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The Photographic Universe: Vilém Flusser’s Theories of Photography, Media, and Digital Culture

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THE PHOTOGRAPHIC UNIVERSE: VILÉM FLUSser’S THEORIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY, MEDIA, AND DIGITAL CULTURE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC UNIVERSE: VILÉM FLUSSER’S THEORIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY, MEDIA, AND DIGITAL CULTURE

Adviser: Professor Anna Chave

Despite accelerated changes in the way we create, view, and experience photographs, critics and scholars in North America continue to read and assign an accepted canon of photography theory, often predicated on old concepts and technologies. This dissertation seeks to remedy that situation. It focuses on the work of Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991), author of such books as *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985), and *Does Writing Have a Future?* (1987), which develop a theory of technical images that reaches beyond photography to include film, television, video, computer, and satellite images. Rather than reading images textually, Flusser employed philosophy and information theory to consider the apparatuses of image making and the screens through which we communicate. Born in Prague in 1920 and forced to flee Europe in 1939, Flusser spent thirty-two years in Brazil before returning to Europe. He was a philosopher, yet practically an autodidact. His entire family was killed in the holocaust and he became a proponent of migration and wrote in multiple languages: German, Portuguese, French, and English. Moreover, Flusser was writing at a moment when digitization and biotechnology and were both emerging and these overlap in books like *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (1983) and his “Curie’s Children” column for *Artforum* magazine (1986-1991). This dissertation will examine Flusser’s thought from its roots in European thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Kafka, to its place alongside contemporary theorists and media philosophers such as Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Donna Haraway, Alexander R. Galloway, and François Laruelle. Not only this does this
dissertation introduce Flusser into the U.S. conversation on photography history and theory, it coincides with renewed interest in other artists and theorists from the seventies and eighties whose work, rather than becoming “obsolete,” like early versions of technology, aids us in thinking about images and culture today.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Professor Anna Chave who saw me through this process, even into her own retirement. Her careful reading and astute editing and suggestions helped this manuscript immeasurably and taught me a great deal about both writing and advising other students. My dissertation committee, Professors Maria Antonella Pelizzari, David Joselit, and Alexander R. Galloway, encouraged me to think of new ways to address this material. Geoffrey Batchen has been an important influence, interlocutor, and mentor. I am also in debt to everyone at the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin, particularly the Archive’s scientific director, Daniel Irrgang.

I thank my friends, classmates, colleagues, students and particularly my siblings, Mary Schwendener-Holt, Susan Schwendener, and John Schwendener for their love and solidarity. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Ann and John Schwendener. Neither lived to see its completion, but they encouraged me in myriad ways and their love and support – emotional, intellectual, financial, and spiritual – have continued to sustain me.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iv

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. vi

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Flusser in Brazil ................................................................................................. 17

1.1 Education in Prague and the Flight to Brazil ............................................................... 17
1.2 The Journey to Brazil .................................................................................................... 22
1.3 The Brazilian Language ............................................................................................... 24
1.4 The “Philosophical Self-Portrait” and Becoming a “Brazilian Writer” ...................... 26
1.5 Manuscripts from the Fifties ....................................................................................... 31
1.6 The “Philosophical Self-Portrait”: João Guimarães Rosa ........................................ 36
1.7 The “Philosophical Self-Portrait”: Vicente Ferreira da Silva and Philosophy in Brazil ................................................................................................................................. 42
1.8 *Language and Reality* ............................................................................................... 47
1.9 *The History of the Devil, “On Doubt,” and Of Religiosity* .................................... 52
1.10 Brazil and the 1964 Coup d’Etat ................................................................................ 62

Chapter 2: Leaving Brazil and Flusser’s Writing in the Seventies .................................... 71

2.1 Flusser in the Art World: Brazilian Artists and the São Paulo Biennial ................. 71
2.2 The Return to Europe and Writing in the Seventies ................................................... 85
2.3 *The Force of the Everyday, The Codified World,* and “Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television” .......................................................................................... 91
2.4 *Natural: Mind* .......................................................................................................... 102
2.5 *Post-History* ............................................................................................................. 106

Chapter 3: The Technical Image Writings and Other Texts ............................................. 119

3.1 Photography Theory in the Seventies ......................................................................... 119
3.2 Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* ................................................................. 127
3.3 Flusser’s Writings on Photography: The Technical Image Trilogy .......... 133
3.4 *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* ...................................................... 136
3.5 *Into the Universe of Technical Images and Does Writing Have a Future?* ...... 157
3.6 Flusser’s Other Writings .............................................................................. 169
   3.6.a Photography Texts .............................................................................. 169
   3.7.b *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* ................................................................... 180
3.8.c The “Curie’s Children” Column in *Artforum* ...................................... 191
3.9.d *Kommunicologie, The Shape of Things, and Other Texts* ................. 201

Chapter 4: Flusser’s Reception and Context .................................................... 210

4.1 Flusser and Philosophy .............................................................................. 210
   4.2.a Wittgenstein, Husserl, and Heidegger ............................................... 210
   4.3.b Buber, Kafka, and Ortega y Gasset ..................................................... 217
4.4 Flusser and Information and Media Theory .............................................. 221
   4.4.a Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon ................................................ 221
   4.4.b Marshall McLuhan ............................................................................. 232
   4.4.c Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Jean Baudrillard ............................. 238
   4.4.d Paul Virilio and Gilles Deleuze ............................................................. 251
   4.4.e German Media Theory and Friedrich Kittler ...................................... 262
4.5 Donna Haraway and Technological Feminism ......................................... 270
4.6 Flusser and Artists ..................................................................................... 274
4.7 Flusser and the Current Moment .............................................................. 296
   4.7.a U.S. Media Theory: Lev Manovich, Alexander Galloway, and Branden Hookway ................................................................. 299
4.8 Flusser and Contemporary Art ................................................................. 307

Conclusio ........................................................................................................ 312

Bibliography .................................................................................................... 330
INTRODUCTION

What is photography today? Since the advent of the digital revolution, “photography” has come to mean anything from a large scale print hanging on a gallery wall to a picture taken with a cellphone camera and posted on social media, or an image captured by a drone and transmitted halfway across the globe. Most people live in an image-saturated world. But despite accelerated changes in the way we create, view, and experience photographs, critics and scholars continue to read and assign the same photography theory, often predicated on old concepts and technologies. This dissertation seeks to remedy that situation. It focuses on the work of Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991), author of such books as Towards a Philosophy of Photography (1983), Into the Universe of Technical Images (1985), and Does Writing Have a Future? (1987), which develop a theory of technical images that reaches beyond photography to include film, television, video, computer, and satellite images.1 Starting with the premise that the term photography today encompasses all of digital media, and therefore requires a new kind of theorization, this dissertation will argue that Flusser is an important, if insufficiently acknowledged theorist, and that his writings offer an exemplary model for understanding the contemporary state of photography. In addition to introducing Flusser to a broader U.S. audience and arguing for his inclusion in the photography discourse, this dissertation questions the end of

photography putatively precipitated by the digital revolution and advocates the merger of photography scholarship with media studies and the field of visual culture.²

Moreover, by highlighting the fact that different photography discourses predominate on different continents, the example of Flusser challenges the notion of a universal photographic theory. It raises the question of how and why particular theorists are adopted and canonized—or ignored—in particular contexts. As the call is sounded for a more globally aware art history, how do we account for the fact that, despite photography’s ubiquity, most photography theory has been produced within Europe and the United States? Flusser’s peripatetic existence and migratory approach to philosophy argue for methods not fixed in one language or location, and a greater fluidity between mediums and ideas. Ultimately, I hope this dissertation can serve as a vehicle for creating dialogue with other disciplines, fields of knowledge, and political subjects.

Discovering Flusser

I stumbled upon Vilém Flusser in 2007 when I was writing an essay for a museum exhibition devoted to functional art objects.³ In the course of my research, I consulted a design theory anthology and encountered a piece of writing that jumped off the page. Flusser, a writer I had never heard of, wrote in a sly, clever way about objects, delving into etymologies and turning arguments inside like Martin Heidegger, whom I would later learn was one of Flusser’s greatest touchstones. When I learned about Flusser’s biography, I was even more intrigued. Born in Prague in 1920 and forced to flee Europe in 1939, he received, beyond secondary schooling, little formal education. He was a philosopher, yet practically an autodidact. Flusser's entire


family was killed in the holocaust: his father at Buchenwald and his mother and sister at Auschwitz. And yet, although Auschwitz became a defining figure in his philosophy—the prototypical example of a Western Enlightenment “apparatus” and of rational science gone awry—it often served as the punch line for a very dark joke. In his essays, the Nazis “failed” at design because they didn’t kill their victims efficiently enough or, in the technical image writings, postwar apparatuses proliferated “like mushrooms after a Nazi rain, from the ground that has become rotten.”

I was intrigued by Flusser's deeply irreverent tone and his use of irony, which he considered an important rhetorical device for addressing not just the Nazi past, but the equally frightening future. I was impressed that this refugee and self-described migrant had persisted in studying “philosophy at night,” mostly on his own or corresponding with a handful of friends, while working as a bookkeeper during the day in a transistor factory owned by a relative in São Paulo. In the late fifties and sixties, he contributed to Brazilian philosophy journals, taught communications at the local university, and became a celebrated newspaper columnist. In 1972, following the 1964 military coup, he relocated to Europe and entered art and communications circles in France and Germany. Eventually, he became a sought after theorist and philosopher of media and photography and published nearly twenty books, as well as articles, essays, and reviews in magazines and journals ranging from European Photography and Camera Austria, to the “Curie’s Children” column in Artforum, which ran from 1986 to 1991. Although he forecasted the cultural impact of the Internet and digital photography, he died in 1991, in a car accident on the way home from a lecture in Prague, before many of the technologies he imagined had been implemented on a large scale.

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Photography Theory in the Seventies and Eighties

Flusser’s technical image writings appeared at a crucial moment. Participating in what Roland Barthes once called a “theoretical boom” in photography in the mid-seventies, Flusser joined a growing group of artists, critics, and scholars—many of whom were not specialists in the field—in writing about photography. Following artists, numerous of whom had embraced photography as a mode of documenting performances or creating conceptual art works in the sixties, photography entered the academy at virtually the same moment the digital revolution commenced. The theories and methods adopted to study it within art history by a new generation of scholars and critics such as Rosalind Krauss and other writers associated with the October journal, or the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, which was founded in 1977 and published Afterimage, a journal devoted to photography, were generally couched in ideas inherited from the sixties, from the neo-Marxism of the thirties, or a combination of the two, and shaped in reaction to the positions of curators such as Beaumont Newhall and John Szarkowski.

Primary among the “new” theorists of this age were Walter Benjamin’s essays “A Little History of Photography” (1931) and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” (1936), which were translated and disseminated in English in the late sixties

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6 For changing ideas about photography among artists, see Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,” Reconsidering the Object of Art, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art), 247-267.

and seventies.⁸ Benjamin wrote about photography as a potentially liberating technology that would broadcast information and knowledge to larger masses of society,⁹ an argument that appealed to a younger generation of critics and historians in the U.S. reacting to the formalism of curators such as Newhall and Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art, as well as Clement Greenberg’s “positivist” art criticism.¹⁰ The 1976 founding of the October journal in New York was largely based on these anti-formalist principles; the editors’ mission statement, appearing in the form of an editors’ note in the first issue, put technical images—experimental film, photography, and video art—at the center of their program.¹¹

The other giant of photography theory during this period, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, was Roland Barthes. In essays such as “Photography and the Electoral Appeal” and “Shock-Photos”—both included in his Mythologies (1957)—as well as “The Photographic Message” (1961) and “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), Barthes drew from structural linguistics, semiotics, and Brechtian Marxism to demonstrate how everyday images function like sign systems and contain ideological messages that aren’t immediately apparent. Barthes is best known within this context, however, for Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (1981), a meditation on photography as a kind of death-premonition that was

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⁹ One could also include the proto-Frankfurt School figure Siegfried Kracauer and his essay “Photography” (1929), as well as film critic and theorist André Bazin, whose essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945) was influential in both the film and photography scholarship.


written a year after his mother’s death and a few weeks before Barthes’ own untimely demise.12 Barthes was translated occasionally by Susan Sontag, whose On Photography (1977), a collection of essays originally published in The New York Review of Books, is another germinal text from this period.13 Sontag’s work, however, is more in keeping with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s Photography: A Middle-Brow Art (1990).14 Like Bourdieu, Sontag looked at the social configuration of photography, but her conclusions, written shortly after the Vietnam War and Watergate, reflect the pessimism of that period. Meanwhile, building from Benjamin and Barthes, October critics and scholars such as Rosalind Krauss—a former protégé of Greenberg—drew on the semiotics of C.S. Peirce to formulate a theory of the “index” in which the logic of photography, read semiotically, became the model for much of contemporary art.15

Flusser’s writing came from a different lineage and trajectory, which may partially explain why it wasn’t adopted in U.S. art history. Although his best known book was titled Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Flusser wasn’t married to photography as a technology or a medium. Instead, the concept of “technical images,” described in books such as Post-History (1980) and Into the Universe of Technical Images (1985), opened the field up to many other types of imaging. More important, Flusser focused less on photographic images than on the apparatus of the camera and the interface between technology and humans. What really sets


Flusser apart from other photography theorists of this moment is his emphasis on a future of images rather than an end of photography, and an insistence on present and future images as electromagnetic. Advancing the concept of “The Photographic Universe”—the condition in which we experience, know and evaluate the world as a consequence of photographs—he provided a model for marrying the fields of communications, media studies, and art history. It should be pointed out that there are U.S. art historians endeavoring to forge these connections: Christiane Paul, David Joselit, Branden Joseph and the Grey Room journal—picking up from October—have been instrumental in looking at electronic and digital art and fostering a cross-disciplinary discourse. However, Flusser has not been included in these conversations.

Reading Flusser on my own, I was, like many readers, initially perplexed. The primary terms he proposes in Towards a Philosophy of Photography are “image,” “apparatus,” “program,” and “information.” But in what I would discover to be true Flusserian fashion, he only defines these as the primary concepts in the last essay in the book and in a somewhat cryptic “lexicon” of terms that appears after that. In order to understand his writing as a theory of photography, one must overturn some of one’s assumptions about what photography is and follow Flusser in speculating on what it might become. This means reading photography through information theory and philosophy, in which the dematerialization and digitization of images sets

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up an epistemological problem in a world where people have become active makers and transmitters of photography rather than merely passive receivers.

To take on Flusser as a dissertation subject was a speculative venture. For while *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* became integral to the theoretical canon in Europe, where figures such as Andreas Müller-Pohle, Friedrich Kittler, and Peter Weibel, served as advocates for his work, Flusser’s name remained virtually absent from U.S. photography scholarship. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* was originally published in German and Flusser translated it into English and Müller-Pohle published that version in 1984—although it was largely ignored in the U.S. until a 2000 translation was published by the British press Reaktion. When I started reading Flusser, however, I didn't know anyone who had read him—or anyone who had even heard of him.

Flusser’s writings took the form of very short essays; often only four to six pages. Klaus Sander counted approximately 406 essays in German, 352 in Portuguese, 90 in English, and 60 in French, as well as a small number of essays in other languages—although these numbers have shifted a bit as the Archive has grown and developed over time.

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essays—particularly those from the 1960s—were written in a format Flusser called “science fiction philosophy.” Moreover, from a language standpoint, the task of writing a dissertation on Flusser looked exceptionally arduous: like Kafka and other Jewish intellectuals from Prague, Flusser initially wrote in German. But as he migrated around the Western Hemisphere, he learned Portuguese and wrote and published in that language, as well as in French and English. Most of his texts had not been translated into English when I first encountered Flusser, and one of the key elements of his process is that he often translated his essays himself, arguing that there was no fixed meaning in his work; instead, paralleling the arguments of Jacques Derrida, he saw meaning as created in the process of translation.

The secondary literature on Flusser in English is not extensive, particularly within art history. Isolated articles exist, but a special section devoted to his writing on photography appeared only in 2012 in the relatively new journal *Philosophy of Photography.* A small group of international scholars devoted to translating his writings into English has centered around Anke Finger, a professor of German studies and comparative literature at the University of Connecticut. My courage was bolstered, however, by tiny encouragements: the French photography scholar Michel Frizot mentioning that he was influenced by the “radical thoughts”

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of Flusser;\(^{24}\) perusing German photography theory surveys in which Flusser was amply represented;\(^{25}\) asking every German art history graduate student I met if he or she had ever read Flusser. The answer, inevitably, was an indignant “Of course!” (After several such exchanges, it became clear that this was an insulting question: tantamount to asking a North American graduate student if she had read Roland Barthes.)

At the same moment I was discovering Flusser, other people were, too. Artists, often ahead of the curve in the realm of visionary ideas, were mentioning him in their writings,\(^ {26}\) and during the course of researching and writing this dissertation, more than half a dozen of his texts have been translated into English and published or reissued.\(^ {27}\) The Brazilian translator Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, an artist and former student of Siegfried Zielinski, the German media theorist who is the director of the Flusser Archive in Berlin, has translated a number of Flusser texts written originally in Portuguese, such as *The History of the Devil, On Doubt, Natural: Mind,* and *Post-History,* all of which have been published in the last five years.\(^ {28}\) In the same way Richard


Howard aided a generation of scholars with his translations of Roland Barthes, Maltez Novaes has been an enormous boon to Anglophone Flusser scholars. Current media scholars such as Alexander Galloway, Steven Shaviro, and Mark Poster have cited Flusser’s work, and there is a respectable body of secondary literature on Flusser in both Portuguese and German. Artforum has republished essays and appreciations of Flusser’s work, as well. Clearly, I am not alone in feeling that Flusser has something to say to our moment, and renewed interest in other artists and theorists from the seventies and eighties has shown that many critics and scholars feel that art and theory forged in the early days of the digital revolution, rather than becoming, like early versions of the technology itself, “obsolete,” might aid us in thinking about images and culture today. (A similar, if earlier example of such a phenomenon, has often been pointed out Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: writing at the dawn of industrial capitalism, they forged a theory for a phenomenon that was only emerging, and yet those writings are still considered vital today.)

The History of the Devil, trans. Rodrigo Maltz Novaes (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014); and On Doubt, trans. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014). Maltez Novaes has also translated Flusser’s Language and Reality, but it has yet to be published. Also see metafluxpublishing.com, accessed September 1, 2015. Maltez Novaes he has also recently started a new press in São Paulo, Metaflux, where he will publish a book collection of Flusser’s Artforum essays for which I will write an introduction.

29 See flusserstudies.net


Structure

While Flusser’s technical image writings serve as the backbone of this dissertation, I will consider his entire oeuvre, from his emergence in philosophy circles in São Paulo in the early sixties to his writings on photography and the developing fields of digital imaging and biotechnology. Chapter 1 describes Flusser’s early education and the intellectual climate in the new Czechoslovak Republic in the 1920s and 1930s, tracking his flight with the Barth family (his future wife, Edith, and parents-in-law) from Prague to London and finally to Brazil. In addition to focusing on early works such as *Language and Reality* (1963), *The History of the Devil* (1965), and “On Doubt” (1965), the chapter discusses how European literature and philosophy, from Kafka and Rilke to Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Martin Buber shaped his thinking. Wittgenstein plays a special role in these early writings, since his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), with its numbered propositions, served a structuring-model for both *Language and Reality* and *The History of the Devil*. The importance of Brazilians such as fiction author João Guimarães Rosa and the philosopher Vincent Ferreira da Silva is considered, as well as Flusser’s career as a journalist for publications such as *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Folha de São Paulo* and the German newspapers *Merkur* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Chapter 2 begins with Flusser’s engagement with the Brazilian art world, including his friendships with artists such as Samson Flexor and Mira Schendel and his brief role as technical director of the São Paulo Biennial, following an international boycott in 1969, after the 1964 military coup. Flusser’s return to Europe in 1972 and his writing thereafter is discussed, including *Force of the Everyday* (1972), *The Codified World* (1974), *Natural: Mind* (1978) and
Post-History (1980). Here his focus turns away from language, towards mass media and communications and the nature-culture dialectic. The chapter also discusses his participation in “Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television” (1974), held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where Flusser delivered the paper “Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television” and his engagement with thinkers such as Milton Vargas, Abraham Moles, and Marshall McLuhan.

