Philosophizing in Translation: Vilém Flusser's Brazilian Writings of the 1960s

Of the thirty-two years this original and controversial philosopher lived in Brazil—from 1940 to 1972 when he left the country to lead a truly nomadic international life of lectures and publications—the 1960s decade marked the incorporation of Portuguese into his philosophical practice, as well as his activist engagement with the effervescent cultural context of the era. Flusser's lifelong interest in the philosophy of language and communication is expressed throughout his writings and especially in his first three books, written in Portuguese, and published in São Paulo between 1963 and 1967.

Although Flusser became famous as a media philosopher in the 1980s, the focus of his thought was on dialogue and upon an analysis without foundations. This included speculation on language and science, theology and design, philosophy and history. Flusser's editor Andreas Ströl underlined the focus of his thought: "Flusser posits that existential 'uprooting' is a condition of freedom."[1] Lack of foundation for the philosopher was both an ethical existential condition and a philosophical perspective. Ströl further observed that, "Flusser divides European intellectuals into two camps. One person sees in him a pessimistic, cynical prognosticator of the decline of our writing-based culture and, with it, Western civilization, as we know it. Another sees in him the prophet of a new, posthistorical humanism that will rise up from the present environment of media and communication structures. Flusser himself encouraged both of these views."[2] And of course, these two views are not contradictory. The pessimist and the visionary are combined in writings that looked at the past, simultaneously from a perspective of the present and of the future.

Contrary to the popular Brazilian belief (and colonialist mindset) that one philosophizes better in German, French, or English, Flusser's multidimensional philosophy based on the fluidity of thought among multiple languages, states just the opposite. Without privileging any language as foundational, he found Portuguese—the language of his

involuntary exile, for instance—to be non-contaminated by traditional metaphysical terminology, and thus capable of becoming a true language for philosophy in the future. Flusser wrote primarily in German, Portuguese, and English without privileging any of them as foundational. *Bodenlos*—meaning bottomless, lack of foundation—is the title of his philosophical autobiography written mostly in the mid 1970s after he left Brazil and published only in Germany in 1992 after his tragic death in Prague in 1991.

Over the three-decades he lived in Brazil, and especially in the reflections he made about that period after he left that country, Flusser connected many threads between Brazilian and European history. His first three books— *Língua e Realidade* [Language and Reality], 1963; *A História do Diabo* [The History of the Devil], 1965; and *Da Religiosidade: A Literatura e o Senso de Realidade* [Of Religiosity: Literature and the Sense of Reality], 1967— were recently republished for the first time since the 1960s.[3] With the exception of *The History of the Devil* the other two remain without translation into other languages.[4] The major theme that traverses these three very different books is the idea that language produces reality. Throughout his life the philosopher worked on variations of this central theme, constantly translating, retranslating, and rewriting his essays in a process in which each new language enriched the meaning of the previous one. At each new translation of a text he wrote a new version of his ideas by weaving fresh connections and unforeseen conceptual possibilities.[5] Flusser's *Língua e Realidade* [Language and Reality] demonstrates this reasoning through a phenomenological thinking-in-translation, which includes the examination of partial translations, productive mistranslations, and misreadings, as well as the impossibility of the translation of certain words and structures from one language into another. Given that for this polyglot thinker language is always plural, instead of abstracting differences among Western languages, which one must do in order to translate, he probed these differences while contrasting multiple worldviews, which languages produce and enable.

In *Língua e Realidade* [Language and Reality] Flusser used two diagrams to argue that many philosophical categories of Western knowledge are in fact structures of language —and thus dependent upon grammar, syntax, and semantic horizon, which vary, whether

one is thinking in Greek, Latin, or German. To make this point he uses Portuguese as his instrument of investigation, and translates into it words, concepts, and structures from German, English, and Czech—while allowing readers to capture the dynamic changes in meaning among these languages he knew so well. To Portuguese, that Flusser qualified as a "language of digression," he brings a fresh, direct, and clear style that is anti-academic, yet scholarly; simultaneously communicative and speculative. In *Língua e Realidade* [Language and Reality] Flusser privileged Portuguese over other languages for its richness of meanings and plastic structure, besides its lack of metaphysical foundation. In the book's preface Gustavo Bernardo Krause observed:

