meaning of media systems – as a synonym for social structures of all kinds: for the state, the church, capital, culture, infrastructures, etc. In the history of German-language philosophy, Flusser also contributed to this expansion. However, the initiative for this came primarily from the Hegelian Ernst Kapp, whom Flusser unfortunately did not know, and whom I would like to remember together with Flusser. For him, too, - one and a half centuries ago - *projection* was a central epistemic figure around which his understanding of the relationship between anthropos and technology revolved.

### III.

In his book *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik (Basic Outlines of a Philosophy of Technology)*, published in 1877 with the subtitle *Über die Geschichte der Ursprünge der Cultur aus neuen Perspektiven (On the History of the Origins of Culture from New Perspectives)*, Kapp discusses the expanded concept

of the apparatus. The last chapter of his book "Der Staat" (The State) is breathtaking from today's perspective. Here, Kapp outlines the connection between "language organism and state organism," between "body constitution and state constitution," the "mechanical discipline" of the state, the "archetype of the state and the machine," for which the common foundation in language is decisive. Deleuze and Guattari would have been thrilled if they had had access to this text. "We believe that this removes all doubt, that this connection between state and machine shows that one gains a higher degree of understanding within the other," Kapp concludes his analysis of disciplinary apparatuses, "because both have a common model in one and the same archetype of disciplinary completeness" (341).<sup>6</sup> Here we already have the circular "completeness" or better: conclusiveness, that was formulated 70 years later in cybernetics.

Kapp's book is – like most of Flusser's writings – a critical anthropological study. It focuses on human beings and their relationship to the world around them, including technology. The theoretical core of the study is the idea of "organ projection," which Kapp explains in more detail in Chapter 2. It includes the concept that humans use technology to try to project their organs outward, outside their bodies. Their worldview is determined by their own bodies, or rather, by their idea of them. "In all cases, projection is more or less the ejection, the bringing forth, the displacement and the shifting of something internal to the outside." Projection and imagination do not differ greatly from each other in essence, "since the innermost act of imagining is not free from the object that is before the eyes of the imagining subject."

The idea of projection as the creation of a new virtual world by means of the powers of imagination is just as relevant to Flusser's concept of the technical image in the context of art as the idea borrowed from the avant-garde of the 1920s that advanced technical apparatus must be turned against its functions if one does not want to end up as a functionary of the apparatus.

#### IV. Excursus on the state of affairs

In a brief transition to the text of the manifesto, I attempted to deduce from the current debates why I considered the seemingly awkward connection between the anthropologists Flusser and Kapp and the major language learning models to be meaningful.

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations are taken from Kapp's *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik (Basic Outlines of a Philosophy of Technic)* from 1877 (Braunschweig: Westermann). The translation is mine. On my initiative, Cary Wolfe had Kapp's text, which is of eminent importance for media research, translated into American English for his Post-Humanities series. It was published in 2018. See: Zielinski, Afterword. A Media-Archaeological Postscript to the Translation of Ernst Kapp's *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology (1877)*, (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018)

We, who for decades have been harsh critics of entrenched social structures such as late capitalism, find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. We defend the achievements of advanced systems of coexistence – such as the separation of powers, equality before the law, and democratic identities and institutions. In contrast, the criminal protagonists of global power and wealth stand for destruction, ruthless exploitation of people and non-human nature, and the deliberate disruption of the balance of political forces through the reactivation of autocratic forms of government based on the power of money, excessive egomania and bottomless stupidity.

With disgust and horror, we observe a renewed heteronomy of bodies and souls through learning machines centralised in the hands of a few technocrats and mass media applications that have completely spiralled out of control. Violence against humans, against non-human nature and even against objectified technology has once again become a legitimate discursive force. Early capitalist Darwinism is becoming the ideal economic form for chronocracies and *consciousness industries* – never has this term from critical theory been more apt. Entire countries are treated like disposable real estate, available for purchase or sale at will. The hearts and minds of large sections of the population are degenerating into objects of an *ontology of advertising* – a sadly forgotten term coined by Adorno to describe anti-Semitism and authoritarianism. For mass media communication networks, this means that the subjects connected to networked devices are primarily relevant as commercial and ideological objects of seduction and no longer as actors in a project of enlightenment. Jürgen Habermas' utopias of *communicative action* seem to have sunk into the depths of the 20th century.

“The product of television, commercial television, is the audience. / Television delivers people to an advertiser.” With these two short statements, in 1973 Carlota Fay Schoolman and Richard Serra summed up one of the central discourses in early media art, which has lost none of its relevance for advanced network communication. With a striking artistic intervention, they made it clear that the task of commercial television and networking is not to deliver programmes to the audience in front of the sets, but to deliver the audience with its purchasing potential to the advertising industry. “You are consumed. You are the product of television.” Commercial television was thus unambiguously deconstructed in its claim to want to play the role of a social or even political public medium. Through the privatisation of its operators, the various practices of *commodity aesthetics*<sup>7</sup> were inscribed into it as inherent meta-strategies.

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Fritz Haug coined this term in his book *Kritik der Warenästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971

## V. and Conclusion:

In my subsequent presentation of the manifesto on artificial intelligence, I focused on two aspects. Using a historical-poetic device about Novalis and his idea of thinking machines – "Our mind should become a sensually perceptible machine, not within us, but outside us" (Unser Geist soll sinnlich wahrnehmbare Maschine werden, nicht in uns, aber außer uns)."<sup>8</sup> – I explained why, in our passage to posthuman realities, we should speak of artificial *ex-telligences* rather than artificial intelligences. And I argued that, in view of the results of almost unlimited generative media production, we should say goodbye to particular media concepts such as photography. I no longer refer to the visual agents that emerge from generative operations, which for the time being – accepting misunderstandings – are still called *images/pictures/Bilder*, as photographs (or films, videos, songs, etc.), but as *algorithmic artefacts*, or, somewhat more cumbersome but more complete: algorithmic artefacts from the spirit of applied statistics and advanced, i.e. mechanised, probability calculation.

The final thought of my lecture was again directly dedicated to Vilém Flusser. He was born in the capital of alchemy and natural philosophical speculation, which spread widely in pre-modern Europe under Rudolph II. I ended the manifesto with a reference to radical alchemical thinking: "Let us not make the mistake again of separating what can only be thought from what can be felt, touched and produced. Let us face the new realities of predictable sorting and control systems and the nervous, sensitive matter of the real with a new hermeneutics, which I call *extended matériology*<sup>9</sup>. It currently might offer an adequate method with which we can meet the challenges posed by artificial intelligences."

From concrete material through abstraction to possible new concretisations – that is the epistemic credo of Flusser's communicology in the broadest sense. It has clearly lost none of its appeal.

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<sup>8</sup> Novalis, Schriften, Band III: 252. Siehe dazu auch: Juliane Henrich, Siegfried Zielinski, with GPT-4, and Friedrich von Hardenberg aka Novalis, "Crystallographic Resonances: Rewriting Novalis", in *Technology and Language* # 125, Future Writing. St. Petersburg Polytechnic University and TU Darmstadt, 2023 (<https://soctech.spbstu.ru/en/article/2023.12.2/>)

<sup>9</sup> I have written several essays on this concept in recent years, primarily on artists. For its rationale, see (in German): Extended Materiologies. A Case Study on Alchemy as a Method and Form of Thinking Hybrid Realities. In: Hyan Kang Kim (ed.), *Form follows data. Design in the digital era* (Paderborn: Brill/Fink, 2023, 132-162)