Chapter 3 describes the state of photography theory in the years leading up to the 1983 publication of Towards a Philosophy of Photography, then delves into Flusser’s technical image trilogy and related photography texts. The influence of Heidegger—rarely mentioned in the U.S. photography canon—and texts such as “The Age of the World Picture” (1938), “The Turning” (1949), and “The Question Concerning Technology” (1955) is explored, as well as Flusser’s use of the word “magic,” which has proliferated recently among contemporary artists. This chapter further includes discussions of: Flusser’s “parabiology” essay Vampyroteuthis infernalis (1983); his essays for the U.S. journal Leonardo; his “Curie’s Children” column in Artforum; and his posthumously published books.

Flusser’s context and reception are the subjects of Chapter 4. The chapter looks back to his origins in Europe, examining how philosophies of language, phenomenology, history, and


33 The essay was also reprinted in German as “Für eine Phänomenologie des Fernsehens” (1974) in Lob der Oberflächlichkeit, Schriften Bd. 1, 2 (Mannheim, Germany: Bollmann, 1995), 180-200, and in Medienkultur (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2008), 103-123.

34 All of these are included in Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977).
technology impacted Flusser’s thinking, before moving to midcentury U.S. information theorists such as Norbert Weiner and Claude Shannon. Marshall McLuhan is discussed, as well as Flusser’s contemporaries such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Gilles Deleuze, before Flusser is examined in relation to German media theory and to contemporary artists internationally such as Joan Fontcuberta, Harun Farocki, Peter Weibel, Eduardo Kac, Christopher Williams, and the so-called Düsseldorf School photographers.35 The chapter ends by recounting some of the ways in which Flusser has been revived by younger artists working with photography. A conclusion reexamines Flusser’s work as affording an exemplary model for understanding photography in its current state, by pointing up the social, political, and cultural implications and resonance of his writing in the present day.

Finally, as I write this introduction in the late summer of 2015, migrants from Africa and the Middle East are streaming across the borders of Europe and dying in the Mediterranean Sea. I am moved by their plight and struck by the similarities with Flusser, who was uprooted in his youth, lost his entire family in the holocaust, and ultimately wrote an autobiography titled *Bodenlos* (1992) [groundless, rootless] and a book of essays titled *Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (1994).36 In the latter book, Flusser pointed out that being “settled” was a relatively new condition for humans: a condition only about 10,000 years old, although his


own Jewish ancestors appeared to have lived in Prague for more than a thousand years.\textsuperscript{37} And yet, Flusser argued, we as a species are leaving the condition of settled-ness and moving into a new period in which migrants are in the vanguard of a new mobility. Flusser acknowledged that migration often comes with suffering, particularly if one is expelled from one’s country of origin. But while his early dislocations were painful, he probably could not have left his then current home in Robion, in the South of France, without that sort of rupture. Flusser argued that migrants should no longer be considered “pitiable victims whom we need help to regain their lost heimats [homeland, home, origin] but rather models whom we should emulate, if we have the requisite courage.”\textsuperscript{38} Being a migrant opened up new horizons, a new “field of potentiality” leading to “Exile and Creativity,” as one of the essays in \textit{Freedom of the Migrant} is titled.\textsuperscript{39}

In a way, Flusser’s attitude towards migration mirrors his approach to technical images. Rather than mourning the demise of chemical photography, he saw digitization as offering unprecedented opportunities. The photographic universe is a shifting field of images, a permanently changing environment in which one “redundant” image replaces another. But it is also a field of potentiality. “Don’t underestimate technology!” Flusser wrote. “We have the technological means to open ourselves to others and to talk to people all over the world in order to give meaning to our lives! I think that for the first time we now have the technical ability to overcome geography and history and to relate to each other based on competence and not on


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{39} Interesting comparisons might be drawn between Flusser’s writings on marginality and those of thinkers such as Homi K. Bhabha, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and bell hooks. See \textit{Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures}, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (Cambridge, MA and New York: MIT Press and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990).
what one has received.” As numerous Europeans reach out to migrants on social media, motivated largely by images proliferating on the Internet, and defying their governments’ immigration laws to offer money, transportation, shelter, and support, Flusser’s writings, which defied the confines of language and disciplinary borders, feel more pertinent than ever.

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Chapter 1: Flusser in Brazil

Education in Prague and the Flight to Brazil

Vilém Flusser’s journey to writing *Toward a Philosophy of Photography* and the texts that form the core of his philosophy of media and technical images, was a circuitous one. Born in Prague on May 12, 1920, he grew up in the manner of many assimilated Jewish intellectuals, speaking both Czech and German. His mother, Melitta Basch, was a “dutiful daughter,” a former singer married off in 1919 by her wealthy family to a man twelve years her senior. Vilém’s father, Gustav Flusser, studied philosophy, mathematics, and physics in Vienna— with Albert Einstein, among others. Gustav Flusser translated the books of Tomáš Garrigue Marsaryk into German, and became a member of parliament for the social democrats in 1918. However, by 1924 he had left politics and become a mathematics instructor and the director of the Prague Handelsakademie, a business (or “commercial”) school based on a Viennese model. Vilém Flusser described his parents’ marriage as that of “the haughty ‘thinker’ and the much younger, cultivated fille rangée. But I think, too, that it was a good marriage: my father ‘educated’ my mother, and she ‘cultivated’ my father.” The Flussers had two children, Vilém, and his sister, Ludovika, who was born in 1922.

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43 Koeltzsch, “Gustav Flusser,” 4-5.
Prague itself was crucial to Flusser’s education. A vital, multiethnic center, it set the stage for Flusser’s writings across the fields of language, philosophy, photography, communications, and design. Peter Demetz has written about Prague as a city built over many centuries by Czechs, Germans, Jews, and Italians—but also as the site of a long history of religious and ethnic cleansing that “invariably dirtied the hands of the ‘cleansed.’” Flusser’s Prague was the result of a recent “cleansing”: in the mid-1880s Prague’s Old Town underwent a modern “sanitation,” in which most of the old Jewish quarter was razed; Prague’s physical geography was reconfigured to construct new cultural monuments like the National Theater (1881-83), the Rudolfinum concert hall (1884), the School of Applied Arts (1884), the new National Museum (1885-90), and the Museum of the City of Prague (1898). In the 1890s, Prague also hosted three international exhibitions. Writing in a more celebratory mode, Martin Pawley describes Flusser’s Prague as one of Europe’s most cosmopolitan and avant-garde centers, in

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44 See Flusser Studies 5 (2007), accessed May 31, 2014, http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/interview.pdf. The first section of the issue is devoted to Vilém Flusser’s early years in Prague and includes an 2007 interview with Edith Flusser, Vilém’s wife, when Edith was 87 years old.


47 Prague’s wealthier Jews had already left the district after the revolution of 1848. By 1852 Jews were allowed to live wherever they wished in the city and in 1867 they were given civil rights equal to the city’s Czech and German citizens. Peter Demetz, Prague in Black and Gold, 314-16.
which modern design flourished. Flusser’s own description in his book *Bodenlos: A Philosophical Autobiography*, focuses on a multicultural center inspired by Masaryk in which European Jewish culture, German culture, and the new Czech culture merged. Citing the Prague Linguists, Kafka, experimental theater, phenomenology, and Einstein’s lectures at the university, he wrote: “To grow up in such a climate, to sense these productive tensions in one’s surroundings and within oneself, to participate in them actively since puberty, was entirely natural for the son of Jewish intellectuals. Only through the distance of time and space did this naturalness emerge as a privileged situation.”

Flusser attended German-language primary school and the German Realgymnasium grammar school in Smichov, where he wrote poetry and, when he was sixteen, a play titled “Saul.” One of his most important experiences, however, was attending a 1937 lecture delivered by Martin Buber, “Prejudice against God.” Buber’s charismatic delivery galvanized the young Flusser, who would return to Buber’s writings repeatedly throughout his life. Buber’s idea of the

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49 “Bodenlos” has been translated variously as “rootless,” “groundless,” and “homeless.” Because it loses some of these valences in English and is generally referred to as *Bodenlos* in English texts, I will refer to it by its German title. Written in 1973, the book was published posthumously as *Bodenlos. Eine philosophische Autobiographie* (Düsseldorf; Bensheim: Bollmann, 1992) and in Czech and Portuguese as *Bezedno: filosofická autobiografie* (Prague: Hynek, 1998) and *Bodenlos: Uma autobiografia filosofica* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2010).


“I and you” became in time central to Flusser’s theories of media and communication, which emphasized the “dialogic” and “telematic.”

In 1938, Flusser matriculated in law at Charles University in Prague. His education was quickly cut short, however, which would affect him for much of his life, preventing him from obtaining academic employment in the United States and from publishing in some venues. At the Munich Conference in September 1938, at which no Czechoslovaks were present, representatives of Germany, Great Britain, France, and Italy agreed that Germany could annex the Sudentenland along Czechoslovakia’s borders, which was inhabited mostly by German speakers and included most of its mining industry and banking interests. The invasion commenced on March 14, 1939 and Prague was occupied by troops the following day. There was no armed resistance and Prague’s physical structures remained relatively untouched by the war—although Prague was occupied longer than other regions: from six months before the outbreak of World War II through several months after the liberation in 1945. The young Czechoslovak Republic disintegrated immediately and civil society changed rapidly, with professional societies publishing notices in newspapers declaring that “non-Aryan” members must appoint “Aryan” substitutes to manage their affairs.

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54 Demetz, *Prague in Danger*, 17.
Prague had been a haven for anti-Nazi intellectuals, and this changed quickly, too. The liberal papers Prager Presse and Bohemia ceased publication in 1938 and the Prager Tagblatt was closed by occupation authorities on April 4, 1939. The German university became an educational institution of the Reich on September 1, 1939 and the Czech university was closed on November 15, 1939. Hitler declared war against Poland on September 1, 1939 and Jews in Prague were instructed to register their apartments and deliver their radios to special locations. By February 1940, they were not allowed to attend the cinema or theater performances. In March their identity documents had to be stamped with the letter “J,” as of May 17, 1940 they were forbidden to linger in parks, gardens, or forests; to keep pigeons, use taxis, or sit in the front carriage of a tram. If a tram had only one carriage, they were to wait for the next one with two carriages.

Flusser’s survival amidst the Nazi terror is a fundamental aspect of his biography. His wife, Edith, was central to this narrative. Born in 1920, two months after Vilém, Edith Barth’s family lived on the same street as the Flussers; their mothers played bridge together. Her father, Gustav Barth, opened Prague’s first automated restaurant. At the age of sixteen Edith enrolled at the Handelsakademie, where Gustav Flusser was the director, and she and Vilém attended dance

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55 Some, like Bertolt Brecht, came to Prague only for a few days. Others stayed longer: Erich Maria Remarque, Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Friedrich Burschell (Proust’s German translator), Bruno Frank, Stefan Heym, Franz Pfemfert, Friedrich Torberg. Artists included John Heartfield, Oskar Kokoschka, and Peter Weiss, who came to Prague to study painting and ultimately wrote the three-volume novel The Aesthetics of Resistance (1975-81). Demetz, Prague in Danger, 30.

56 Because works of theater, literature, and music were later written, composed, and performed at the concentration camp in Terezín, the Gestapo was charged with representing the camp to outsiders as a kind of “spa” for artists and writers. There were instances when inmates were commanded to mount performances for international observers. Demetz, Prague in Danger, 160.

57 Demetz, Prague in Danger, 63.
school together. Later, Gustav Barth would predict the severity of the Nazi occupation and move his possessions from Prague to London. Gustav Flusser had received an invitation to teach at the university in Jerusalem, but he felt tied to Prague. A verbal confrontation between the two fathers ensued, but Gustav refused to leave and Vilém left the country with Edith and her mother to join Gustav Barth in London.

The Journey to Brazil

Flusser briefly resumed his studies at the London School of Economics, but the bombardment had started and London was not safe. Gustav Barth rented a bus with other Prague families and told the driver to take them as far as the tank of gas would allow. They ended up in Cornwall, near Exeter, and took up residence in an abandoned manor house. Unable to enroll at the university, Vilém cut hair and Edith apprenticed in the maternity ward at a local hospital. Opportunities for Jewish refugees to leave England were limited to places like Shanghai, Panama, and Brazil. After being baptized, as required, Flusser and the Barths obtained visas to Brazil and in 1940 they left South Hampton on a ship accompanied by a cruiser to protect against submarines. The month-long voyage was made strictly in darkness to avoid detection by German ships (passengers could not even light cigarettes), although Edith remembers it somewhat fondly: they became friendly with other passengers, including Alex Kafka, whose father, Bruno, was a second cousin of the author Franz Kafka. (Alex Kafka would later become an economist and Brazilian Director of the International Monetary Fund.)

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59 Ibid., 16.
However, the terror of war and the Nazis returned as soon as they reached the port of Rio de Janeiro. While still onboard ship in the harbor, Flusser was informed that his father had been murdered at Buchenwald on June 18, 1940. At the end of the war, in 1945, he would learn that his mother and sister were killed at Auschwitz. Survival came with feelings of enormous guilt. In *Bodenlos* Flusser writes:

The decision to escape had immediate and horrendous results. I had died for my parents, siblings, and closest friends, and they had died for me. I looked into their faces and saw death masks. I was a ghost among ghosts. When I, much later and successively, received the news of their various and gruesome deaths, it was only an affirmation of that which I had experienced back then. With the decision to escape they had already departed into the realm of shadows, and their murder was only the automatic execution of a process that had taken form back then. Not the Nazis—I myself had murdered them with my decision to escape in order to save my shadowy self … This is how Prague died.  

The Barths and Flusser stayed in a pension in Rio for a few months then left for São Paulo where Vilém found a job in a Czech import-export company, working for Edith’s uncle. Edith and Vilém were married on January 15, 1941 and she was soon pregnant with their first child, Dinah. Her parents and sister obtained visas and moved to the United States in 1941.

Flusser found intellectual companionship in Alex Bloch, another Jewish immigrant from Prague who worked in a bookstore and provided Vilém with books, and with whom he would later correspond. Despite his marriage and the birth of his children (Dinah, Miguel Gustavo in 1943, and Victor in 1950), however, Flusser described the forties as a dark period. Edith accompanied him to work because she was afraid he would kill himself, and Flusser later described carrying around a piece of paper divided into two sections: “in one section I had listed the reasons for

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61 These letters were later collected and published as *Briefe an Alex Bloch (Letters to Alex Bloch)*, eds. Edith Flusser and Klaus Sander (Göttingen: European Photography Verlag, 2000).

suicide, in the others the reasons against it.” These were the days in which, referring to himself in the third person, “one engaged in business during the day and philosophized at night. One pursued both activities with detachment and both with disgust.”

The Brazilian Language

The early part of Flusser’s exile was also marked by a lack of language. Arriving in Brazil, the Flussers did not know “a word” of Portuguese. And yet, Flusser wanted to become a writer and philosopher. Flusser’s later philosophy was couched in the idea of “groundlessness,” with a prescient view of nomadism and migration. But Flusser was a Jewish refuge migrating

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64 Flusser, Bodenlos, 41. Quoted in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vilém Flusser: An Introduction, 19.

65 Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vilém Flusser: An Introduction, 18.


67 See Flusser Studies 7 (2008), which is devoted to migration. In particular, Rolf Kaluweit’s essay, “Postmodern Nomadism and the Beginnings of a Global Village,” which cites a 1990 essay by Flusser, “Nomadische Überlegungen (Thinking about Nomadism),” published in The Freedom of the Migrant (2003), in which Flusser describes the difference between nomadism and migration: “A migrant does not leave her area voluntarily but rather is forced in some way. Her odyssey, at least in her range of expectations, is finite: sooner or later she arrives at another shore and attains what Flusser calls ‘an unacceptable reality of second rank.’ The migrant thus passes from one situation of unlivable settledness into an unlivable second one. Migration leads to the interaction of two socio-cultural domains, not to the abundance of one domain and the adoption of another…. On the contrary, nomadism, which is our actual concern, refers to just one space that might be vague in its boundaries. Nomads scorn settledness from the outset. They move from way station to way station without striking roots. Hence, the mapping of nomadism differs rigorously from the mapping of migration.” Kaluweit, “Postmodern Nomadism and the Beginnings of a Global Village,” Flusser Studies 7 (2008): 6-7, accessed June 2, 2014,
to a country that not only spoke a different language, but that carried with it a complicated history of colonization, slavery, immigration, and independence. Brazil was the main destination for Germans heading to Latin America in the nineteenth-century after a crisis in the German states brought on by the French Revolution, political censorship, and economic depression. German immigrants were vastly outnumbered by Italians, Spaniards, and Portuguese immigrants, and by earlier Portuguese colonizers, African slaves, and native Indians. But they were welcomed in a country under pressure from other nations to abolish slavery. On account of a goal of improving its economy and “whitening” its population, hardworking Germans were seen as “ideal settlers.”

Brazil in the twentieth-century, however, had what Matthew D. Goodwin calls a “bizarrely ambivalent” policy toward Jews. They were wanted for their perceived wealth and skills and to help Brazil improve industrially, and because they were white. But they were also judged as “a separate race,” if one that could not easily be distinguished physically. Brazilian visas, even for illustrious European Jews were not always guaranteed: Stefan Zweig, whose 1941

\[\text{http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/kailuweit-postmodern-nomadism.pdf.}\]


autobiography *Brazil: Land of the Future* was criticized for promoting the Vargas regime’s agenda and positing Brazil as a multicultural utopia that differed from the more capitalist-driven United States, obtained a visa; Claude Lévi-Strauss did not.\(^{70}\) Ultimately, the idea of Brazil as a tolerant haven for Jews might be a myth. In an interview recorded on September 30, 1991, nearly two months before his death, Flusser admitted that “the Brazilian consul was corrupt, and he accepted relatively small bribes, and so he gave us a Brazilian visa.”\(^{71}\) Gustav Barth’s money had apparently bought their safe passage to Brazil.

**The “Philosophical Self-Portrait” and Becoming a “Brazilian Writer”**

The 1940s remained a dark period for Flusser. In a 1969 autobiographical essay titled “In Search of Meaning,” he describes his intellectual trajectory and the violent uprooting from Europe and relocation to Brazil:

> I spent my youth in the spiritually and artistically inebriating atmosphere of the between-wars Prague. I survived, groggily, the bestial and stupid earthquake of Nazism, which devoured my world (i.e., my others and my things), but also the scales of values that had structured that world. I was vomited, by the fury of events, upon Brazil, which is a greatly amorphous situation, greedy in every sense, and also in an ontic one. I was vomited upon Brazil at a plastic and assimilable age, and I spent the last thirty years of my life in search of myself in Brazil, and in search of Brazil within myself.\(^{72}\)

What Flusser glosses over in his “Philosophical Self-Portrait” is the lack of a formal education caused by the timing of his exile from Prague. He never obtained an advanced degree,

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\(^{71}\) Flusser interview with Patrik Tschudin in *The Freedom of the Migrant*, 92.

\(^{72}\) Flusser, *Writings*, 198.
even if he “lived philosophically.”

Gustavo Bernardo Krause describes Flusser’s philosophy, which developed mostly outside the academy, as “street philosophy.” It is “as rigorous as the best academic philosophy, but it is as poetic and clear as the best street philosophy, that is, the philosophy that lives outside of the academic ivory tower.” As he recovered from the trauma of the war, Flusser read through Kafka, Camus, José Ortega y Gasset, and Nietzsche. Nonetheless, “My salvation was Kant, my catharsis in every crisis” and he devoured “Cassirer, Cohen, Hartmann, the entire Marburg School,” until he decided that, “my central problem was going to be language.” With this in mind, he read the writings of the Viennese School, Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger – but not the French: “Saussure did not impress me.” Andreas Ströhl argues that “Flusser saw himself as an Old European, especially when he was in Brazil” and that his texts “have less in common with those of Marshall McLuhan or Jean Baudrillard than with those of Edmund Husserl or Martin Buber.” Flusser rarely mentions other thinkers in his writings, but his work contains references to Hannah Arendt, Franz Werfel, Kafka, and Wittgenstein, as well as traces of Thomas Kuhn, Marshall McLuhan, Albert Einstein and Werner

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73 Ibid.


75 Flusser, Writings, 199-200.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Ströhl, “Introduction” to Flusser’s Writings, x.
Heisenberg. Ströhl singles out Husserl and Buber as the largest influences on Flusser’s thinking.\(^79\)

Rafael Cardoso also argues for the importance of European Enlightenment thinking for Flusser and, moreover places Flusser in a somewhat inflated place within that lineage, as “arguably, the last representative of the grand tradition of critical analysis that dominated European thinking—and, especially, the German-speaking portion of it—between the late eighteenth and twentieth centuries.”\(^80\) For Cardoso this stretches from Kant to Adorno and includes Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, with the unifying feature being “a belief in Reason as an instrument of investigation and evaluation”—although Flusser himself would often critique the ideas of reason and rationality, arguing that they resulted, ultimately, in “rational” apparatuses of destruction, like Auschwitz.