> We are dealing with a masterpiece, because it is the first book of this thinker and also because the book is absolutely original. Never before or after has the philosophy of language been discussed as in this work, based not only on erudite information but also upon the experience of an exiled polyglot. *Língua e Realidade* was written in Portuguese by a Czech philosopher who usually wrote in German. By writing this book Fluser felt he incorporated Portuguese as a third mother language.[6]

Related to the notion that language produces reality is Flusser's emphasis on translation: "The problem of translation and translatability takes on the cosmic dimensions of all existential issues: it encompasses everything."[7] For him, the issue of translation was at once an epistemological problem—a question of knowing; an ethical problem—an issue of value; and a problem of meaning—an ontological dilemma. The question of language indeed traversed and shaped his philosophy and existence. From this perspective of language and communications he later reflected on media, on the development of technical images, and upon the future of Western civilization.

THE HISTORY OF HISTORY: THEOLOGY, EVOLUTION, AND TELEOLOGY

Flusser's second book *A História do Diabo* [*The History of the Devil*] explored the issue of time. Published in 1965, it was in fact his first book written in German and then translated into Portuguese. With wit, humor, and a sense of reflective adventure, the book examined the idea of linear progress by combining science and theology, which against

common preconception, Flusser identified with the devil. History thus began theologically with man's fall from paradise, and historically with the invention of writing in Mesopotamia. According to Flusser, the realm of God, the divine and sacred dimension, is timeless and eternal, and our earthy mundane world is temporal. Therefore, the book posits the devil as synonymous with history, with progress and evolution; and God is equated with the notion of infinite time and eternity. "The history of the devil is the history of progress. Our book should have been called 'Evolution' but the term would have caused some misunderstandings. Evolution as the history of progress is the history of the devil."[8] Flusser explored in this book the history of science, Buddhist philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology. The book chapters were structured after "the work of the devil," that is, according to the way the devil exercises his influence upon men through the seven capital sins, which Flusser further organized hierarchically and dynamically from lust to sloth, while reinterpreting them in the following positive light:

> Pride is self-conciousness. Greed is economy. Lust is instinct (and the affirmation of life). Gluttony is the improvement of living standards. Envy is the fight for social justice and political freedom. Wrath is the refusal to accept the limitations imposed on human will; and therefore it is dignity. Sloth or Sadness is the stage reached by calm philosophical meditation.[9]

The History of the Devil also identified history with the invention of the alphabet and of writing (made popular after a few millennia through the invention of typography). To this definition of history Flusser later added a third major technological revolution—the invention of photography and thus of the making of technical images—that according to him would lead to the end of history and to the beginning of a posthistorical era. In his 1960s writings, however, Flusser examined the moment of crisis of Modern history while pointing out that a future epoch was not yet born. It was only in the 1970s decade, and especially after he returned to Europe, that he would theorize the shift from industrial to information-digital culture, and thus the passage from history to posthistory. Marking this transition was his most famous book *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* [*Towards a Philosophy of Photography*] first published in Germany in 1983, positioning him as an original media

theoretician who advanced and urged an equally radical new Philosophy. Flusser's enthusiasm for cybernetics and digital technologies acquires a different dimension when positioned in the context of his earlier writings on language, history and religion, as well as in relation, first to his embrace of the Brazilian utopian project, followed in the late 1960s by an even more radical embrace of exile.