However, these arguments seem to entirely ignore the effect Brazil had on Flusser, which he describes in the “Philosophical Self-Portrait”: “My German culture persisted, but gained a new coloring: he who dwelled within the nucleus of myself was my enemy.”\(^81\) Flusser was not, in his estimation, the “classic” immigrant who crosses the border of one culture and enters another, but a migrant and a nomad. He writes in “The Brazilian Language”:

> When I came to Brazil I did not have my own culture within me, I was in limbo. So I did not experience the Brazilian culture as a border culture, but I considered it one among many above which I hovered. I had never been a “classic” immigrant … In the case of my own experience of Brazilian culture, the Portuguese language took center stage for the simple reason that I had decided in its favor when I decided to become active in Brazil. It meant that I experienced this language predominantly as rough material, challenging me to work with and change it in a way so that this change may transform me and bring me into contact with others. That is, I experienced the Portuguese language as a

\(^79\) Ibid., xi.

\(^80\) Rafael Cardoso, “Devil may care,” *Flusser Studies* 7: 1.

challenge and a life-task.\textsuperscript{82}

Flusser also started to see in the Brazilians themselves a reflection of his condition, particularly of his own rootlessness since he realized later about Brazil, “the great majority of the population lived a seminomadic existence during the 1950s, following the harvests in misery, hunger, and disease.”\textsuperscript{83}

It is interesting to note that Flusser begins the essay “The Brazilian Language” by starting at the end of his period of perceived exile, as if hoping to minimize or erase the horror and trauma of those years. The first sentences of the essay read: “Towards the end of the 1940s the first real contact with Brazilian culture was complete. This step was determined by the decision to become active in this culture. One wanted to grasp it as thoroughly as possible, not only to absorb it but also in order to act within it. This is an atypical way of getting in touch with another culture.”\textsuperscript{84} But his first encounters with the intellectual culture in Brazil were jarring. While on the one hand he found “many forms of voodoo, spiritism, irresponsible lofty talk, and attitudes copied third hand,” there was also amongst the Brazilian intelligentsia a “formalistic sterility” filled with “Positivisms, scholasticism, Marxisms, academisms, and formalistic preciosities à la brésilienne.”\textsuperscript{85}

Flusser’s opinions sound like the prejudice of a European exile, but were echoed by native Brazilians. In a paper from the early forties titled “Some Considerations on the Problem of

\textsuperscript{82} Flusser, “The Brazilian Language,” \textit{Flusser Studies} 3: 2-3.


\textsuperscript{84} Flusser, “The Brazilian Language,” 1.

\textsuperscript{85} Flusser, \textit{Writings}, 200. Raimundo de Farias Brito (1862-1917) was a Brazilian scholar, philosopher, and educator.
Philosophy in Brazil,” Afranjo Coutinho, an instructor of philosophy in Bahia wrote that, “one cannot speak of a Brazilian philosophy or of Brazilian philosophers as distinguished from thinkers. We have neither. We have not even a philosophical mind. Our creative capacity expresses itself in poetry and music, both of them having been elevated in our country to the highest level of greatness.” Coutinho’s argument was repeated frequently in later decades as liberation movements swept across the globe and multiculturalism and postcolonial theory pervaded academia: “The creation of a Brazilian philosophy depends on our total behavior and culture, which depend, in turn, on the general condition of our civilization. With a colonial status of civilization we can have only a colonial mentality, which is not the ideal mentality for building a creative philosophy.” Coutinho describes the adoption of French Positivism in Brazil, particularly amongst the military, which I will take up later in relation to the military coup of 1964 and the subsequent dictatorship. He also considers Farias Brito, whom Flusser mentions in his biographical essay, and discusses how Brito was adopted by Catholic thinkers in reaction to Positivistic, nationalistic ones, underscoring Flusser’s misgivings.

And yet, if Coutinho approached Brazilian philosophy as a skeptical native, and colonized subject, Flusser, while finding the “Brazilian scene” lacking, also identified places of entry for a migrant and exile, a young man without a degree, educating himself outside a formal institutional structure. Decades later, using the language of information and media theory, he wrote about Brazil:

The network being woven remained open. For example, the philosophical institute in which Italian students of Croce, German Heidegger scholars, Portuguese


87 Ibid.
followers of Ortega, Jewish positivists from Eastern Europe, Belgian Catholics, and Anglo-Saxon pragmatists took part had to open itself up to Japanese students of Zen Buddhism, a Lebanese mystic, and a Chinese literary scholar, and it had to make room for a Talmudist from Western Europe as well.\textsuperscript{88}

One need only look at Flusser’s “traveling library” on view in his archive in Berlin—actually his personal library, but jokingly called the “traveling library” by Edith Flusser, because they moved around so much in the sixties and seventies—to see a reflection of this range of thought. I will return to this argument later: Flusser’s status as a German or European versus Brazilian thinker—really, perhaps, a post-national thinker whose thought is reflected in the multiple languages he wrote in and the technological media he gravitated toward later in his career. First, however, I will look at the texts he wrote in the fifties before coming into significant contact with the intellectual community in São Paulo.

**Manuscripts from the Fifties**

In 1950 Flusser moved briefly with his family to Rio de Janeiro for work. The same year he began exchanging letters with Alex Bloch\textsuperscript{89} and wrote a manuscript, in German, now lost, on the history of ideas in the eighteenth-century.\textsuperscript{90} In a letter dated August 27, 1951 to the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University in New York Flusser wrote that he was impressed by “the inability of recent philosophy to digest the imminent, or even accomplished, downfall of European civilization.” He added, “the eighteenth century seems to be at the same


\textsuperscript{89} See *Briefe an Alex Bloch* [Letters to Alex Bloch], Edith Flusser and Klaus Sander, eds. (Göttingen: European Photography Verlag, 2000). The first letter in this book is dated January 8, 1951, written while Flusser was in Rio. The archive dates the correspondence back to 1950.

time the climax and the beginning of the decline of European civilization and I am therefore planning a book on 18th century thought as seen from our present position."91 Clearly, however, the concern of that manuscript was Flusser’s own position in the world and how to frame his argument within that experience. The letter continues:

Ever since my arrival in Brazil, my contact with recent philosophy has been restricted to reading. In view of this country’s remoteness from events and the smallness of the philosophically interested public there is, to my knowledge, no chance in this country for a critical appraisal of my thinking and for an eventual publication of the book I am planning.92

Flusser suggested that the introduction of the manuscript could be published as a discrete essay, and although it was written in German, he could have it translated into English. There is no record of a response. Flusser would continue to lament Brazil’s lack of vitality as an intellectual center, although he could also switch gears and be optimistic. In 1952 he wrote to his cousin David Flusser (né Gustav Flusser), who had settled in Jerusalem and eventually became a renowned religious scholar, praising São Paulo:

The city is developing into something incredible, it is reaching the 3,000,000 [sic] mark this year. When we came here in 1940 it had 1,200.00. It has surpassed Rio and is approaching Buenos Aires very quickly to become the largest city of the Southern hemisphere. They are finishing fifteen buildings every day, including three skyscrapers. It looks quite like any big time US city [Flusser had not yet been to the United States] only more modern. Nonetheless the way of life has a Latin contonation [sic] (50% of the population are of Italian origin, 20% of Portuguese origin) and although they work as much as the Americans, they do it with more grace and savoir vivre.93

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91 Letter from Flusser to Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, August 27, 1951. Flusser Archive, English correspondence binder 53, number 83.

92 Ibid.

93 Letter from Vilém Flusser to David Flusser, July 17, 1952. Flusser Archive, David Flusser correspondence.
Flusser would write two more books in German before switching to Portuguese. In 1957 he wrote The Twentieth Century, a manuscript with a similar thrust to the earlier one, but with a more sweeping scope. Unpublished and rarely mentioned in the literature, the manuscript, just over two hundred pages, includes a subtitle: “Attempt at a subjective synthesis.” A few lines below this, on the cover page, is the phrase “Ex Ponto.” This could refer to Ovid’s first-century C.E. *Epistulae ex Ponto*, “Letters from the Sea”—in Ovid’s case, the Black Sea where the poet was exiled. The table of contents and bibliography are some of the most vivid and concise illustrations of Flusser’s range. The table of contents lists headings in this order:

“Politics” (“Rome,” “Byzantium,” “Babel,” “India” and the “Far East”); then “Society,” “Clergy,” “Nobility,” “The City,” “Science,” “Worldview of Magic,” “Worldview of Science,” “Retrospective of the Scientific Worldview,” “Worldview of the Vedanta [Upanishads],” “Resume of Science”; and headings devoted to “Art,” “Philosophy” and “Religion.” Following the table of contents, the manuscript is divided into short sections, some only a few paragraphs.

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94 I obtained the manuscript, *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert*, in PDF form from Michael Hanke, Associate Professor for Communication Sciences at the Federal State University in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in December 2013. A copy was also uploaded to the Chilean website http://www.flusserestudios.cl, but cannot be accessed from the United States.

95 For instance, it is not mentioned in Oliver Bidlo’s *Vilém Flusser: Einführung* [Vilém Flusser: Introduction] (Essen: Oldib Verlag, 2008). Bidlo starts with *Language and Reality* instead.

96 Actually “Ein Versuch einer subjektiven Synthese,” although the “Ein” is crossed out with three short hatch marks on the manuscript.

which would prefigure Flusser’s predilection for the short essay, and which he honed just a few years later when he became a newspaper columnist.\footnote{It should be noted that Flusser’s newspaper writing in Brazil was more along the lines of the French feuilleton form developed for literary supplements, or Roland Barthes’ short essays für \textit{Lettres Nouvelles}, later published as \textit{Mythologies} (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957). Another comparison might be Clarice Lispector’s \textit{crônicas}, originally published in the Saturday edition of the \textit{Jornal do Brasil} from August 1967 to December 1973 and later published as the collection \textit{A Descoberta do mundo: crônicas} (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1999), and in English as \textit{Selected Crônicas} (New York: New Directions, 1992).}

The bibliography of \textit{The Twentieth Century} is also interesting, for two reasons: one is that it demonstrates Flusser reading in multiple languages: primarily German, English, and French. The second reason is that Flusser only included bibliographies in his early manuscripts; in later essays and books, references had to be deduced by the reader and Flusser often quoted (or slightly misquoted) texts and authors without citation. The bibliography here includes a short notation stating that the books below functioned as “raw material” which Flusser believed influenced him “primarily in principle.”\footnote{“Die Synthese, die in diesem Buche angestrebt wurde, schöpft ihr Material nicht sum mindesten aus Büchern. Um dem Leser eine notgedrungen begrenzte Idee von diesem Rohmaterial zu geben, um dem Autor bis zu einem gewissen Grade den Rücken zu decken, führen wir in der Folge einige jener Werke an, von denen er glaubt, dass sie ihn grundsätzlich beeinflusst haben,” Flusser, \textit{Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert}, 215.} Even listing the first ten is illuminating because it shows Flusser’s extended reading, from ancient to modern; East to West; from philosophy to psychology and religion; poetry to prose; and even human to animal, which would become important in texts like \textit{Vampyroteuthis infernalis} and the “Curie’s Children” column in \textit{Artforum}, which coincided with developments in biogenetics. The first entries in the bibliography are Gerhard Adler’s \textit{Studies in Analytical Psychology}, published between 1910 and 1965; W.C. Allee’s \textit{The Social Life of Animals} (1938); Franz Altheim’s \textit{Empire at Midnight: Asia’s Road to Europe} (1955); Aristotle’s \textit{Organon}; Arthur Hilary Armstrong’s \textit{Introduction to Ancient Psychology}
Philosophy (1947); Matthew Arnold’s Sohrab und Rustum (1853); Augustine’s Confessions and City of God; Sri Aurobindo’s Le Guide du Yoga (Guide to Yoga) (1955) and Trois Upanishads (Three Upanishads), first published between 1910 and 1920.¹⁰⁰

The text begins in a signature manner for Flusser, looking back to ancient civilizations and connecting them with the present:

Every period has the feeling of standing at a crossroads. Historical perspective deceives us, though, so that we believe events periodically roll off in obedience to their own laws and we believe we must distinguish between times of decay. That alone makes it possible to speak from an understanding of history. If we could not distinguish turning points in the story, they seem to us an amorphous process and it would actually not make sense to speak of an understanding.¹⁰¹

Flusser thinks in broad terms about historical epochs and the possibility of synthesizing them. (It makes sense that history would be significant for a writer who, some twenty years later, would write a text called Post-History.) The idea of rupture is also central to his argument. He is looking at large trajectories: the rise and fall of civilizations, chaos and barbarism,¹⁰² the rise of

¹⁰⁰ They appear in the bibliography as follows, except that I have listed them in a continuous text rather than separate lines: Adler G: Studies in Analytical Psychology; Allee [sic], W.C.: The Social Life of Animals; Altheim F.: Reich gegen Mitternacht; Aristoteles: Organon; Armstrong A.: Introduction to Ancient Philosophy; Arnold M.: Sohrab und Rustum; Augustin: Confessions; City of God; Aurobindo S: Le Guide du Yoga; Trois Upanishads. Some of them, more specifically, are Franz Altheim’s Reich gegen Mitternacht: Asiens Weg nach Europa (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1955); Arthur Hilary Armstrong’s Introduction to Ancient Philosophy (London: Methuen, 1947); and Sri Aurobindo’s Le Guide du Yoga (1955) and Trois Upanishads (first published between 1910 and 1920; Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2001).


¹⁰² Flusser, Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert, 15-18.
logic and pragmatism.\textsuperscript{103} He quotes—in English and without citation—“The Rubaiyat” of Persian poet Omar Khayyam: “Shatter it to bits and then remould [sic] it nearer to the heart’s desire,”\textsuperscript{104} mirroring both what had happened in recent Western culture and in his own life in Prague. There is a sense of purpose embedded within his nihilism, however. At the end of the introduction he writes that the point of traveling through history and witnessing its failures is “to uncover the sources of our age.”\textsuperscript{105}

During this period Flusser also wrote a German manuscript titled \textit{The History of the Devil} and translated it into Portuguese. Neither of these texts—the German or Portuguese versions of \textit{The History of the Devil}—would be published in the fifties, although the Portuguese version was published as his second book, in 1965.\textsuperscript{106} Clearly, this was a transitional period for Flusser, as he shifted from writing in German to Portuguese. However, he was still doing business during the day and philosophy at night. In 1959, he became a director of the Stabivolt, the transistor factory where he had worked throughout the fifties—in retrospect a fitting day job for a thinker who would end up theorizing technology and new media, but it wasn’t until the early 1960s that he began to make contact with members of the Brazilian philosophical community.

\textbf{The Philosophical Self-Portrait: João Guimarães Rosa}

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 18-20.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{105} “die Quellen unserer Zeit.” Flusser, \textit{Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert}, 12.

If history and “rupture” were Flusser’s focus in the fifties, in the late fifties and early sixties his interest shifted to language. In an essay titled “In Search of Meaning (Philosophical Self-portrait)” written in the late sixties, Flusser describes the development of his thought. In “First productive phase”—he’s vague about dates, but uncharacteristically specific with his references—he writes that he began “to read systematically about language,” focusing on the Vienna School, Bertrand Russell, and Wittgenstein. He was reading them in a new way, however, resulting from his reading of Heidegger. (He was not, to reiterate, interested in French thought: “Saussure did not impress me.”) He also mentions Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Goethe, and Thomas Mann, calling them the “great masters of language,” along with his “two most important influences,” Kafka and Rilke, whom he places alongside Wittgenstein and Heidegger:

Kafka, the ascetic, and Rilke the orgy of language. Kafka, like Wittgenstein, the relentless revealer of the phoniness of language, in order to clear the way toward the sacred purity of the fundamental silence of language. Rilke, like Heidegger, the prophet, revealing the mystery that dwells in language.

One of the first essays Flusser published in the literary supplement of the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo was “Prague, City of Kafka” in 1961. But if the first productive phase underscores the argument for Flusser as a European thinker, in the next section Flusser writes

107 Writings, 197-208.

108 Ibid., 201.

109 In the next paragraph Flusser describes how music led back to philosophy: “Following that model, I dove, as if spontaneously, into the ocean of music, the world of records. For reasons I cannot explain, Mozart took hold of me violently. I felt his almost superhuman perfection in the effort to overcome human despair. And this dive of mine into music returned me to Schopenhauer, so anti-Mozart and yet so language become music and music become language. ‘Was er sagte ist vertan, was er war, das bleibt bestahn. Seht ihn nur an! Niemand war er Untertan’ [Whatever he said is gone, whatever he was remains. Just look at him! He was inferior to nobody] (Nietzsche). I wrote Lingua e realidade trying to say all this.” Flusser, Writings, 202.

110 Sander, Sources, 14.
that “Brazil opened itself up to me through gigantic windows: Guimarães Rosa and Vincente Ferreira da Silva. My two great Brazilian masters and (dare I say it myself?) my two friends—dead, both of them.”¹¹¹ Ferreira da Silva seems like a logical reference point, since he was a philosopher.¹¹² But Flusser writes, “I recognized in Guimarães Rosa all my linguistic commitment on a grandiose level. Sagarana and Corps du Ballet, and especially The Devil to Pay in the Backlands, are like demonstrations in fieri of my theses in Lingua e realidade.”¹¹³

João Guimarães Rosa was a medical doctor, diplomat, and writer whose opus Grande Sertão: Veredas (The Devil to Pay in the Backlands), published in 1956, is often compared to James Joyce’s Ulysses or Alfred Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz for its experimentation with language and narrative, as well as its length: over five-hundred pages with no chapter divisions. How close Flusser was to Guimarães Rosa is uncertain. Unlike his friendly relations with Milton Vargas, who would become a longtime correspondent, a letter in the Flusser Archive shows Flusser addressing Guimarães Rosa with the rather formal “Dear Ambassador” (“Caro embaixador”).¹¹⁴ By comparison, Flusser addressed his letters to Vargas, “my dear friend” (“Meu caro amigo”).

¹¹¹ Flusser, Writings, 203.


¹¹⁴ Letter from Flusser to Guimarães Rosa, January 28, 1964, Flusser Archive, Portuguese correspondence, number 15.
Nonetheless, there are many similarities between the two and one can see retrospectively how Guimarães Rosa was an important model for Flusser. Guimarães Rosa was fluent in Portuguese, German, French, and English. (He also knew Esperanto, Spanish, and some Russian.) Moreover, Guimarães Rosa played fearlessly with narrative form, in the same way Flusser would develop a signature short essay style. Flusser wrote two essays on the essay genre, one of which, “Essays,” explained it thusly:

The essay is not merely the articulation of a thought, but of a thought as a point of departure for a committed existence. The essay vibrates with the tension of the fight between thought and life, and between life and death, that Unamuno called ‘agony.’ Because of this the essay does not resolve its topic as the treatise does. It does not explain its topic, so in this sense it does not inform its readers. On the contrary, it transforms its topic into an enigma. It makes itself in the topic and in its readers. This is what makes it attractive.

*Sagarana* (1946), Guimarães Rosa’s first significant book, was a fairly straightforward fictional outing: a collection of short stories about the people of the *sertão* or backlands of Minas Gerais state, where he was born. But his next book, *Corpo de Baile* (1956) was originally published as seven novellas in two volumes divided up into what Guimarães Rosa called “poems” and “novellas,” and the second edition was published as one volume later divided into three books. His opus, *Grande Sertão: Veredas (The Devil to Pay in the Backlands)*, also published in 1956, and which might be more literally translated as “The Great Wilderness: Paths,” follows a former gunrunner, Riobaldo, who recounts to a silent doctor his exploits as well as his affair with Diadorim, the only daughter of a bandit farmer—and his arrangement with the devil to sell his soul in order to avenge the killing of a comrade. One must remember that Flusser

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116 Quoted in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction*, 17 and Flusser, *Writings*, 194. Later in this essay Flusser points out how Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is a treatise rather than an essay and cites another author known for blurring genres: Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), the Spanish essayist, novelist, and Nobel Peace Prize winner.
would write *The History of the Devil* during this period, in 1957 and 1958, shortly after the publication of *Grande Sertão*. The posthumously published collection *Tutaméia* (1967) by Guimarães Rosa also shifted between the idea of *estoria* (story) versus *historia* (history) and *Palavra* [*Bird/Word*] (1970) is even more heterogeneous, with an emphasis on language more than narrative.