LITERATURE AND THE SENSE OF REALITY: DIMENSIONS OF THE SACRED AND THE POETIC

Flusser's third book *Da Religiosidade: A Literatura e o Senso de Realidade* [*Of Religiosity: Literature and the Sense of Reality,* 1967] contrasts with his first two books by being a compilation of short essays that more urgently addressed the 1960s zeitgeist. His preference for the essay form, according to the philosopher, affected not only the form of his writing (such as a short text without footnotes) but also the content, besides the way the author engages and reaches audiences. He contrasted the essay to academic writing: "Academic style is a special kind of style. It unites intellectual honesty with existential dishonesty, because the person who has recourse to it commits the intellect and withdraws the body."[10] I believe that an additional reason for Flusser's preference for the essay might have been his desire to write for newspapers. In Brazil of the 1950s and 1960s, important cultural discussions took place in literary and cultural supplements of the most important periodicals of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Flusser wanted to engage this conversation, and most essays in the book were originally published in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*. While these essays highly praised current art and poetry movements, they were often also critical of their shortcomings. Furthermore, the book title— *Da Religiosidade* —calls attention to our continuous loss of the sense of the sacred, as well as the superficiality and the conformity of thought in contemporary life. The choice of articles for the book were made, according to the philosopher, following vaguely thematic criteria:

> Literature, whether philosophical or not, is the place in which the sense of reality is articulated. And 'sense of reality' is, under certain aspects, a synonym of religiosity. Real is everything in which we believe. During the pre-Christian era the real was nature, and the pre-Christian religions believed in the forces of nature, which they made divine. During the Middle Ages the real was transcendent, as is the God of

Christianity. But beginning in the XV century the real is problematized. Nature is questioned and put in doubt, and the faith on a transcendent reality loses ground. Thus our situation is characterized by an unreal sensation and by the search for a new sense of religiosity. This is the theme of these chosen essays.[11]

Central to the book are two philosophical essays—"Pensamento e Reflexão" [Thought and Reflection] and "Da Dúvida" [Of Doubt]—that contextualize the loss of the sacred as that dimension which is unknowable. They were not written for newspapers but for more specialized publications.[12] Flusser's intuition was that there is something fundamentally wrong and insufficient with the Cartesian rationality and the pure materialism of science and technology. For the philosopher there was always something more than material reality, which poetry touches and articulates as the limit of thought: "Poetry produces language because it articulates the inarticulate." […] The inarticulate is inexhaustible."[13] These philosophical essays are critical of the limitations of the Enlightenment's instrumentalization of reason, to which Flusser opposed the reflective nature of philosophy, the inventive nature of literature, and the sense of wonder of religious affect. According to Flusser's introduction to the book, the Modern era religiosity ended up in the total and boring profanation that is technology. And he urged that a new era bring about new religious possibilities:

Indeed, all of our creative activities, including scientific and artistic ones are dedicated to the effort to create a new field open to religiosity. With our intellect we are still modern, but with our religiosity we already participate in the era to come. Which is the same as saying that we are beings in transition and in search of the future. And if the traditional religions are unacceptable, and the exotic religions are exposed as escapist, and if the detour of religion towards politics, economy, and technology disappoints, we remain with our religious hunger unsatisfied.[14]

In a recent passage about Flusser that could have been a review of his third book, cultural critic Sean Cubitt emphasized the European Gnostic tradition present in Flusser's thinking:

It is sad therefore to note that materialism has often—though not universally—
eschewed any address to the sacred. By this I do not mean that materialism in any
way fails for lack of a theology, nor that the sacred forms some ontological ground
on which the material world is more deeply founded. Rather, what has been often
lacking is a commitment to understanding that affect which we recognize under
the rubric of sacredness, an elevation beyond not merely the instinctual but also
the intellectual pleasures, a yearning apart from the desire for justice, peace and
plenty for all.[15]

The religiosity Flusser envisioned for the era to come would be articulated in the
1970s and 1980s by his media theory. His hopes for a telematic culture and discussions of
humanism and posthistory, all contributed to the renovation of the sense of wonder which he
connected with the sacred, and which this book *Da Religiosidade* [*Of Religiosity*] so
poignantly emphasized.

THE BRAZIL PROJECT: UTOPIA, REVOLUTION, AND THE ISSUE OF PATRIOTISM[16]

Flusser's first three books reflect his engagement with the utopian Brazil project.
During the 1950s and 1960s he was at the same time a critic and an enthusiastic articulator
of the new Brazil under construction, as he connected Prague and São Paulo; European and
South American modernisms; Kafka, Guimarães Rosas and the São Paulo Concrete poets.[17]
Flusser sought integration into Brazilian life as long as he believed a new type of civilization
was possible from its complex mixture. He explained: "For decades, I was involved in an
experiment to synthesize Brazilian culture from a larger mix of Western European, Eastern
European, African, East Asian, and Indian cultural phenomena."[18] In later essays in which he
reflected upon the Brazilian project, such as the 1981 "Mythical, Historical, and
Posthistorical Existence" he begins by stating: "the Brazilian situation is extraordinarily
instructive for Europeans."[19] Flusser observed that the different Western developmental
epochs—mythic-magical; historical (equated with writing, linear time, and later with logical
reason); and post-historical (equated with telematics and digital images)—are layers which
in Europe tend to be stacked upon each other while in Brazil coexisted side by side. At first,
he considered this coexistence of different temporalities to be part of Brazil's open

possibilities. However, after the military coup in 1964, and a decade of a repressive and nacionalist technocratic government, he realized that the lack of communication among the different social classes and cultures was a problematic structure headed for disaster.[20]

In *Bodenlos: a Philosophical Autobiography* Flusser described the men and women he met in São Paulo and who shaped his intellect. They are a total of eleven—nine men and two women—seven were born in Brazil and four were immigrants like him. And despite the importance of these relationships, or perhaps because of them, after he lost the belief that Brazil, at the edge of Western culture, could become a promising model for the future of Western civilization, Flusser opted to live in permanent exile and become a foreigner to every culture:

> When I arrived in Brazil and as soon as I managed to free myself from the gas
> chambers to a certain extent, I was carried away by this fever. I indulged myself into
> building a new, humane home free of prejudice. It was not until the *golpe*, the
> army's coup d'état, that I became more humble. But not because I understood the
> Brazilian coup to be a reactionary intervention—the way most European observers
> interpreted it—but because I recognized it as the first manifestation of a Brazilian
> homeland.[21]

Believing that "patriotism is the symptom of an aesthetic disease," in 1972 Flusser left Brazil and returned to Europe.

CONCLUSION: THE VIOLENCE OF HISTORY AND THE ETHICS OF EXILE

The decision to embrace exile in a more radical way strengthened the ethical and existential choices that guided Flusser's philosophy. His decision to "take up residency in homelessness" reinforced his desire to free himself from any attachment to a homeland. He understood this attachment as the root of preconceptions and unquestioned values: "The loss of home sheds light on this secret. […] It discloses what it really is: the seat of most (perhaps all) of our prejudices—the judgments made before any conscious judgments."[22] And he further connects this familiar attachment to a homeland as the root of false aesthetic values: "The immigrant becomes even more unsettling to the native, uncannier than the traveler out there, because he reveals the banality of the sacred to the native. He is hateful;

he is ugly, because he exposes the beauty of home as nothing more than pretty kitsch."[23] Flusser saw this aesthetics handicap as the root of ethnocentrism, which could escalate into nationalism, fascism, and ethnic pogroms. That is why for him the Zionist project was never appealing. His multicultural upbringing and multiple exiles allowed him to see how signs are naturalized and made transparent and thus invisible.

At first he struggled with the devastating sense of loss brought about by the holocaust in which all his family and friends were killed: "All of the people to whom I was mysteriously bound in Prague were murdered. All of them. The Jews in gas chambers, the Czechs in the Resistance, the Germans on the Russian front."[24] But he later also found an incredible sense of freedom from no longer having any ties to a country. He reflected upon this condition of exile in various essays and spent his life transforming a negative experience as an expellee into a positive creative force by proposing:

> We, the uncounted millions of emigrants (whether we are guest workers, expellees, or intellectuals traveling from one seminar to another), do not recognize ourselves as outsiders, but rather as pioneers of the future. For this reason, the Vietnamese in California, the Turks in Germany, the Palestinians in the Persian Gulf, and the Russian scientists at Harvard should not be considered pitiful victims in need of aid. One should not aid so that they can go back to their homelands. Instead, they should be considered role models whose examples we follow in case we are sufficiently daring. Certainly, only the expelled and emigrants can allow themselves such thoughts, not the expellers or those who stayed behind; for emigration is a creative activity, but is also entails suffering[25]