Even more important perhaps than their formal and stylistic innovations was Guimarães Rosa’s approach to translation.¹¹⁷ Guimarães Rosa was intimately involved with the commissioning of translators, utilizing his diplomatic skills (he was in the Brazilian diplomatic service in Germany during the war) to manage the translations, assist publishers in commissioning translators, and corresponding with each of his major translators, often fostering a sense of urgency and competition.¹¹⁸ Piers Armstrong writes that *Grande Sertão: Veredas* was a “virtually unique” case in world literature in its “pedigree of translators” and the richness of dialogue between writer and translator.¹¹⁹ Guimarães Rosa’s approach to translation was aesthetic and philosophical—but also pragmatic. Translation was crucial to a Latin American author attempting to enter the global conversation and Guimarães Rosa developed a logistic strategy for dissemination outside Brazil with each translation conceived in terms of his “apprehension of the cultural more than the linguistic possibilities of the target community”: the English translation would address the international market while the philosophically rich German

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¹¹⁸ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 66.
version would provide a master model for other translations and the Italian one would provide a “spiritual affinity” with Latinate cultures.\textsuperscript{120}

Guimarães Rosa’s work was already considered exotic within Brazil because he was translating languages and modes of living from his native region to other Brazilian readers. But if “universals” might be considered fundamental to the language of modernism, Armstrong shifts to the language of the postmodern, using words such as “appropriation” and “pastiche” to address how Guimarães Rosa arrived at an original narrative voice that would make him distinct from his European predecessors. As in the case of Flusser, language was central to his concepts of meaning and truth, two ideas that would be increasingly challenged in the sixties and seventies. What he suggests is that

the writer is attempting to discern a truth, one which is similarly available to the translator, i.e., \textit{that the translator could actually achieve a better version of the truth} (here the pertinent theoretical perspective is Borges’s paradoxical notion of the unfaithfulness of the original to the translation; however, it is important to grasp that the genuinely superstitious Guimarães Rosa stressed metaphysical truth and did not like Borges engage in the notion of many possible substitutions for reality).\textsuperscript{121}

For his part, Flusser removed the middle figure, becoming the translator himself. Writers engaged in concrete poetry, which dominated São Paulo in the sixties and which Flusser mentions periodically in his writing, were also confronted with these difficulties; the issue was

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 70.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 66. Italics mine. By comparison, Walter Benjamin argued that translation was a form rather than a process and that one had to look at the original text to see if it was in fact “translatable.” Benjamin’s emphasis on the “original” and the “translated” text, or “copy,” is also notable in light of his writing on photography and reproducibility. Rather than meaning being created in translation, Benjamin argued, “the task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original.” Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (1921), \textit{Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926}, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 258.
\end{quote}
debated by Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, who coined the term “transcreation” to describe what happens to poetry in translation. But Flusser was already sensitive to issues of language and of Brazil’s cultural “remoteness,” as his letter to Columbia University in 1951 shows. What Guimarães Rosa provided in the fifties perhaps was a cogent model of how language was not just the vehicle for meaning, but how translation itself—like Heidegger’s “way,” which will be discussed later in this dissertation—becomes the creator of meaning.

The Philosophical Self-Portrait: Vicente Ferreira da Silva and Philosophy in Brazil

The other “giant” Flusser mentions in the essay “In Search of Meaning: Philosophical Self-Portrait” is Vicente Ferreira da Silva, a philosopher credited with bringing Heidegger to Brazil, but with whom Flusser often clashed around his negative views of nature and technology. Vicente’s wife, Dora Ferreira da Silva, was a poet who started the magazines


Dialogue in 1950 and Cavalo Azul in the late sixties. (The sixth issue of Cavalo Azul was actually devoted to Heidegger and Flusser contributed the essay “The Soul Sold.”)\(^{124}\) From the vantage of the late sixties, Flusser writes: “To think that Vicente Ferreira da Silva lived in my next neighborhood during the terrible war period and during the years of anxiety that followed it, and that I did not meet him is a nightmare. Had I known Vicente in 1940, my way would have been different. And had he known me, this I believe with all my heart, he, and with him Brazilian culture, would have changed at least a little.”\(^{125}\)

Flusser refers here presumably to some of Ferreira da Silva’s ideas, like the Brazilian’s rejection of nature in his philosophy. But while Ferreira da Silva is often cited for introducing Heidegger to Brazil, it is important to consider him within the greater scope of Latin American philosophy.\(^{126}\) Broadly speaking, twentieth century Latin American philosophy grew out of a tradition that had roots in Mesoamerican and Pre-Columbian culture, including the Aztec, Mayan, and Incan peoples, mixed with earlier ideologies and reactions against colonialism, slavery, and independence. On the one hand, despite the “utter silence about Latin American philosophy and philosophers” in world-historical narratives, various strains of European thought actually reached South America before they reached North America, due to the forced exile of


\(^{125}\) Flusser, Writings, 203.

European intellectuals during the 1930s and 1940s.\textsuperscript{127} It has also been argued that there can be no such thing as Latin American philosophy because it only reflected the interests of colonial and neocolonial empires.\textsuperscript{128} But the effects of colonialism and slavery on Brazilian philosophy were often very specific. Writing in the early 1960s, Arthur W. Munk pointed out that Auguste Comte’s nineteenth century positivism was strong in Brazil, whose flag actually bears the motto, ‘Order and Progress.’\textsuperscript{129} Writing nearly half a century later, Amós Nascimento suggests a more sinister application. The abolition of slavery in 1888 led to the establishment of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, without a civil war, but with no change in the situation of Afro-Brazilians, who became the poor and migrated to cities. The positivistic influence in the military academy at the turn of the century taught a brand of scientific syncretism which supported disciplines, such as phrenology, eugenics, anthropometry, craniology, criminalism, and ethnology, and followed a Darwinistic determinism in order to establish a hierarchy of the races and arrive at the synthesis


\textsuperscript{128} Mendieta, \textit{Latin American Philosophy}, 2. Also see Jorge J.E. Gracia, \textit{Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective} (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999) and Amós Nascimento, “Colonialism, Modernism, and Postmodernism in Brazil” in Mendieta, \textit{Latin American Philosophy}, 124-49. Nascimento is succinct: “Brazil was a Portuguese colony starting in 1500, declared its independence from Portugal in 1822 to become the first and only monarchy in the Americas, and adopted the status of a republic through a coup d’état in 1889. Over this period, American Natives were slaughtered (1500-50), Africans were brought as slaves (circa 1550-1850), and the poor and undesirables were expelled from Europe to become colonists in an immigration wave that lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century (broadly, 1800-1900). Therefore, four out of the last five centuries of history have been marked by violent forms or aspects of colonialism such as genocide, slavery, and expatriation. This confirms that it is necessary to amplify our understanding of colonialism, instead of limiting it to a given crystallized period” (129-130). For a detailed study on the ideology of colonialism in Brazil, he suggests Nelson Werneck Sodré’s \textit{A Ideologia do Colonialismo} (Rio de Janeiro: Vozes, 1984).

\textsuperscript{129} Arthur W. Munk, “The Spirit of Latin American Philosophy,” \textit{Ethics} 72, no. 3 (April, 1962), 197.
of “racial perfectibility.” Philosophy and literature became instruments of this synthesis, aimed at purifying the blood of the nation and searching for an “ideal Brazilian.”

Twentieth-century Brazilian philosophy was marked by a backlash against positivism and a revalorization of Thomas Aquinas in Catholic universities, as well as the influence of philosophers exiled from Spain after the fall of the Spanish Republic and the writings of José Ortega y Gasset. The question of whether Latin Americans were merely adopting European ideas or forging their own forms led to a process of critical self-examination, which continues to be debated. However, what many of these Latin American thinkers shared with Flusser was the reality of migration and dislocation. Similarly, the question always arises: How could Flusser, whose family had perished in the holocaust, embrace an avowed Nazi like Heidegger? As Ofelia Schutte points out, “Heidegger, despite his Nazi leanings, offered a strong critique of technology and European modernity, thereby distancing himself from certain core elements of the Eurocentrist historical project.” And there were Latin American thinkers such as Paulo Freire who took European philosophy and employed it to radical and revolutionary ends.


133 “In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire explains the methodology and philosophy of his new teaching strategy. He had read Fanon, along with the Western Continental canon of the sixties (when his book was first published)—Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, Althusser, Buber. A Christian, Freire had also read the New Testament, along with the work of Marxists, including Third World Marxists, and developed a Christian interpretation integrating some of the keenest insights of his sources. He intended his book to serve as a handbook for revolutionary leadership. Devoted to empowering the people as they became engaged in a process of popular education, it was received throughout the developing world as a tool of liberation. In 1964, Freire was
allies were much less radical, however. In Vicente Ferreira da Silva, Flusser saw “the same Wittgenstein and the same Heidegger, the same Rilke and the same Kafka, the same thirst and the same search. Yet everything different.” It was European ideas, “seen now not from within, which was my vision, but from outside: his vision.”

Ferreira da Silva was radical in one sense, though: he was rebelling from the scholasticism of academic Brazilian philosophy and working in the analytical vein, adopting existentialism, as well as the phenomenology introduced to Brazil by another Flusser associate, Miguel Reale. And he was Flusser’s entry into Brazilian intellectual circles.

Two other figures need to be mentioned in conjunction with Flusser’s entry into Brazilian philosophy: Miguel Reale, a co-founder of the quarterly Revista Brasileira Filosofia (1951) and the Instituto Brasileiro de Filosofia (IBF) where Flusser would deliver his first lectures in linguistic philosophy in 1960; and Milton Vargas, an electrical engineer and another member of the Institute. In an oft-cited passage from Bodenlos, Vargas remembered the first time he met Flusser, at da Silva’s house:

Vicente, who had introduced Heidegger’s philosophy to Brazil, his wife Dora who was already a quite well-known poet, and I were deeply in conversation when someone knocked at the door. It was a peculiar young man, bald already back then, with a sharp nose and impressive glasses. He was completely unknown to us. Confidently, he introduced himself and said that he was looking for people imprisoned by the Brazilian authorities on account of his freedom-oriented thinking, his solidarity with humble folk, and his subversion of authoritarian thinking.” Schutte, “Continental Philosophy and Postcolonial Subjects,” 158.

Flusser, Writings, 203.

with whom he could exchange ideas. He added that São Paulo was a desert devoid of people and ideas.\(^{136}\)

Through this circle, in 1959 Flusser started lecturing on the “Philosophy and Evolution of Science” at Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and was invited to participate in the circle of Instituto Brasileiro de Filosofia (IBF) [Brazilian Institute of Philosophy], in 1962. In 1961 he began publishing in the newspapers Estado de São Paulo and Folha de São Paulo—and later, in 1966, in the German newspapers Merkur and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung—and began honing his short-essay form. The breadth of the subject matter in the Estado de São Paulo essays is impressive, ranging from language and translation to nature, Judaism, art, migration, and philosophy and ideas that would be developed in longer texts, like the Devil, programs, doubt, and the essay form itself.\(^{137}\) Additionally, in 1962 Flusser began giving philosophical lectures every Wednesday afternoon in his home for the fellow students of his daughter, Dinah, who helped publish his text, “Prague, City of Kafka” in the literary supplement of O Estado de São Paulo.\(^ {138}\) In 1963 he was hired to lecture in Communication Theories at the University of São Paulo, delivering a series of lectures titled “Philosophy of Language.” This is not to say that in the early sixties Flusser was wholly committed to Brazil. In 1962 Flusser wrote to Professor Lionel Ruby of the American Philosophical Association that Brazil was at once “stimulating and

\(^{136}\) Quoted in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vilém Flusser: An Introduction, 19.

\(^{137}\) The most comprehensive list of O Estado essays can be found in Sander, Sources, 154-157. Many of the essays were later published in Vilém Flusser, Da Religiosidade (São Paulo: Conselho Estadual de Cultura, 1967), Lob der Oberflächlichkeit. Für eine Phänomenologie der Medien, eds. Stefan Bollmann and Edith Flusser (Bensheim and Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1993), Medienkultur, ed. Stefan Bollmann (Frankfurt, Germany: Fischer, 1997), and Ficções Filosóficas (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1998).

frustrating” because it was divided into two rival camps, the Marxist and the Catholic.\footnote{Letter from Flusser to Lionel Ruby, November 2, 1962, quoted in Anke Finger, “Introduction,” \textit{Freedom of the Migrant}, vii.}

Moreover, he was still seeking a job, despite the fact that American institutions are “extremely degree conscious” and “I hold no degree, having left my home, Prague, when it was occupied by the Nazis, at the age of twenty.”\footnote{Ibid., xvii-xviii.} In December 1962 he received a predictable reply: it would be “extremely difficult” to obtain a teaching position without a degree. By this time, however, Flusser had already begun building a career based on a body of work written in Portuguese and published in Brazil.

\textit{Language and Reality}


140 Ibid., xvii-xviii.


suggest, the book posits the idea that everything is linguistic: knowledge, truth, and reality. Language gives form to reality and creates reality, but since there are different languages, and their structures vary, the realities created by them are different.

If there seem to be overlaps with contemporary French philosophy here—with structuralism, but also with Barthes’ *Mythologies* and other texts from the period—Michael Hanke argues that Flusser’s assertion of an ontological structure to language in *Language and Reality* leads to an ontology translated as reality, but one that is predicated on “German philosophy tied to the German language (i.e., Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche).” Hanke points to the list of European thinkers that Flusser mentions at the back of *Language and Reality*: the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen; Fritz Mauthner’s *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901-02); Max Black’s *Language and Philosophy* (1949); Nicolai Hartmann’s *In the Structure of the Real World* (1940) and *The Foundation of Ontology* (1935); Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (1900-01); Ernst Cassirer’s three volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923, 1925, 1932).

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143 For a concise abstract of *Language and Reality*, see Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction*, xx.


1925, 1929); Bertrand Russell and Alfred Whitehead’s three volume *Principia Mathematica* (1910, 1912, 1913); Wilhelm Dilthey’s *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (1910); and Heidegger’s *Off the Beaten Track* (1935-36).\(^{146}\) Nonetheless, Europe was seen by many thinkers to be a civilization in decline after fascism and a series of devastating wars, and Brazil represented, in Hanke’s words, a “‘kind of laboratory for Flusser's media philosophy.”\(^{147}\)

But where is the media? Following the introduction, the next section in *Language and Reality* begins:

> Our age is characterized by a mania for statistics. Tables, curves and scores invade the scientific and para-scientific literature, proof that we are a generation of accountants engaged in taking an inventory of the world. Data is being compiled and compared, to be computed. We are a generation of accountants who are about to be transformed into a line of computers. The goal seems to be an Electronic Superbrain, devouring ”data” and excreting statistics. We lack, however, a basic statistics: what elements make up the sum of the ”data”?\(^{148}\)

Rather than an Old World philosopher, Flusser sounds here like a new media theorist. Using the tools of European philosophy, however, Flusser treats information as language. The book argues that we are confronted with chaos in the form of “raw data” (*dados brutos*), and that in order to create meaning and order, we must structure this data—which is where language comes in. Language is what we inherited from earlier generations and what connects us;


\(^{147}\) Hanke, “Vilém Flussers Sprache und Wirklichkeit,” 2.

conversation (conversação) is the essence of language and communication—something that will be increasingly stressed in his later writings, particularly formulated as Martin Buber’s “dialogic” thinking—and the structure of language, articulated through systems like philosophy, religion, science, and art are what create “reality.” Within this, however, are various forms and uses of language: prayer and mathematics, which foregrounds abstract and symbolic structures.

As Hanke points out, Flusser doesn’t explicitly examine new media in Language and Reality, or in a subsequent text, Philosophy of Language (1966). And Language and Reality was not warmly embraced in all quarters. But it contains the seeds of Flusser’s media theory in which language was the entry point, even if Flusser himself later rejected the term “media philosopher” and stressed that during this period, from 1961 to 1965, he taught philosophy of science and was more interested in communication structures like art. (His first academic lecturing in Brazil was on the “Philosophy and Evolution of Science” in 1959 at the Universidade de São Paulo [USP] in 1959.) Language and Reality would also help establish Flusser professionally: in 1964, he was appointed Professor of Communication Theories in the Faculty for Communication and Humanities of Fundação A.A. Penteado (FAAP) in São Paulo, a position he would hold until 1970. The same year, 1964, he became co-editor of the Revista Brasileira de Filosofia.

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150 Hanke includes a survey of the book’s reception, with critics attacking it as “linguistic solipsism” (Anatol Rosenfeld) or “wrong from beginning to end” (Oswaldo Marques, 1968), but occasionally praising its poetic language and “ludic philosophy.” Hanke, “Vilém Flussers Sprache und Wirklichkeit,” 12-16.

151 Ibid., 18-19. Hanke cites a 1988 interview with Marion Picker on July 17, 1988 in Cologne. By the time of that interview Flusser had been an advisor to the São Paulo Biennial and was writing for Artforum, so his ties with the art world were significant and fertile.
The History of the Devil, “On Doubt,” and Of Religiosity

In the introduction to his recent English translation of The History of the Devil, Rodrigo Maltez Novaes writes that, when Flusser left Prague in March 1939, he took two books with him: a small Jewish prayer book his mother gave him at the last minute and a copy of Goethe’s Faust. The latter was a prime inspiration for Guimarães Rosa’s Grande Sertão and Flusser would write the first version of The History of the Devil, in German, in 1958, shortly after reading Grande Sertão. Seven years later, in 1965, he translated Die Geschichte des Teufels into Portuguese and published it as his second book, A História da Diabo. At first glance, the book seems like a quirky item from his early career. Longer than most of his other books, the writing is generally not as sharp or succinct and the seemingly religious subject matter seems uncharacteristic of Flusser. And yet, the book includes the kernels of many ideas that would occupy him throughout his career: language, writing, history, technology, science (physics and biology in particular), evolution, art, nationalism, magic, and the differences between Eastern and Western thought. Flusser mentions his two “most important influences” in the book—Kafka and Rilke—as well as his Brazilian friends, Guimarães Rosa and Vicente Ferreira da Silva. The greatest conversation, however, is with the Western European philosophical tradition: Descartes and Kant, but more specifically Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and philosophy’s role in a world dramatically altered by science and technology.


153 The German version was published posthumously as Die Geschichte des Teufels (Göttingen, Germany: European Photography, 1996).
Maltez Novaes argues that The History of the Devil essentially replicates Language and Reality’s argument for language as the primary vehicle for the creative human Will, but this time written as an “allegorical philosophy, or philosophical fiction.” The book is organized into chapters named after the Seven Deadly Sins: Lust, Wrath, Gluttony, Envy and Greed, Pride, and “Sloth and the Sadness of the Heart.” The internal organization of these sections once again copies Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: a series of numbered propositions, although the layout is more visual rather than structural. What becomes immediately clear, however, is that Flusser’s text is a subversion. His Devil is a “glorious prince” whose “positive aspects” include his inventing art, science, and philosophy. The Deadly Sins serve as stepping stones, a teleology served up in “layers” that builds an argument about history and the contemporary moment. In the introduction Flusser writes, “Pride is self-awareness. Greed is economy. Lust is instinct (or the affirmation of life). Gluttony is the improvement of the standard of living. Envy is the struggle for social justice and political freedom. Wrath is the refusal to accept the limitations imposed upon the human Will; therefore, it is dignity. Sadness or sloth is the stage reached by calm philosophical meditation.” In the text then, Pride expresses itself in the arts; Greed in the development of economies; Lust as central to evolution, but also producing nationalism, which is “lust elevated to the level of social reality” (remembering, of course, that Flusser would write a series of essays


156 Flusser, The History of the Devil, 2.

157 Ibid., 6.
Gluttony drives the development of technology, instruments and programs; Envy promotes activism on behalf of social and political justice; Wrath gives humans dignity and leads us into science; while Sloth (or sadness) is the highest stage, leading to philosophy.

Science is a primary concern. Nuclear physics is described as “a sin”\(^{159}\) and biology “in crisis,”\(^{160}\) foreshadowing books like *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* in which animals assume similar roles to the ones occupied here by God and the Devil. Flusser’s argument that science has turned nature into technology also prefigures essays he would write for the “Curie’s Children” column in *Artforum*, which speculated on biotechnology.\(^{161}\) The word “magic” also appears, which he would brandish provocatively in his technical image writings. Maltez Novaes writes, “some say Flusser allegedly felt this book had magical qualities and for this reason he would not allow it in his house,” although “this myth is difficult to prove or disprove.”\(^{162}\) In the introduction, Flusser describes his construction of the Seven Deadly Sins as a “magical circle of sins,”\(^{163}\) and in the chapter on Wrath he describes how, in previous centuries, magic opened the door to nature and science. What changed was the attitude toward the supernatural and causality: “magic formulas” have been supplanted by “pure mathematical formulas.”\(^{164}\) In a particularly lyrical passage he

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\(^{158}\) Ibid., 72.

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 44.

\(^{161}\) Ibid., 118.


\(^{164}\) Ibid., 103.
describes “today’s situation” in which the “lustful mass of the sensible world” bubbles purposelessly with the “remains of the world of magic” hovering over it and the “rigid crystals” of mathematical symbols underneath. And yet, an inversion is taking place in which the “crystals are beginning to evaporate into magical fog.”  

Flusser is describing in a sense is the postmodern condition—the rigorous critique of Western rationality and scientific systems—which wouldn’t be labeled as such for at least another decade. But he is also predicting his own use of the term in texts like *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, where he honed his definition of “magic” to the succinct “existence in a world of eternal return”—in contrast to linear history and causal phenomenon. Similarly, he would later distinguish between prehistoric magic, which dealt with myths, and post-historical magic, which deals with programs.

In thinking about language, which was still his primary concern rather than media theory or technical images, Flusser mentions concrete poetry and music as language forms and considers mathematics as a “meta-language,” predicting his later stance in *Does Writing Have a Future?*: that writing would disappear into binary code and images. But the biggest—and most personal—argument is with philosophy. Kant and Descartes serve as backdrops; Flusser mentions them several times, and Descartes would become the foil for his next work, *On Doubt.* But the main interlocutors are figures like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who proclaimed God dead at the end of the previous century, a pronouncement that extended into Existentialism, represented by thinkers like Sartre and Camus. Near the end of the book, Flusser argues that

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165 Ibid., 103-104.

neither God nor the Devil have “disappeared.” Instead, these “twin brothers” might be considered alongside Eastern philosophy and particularly Buddhist teachings (or what Flusser loosely calls “Yoga”). However, there is the concern of dissolving into nothingness when, in the current “systematic revaluation of all values” we achieve the “enlightenment of Samadhi.” The mind becomes emancipated, free of all illusion, until its only support is “the Devil’s trident” and “the paradise of disciplined enlightenment is the rotating skewer, upon which the mind spins.” What is the point of philosophy under these conditions? “We must not philosophize with thirst for knowledge,” Flusser writes, “or with thirst for enlightenment … We must do it in resignation.” Philosophy should be practiced as a game (prefiguring his interest in game theory) and with irony, one of his primary rhetorical weapons. Philosophy becomes a “feast of annihilation,” but its “rigor is authentic,” providing a path which preserves the “last vestiges of hope.”

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168 Ibid., 214.

169 Ibid., 180.

170 Ibid., 202.

171 Ibid., 203-204.

172 Ibid., 204.

173 Ibid., 217. The reception of *The History of the Devil* has been described in contrasting ways. In the essay “In Search of Meaning (Philosophical Self-portrait)” (1969), Flusser writes, “I rewrote *A historia do diabo* in Portuguese to reply to Guimarães Rosa and Vicente Ferreira da Silva. It was published by Livraria Martins Editora and received without echo.” Flusser, *Writings*, 204. Other sources argue that *The History of the Devil* was “amply reviewed in Brazil.” Anke Finger, “Introduction,” *Flusser Studies* 07 (2008): 4. One of the few English accounts is by Laurence Rickels, who compares Flusser’s text to Freud’s musings on the devil. Rickel calls *The History of the Devil* Flusser’s best work “by far,” but “completely out of context with his condensed all-out effort to be recognized many years later” and the only work by Flusser “that
Around the same time, Flusser wrote *On Doubt*, which picks up many threads from *The History of the Devil*. However, where Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were touchstones for *The History of the Devil*, Kant and Descartes are foils in *On Doubt*, which posits a “Critique of Pure Doubt” in contrast to Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” and a challenge to Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* expressed in *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations* (1641). The essay (which mirrors the book version) begins: “Doubt is polyvalent. It means the end of a certainty … that is, inverted certainty. In moderate doses it stimulates thought. In excessive doses it stops the intellect. As an intellectual experience, it is one of the purest pleasures. As a moral experience, it is torture … Doubt is a method that seeks to create inauthentic certainties through the destruction of genuine certainties.” Clearly, here one can see Flusser’s alignment with other postmodern thinkers (Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida) bent on overturning “natural” order and Enlightenment seeks a fit with Freud” (as if psychoanalysis were one of Flusser’s primary concerns). See Laurence Rickels, “The Sound of Satan,” in *The Dreams of Interpretation: A Century Down the Road*, eds. Catherine Liu, John Mowitt, Thomas Pepper and Jakki Spicer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 86. Given Rickels’ cynicism, one wonders if he was pressured to address Flusser, since Rickels’ essay appears in a book published by the press that has published many English translations of Flusser.


reasoning. According to Flusser, the last step in the Cartesian method was to “doubt doubt.” However, this could turn into a nihilistic situation in which “doubt of doubt is the intellect’s suicide”—an unbearable existential situation, which produces meaningless and perhaps the end of philosophy.

Positing On Doubt as a “modest search” within philosophy for “a new sense of reality,” Flusser then sets out to trace the rise of certainty and to undermine Kant and Descartes. In doing so, he revives from The History of the Devil the interest in “Yoga” and Eastern thought, which seeks through meditation to conquer the Will’s drive to intellectualize—that is, to form thoughts. What Descartes ignores, Flusser argues, is that there is a Self that thinks and this Self has other attributes: it wants. Moreover, in our contemporary moment—and this is interesting vis a vis later Flusser—there are also thoughts “mechanically produced by electronic instruments.” This is an aside, however. What Flusser wants to focus on here is the process: how thoughts behave and how they are produced—calling up Husserlian phenomenology, which would become important for him in the next decade with books like


178 Flusser, On Doubt, 7.

179 Ibid., 10.

180 According to Flusser, “Yoga,” as he describes it, is “worth a thousand treatises by Nietzsche or Bergson. It illuminates, in a flash of immediate experience, that which Nietzsche and Bergson intended (inter alia), perhaps without knowing it.” Flusser, On Doubt, 19.

181 Ibid., 23.

182 Ibid.
Thoughts exist in a web—another term that would become crucial as he moved deeper into technology and information theory. The web of thoughts is identical to doubt, and since the intellect as Flusser defines it is “the field in which thoughts occur,” the “intellect is the field of doubt.” Flusser then dips briefly back into his Language and Reality arguments, citing thinkers like Wittgenstein, Carnap, and Dilthey before concluding that the new “science of pure language” is a “discipline yet to be established.” Grammar creates subject and object and a “search for meaning” (which would become the title of a 1969 autobiographical essay), which moves from “partial meaning to partial meaning in search of an unreachable full meaning.”

One of the ways we attempt to produce meaning is by the use of proper names. The proper name is holy; it has been mythologized and become an act of poetry or “verse,” consolidated in the act of conversation. (Moreover, “to reformulate Descartes: ‘I have proper names, therefore I am.’”) But, of course, the Western conversation is one approaching exhaustion and nihilism.

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183 Ibid., 25.

184 The web is defined as “a dynamic set of organizations of concepts that absconds reality in the effort to ultimately reveal it: it is a search for reality that starts by abandoning it.” Flusser, On Doubt, 28. Flusser would also mention communication in similar terms in the essay “Filosofia da Línguagem,” which published in the journal of the Institute for Technology and Aeronautics. See Vilém Flusser’s “Filosofia da Línguagem,” ITA-Humanidades 2 (São José dos Campos, Brazil, 1966): 133-210. For example: “The conversation is a fabric made out of sentences that are connected by links called arguments. It is a flowing fabric, expanding constantly. At certain points in the fabric (it would be better to call them moments) the threads of the arguments cross … the conversation consists of these knots that are tied together by arguments.” Flusser, “Filosofia da Línguagem,” quoted in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vilém Flusser, 34.

185 Flusser, On Doubt, 28.

186 Ibid., 32.

187 Ibid., 48.

188 Ibid., 75.
We are “groundless,” Flusser writes, using a term that will become the title for his autobiography, *Bodenlos*; naming “the thing” (here echoing Heidegger) is a dead end, since we are at a moment when the proper name, the “seed of order,” signifies nothing but itself; Western conversation has become a prayer that “prays about itself”; it has become small talk. The proper name is the hedge against the “all-different”: chaos, or everything that lies outside it. What we need, Flusser argues, is a revaluation of the intellect, a knowledge of our limitations, and to treat Western conversation not as “magical instruments and institutions” designed to conquer, but as an engaged art. What must be sacrificed (again, circling around to *The History of the Devil*) is pride. But it is also a new approach to meaning: as translation, from one language to another, but also “from one layer of meaning to another within the same language.”

Although Flusser would not venture further into Eastern thought—objects, phenomenology, and technical images would provide more fertile ground and a receptive audience—what he identifies in *On Doubt* is prescient. Recognizing the “conquest” nature of Western thought, for him located in proper names and the pride inherent in Kantian and Cartesian thinking, he ends the book with this proclamation: “Let us continue the great adventure that thought is, but let us sacrifice the proud madness of wishing to dominate the all-different with our thought. Let us face the all-different by adoring it, that is, by being doubtful and submissive. In other words, let us once again be thinking beings; let us once again be humans.” To name merely one recent writer and text, Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman* (2013), Flusser’s identification of Western thought’s “pride” echoes Braidotti’s argument of how

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189 Ibid., 82.

190 Ibid., 94.

191 Ibid., 100.
Humanism not only posited the human as the dominant subject on the planet, but also created a Eurocentric paradigm in which “subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behavior, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart.” Difference—Flusser’s the “all-different”—is pejoratively associated in Humanism, with “sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies.”

In 1967, a collection of Flusser’s essays was published under the title Of Religiosity. Most of the essays had already been published either in the literary supplement of O Estado de São Paulo or the journal of the Institute for Technology and Aeronautics (Instituto de Tecnologia e Aeronautica) in São José dos Campos. These included “On Doubt,” two essays on Kafka, appreciations of Guimarães Rosa and Vicente Ferreira da Silva, essays on concrete poetry, music and painting, and the Portuguese language. Flusser was also moving closer to communications theory, with religious “faith” now underpinned by mathematics and codified by algorithmic programming and algorithmic language as a “last reality.” Flusser later identified his friendship with Milton Vargas during this period as instrumental in driving his interest toward communications. He wasn’t always comfortable, however: “I felt a stranger in the desert land of formulas, of computations, and of the excessively reasonable. I felt admiration, but also a deep divergence, for engineers in poetry such as Haroldo de Campos. I had lost myself. In order to

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193 Ibid.
196 Flusser, “In Search of Meaning,” Writings, 204.
find myself again, I wrote ‘Até a Terceira e quarta geração’ [Unto the third and fourth generations], influenced by Foucault, but still and ever looking for a new way out into non-language within the tissue of language.”

Rainer Guldin points out that there is a distinct overlap here between Flusser and Norbert Weiner’s 1964 book God & Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points Where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion, and that the German edition of Weiner’s book was in Flusser’s library.

But he was also being pulled toward game theory, as well as communications and visual art. He writes in the “Present Phase” section of “In Search of Meaning,” that the discovery of game theory was “like a rupture of dams. Suddenly, I saw a whole new field of action extending before me: the field of critique as transcendence of games, that is, critiquing as meta-language” offering a way for the “odd pieces of my previous phases” to fall into a pattern that opened up to the future.

Brazil and the 1964 Coup d’Etat

Flusser, Writings, 205. Regarding “Até a Terceira e quarta geração,” Andreas Ströhl writes that the manuscript was given to Miguel Reale “for safe-keeping, because it was never published. Flusser wrote the text in 1965 and revised it again in 1970 for a planned publication by Editoria Universitária that never happened. Later on, in the 1980s, Stefan Bollmann scheduled a German-language publication as volume 12 of the Schriften. However, only the first five volumes were published.” Ströhl, Writings, 208, footnote 10.


Flusser, Writings, 205.
What is not explicitly stated is what was happening in Brazil in the late sixties. At the end of “In Search of Meaning” (1969), Flusser writes: “I publish, that is, I try to change the world in which I find myself. I do it with many doubts and many reservations. At the same time, this publishing is my only justification to the others and to myself. And it is my only hope of not having lived in vain … By this, I have perhaps contributed, though certainly in a problematic way, to my Brazilian surroundings.”  

Sentiments of “changing the world” might sound appropriate to the sixties, but they also apply particularly to Brazil, which was subject to political turmoil and, by the time Flusser wrote these lines, severe repression.

Flusser had arrived in Brazil when it was under the reign of Getúlio Vargas, who rose to power after the Revolution of 1930, instigated by the worldwide crisis of 1929. The Revolution of 1930 ended Brazil’s First Republic and created a new type of state in which industrialization was promoted, urban workers were offered state protections, and the military was given a central role. Vargas remained in power for fifteen years. He was reelected president by a popular vote in 1950, which ended in 1954 when, on the verge of a second fall from power, Vargas committed suicide. The succeeding five-year administration of Juscelino Kubitschek was marked by the official motto “50 years in five,” in which accelerated development was the goal. Brasília, the federal capital developed by Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, with the landscape

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200 Ibid., 206-207.


202 First as head of the provisional government, then as president, elected in 1934 by indirect vote of the Constitutional Assembly, and after November 10, 1937, as a dictator of the Estado Novo (New State), under which congressional representation disappeared. See Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil*, 216-17.

203 Ibid., 253.
architect Roberto Burle Marx, was built and an automotive industry was installed. Some of this was reflected in Flusser’s writing, particularly on design and its role and function in society. In the 1964 essay “The Factory,” the factories of the future would be places where “human beings can learn how robots function so that these robots can then relieve human beings of the task of turning nature into culture”; factories themselves would become “scientific laboratories, art academies and libraries and collections of recordings.”

While Flusser was writing of a techno-utopian future, however, Brazil was faltering. In 1961, the International Monetary Fund and Brazil’s European and U.S. creditors rescheduled its debt and the U.S. offered more aid to make sure the largest country in Latin America didn’t fall into Communism. Protest movements were on the rise, the result of instability caused by rapid industrialization, urban growth, increased migration, and discontent among rural populations. Guerrilla warfare became a concern within the military after Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba. In this climate, the military in Brazil acquired a permanent, active role in guaranteeing national security and development.

204 Some of the primary writings are collected in Vilém Flusser, The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design (London: Reaktion Books, 2009). Many others were published in magazines and journals in the seventies and eighties.


206 Fausto, A Concise History of Brazil, 263.


209 Fausto, A Concise History of Brazil, 270-71. Also see Thomas Skidmore, Politics in Brazil: An Experiment in Democracy, 1930-1964 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969) and The
began setting up an authoritarian regime. The notorious Institutional Acts or AIs (Atos Institucionais) were instituted—the first of which sought out people “responsible for ‘crimes against the state or its patrimony, as well as for crimes of a social or political nature, and for acts of revolutionary war.’” Citizens retained the right of habeas corpus and the press was left relatively untouched, but violent repression was carried out in the countryside, particularly in the Northeast, and in the cities students who had been politically active were targeted.

In “The Terrace” section of Bodenlos, Flusser’s autobiography, he describes how the patio behind his house in São Paulo became a gathering place for students, artists, scientists, friends, and “friends of friends”—a place to think about “new music, new art, new poetry, new theater, and new perceptions of the world.” In the early days of the regime, in 1966, Flusser traveled to Europe and North America as a “delegate for cultural cooperation,” lecturing at Harvard, Yale, MIT, and several European universities and in 1967 he was appointed Professor for Philosophy of Communication at the Escola Dramática and the Escola de Superiore de Politica.

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210 “It is true that the United States government supported the coup and knew about it beforehand. It even dispatched a naval task force to support the revolutionary movement in the event of a prolonged struggle. But that measure was not necessary, given the ease with which the military came to power,” Fausto, A Concise History of Brazil, 277.

211 Ibid., 281.

212 Ibid. General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco was elected president by an indirect vote in Congress on April 15, 1964.

Cinema in São Paulo. He would not have been wrong in thinking a “renaissance” might erupt in Brazil because, as other writers have noted, at the beginning the regime tolerated a leftist subculture in the major urban centers—a festive Left (esquerda festiva) that “actively produced and consumed a redemptive protest culture perceived as a vehicle for political resistance.”

The most celebrated aspect of this was Tropicalismo, which started in São Paulo in popular music and branched out to film, theater, the visual arts, and literature. Led by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, two young composers from Bahia, the Tropicalista group fused international and local music and retooled the concept of antropofagia outlined in Oswald de Andrade’s modernist Cannibalist Manifesto (1928), which advocated for “devouring” the cultural heritage of dominant nations and creating an anti-colonialist blueprint for Brazilian cultural. Technology was celebrated—Veloso and Gil used electric instruments—and song lyrics underscored the current historical contradictions: violence and poverty versus the national mythology of Brazil as a tropical paradise. This idea of a “redemptive” culture was true in intellectual circles, too. In a 1970 essay titled “Culture and Politics in Brazil,” the Viennese-born Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz wrote: “Despite the existence of a right-wing dictatorship, the cultural hegemony of the left is virtually complete. This can be seen in the

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216 The Tropicalist group also included Tom Zé, Gal Costa, Torquanto Neto, and José Carlos Capinam, the group Os Mutantes, and composers Rogério Duprat and Júlio Medaglia. Dunn, “Tropicalism and Brazilian Popular Music,” Dunn, “Tropicalism and Brazilian Popular Music,” The Brazil Reader, 242.

217 Ibid., 242-43.

218 Ibid., 243.
bookshops of São Paulo and Rio, which are full of Marxist literature; in incredibly festive and feverish theatrical premieres, threatened by the occasional police raid; in the activities of the student movement or the declarations of progressive priests. In other words, at the very altars of bourgeois culture, it is the left which dictates the tone.”

Opposition to the military government began to assert itself, though. The death of Che Guevara in Bolivia on October 9, 1967 transformed the Argentine revolutionary into a hero for young people; in March 1968, demonstrations were set off by the murder of a student by the Brazilian military police. In June 1968, the Protest March of the Hundred Thousand (Passeata dos 100,000) included students, clergy, and middle class residents of Rio de Janeiro. Worker strikes proliferated and armed groups influenced by guerrilla rebels in other countries began to emerge.

On December 13, 1968, AI-5 was passed, which closed congress and, unlike the earlier acts, had no expiration date. Boris Fausto writes: “With AI-5, the military nucleus of power became concentrated in the so-called information community, that is, among those people in command of intelligence and repression … Censorship of the media was put into practice. And torture became an integral part of the government’s methods.” Government targets shifted to include middle- and upper-class citizens: “The more prominent the victim, the greater

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220 Fausto, A Concise History of Brazil, 287.

221 Ibid., 289. The traditional leftist organization, PCB (Partido Communista Brasileiro) was against armed struggle, however.

222 Ibid., 290. “One of AI-5’s many tragic effects was that it strengthened the theses of groups dedicated to armed struggle. The military government appeared incapable of giving in to social pressure and of reforming itself. To the contrary, it began to act more and more like a brutal dictatorship. Starting in 1969, armed encounters multiplied,” (ibid.).
the shock.”223 The government used microwave communication systems, computer-based suspect lists, and tapped phones to create a huge security apparatus that watched over university classrooms, union headquarters, seminaries, high schools, newspaper offices, churches, and community organizations.224 Censorship affected at least one of the publications Flusser wrote for: O Estado de São Paulo.225 After AI-5 was passed on December 1968, there was a general crackdown on culture: most visibly, Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso were arrested in their apartments in São Paulo, held for fifty-seven days without explanation, and later exiled to London.226 Schwarz wrote: “The right has taken on the inglorious task of cutting its head off: its best singers and composers have been imprisoned and are now in exile, Brazilian directors are now filming in Europe and Africa, university teachers and scientists are leaving, if not going to jail.”227

The military regime countered by claiming that a vigorous industrial recovery was underway, headed by the automotive, chemical, and electrical industries.228 General Motors, [223]Thomas Skidmore, The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-85 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 129-30. Skidmore cites the case of Rubens de Paiva, a distinguished geological engineer from a socially prominent Rio background who was kidnapped and killed.

224 Ibid., 131. Furthermore, as Skidmore writes, Brazil’s human rights abuses were well documented in military archives. Later, the São Paulo archdiocese research team was able to use this for the documentary “Brasil: Nunca Mais” and it seems likely access to these records was facilitated by someone inside. “If so, that underlines again the role played by military justice both during and after the repression,” (ibid., 133).