The theme of exile in his philosophy connects an existential ethics with a visionary enthusiasm for telematics, thus allowing us to relate the idea of rootlessness with a media philosophy that theorized the non-linear logic of networked technology. Furthermore, his philosophy always sought the dialogue with other disciplines whether literature, sciences, art, logic, theology, music, or design. His ability to make comparisons among different elements and dimensions as he does for instance in the first chapter of the book *Da Religiosidade* [*Of Religiosity*] making a parallel between music and religion, characterized his elastic thinking and it is in this sense that he should be understood as a "media

philosopher." Siegfried Zielinsky's insightful archeology of hearing and seeing by technical means places Flusser among original thinkers. Zielinsky points out how Flusser's presence in the media debates of the 1980s was important for new media artists who wanted to change the world and saw no connection between their ideas and the more abstract Lacanian and poststructuralist theories, and thus were thirsty for new impulses:

> In his lectures, Flusser often jumped back and forth between the reality of facticity and fecund speculation, or sketched the identity of thought that operates within the strong tension of *curiositas* and *necessitas* (curiosity and necessity) as [Giovan Battista Della] Porta defined the two most important motivations for the work of the researcher. Flusser charismatically embodied this identity. […] For established academe, his thinking, characterized by its mental leaps between the disciplines, is unacceptable even today.[26]

Flusser's analysis of words and images exemplifies this type of articulation as he contrasted the one-dimensional verbal linear structure of one-word-after-another with the two-dimensional plane of photographic images, and further with the zero dimension of computational visualization. Always seeking to expand dialogue Flusser bridged many worlds and found original correspondences and analogies among different elements. He called attention, for instance, to the fuzzy passage among the three orders of magnitude in science: the Newtonian world of centimeters and seconds; a second bigger order of magnitude measurable in light-years, in which Einsteinian rules apply; and a third micro world of nanoseconds, in which the rules of quantum mechanics are valid. "In each of these worlds, we have to think differently, try to imagine differently, and act differently."[27] And that is what he continuously did.

Flusser argued, for instance, that linear writing produced causal explanations and logical thought processes to which the numerical codes have been attached throughout the entire history of the West. "Recently, the numeric code broke out of the alphabetical code, freed itself from the pressure of linearity, and switched over from numeric to digital."[28] And of course this realization has important consequences to image making and reception. According to him, images are no longer two-dimensional translations of a four-dimensional world. They are two-dimensional planes created from zero-dimensional elements. Synthetic

images are calculations, pure abstractions, "pure aesthetics." Thus he concluded that digital images were no longer ontologically and epistemologically suspicious of simulacra, as they once were for Plato and for a theological iconoclastic tradition inspired by Judaism. They rather *leap* from a linear logic into the zero-dimension of computations. They are a conceptual leap of imagination.

As media art histories abandon the rhetoric of "the new" for a historiography that does not simply "sweep up the pieces into a sensible heap,"[29] Flusser's fluidity, range, and elasticity of thought constitute a high standard for a more rigorous yet accessible engagement with philosophy and history. His philosophizing-in-translation combined with a phenomenologist capacity to capture the sacred and the poetic dimensions of the world, besides his ethical position of exile and lack of foundations as a condition of freedom, are a fecund source of inspiration for media histories to come. Our task is to continue writing histories with this kind of insight.

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[1] Andreas Ströl, "Introduction," in *Vilém Flusser Writings*, Andreas Ströhl, Ed., and Erik Eisel, Trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minesota Press, 2002), xvi.

[2] Ibid., ix-x.

[3] Recent editions of Flusser's books in Brazil include: *O Mundo Codificado: Por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação*, Rafael Cardoso, org. (São Paulo: CosacNaify, 2007) [a compilation of design essays published between 1973 and 1991]; *Bodenlos: Uma Autobiografia Filosófica* (São Paulo: Annablume 2007) [originally published in 1992]; *A História do Diabo* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2005) [1965]; *Língua e Realidade* (São Paulo: Annablume, second edition 2004, third edition 2007) [1963]; *Da Religiosidade: A Literatura e o Senso de Realidade* (São Paulo: Escrituras, 2002) [1967]; and *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2002) [1983].