225 “Other prime targets for the censors were Opinião, a weekly of center-left views; Movimento, a military leftist weekly; O Estado de São Paulo, the conservative São Paulo daily owned by the pugnacious Mesquita family; O São Paulo, weekly organ of the archdiocese of São Paulo; and the centrist Veja, Brazil’s leading weekly newsmagazine.” Ibid., 135.

226 Dunn, “Tropicalism and Brazilian Popular Music,” 246.


228 Fautso, A Concise History of Brazil, 291.
Ford, and Chrysler had invested in Brazil. After 1964, media and communications underwent a tectonic shift with more people owning televisions, due to extended personal credit. TV Globo became the national network, promoting “Brazil – a Great Power.” The economic “miracle” that bloomed from 1969 to 1973 was later explained by the easy availability of loans and foreign investment. The negative impact of the “miracle” included a decreased minimum wage, greater disparities of wealth, and a decline or abandonment of state-sponsored social programs; Brazil became “notorious worldwide for its high industrial potential coupled with low standards of health, education, and housing.” Flusser himself described this as a “black period:” “forced to teach” while living in the network of a totalitarian apparatus. Worse, he noted that, “young people vanished from sight on a daily basis. The fledgling embryo of a new culture, which, as I had to comprehend now, was not at all viable, became dismembered. The scene had changed: reality had broken through.” Schwarz too noted a distinct shift, with university purges, censorship of books, and teachers resigning “en masse.” Others note the unsettling situation in which military personnel were entering the university to teach. The Flusser Archive biography

229 Ibid., 293-94.

230 “Es war eine schwarze Periode für mich, denn ich sah mich gezwungen, zu lehren, was mir nicht wahr schien. So wurde das Lehrersein für mich zwar eine noch dringendere Aufgabe als früher, aber gleichzeitig eine Plage.” [“It was a black period for me because I was forced to teach what seemed to me not to be true. So the teaching for me was an even more urgent task than earlier, although simultaneously a plague.”] Flusser, Bodenlos, 212. My translation.

231 Ibid.; also quoted in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vílém Flusser: An Introduction, 21.


233 Ibid., 155-56. In the introduction to Elizabeth Ginway’s essay “Literature Under Dictatorship,” the editors write that “the military regime in Brazil had an impact on an entire generation of writers because of its use of censorship and its protracted hold on power for over twenty years (1964-85),” although “the years 1969 to 1974 are remembered as the darkest of the dictatorship,” The Brazil Reader, 248.
describes his personal situation thusly: “Because of the more and more problematic political situation in Brazil during the dictatorship it is getting harder for Flusser to lecture and to publish.”

In “Taking Up Residence in Homelessness,” an essay from the eighties, Flusser describes the process of becoming and un-becoming a Brazilian:

After 1964, it became clear to me that the only possible way to build a Brazilian homeland was through the eventual victory of technocracy over populism. Moreover, it became clear to me what this homeland would look like: a gigantic, progressive apparatus that would be equal in every way to the closed-mindedness, fanaticism, and patriotic prejudices of every European homeland. And yet, my involvement in Brazil lasted until 1972, when I made the painful decision to give it up and live in Provence, which is for me an anti-Brazil.

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235 See Flusser, Writings, 91-103. The citation in Writings states that the essay was originally titled “Wohnung beziehen in der Heimatlosigkeit: Heimat und Heimatlosigkeit—Wohnung und Gewohnheit” and delivered as a lecture at the Second International Kornhaus-Seminar on the topic “Home and Homelessness” in Weiler im Allgäu. It was written in 1984 or 1985 and first published in Christa Dericum and Philipp Wambolt, eds., Heimat und Heimatlosigkeit (Berlin: Karin Kramer, 1987), and republished in Vilém Flusser, Bodenlos, 220-21.

236 Flusser, Writings, 99.
Chapter Two: Leaving Brazil and Flusser’s Writing in the Seventies

Flusser in the Art World: Brazilian Artists and the São Paulo Biennial

Although Flusser’s permanent departure from Brazil did not occur until 1972, it was facilitated in part by his involvement with artists and the art world. In The Deep Time of Media, Siegfried Zielinski, current director of the Flusser Archive, writes that Flusser was important for artists in the eighties who were working with new media and looking for a perspective different from the reigning poststructuralist and Lacanian ones.237 But Flusser’s engagement with artists goes back much further, to the sixties and an older generation. After World War II, the Brazilian art world underwent a structural change with the opening of the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo (1948) and the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (1949),238 the establishment of an art market, and the first São Paulo Biennale in 1951.239 As in North America, battles between figurative and abstraction artists were instrumental in these shifts, and Flusser’s friendships allied him with the latter camp.240 Particularly important within that camp were his affiliations with Samson Flexor (1907-1971) and Mira Schendel (1919-1988). Like Flusser, both were

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238 The Museu de Arte Contemporânea of the Universidade de São Paulo was founded in 1963, based on gifts from the private collections of Ciccillo Matarazzo (founder of the São Paulo Biennial) and Yolanda Penteado and it became one of the most important collections of international contemporary art in Latin America, starting with Cubism. It also favored experimental art and the work of young artists, and exhibitions were organized that traveled to provincial capitals.


240 Brazilian artists working in abstraction, many of whom were immigrants, were also inspired by Max Bill’s 1941 visit to Brazil, the first two São Paulo Biennales, and the support of the critic Mário Pedrosa.
Jewish refugees from Europe. Flexor, from a wealthy family in Moldova and educated in Brussels and Paris, participated in the French Resistance in World War II before moving to Brazil in 1948 and settling in São Paulo. In 1951 he opened Atelier-Abstração, a workshop/exhibition space which showcased the work of contemporary Brazilian abstract painters. Schendel was born in Zurich and raised Roman Catholic in Italy, but stripped of her Italian citizenship in 1938 and forced to leave the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, where she was studying philosophy. After spending the war in Bulgaria and Sarajevo, she immigrated to Brazil in 1949, where she met Knut Schendel, a German bookseller, in 1953. Through him she met Flusser and became part of that intellectual circle.

Schendel’s paintings from the early fifties resemble the work of Giorgio Morandi somewhat. She also was associated with the Concrete movement, creating geometrically abstract paintings reminiscent of Mondrian, but with a darker palette. By the early sixties, however, she began making two-dimensional works in which letters, numbers, and symbols were arranged to look like everything from ancient hieroglyphs to math equations and computer code. Schendel is best known for three series: Monotypes (Monotipias) (1964-65), Little Nothings

241 Lesser known than Schendel, Flexor was the subject of a retrospective in 2007 at the National Art Museum of Moldova in Chișinău.

242 Or thereabouts: “Between 1939 and 1944, Mira’s movements are uncertain, however it seems that probably in 1939 she heeded her mother’s advice and departs for Sofia, Bulgaria, to stay with an aunt. While in Vienna, en route to Sofia, Mira joins a group of refugees bound for what was then Yugoslavia. In Sarajevo, she meets a Catholic Croat of Austrian descent, Josip Hargesheimer, whom she marries in April 1941. She receives a Yugoslav passport and papers under her married name to replace her revoked Italian citizenship.” Mira Schendel (Exhibition catalogue, Tate/Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 2013), 218. Schendel first exhibited in Brazil in the early fifties under her married name, Mira Hargesheimer.

243 Flusser is first mentioned in the timeline entry for Schendel in 1955: “This period coincides with her burgeoning friendships with the physicist and art critic Mario Schenberg; the psychoanalyst, poet, translator and art critic Theon Spanudis; and the philosopher Vilém Flusser.” Mira Schendel, 222.
(Droguinhas) (1965-66), and Graphic Objects (Objetos gráficos) (1967-68). Working on rice paper, which she mounted in windows and the middle of rooms to highlight its transparency, she also did thousands of drawings, replicating the reproductive nature of photography and printing presses. One can also see the resonance of concrete poetry in her work. In 1967, Flusser wrote about her work in *O Estado de São Paulo*:

Mira’s writings are not texts. They are not about anything, and so they cannot be read as representations. They are pre-texts. They are what texts are before they become texts. But as they are almost symbolic, as pre-texts, they cannot be ‘read’ as drawings either (not in the traditional sense of the term). They do not intend the thing, as drawings do; though neither do they intend, as texts do, to be about things. They should not be ‘read’ in a metaphorical sense, but literally.

Two decades later, Flusser devoted chapters in a section titled “Dialogues” in *Bodenlos*, to Flexor and to Schendel. (The book also includes photographs of each artist in the backyard

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244 Writing about “Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel” at the Museum of Modern Art in 2009, Roberta Smith described “Still Wave” (1969), a work with thousands of tiny threads of translucent nylon hung from the ceiling by jeweler’s hooks, as “an early and rather monumental instance of Post-Minimalism.” Smith further described this exhibition as “the Modern’s latest attempt to explore modernisms beyond the narrow Euro-American version that it did so much to lock in place.” But to Smith the effort seems halfhearted at times, suggesting an “unwillingness to commit” to extending modernism’s art historical narrative by “wedging a double survey into galleries usually occupied by single ones” and showing together two artists who knew each other only slightly. Nonetheless, “Tangled Alphabets” brought “together more work by Ms. Schendel and Mr. Ferrari than has been seen in a North American museum.” See Roberta Smith, “Alternative Modernism Via South America,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2009: C25. The only other major solo show of Schendel in North America was at the Drawing Center in New York in 1995. It should be noted that Schendel represented Brazil in the 34th Venice Biennale in 1968, along with Lygia Clark, Farnese de Andrade, and Letycia Quadros and she had exhibited in the São Paulo Biennials since the first one in 1951.


patio of Flusser’s home in São Paulo and there is a reproduction of a 1968 Flusser portrait by Flexor.) Flexor’s section includes a philosophical meditation on Flexor’s position as a European Marxist in Brazil and art as a form of revolution.\textsuperscript{247} The section on Schendel is more personal. Flusser wrote: “Our dialogues have an influence on Mira's work (and also, it must be said, on mine). And Mira's work was the theme of the dialogues. This is precisely what is fertile in our relationship: I am for Mira a genuine critic; I influence her work. And it provides me real issues that have to be thought through and worked through.”\textsuperscript{248} In the next paragraph Flusser elaborates on an issue in Schendel’s work that has affected his own:

“Transparency” is a consequence of the ability of the human gaze to penetrate beneath the surface of things. With this capability, the human gaze distinguishes itself from all others. The human is not necessarily thrown back by the surfaces that surround him; he does not necessarily live like an animal in an ‘environment,’ but rather his view may be disciplined or brutalized by penetrating the surface into the depths of things, and it is thanks to this depth-dimension that the human finds himself in a “life world.”\textsuperscript{249}

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\textsuperscript{249} “»Durchsichtigkeit« ist eine Folge der Fähigkeit des menschlichen Blicks, unter die Oberfläche der Dinge zu dringen. Durch diese Fähigkeit unterscheidet sich der menschliche Blick von allem anderen Sehen. Er wird nicht unbedingt von den Oberflächen, die ihn umgeben, zurückgeworfen, und darum lebt der Mensch nicht unbedingt, wie das Tier, in einer »Umwelt«, sondern der Blick kann, diszipliniert oder brutal, durch die Oberfläche hindurch in die Tiefen der Dinge dringen, und es ist diese Tiefendimension, dank derer sich der Mensch in einer »Lebenswelt« befindet.” Flusser, \textit{Bodenlos}, 198-199. My translation. It should be noted that the term “Lebenswelt,” or “life world” was instrumental to the phenomenology of philosophy of Edmund Husserl, which will be discussed in more detail later in this dissertation.
The concept of surfaces would recur in Flusser’s work: both in writing as a “penetrating gesture that informs a surface” and later in the technical image writings. But Schendel and Flusser also shared a common background as displaced persons. “She didn't feel at home either in Brazil or in Europe,” Schendel’s daughter said in a recent interview. “She spoke many languages, but all of them with an accent … She hoped when she arrived in Brazil that she could find a territory of her own – a place for her. But it was not that easy. She was a misplaced person. Territory, for her, was always an issue, and you can see it in her work.”

In Flusser and the Arts, Marcel René Marburger also cites Flusser’s relationship with Schendel as an example of how Flusser was engaged with “new media” artists not only in the seventies and eighties but much earlier, as well.

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252 Marcel René Marburger, Flusser und die Kunst (Cologne: Self-published dissertation, 2011). I put “new media” in quotation marks to highlight the resistance with which this term is met in media studies. Although the question of new versus old media, in regard to art or otherwise, is not a central concern of this dissertation, it should be noted nonetheless. See, for instance, Friedrich Kittler’s “What’s New about the New Media?,” Mutations, ed. Rem Koolhaas, et al. (New York: Actar, 2001), 58–69; Also see Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark’s Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), particularly the introduction.

253 Marburger, Flusser und die Kunst, 14-15. Marburger also cites Isobel Whitelegg’s Writing the Present: Vilém Flusser and Mira Schendel (Dissertation, University of Essex, Department of Art History and Theory, September 2000). Regarding Flusser and the German media theory scene, it should be noted that Siegfried Zielinski is the current Director of the Flusser Archive in Berlin, although it is housed in The Berlin University of the Arts (Universität der Künste Berlin). Flusser’s involvement with German media theory will be discussed in later chapters.
Flusser’s most significant involvement in the *institutional* art world, however, was with the São Paulo Biennial in the early seventies.\(^{254}\) Founded in 1951 by the Italian-Brazilian industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo and modeled after the Venice Biennale, the São Paulo Biennial quickly becoming one of the most prominent international exhibitions in the world.\(^{255}\)

Throughout the sixties, Flusser wrote about the Biennial for the literary supplement of *O Estado de São Paulo*.\(^{256}\) In a 1969 article he described the Biennial as a “stubborn fact” that “has always been intended to indicate Brazil’s competent modernism to an international clientele, and to energize local developments by injections of the international.”\(^{257}\) This last article coincided, however, with the military dictatorship’s most repressive period of rule and the largely successful 1969 boycott of the Biennial’s 10\(^{th}\) edition.\(^{258}\)

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\(^{255}\) Although his given name was Paulo Antônio Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, he went by Ciccillo Matarazzo.


The boycott was initiated in several quarters. On June 16, 1969, a group of artists and critics gathered in Paris to read aloud a dossier titled “No to the São Paulo Biennial (Non à la Biennale de São Paulo),” and to listen to testimonies given by Brazilian artists describing violence, torture, and repression under the military dictatorship. This followed Pierre Restany’s cancellation of an exhibition schedule to run parallel to the 1969 São Paulo Biennial titled “Art and Technology.”259 Eduard de Wilde, director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam had already withdrawn the Dutch delegation and on June 6 the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera published an article titled “Lo Scandallo di San Paolo – La Biennale rischia per la situazione politica de Brasile (The Scandal of São Paulo – The Biennial is at risk because of the political situation in Brazil).”260 After a vote, French artists decided to boycott the Biennial, which was scheduled to open in September. Delegations from Sweden, Greece, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Mexico withdrew, including seventy-three year old Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who had been invited to exhibit his mural March of Humanity on Latin America.261 The United States also withdrew its entry. In April 1969, Hans Haacke wrote a strongly-worded letter to György Kepes, director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, who was organizing a much-anticipated art and technology exhibition to be shown in São Paulo:

The American government is engaged in an immoral war in Vietnam and supports vigorously the fascist regimes in Brazil and other parts of the world. At this time, all exhibitions under the auspices of the American government are done to promote the image and the politics of this very government. It is a public relations operation no matter what the intentions of the organizers and participants are, and thanks to the tolerance of repressive governments, the energy of the artists is channeled to serve a policy that they rightfully despise. If they don’t want to

259 The exhibition would have included works by César, Gyula Kosice, Piotr Kowalski, Julio Le Parc, Marta Minujin, Bernard Quentin, Martial Rayasse, Vassilakis Takis, and others.

260 Calirman, Brazilian Art under Dictatorship, 24-25.

261 Ibid., 27.
become involuntarily accomplices they do not have another choice than to refuse to show their work in the national representations abroad.\textsuperscript{262}

On July 6, 1969, Grace Glueck published an article in The New York Times covering the boycott. On July 14, in a joint press release with the Smithsonian, which had taken over sponsorship of the U.S. delegation from the State Department, Kepes announced that nine of the twenty-three artists selected to participate in the exhibition had withdrawn. He therefore decided, “I do not see justification for presenting at Brazil an incomplete exhibition. It would be misleading.”\textsuperscript{263}

\textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 27-28. Haacke was not wrong. James Naylor Green writes that “scholars have documented the ways covert funding channeled through the CIA supplied resources to conservative Brazilian forces with an anti-left-wing agenda,” even though incomplete access to CIA and other national security documents only allows researchers to identify the overall approaches intended “to carry out a government destabilization plan backed by covert actions.” See James Naylor Green, \textit{We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 30. Green details how Phyllis R. Parker, a graduate student at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin stumbled upon information showing that U.S. government officials had lied about Washington’s involvement in the events of 1964, uncovering “Operation Brother Sam,” a military contingency plan that provided assistance in the form of an aircraft carrier, six supporting destroyers, four petroleum tankers, ammunition ships and provision ships. However, the swiftness with which the Brazilian armed forces seized power allowed the White House to cancel the task force. After the military takeover on April 1, 1964, U.S. ambassador Lincoln Gordon urged the White House to recognize immediately the new government and a message ws sent by President Johnson from the Oval Office which began: “Please accept my warmest good wishes on your installation as President of the United States of Brazil. The American people have watched with anxiety the political and economic difficulties through which your great nation has been passing, and have admired the resolute will of the Brazilian community to resolve these difficulties within a framework of constitutional democracy and without civil strike,” Green, \textit{We Cannot Remain Silent}, 22. When the news broke in 1976 about U.S. involvement in Brazil, Gordon issued a statement titled “Made in Brazil” that argued the coup was a “100 percent Brazilian movement” and that U.S. aid was a “contingency” in case civil war broke out in Brazil (ibid., 47). Also see Thomas E. Skidmore, \textit{Politics in Brazil 1930-1964: An Experiment in Democracy} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

\textsuperscript{263} Green, \textit{We Cannot Remain Silent}, 121. Biennial organizers, assisted by Dr. Humbert Affonsoeca, a wealthy São Paulo businessman, and the Brazilian consul general in New York, tried to broker a last minute deal with Leo Castelli to loan thirty-three engravings by Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns and put these on view as the U.S. exhibition, but this failed, leaving the Biennial without an official U.S. entry.
Lygia Clark and Amélia Toledo were the first to withdraw from the Brazilian delegation and more would follow. The Brazilian Association of Art Critics (ABCA), presided over by Mário Pedrosa, released a document on July 2, 1969 asking the government to reveal its criteria for censorship in the visual arts, since censorship was neither in the Brazilian constitution nor consistently applied by the current regime. Pedrosa was referring to the Second Bienal da Bahia, a small exhibition in northeastern Brazil held in December 1968, at which federal police confiscated ten works of art based on allegations of “erotic and overtly political content” and exhibition organizers were jailed; and the May 1969 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, from which twelve artworks would be chosen to represent Brazil at the Biennale de Paris, and which was shut down before it opened to the public. Pedrosa also encouraged members of the ABCA to refuse to participate in judging the 1969 São Paulo Biennial. Not every Brazilian artist withdrew from the Biennial, however. Flusser’s friend Mira Schendel, who had exhibited in the Biennial since its first edition in 1951, showed a work titled *Still Waves of Probability – Old Testament, Book of Kings I, 19* (Ondas paradas de probabilidade – Antigo


265 Ibid., 21.

266 Pederosa himself was forced into exile, although supported by an international cadre of artists. An open letter to the president of Brazil signed by Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Max Bill, Soulage, and twenty-five Latin American artists living in Paris stated: “We, the intellectuals and artists who sign this letter, have received with indignation and apprehension the news of the order of arrest for political motives issued by your government against the writer and art critic Mario Pedrosa. Mr. Pedrosa is known to us for his works in the field of art, and to all those who have read his works or known him personally he represents one of the most accomplished expressions of the intelligence of a country that he has always brilliantly represented and uncompromisingly and courageously defended. We hold you personally responsible for the bodily and mental well-being of this eminent Brazilian who has won everywhere, by his personality, admiration and respect from his associates. We await with impatience and anxiety to be informed that the measures taken against him by your government have been revoked.” Titled “The Case of Mario Pedrosa,” the letter was published in *The New York Review of Books*, March 9, 1972. Accessed February 28, 2014, www.nybooks.com.
Testamento, Livros dos Reis I, 19), an installation of nylon threads hanging from the ceiling and accompanied by a moving Biblical text. Claudia Calirman writes that Schendel’s presence was an act of protest that differed not only from the consensus supporting withdrawal, but which “questioned the efficacy and force of artistic removal as a political strategy.”

But the 1969 boycott would have lasting consequences. Efforts to sustain it to later editions were put forth by an organization of artists in New York called Museo Latinoamericano, which included the Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer and a self-published book titled Contrabienal. Gordon Matta-Clark participated in the Contrabienal, writing an open letter in 1971 calling for artists to boycott the São Paulo Biennial that year, and Isobel Whitelegg writes that the boycott successfully appropriated the exhibition's international prestige such that participating in it had come to be seen as a dubious activity for any politically engaged artist, and “national agencies, including the British Council, maintained a diplomatic but distanced mode of participation until political change became apparent in the early 1980s.”

Flusser entered the Biennial enterprise at this moment. In 1971, he presented an “Initial Proposal for the Organization of Future Biennials on a Scientific Basis,” and was subsequently

267 Calirman, Brazilian Art under Dictatorship, 34.


269 An excerpt of Matta-Clark’s May 19, 1971 letter was printed at the back of the catalogue for the 27th São Paulo Bienal in 2006, after pages filled with the logos of corporate sponsors.

270 Whitelegg, “The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone (1969-1981).” As Whitelegg points out, the Biennial was also more complicated for artists who remained in Brazil. While Pedrosa and artists like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, who had gained international prominence in the sixties, had left the country, the circle of artists who remained constituted an intimate group and often made ephemeral works like Conceptual artists in New York or Europe.

271 Vilém Flusser, “Initial Proposal for the Organisation of Future Biennials on a Scientific
nominated by the board to be a “technical advisor” to the 12th edition of the Biennial in 1973.\textsuperscript{272}

It was a period when curators were invested in changing exhibition paradigms: Harald Szeemann's \textit{documenta 5} of 1972 in Kassel, Germany is an oft-cited example and exhibitions like “Cybernetic Serendipity” (1968) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, “Software” (1970) at the Jewish Museum in New York, and “Information” (1970) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York were also dedicated to showcasing so-called “new media.”\textsuperscript{273} The São Paulo Biennial was working on an older model, though: there was no artistic advisor or chief curator and its founder, Ciccillo Matarazzo, served as the director, organizing the Biennial around the national-pavilion model. Flusser traveled to Paris, where, at the

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\textsuperscript{272} Vinicius Pontes Spricigo, “Oui a la Biennale de São Paulo: Vilém Flusser’s Anti-Boycott,” revised version of a paper presented at the conference “Zones de convergence: l’actualité de la recherche en théorie et histoire de l’art latino-américain” at the University Rennes on the March 7, 2012, accessed March 2, 2014, http://www.essex.ac.uk/archistory/research/pdfs/arara_issue_11/spricigo.pdf. I also obtained a draft of Spricigo’s “The Exhibition as Medium: the large scale art exhibitions from the theoretical perspectives opened by Vilém Flusser and Hans Belting” at the Flusser Archive in August 2013. In that paper, Spricigo writes: “It is important to underline that the position occupied by Flusser as a technical advisor at the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo was related to the discipline of theory of communication and aesthetics he created at the School of Communication of the Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado. Flusser was not a curator, as has been argued by the researcher Ricardo Mendes and the artist Mario Ramiro. In fact, at that time, the Bienal de São Paulo had neither a curator nor an artistic director. The exhibition was organized by Matarazzo according to the national pavilion format. Flusser’s contribution to the Round Table held at the 11th Bienal concerning the reformulation of the biennial was based on the emerging field of communication sciences and was presented alongside other critical contributions by Jorge Romero Brest, René Berger, Umbro Apollonio, Jorge Glusberg, Jacques Lassaigne, Mário Barata, Dietrich Mahlow, among others.” Spricigo, “The Exhibition as Medium,” 3-4.

\textsuperscript{273} Whitelegg also cites experimental practices supported in local São Paulo annual exhibitions, like “Salão de Arte Contemporânea” (1966-75) at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea Campinas and JAC (Jovem Arte Contemporânea) (1963-74) at the University of São Paulo Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC-USP), which occupied a space directly adjoining the third floor of the biennial pavilion. Whitelegg, “The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone (1969-1981).”
invitation of René Berger, president of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), he presented his proposal to restructure the Biennal, moving away from the model of national representation, and creating a dialogue between art and the public sphere. In a letter to Matarazzo, to which he attached his AICA proposal, Flusser wrote: “The so-called crisis in the arts is not the result of structural crisis in the arts themselves, but of an inadequacy in the process of communication between the arts and the people … If a meaningful communication between both were established, art would again become part of daily life. The Bienal of Sao Paulo offers itself as a laboratory for this purpose.” Rather than focusing on objects and setting up a “monodirectional” mode of communication, the restructured Biennial would entail sharing information between multidisciplinary groups and engaging different local institutions including schools, factories, and so on.

Flusser’s proposal was met with resistance in Paris, mostly because Restany and others had decided to systematically boycott the São Paulo Biennial. Flusser argued, “There are two ways to contest, one in a chair in Paris and the other on site. I propose the latter.” But he also used the trip to Paris as an opportunity to reach out to other scholars and intellectuals, resulting, for instance, in a series of lectures he delivered at the Institute de l’Environment in Paris in the

274 Vilém Flusser, “Proposal to be submitted to the General conference of AICA to be held in Paris on September 12th, concerning the 12th S. Paulo Bienal” (1971), Vilém Flusser Archive, Binder Bienal 1, No. 171.

275 Ibid.

276 Ibid. Also quoted in Spricigo’s “Oui a la Biennale de São Paulo,” 5.


278 Vilém Flusser, “General Conference of the AICA,” 1972, Archives de la Critique d’Art. Quoted in Spricigo, “Oui a la Biennale de São Paulo,” 7. Spricigo also argues that, in taking this stance, Flusser was trying to invert the flow of ideas from center to periphery.
fall of 1972.279 The demise of Flusser’s relationship with the Biennial Foundation (Fundação Bienal)—he departed from his position as technical advisor in late 1972—was ultimately more financially driven than political.280 Nonetheless, an “Art and Communication” section was installed on the third floor of the 1973 Biennial pavilion, alongside a room devoted to the work of Waldemar Cordeiro, an early computer artist.281 Otherwise, two of the artists Flusser proposed were included: Fred Forest and Eric McLuhan, son of Marshall McLuhan.282 One of the fruits of Flusser’s involvement would be his the lasting relationship with Forest.283 Flusser would participate in a work by Forest called “Gestures” (1972-74) that inspired Flusser’s collection of essays titled Gestures.284 The two also maintained a correspondence and Flusser later wrote an essay, “The Sociological Art of Fred Forest,” for a book on Collectif Art Sociologique in 1975.285 Even after he left Brazil in 1972, Flusser remained involved with the Biennial and his


280 Spricigo, “Oui a la Biennale de São Paulo,” 7. Spricigo does not detail this particularly well, but it emerges in the correspondence with Matarazzo, carried on largely from Geneva.


contributions continued to be felt. The Biennial remained under the direction of its founder, Ciccillo Matarazzo until 1977, but Flusser’s communication model was adopted by Walter Zanini, who was appointed curator in 1981 of the 16th Biennial edition. Zanini's first edition featured artists' books, video, mail art and actions by artists including Hervé Fischer, Iñarra and Antoni Muntadas and replaced national representation with thematic “nuclei”: a set of exhibitions, each organized around different principles and divided into “vectors” that grouped works from the seventies according to “analogies between media.” Zanini invited Flusser to participate as a lecturer in 1981, and Sheila Leirner, the subsequent curator, invited him to São Paulo in 1985.

Flusser’s involvement with the Biennial influenced his philosophy, too. In 1972 he wrote “Diachronology and Historicity,” an essay he mailed from Italy to Milton Vargas that described abstraction as a “ladder” or “staircase” in which three-dimensionality was being replaced by two-dimensionality. Flusser argued that the three-dimensional world was losing its connection with

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288 Ibid.

conceptual and imaginative thinking and becoming increasingly abstract. In 1985, in the midst of his technical-image phase, Flusser wrote that the Biennial’s “relational context is the focal point of the problem. The choice of the artworks becomes the input of the context, and the information of the audience becomes its output … The attention turns from the ‘source,’ the ‘transmitter,’ to the ‘channel,’ the ‘medium,’ since ‘the medium is the message.’” By this time, Flusser had already written *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. To do so, however, he had to move to Europe and establish himself in a new intellectual atmosphere.

The Return to Europe and Writing in the Seventies

In 1972 Vilém and Edith rented their São Paulo house to a U.S. citizen and left Brazil for good. Initially, they settled in Meran, a resort town in the South Tyrol in Italy. They were “free,” according to Edith, although they were living “the life of nomads,” constantly traveling for lectures and conferences, with Edith driving and Vilém sitting in the passenger seat belting out Mozart arias. Important friends and collaborators emerged from the 1972 AICA conference in

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292 Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction*, 23. Some of the lectures from this period include “Some Present Trends in Brazilian Thought” at Columbia University’s Institute of Latin American Studies and the Department of Philosophy in the early seventies (interestingly, given the political situation in Brazil, the announcement for this in the Flusser Archive states, “under the auspices of The Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations”); several talks in conjunction with essays published in *Main Currents* (see correspondence in 1974 with Melvin L. Alexenberg at Teachers College, Columbia, in the Flusser Archive); a seminar through the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Research and Planning arranged by Robert E. Weber, Director of the Project on Human Potential and the Year 2000. See Flusser Archive, English correspondence, Binder 57, nos. 2-21.
Paris, and they affected Flusser’s writing and publishing. Most significant among them were Abraham Moles, a professor of communication theory in Strasbourg and author of *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception* (1966), and Louis Bec, the artist with whom Flusser would collaborate on the science-fiction philosophy parable *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (1987). In a letter to Moles, Flusser voiced his interest in applying their shared interests in communications in a more imaginative fashion: “Have you ever thought of using the new communications technologies (not for ‘teaching’ it to others) [but] to articulate your ideas?”

During this period Flusser began publishing in French-language publications like *Communication et langages, Cause commune, and Théâtre/Public, Gennevilliers*. But he was still publishing in São Paulo: particularly a column, “Posto Zero,” in the newspaper *Fôlha de São Paulo*. Many of these essays on everyday objects would be published in Brazil as *Things that Concern Me (A coisas que me cercam)* (1970) and appear in France—although translated from

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297 See Vilém Flusser’s *A coisas que me cercam* (São Paulo: Fundo Estadual de Cultura, 1970). Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo cite “three different but not identical versions in German, English,
English—as *Force of the Everyday (La force du quotidien)* (1973), kicking off what has been described as Flusser’s “phenomenology decade.”  

Flusser also published a small pamphlet, *The Codified World (Le Monde Codifié)*, which was the transcript of a conversation held at the *Institut de l’Environnement* in Paris on May 3, 1973—although he wasn’t satisfied with this version and later translated it into German, publishing it in the Stuttgart newspaper *Merkur*.  

In 1974, Flusser participated in a project in France with the Gruppe Art Sociologique (Herv Fischer, Fred Forest and Jean-Paul Thenot); guest-lectured at Columbia University, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and the State University of New York at Buffalo; published essays in the New York-based journal *Main Currents*; and participated in “Open Circuits: The Future of Television” conference at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.  

Without offers for lengthier

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298 Vilém Flusser, *La force du quotidien*, trans. Jean Mesrie and Barbara Niceall (Paris: Mame, 1973). The book, which was translated from English essays, includes a preface by Abraham Moles. In addition to the essays mentioned here, also see his articles for *Merkur, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Neuer Züricher Zeitung, Main Currents,* and the Jewish periodical *Shalom*. Flusser also sketched out ideas in the short “Posto Zero” pieces he wrote for the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* in 1972, like “Synthesis (Sintese),” “Masks (Mascaras),” “Passion (Paixão),” “Irony (Ironia),” “Unicorns (Unicornios),” “People (Gente),” “Brainstorm (O bicho de sete cabeças),” “Walls (Paredes),” “Pantry and Kitchen (Copa e cozinha).”


300 Sander, *Sources*, 195.

engagements in the United States, however, in 1975 the Flussers moved to Robion, a village in Provence, and Flusser lectured at the Institut de l'Environnement and the Ecole d’Art d’Aix-en-Provence and participated in the 1975 Festival of Arles, speaking in a roundtable about art and photography.\(^{302}\) In 1980, the Flussers bought a house in Robion with the intention of living out their days in a “dignified manner.”\(^{303}\)

Although the seventies are characterized as Flusser’s phenomenology decade, one could argue that Flusser’s phenomenology stretched over the course of his lifetime\(^{304}\)—and even posthumously, given the publication of *In Praise of Superficiality: Towards a Phenomenology of Media* in 1993.\(^{305}\) But, as Michael Hanke has pointed out, he also reviewed Brazilian books on

\(^{302}\) See Flusser’s “Art, Photographie et Philosophie” in *le nouveau photocinéma* 39 (October 1975). Flusser Archive M21-PHOCI-01-691.


\(^{304}\) For instance, Flusser wrote about the São Paulo Bienal in a phenomenological context (see Vilém Flusser, “Bienal e fenomenologia,” *O Estado de São Paulo*, Suplemento Literário (December 2, 1967): 5, as well as an essay “Für eine Phänomenologie des Turismus (Toward a Phenomenology of Tourism)” published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 6, 1970. Cited in *The Freedom of the Migrant*, 7. Also see Vilém Flusser’s “Aspects and Prospects of Tsai’s Work” in *Art International* 709 (December 1978), which also takes a phenomenological approach to the work of Tsai Wen-Ying. (Also published as “Cybernetic Art of Tsai Wen-Ying in the catalogue National Museum of History, Taiwan/Taiwan Museum of Art, 1978.)

media and communications, recommending them for publication in France, which shows his interest in communications theory and cybernetics, as well as in connecting Brazilian and European theory.\footnote{306} The selected bibliography at the back of Flusser’s *Writings* mentions only three texts from the seventies, two published in French and one in Portuguese: *Force of the Everyday* (1972), *The Codified World* (1974), and *Natural: Mind* (1978).\footnote{307} In the *Sources*, Klaus Sander mentions unpublished manuscripts like *In Search of New Man*,\footnote{308} *Phenomenology of Human Gestures*,\footnote{309} the autobiography that would be published as *Bodenlos*,\footnote{310} and the lectures

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\footnote{308} The entry for 1970/71 mentions the “emergence of the book manuscript on the search for a new people” (“Entstehung des Buchmanuskripts *Auf der Suche nach einem neuen Menschen*.”). In a 1971 letter to a potential editor (Sander doesn’t specify whom), Flusser wrote that “my essay is an attempt at a phenomenology of the Brazilians from the world standpoint” (“Mein Essay stellt den Versuch dar, eine Phänomenologie des Brasilianers vom Standpunkt Welt”). Sander, *Sources*, 19-20.


\footnote{310} The early version was titled *Testimony from the Bottomless Abyss (Zeugenschaft aus der Bodenlosigkeit)*. Sander, *Sources*, 21.
at the Institut de l'Environnement in Paris that would be published in Kommunikologie.\footnote{Vilém Flusser, Kommunikologie (Mannheim, Germany: Bollmann, 1996). Also see Sander, Sources, 21-22. Sander’s dates are also different for Natural:mente, which he dates 1979—as does Rodrigo Maltez Novaes—for the Portuguese publication, rather than 1978.} In his introduction to the new English translation of Natural:Mind, Rodrigo Maltez Novaes offers a slightly different narrative with the publication of The Force of the Everyday in 1973 followed by Natural:Mind, written in Portuguese in 1974 and 1975 and published in Brazil in 1979, Gestures written in French in 1976—but not published until 1991—and Pós-História written in 1979 and published in Brazil in 1983.\footnote{Vilém Flusser, Natural:Mind, trans. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013) and Pós-história: Vinte instantâneos e um modo de usar (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1983).} To complicate matters further, in an issue of Flusser Studies, Janine Marchessault and Rainer Guldin lay out a different chronology of the seventies, couched in communications theory rather than phenomenology and which emphasizes comparisons with Marshall McLuhan, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard.\footnote{Janine Marchessault and Rainer Guldin, “Introduction,” Flusser Studies 6 (2008): 1, accessed May 31, 2014, http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/introduction06.pdf.} These different narratives are not entirely incompatible. Instead, they reflect Flusser’s indefatigable approach to writing and publication and the fluidity between languages and disciplines that characterizes his output. Moreover, there is a difference in approach here: cataloging published books as opposed to lectures and articles. For Flusser, these were composed in the same manner and the oral aspects of his legacy are only beginning to be explored.\footnote{The recent issue of Flusser Studies 17 examined “Music and Sound in Vilém Flusser’s Work,” and the DVD “We shall survive in the memory of others” (Berlin: Walther Konig, 2010) includes Flusser lectures. Flusser composed his writings generally to be spoken or performed. See Flusser Studies 17 (June 2014), accessed July 2, 2015, http://www.flusserstudies.net/archive/flusser-studies-17-double-issue.}
Flusser’s first book of the decade, The Force of the Everyday was published in France in 1973, but actually appeared in Portuguese around 1970 as Things that Surround Me, and many of the essays appeared in other publications first. The book is made up of short philosophical essays devoted to everyday objects: canes, bottles, pens, glasses, carpets, walls, mirrors, books, beds, and automobiles. That Flusser was suddenly focusing on objects seems odd initially, until put in context. In the introduction, Flusser cites Abraham Moles’ 1972 Theory of Objects as a touchstone, and both books were written at a moment when French writers and thinkers were focusing on objects and industrial design. Larry Busbea cites an “explosion” of design and technology-oriented texts between 1954 and 1958: Pierre Francastel’s Art et Technique, Gilbert Simondon’s Du mode d’existence des objets techniques and Jacques Ellul’s La technique ou l’enjeu du siècle (The Technological Society), as well as Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Structural Anthropology (1958), André Hermant’s Formes utiles, Roland Barthes’s Mythologies, and later Jean Baudrillard’s System of Objects (1968), with “popular manifestations” including the films

315 By Flusser’s account in the introduction to The Force of the Everyday, “Beds” first appeared in Comentário (Rio de Janeiro) and in slightly different form in Cause Commune (Paris); the essays on walls, carpets, and mirrors were first published in the literary supplement of O Estado de São Paulo and—the essays on walls and carpets—in the French periodicals CRÉÉ, Revue de Design et d’Environnement Contemporain. The essay on bottles originally appeared in Main Currents of Modern Thought (New York), while the essays on books, pens, and automobiles were previously unpublished. See Flusser, The Force of the Everyday, 23-24.

of Jacques Tati, and the novels of Georges Perec and Alain Robbe-Grillet, which “addressed the
new ubiquity of commodities with irony and not a small amount of cynicism.”317 Busbea also
mentions several thinkers whose trajectories overlapped with Flusser: Henri Van Lier, Jean
Baudrillard, György Kepes, and Gilbert Simondon.318

It is Moles, however, with whom Flusser was in close dialogue. Flusser wrote in 1973 an
essay called “Apropos of Abraham Moles: Communication: A New Philosophy?” in which he
compared Moles’ thought not to science, but to the lineage of philosophy such as that of
Husserl—or the “new science.”319 About Theory of Objects, Busbea writes that Moles “had very
much internalized the object-environment continuum established in French object theory. Indeed,

317 See Larry Busbea’s “Metadesign: Object and Environment in France, c. 1970*” in Design
length, as well as Max Bense. He doesn’t mention Flusser, but he mentions Jean Baudrillard’s
“Design and Environment or How Political Economy Escalates into Cyberblitz” in For a

318 See György Kepes, ed., The Man-Made Object (New York: Braziller, 1966) and Gilbert
Simondon, Du mode d’existence des objets techniques (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne,
1958). Busbea, “Metadesign: Object and Environment in France,” 107. Also see Martin
Civilization (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1934); and Jacques Ellul, La technique ou

319 See Vilém Flusser’s “Apropos d’Abraham Moles: La communication: science ou idéologie?”
in communication et langages 20, 4th trimester (Paris, 1973): 35-44. Flusser Archive M21-
COLANG-02.682. The opening page of the article includes the works of Abraham Moles to
which Flusser is responding: La Création scientifique (Geneva: Kister, 1957); Théorie de
l’information et perception esthétique (Paris: Denoël, 1958-1971); Sociodynamique de la
culture (Paris: Mouton, 1968); Musiques expérimentales (Zurich: Cercle d’Art, 1961); L’Affiche
dans la société urbaine (Paris: Dunod, 1969); Psychologie du kitsch (Paris: Mame, 1970);
Créativité et méthode d’innovation (Paris: Mame-Fayard, 1970); Art et ordinateur (Tournai:
Castermann, 1971); Encyclopédie de la Communication (Paris: C.E.P.L., 1971); Psychologie de
l’espace (Paris: Castermann/E. Rohmer, 1972); Théorie des objet (Paris: Edition universitaires,
1972). Flusser wrote at least one other article for the the same journal: “Le Phénomène
Archive M21-COLANG-03.683.
his book would go the furthest in describing in exacting detail its social and psychological mechanics,” incorporating Henri Lefebvre’s critique of everyday life, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and attempting to reconcile these with a cybernetic understanding of the world adapted from Norbert Wiener, Marshall McLuhan, and the semiotic theories of Max Bense, Tomás Maldonado, and Gui Bonsiepe. Like Moles, Flusser viewed the object phenomenologically, but through Husserl rather than the lens of French writers such as Merleau-Ponty. In the essay “On Edmund Husserl,” Flusser explained how, coming out of the German philosophical tradition, Husserl defined things in terms of the Schau (vision or perception) of the Lebenswelt: the “concrete world in which we live” or the “network of concrete intentionalities, an area of relationships.” Nothing could be “known if it is not experienced and evaluated, and nothing can be evaluated without being experienced and known.” For Husserl, objects are mere “abstract points” at which “various concrete intentions are aiming,” and this will have enormous consequences for Flusser. It marks “quite brutally, the end of humanism” in which “the human individual is no longer considered as a concrete thing but only as an abstraction from concrete relationships which link men to one another and to intended objects.” In The Force of

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320 Busbea, “Metadesign,” 110. Bense, Maldonado, and Bonsiepe were all associated with the Ulm School of Design, which closed in 1968.