[4] *A História do Diabo* was also published in German as *Die Geschichte des Teufels*, Andreas Müller-Pohle, Ed. (Göttingen: European Photograph, 1993) and in Czech as *Pribeh d'ábla*, 1997.

[5] Flusser's practice of translation as a creative process has been examined by Rainer Guldin, "Translation, Self-Translation, Retranslation: Exploring Vilém Flusser's Multilingual Writing Practice" in *Das Spiel mit der Übersetzung. Figuren der Mehrsprachigkeit im Werk Vilém Flussers*, Ranier Guldin, Ed. (Basel: Tübingen, 2004), 99-118.

[6] Gustavo Bernardo Krause also mentions that Brazilian critic Anatol Rosenfeld, who wrote a review of *Língua e Realidade* in 1964 and despite disagreeing with Flusser's thesis recommended the book as a masterpiece of profound intuition, analytical power, and sharp insight.

[7] *Vilém Flusser Writings*, 194.

[8] Vilém Flusser, *A História do Diabo* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2005), 24. Translation mine.

[9] Ibid., 25. Contrasting with the contemporary emphasis on speed and multitasking, philosophers such as Kierkegaard, artists such as Hélio Oiticica, and cultural critics such as Oscar Wilde have also praised sloth as an essential condition for philosophical and creative practices. More recently, media archeologist Siegfried Zielinski has argued for a cool down period of media reflection in the twentieth first century.

[10] Ibid., 117.

[11] Flusser, *Da Religiosidade*, 13. Translation mine.

[12] They were published in the *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* and the *Revista do Instituto Tecnológico da Aeronáutica, Dept. de Humanidades*, respectively.

[13] Flusser, *Da Religiosidade*, 57.

[14] Ibid., 20-21.

[15] Sean Cubitt's review of the book *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* by Siegfried Zielinski, in *Leonardo Reviews*, August 2007, http://www.leonardo.info/reviews/aug2007/deep_cubitt.html

[16] For further discussion of these relations in Brazilian modern and contemporary art please see my essay: "Tropical Modern: The Political Ambivalence of Cultural Remix," in *Canal Contemporâneo*, December 2006. http://www.canalcontemporaneo.art.br/ documenta12magazines/archives/001001.php

[17] About Flusser's relation to these writers, see Gustavo Bernardo Krause, "Da Prece à Literatura," in *Vilém Flusser no Brasil*, Gustavo Bernardo Krause and Ricardo Mendes, Org. (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2000). The radical verbal and visual innovations of Brazil in the 1950s were an intrinsic part of the developmental years that characterized President Jucelino Kubitschek's government (1956-1960): the building of a democratic society based on a modern national industry; the construction of the new capital—Brasília, a monument to the International Style; all accompanied by an unprecedented cultural effervescence that justified the country's leap into the future (fifty years in five was the motto of President Kubitschek) shaking up most forms of artistic expression throughout the late 1960s including music, architecture, theater, poetry, literature, visual arts, cinema, and design.

[18] *Vilém Flusser Writings*, 91.

[19] Ibid., 117.

[20] The year 1968 marked the beginning of an era of state terrorism in Brazil. On December 13th the military government issued the AI-5 (Fifth Institutional Act) signed by military President General Costa e Silva. The AI-5 closed Congress and suspended all political and constitutional rights, opening the way to political persecution, torture, and censorship. Following the interruption by a military coup in 1964, presidential elections were not held again until 1989. Ironically, during the country's darkest era of political oppression in 1970, Brazil was the first country in history to win the World Cup for the third time. The soccer world leadership produced a strongest display of patriotic fever. It was somehow the certainty that the "sleeping giant" had finally been awakened. The nation wrapped itself in the colors of the flag and repeated the World cup theme song as a mantra for years to come.

[21] *Vilém Flusser Writings*, 97.

[22] Ibid., 93.

[23] Ibid., 95.

[24] Ibid., 94.

[25] Ibid., 92.

[26] Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 97.

[27] *Vilém Flusser Writings*, 89.

[28] Ibid., 113.

[29] "Introduction by Michael Punt," *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, Volume 15, Number 9 - 10, 2007. <http://leoalmanac.org/>http://leoalmanac.org