322 Ibid., 95.

the Everyday, Flusser stresses the importance of objects as phenomenological mediators between humans and the environment, paving the way to think in terms of communications theory. (Moles was less interested in individual messages than an “object ecology” mirroring the media ecology proposed by communications theorists.) Hence, in the introduction to The Force of the Everyday, Flusser writes that, by focusing on telephones, televisions, computers, the press, advertising, television, or cinema, some communications theorists unnecessarily restrict the scope of their investigation. Everyday objects, he stresses, are “intermediaries”—or “media” and “communication tools,” hence their analysis is fundamental to the theory of communication. This is, of course, a somewhat perverse approach to communications theory in which ancient types of objects like canes and carpets eclipse televisions and computers. Flusser argues, however, that objects can either be mediators or obstructions and that, if we don’t see them as a means of communication, we will never discover the structure of communication in our environment and will have the “opposite of what should be the theory of communication.” In the preface to The Force of the Everyday, Moles compares Flusser’s text to McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964), writing that, while McLuhan’s thesis is “the medium is the message,” in which media itself generally overwhelms its content, for Flusser humans are not merely instruments of technology controlled by the

324 Busbea, “Metadesign,” 111.
medium but subjects motivated by, for instance, the contents of a telephone call.329 “The medium is not the message,” Moles writes, but merely one of the components in the world of messages.330

The Flusser-McLuhan comparison is crucial, since Flusser was often likened to the Canadian theorist, although he rarely cited him.331 In an interview with Daniela Kloock in November 1991, shortly before Flusser’s death, Kloock remarked that McLuhan had also associated media with extensions of or a substitute for the human body and Flusser quickly responded, “Nennen Sie keine Namen” (“Do not mention any names.”)332 But Flusser and McLuhan did use similar terms: “medium,” “the message,” “the box,” and “the window onto the world.”333 Both called “man” the “tool-making animal,”334 and both wrote in an interdisciplinary


329 “The human being is motivated in his actions by the contents of the phone call, it is in its value the content of advertising, but it is the telephonic habitus that inserts itself into the technical society, joined together with the possession of a small bright screen.” (“L’être humain est mû dans ses actes par le contenu de l’appel téléphonique, il l’est dans ses valeurs par le contenu de la publicité, mais c’est l’habitus téléphonique qui l’insère dans la société technique, conjointement avec la possession d’un petit écran lumineux.”) Italics in the original text. See Abraham A. Moles, “Sur Les Médiateurs de la Communication,” The Force of the Everyday, 9. My translation.

330 Moles, The Force of the Everyday, 9-10. Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo point out that in texts like Kommunikolgie Flusser later defined himself by clearly distancing himself from McLuhan’s work, by arguing that “media do not possess any one-sided structural trait wired into their hardware and independent of their concrete use within a given sociopolitical setting.” Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vilém Flusser: An Introduction, 100.


332 Quoted in Marchessault and Guldin, “Introduction,” Flusser Studies 6, 2.

fashion, similar to that of cultural theorists such as Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. They were also similar in their phenomenological approach to media studies: both proclaimed the “prosthetic” nature of media in its relation to the human body. And they had comparable relationships to the media they theorized: McLuhan did not drive a car or watch television, and Flusser didn’t drive or use a personal computer. And yet, Janine Marchessault and Rainer Guldin argue that McLuhan and Flusser were writing not just from polar ends of the Americas, but with different theoretical ends in mind, too. By their account, McLuhan is a formalist theorizing the gradual disappearance of the human body from knowledge production in the electronic age, while Flusser is interested in the feedback loop of objects and the phenomenological messages they provide.


The Codified World came out of a conference on May 3, 1973 at the Institut de L'Environment in Paris and was originally published in French in 1974, as a forty-eight page pamphlet, Flusser rewrote it in German and published it as “Die kodifizierte Welt” in Merkur in 1978. The French version of the essay begins by grappling with the difference between nature and culture and the fact that culture is characterized by “codes” that represent things. The French version of “The Codified World” leans heavily on language, considering the “universe” of French language as a system of codes, as well as gestures (and paying homage to semiotics, with references to denotative and connotative codes and a rare reference to Umberto Eco’s “absent structure,”) and ends with a consideration of difference types of communication: the


340 The discussion at the back of the pamphlet includes an argument between Flusser and an unidentified participant regarding the difference between nature and culture, predicting later writings like Natural: mind, Vampyroteuthis infernalis, and the “Curie’s Children” essays in Artforum. Flusser’s interlocutor claims that nature doesn’t exist without culture, but Flusser argues that nature is a realm of neutral ethics; the distinction is not an epistemological difference, but a moral one. The discussion here about whether rain or the moon are nature or culture is echoed in essays like “Rain” and “The Moon” in Natural: mind. See Flusser, Le Monde codifié, 34ff.

discursive and the dialogic—which would appear in later texts. The much shorter German version, later translated to English and printed in *Writings*, is clearly influenced by Flusser’s burgeoning interest in technological media and his participation in photography and television conferences in the mid-seventies. This version gets straight to the point, positing that meaning and “life in the world” (echoing Husserl’s *Lebenswelt*) are utterly transformed by the communications revolution. Flusser begins with the example of color and how our world has been transformed since World War II by an explosion of color: everything from colorful socks, pajamas, beverages, and ice cream to advertisements, stoplights and Technicolor film. Color is part of the codified world—the code being a system of symbols whose purpose is to facilitate communication between people (and wherever you discover codes, you can infer human presence)—but it is also delivered via surfaces, which will become important in the technical image writings. Flusser’s list of surfaces sounds familiar after reading *The Force of the Everyday*: walls, screens, paper surfaces, plastic, aluminum, glass, textiles. All have become important “media” and linear codes like the alphabet—harking back to the essay “Lines and Surfaces,” but also looking forward to *Does Writing Have a Future?*—are becoming less

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342 Flusser, *Le Monde codifié*, 28. The other important thing that Flusser does in the French essay is identify two types of codes: elite and mass, or “elite media” and “mass media,” (ibid., 31). This is important for his later approach to technical images, in which he doesn’t champion art photography specifically, but rather those who experiment with what he calls photography’s “program.”


344 Flusser would later write an essay on color, “Farben statt Formen” [Colors Instead of Shapes], *Lob der Oberflächlichkeit: Für eine Phänomenologie der Medien. Schriften Bd. 1* (Bensheim and Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1993), 118-129. His discussion of color is also interesting in relation to the rise of color photography in the art world at the same moment. William Eggleston’s 1976 exhibition of color photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is seen as an early benchmark of that rise.

important.\textsuperscript{346} If one wants to read or decipher a text, one has to read to the end of a line/sentence to receive the message, while in images the eye wanders across the image, ordering things into position. This is not a new situation: images dominated code systems before text was invented, as Flusser will argue in \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography}.\textsuperscript{347} But even after the invention of writing “surface codes”—frescoes, tapestries, mosaics, stained glass church windows—played an important role.\textsuperscript{348} Flusser sees a new generation programmed by technical images and their diachronized rather than synchronized mode of time, and argues that these images are emblematic of a new age, which he calls “post-historical.” This includes photography, which is part of the new consciousness in that “the techno-codes are a further step away from texts, because they allow us to make images out of concepts. A photograph is not the image of the facts at hand, as was the case with the traditional image, but rather the image of a series of concepts, which the photographer has come up with in the scene that signifies the facts at hand.”\textsuperscript{349}


\textsuperscript{347} Flusser also attempts a definition of “image,” honed later in \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography}. Here he writes that “the scenic character of codes gives rise to a specific way of life of societies that they program. One can call it the ‘magical form of being.’ An image is a surface whose meaning is suspended in a moment: It ‘synchronizes’ the situations that it represents as a scene.” Flusser, \textit{The Codified World}, 37. Later the definition of an image will be simplified to “a magical surface within which the elements relate magically.” Flusser, \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} (Göttingen, Germany: European Photography, 1984), 60. The recurrence of the word “magic” throughout “The Codified World” is also notable and will become prevalent in later technical image texts.

\textsuperscript{348} Flusser, \textit{The Codified World}, 36.

\textsuperscript{349} Ibid., 40. This section also includes a good explanation of the difference between linear and surface thinking in which texts are “explanations” and techno-images are “models.” Flusser writes, “The revolutionary originality of techno-images is not that they move themselves, that they are ‘audiovisual,’ that they shine in light of the cathode ray [sic], and so on, but that they are ‘models,’ the image of a concept of a scene. That is a ‘crisis,’ because the reaching beyond texts
Technical images produce a crisis in which old “programs” such as politics, philosophy, and science are disabled. However, in the same way as it took centuries for people to learn how to wield the writing code, we can gradually learn techno-codes. The essay ends on a hopeful note: “The decline and fall of the alphabet points to the end of history in the narrow sense of the word. The present reflection hopes to raise the question concerning the commencement of the new.”

Like The Codified World, the essay “Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television” also came out of a conference: “Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television,” held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in January 1974. Flusser would write isolated essays on television, although he generally considered it under the rubric of technical images and later of communicology, his term for communications theory. Two things are particularly interesting about this essay. One is the company in which it was given: an illustrious group of artists, critics, and theorists (Flusser’s panel alone included René Berger,


The essay was also reprinted in German as “Für eine Phänomenologie des Fernsehens” (1974) in Lob der Oberflächlichkeit, Schriften Bd. 1, 2 (Mannheim, Germany: Bollmann, 1995), 180-200, and in Medienkultur (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2008), 103-123.

Gerald O’Grady, Pierre Schaeffer, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and John McHale.\textsuperscript{353} The second is that Flusser’s essay considered television from a phenomenological perspective, as a box in the living room around which people sit, with buttons that viewers can press, which gives them the illusion of freedom and control.\textsuperscript{354} Expanding on the quotidian phenomenon in \textit{The Force of the Everyday}, he argues that television is a new window opening onto the world—an update of the window people leaned out of in ancient villages to communicate with their neighbors. He echoes McLuhan in one sense: the television is said to produce “messages.” But for Flusser, the medium moves only one way, creating the illusion of participation while really encouraging passive reception. For television to become an “improved window,” it needs to be treated as both discursive and dialogical, not just transmitting messages but allowing us to “‘recognize’ the other person, in the sense of perceiving and conceiving his message, and it would allow the other person to recognize us in the same way.”\textsuperscript{355} Here one can see the influence of Martin Buber’s idea of seeing God in the face of the Other—but updated for the telecommunications age in which we address one another through surfaces and screens. Flusser would elaborate on this later in the technical image writings. In the meantime, however, he would pick up the argument from the discussion following his lecture on \textit{The Codified World}, parsing nature and culture.

\textsuperscript{353} Some of the other participants included Gregory Battcock, Hollis Frampton, Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas, Stan VanDerBeek, Vito Acconci, Allan Kaprow, Shigeko Kubota, Richard Serra, John Baldessari, David Ross, Barbara J. London, and Harald Szeeman.

\textsuperscript{354} Flusser’s discussion of the box foreshadows his writing about the black box—including the camera, but also other apparatuses—in \textit{Post-history} and other texts. See Vilém Flusser, “Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television,” 237.

\textsuperscript{355} Ibid., 247.
Flusser’s attempt to erode the divide between humans and their environment, as well as the hierarchy of humans over other animals would be a primary concern in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (1983) and the “Curie’s Children” column in *Artforum*. These ideas were also articulated in a series of essays he began writing in 1974, collected as *Natural: Mind* and published in São Paulo in 1979. Reflecting one of his favorite devices—the circular narrative in which the concluding essay serves as an introduction—Flusser explains in “Natural: Mind (a kind of conclusion)” at the end of the book that the essays could be read in any sequence, echoing the literary experiments of Oulipo, Jorge Luis Borges, and Julio Cortazar. Devoted to

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357 Borges’ short story “The Garden of the Forking Paths” offers the blueprint for this. In the story, the protagonist is a descendent of Ts’ui Pên, creator of a manuscript described as both a book and a labyrinth with no linear narrative (the hero dies in one chapter and reappears in a later one). “The Garden of the Forking Paths” has been described as a hypertext that essentially predicts the structure of the internet and “the increased complexity of human consciousness and the failure of linear media to capture the structures of our thought,” *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 3. *The New Media Reader* also includes writing by Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potential, Workshop for Potential Literature) and Italo Calvino’s “Prose and Anticombinatorics” (183-189), an essay on using a computer algorithm to compose a story. Also see Calvino’s lecture “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” in *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 3-27; Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), originally published as *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962); and Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s essay “Topological Structures in Modern Literature,” published in Spanish in the Buenos Aires magazine *Sur* (May/June 1966), which examined
paths, valleys, birds, rain, cows, grass, the moon, meadows, winds, fog, and other phenomena, the essays hinge around a dialectic between nature and culture that Flusser deviously seeks to collapse. In “Paths,” the first essay in the book, for instance, Flusser looks at the Fuorn Pass, which connects the Engadin Valley to the valleys in Trentino-Alto Adige on the borders of Italy, Austria, and Switzerland. “The Fuorn Pass is an asphalt road,” he writes. And yet, “for countless millennia,” it was the path for herds of horses, cattle, and reindeer, “a path which they crossed while being chased by Paleolithic hunters, our ancestors. The route of today’s road was ‘built’ by those herds … we, who travel by car from Bolzano to Zernez, are only following their footsteps, exactly as our ancestors, the hunters, did.”358 Teasing out the difference between “natural” and “artificial” paths, Flusser concludes that it is “extremely problematic … to want to establish a rigorous dialectic between culture and nature.”359 Similarly, where birds once served as models for flight, now that humans can actually fly our relationship to birds must change: “We see birds as flying apparatus, even though such apparatus did not have birds but aerodynamic equations as models. In this sense, airplanes are less ‘natural’ instruments than levers and mirrors: they do not have natural things as models.”360


358 Flusser, Natural: Mind, 1-3.
359 Ibid., 10.
360 Ibid., 22. Flusser was hardly alone in this conclusion. As Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith points out, Leonardo da Vinci proposed a number of possibilities for flight in his notebooks, including human-powered flying machines with harnesses attached to movable, bird-like wings. But it was the Wright brothers’ adoption of fixed-wing principles based on wind-tunnel experiments in their workshop in Dayton, Ohio between 1901 and 1902, that paved the way for human flight. See Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith’s Aviation: an historical survey from its origins to the end of the Second World War (London: H.M.S.O./Science Museum, 1970). Also see “The Wright Brothers and Early Flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, 1900-1903,” accessed May 19, 2014, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/wrbr/hrs/chapter1.pdf. The same analogy--
The rest of the essays challenge the nature-culture binary in other ways. In “Rain,” Flusser describes how observing rain through a window while smoking a pipe and listening to Mozart represents the victory of culture over nature since it offers the possibility of a distanced contemplation of nature.\(^{361}\) And yet, irrigation—which Flusser calls “programmed” rain—upsets this neat divide, demanding that we reconsider our ideas of nature, culture, technology, and progress. In “Cows,” which has been reprinted twice in recent English language publications,\(^{362}\) Flusser describes cows as “efficient machines for the transformation of grass into milk” with “hardware” that can be used in the form of meat, leather, and other consumable products, and prototypes for Western notions of progress: a “highly sophisticated and anthropomorphic machine.”\(^{363}\) Finally, “The Moon” questions whether the moon, which belonged until recently to the class of things that are visible but inaccessible to our hearing, touch, smell or taste, has been transformed into a fiction, since it has been “touched” by astronauts.\(^{364}\) In a hilariously perverse passage, Flusser argues that, “since the Moon (according to TV and newspapers) has left the field of nature and entered into that of culture,” it no longer belongs to “astronomers, poets, and important later for Flusser—can be extended to artificial intelligence (AI). As one journalist recently pointed out, AI “started working when it ditched humans as a model … That’s the thrust of the analogy: Airplanes don’t flap their wings; why should computers think?” James Somers, “The Man Who Would Teach Machines to Think,” The Atlantic, October 23, 2013, accessed May 19, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com. The article profiles Douglas Hofstadter, an early AI researcher and author of Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid (New York: Basic Books, 1979), who pursued an AI trajectory based on human cognition and intelligence. Also see Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach, ed. Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010).

\(^{361}\) Flusser, Natural: Mind, 29.


\(^{363}\) Vilém Flusser, Natural: Mind, 47.

\(^{364}\) Ibid., 65.
magicians,” but “politicians, lawyers, and technocrats.” It has become the property of NASA and a form of “real estate”: "NASA has transformed the Moon from a natural phenomenon into a culture one (into an instrument of astronautics) by having touched it." One of Flusser’s clearest outlines of the nature/culture dichotomy appears at the end of this essay: “I see now, surprisingly, that the Moon, far from being a natural phenomenon on its way to becoming culture, is, and always has been, a cultural phenomenon that is starting to become nature. Here is what culture really is: a set of necessary things that become progressively more indispensable. And here is what nature is: a set of unnecessary and dispensable things. Nature is a late and luxurious product of culture.”

Ultimately, the impact of natural experiences are indistinguishable from cultural ones, leading Flusser to conclude that the ontological distinction between nature and culture is not existentially sustainable within the current context. This upsets concepts and categories like science, modernity, and progress. Physics, which Flusser sees as the paradigm for early modern science, can no longer be the model for all sciences; instead, communications theory becomes more viable. Thus *Natural: Mind* itself becomes part of an “embryonic” scientific literature in

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365 Ibid., 66. Also see David Meerman Scott and Richard Jurek, *Marketing the Moon: The Selling of the Apollo Lunar Program* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014). This book argues that rather than functioning as a secretive government operation, space exploration was turned into a communal one via marketing and public relations campaigns for the Apollo program and product placement that included Hasselblad (the “first camera on the moon”), Sony cassette recorders, Tang instant fruit-flavored drink, and the Exer-Genie personal exerciser.

366 Flusser, *Natural: Mind*, 68.

367 Ibid., 70-71.

368 Ibid., 132.

369 Ibid., 138.
which Husserl, Ortega y Gasset, and Bachelard are predecessors. In the concluding sentences of the book, Flusser draws this out even further, describing the book as a “tourist guide” for Brazilians (since it was first published in Brazil) that explains the European attitude toward nature: “‘Tourist guide,’ as long as ‘tourism’ is understood as an updated synonym of the term ‘theory.’”

Flusser would continue to write about the nature-culture dichotomy in the eighties. But his focus was increasingly turning toward technology, writing, and history. In a January 1976 letter to Helena and Ladislas (Lotzi) Segy, friends who ran a gallery in New York, Flusser detailed some of his recent activities:

This is what I am doing: (a) a series of phenomenological essays on gestures: doing, searching, walking, painting, photographing, eating, writing, listening etc. aim: a book to be called “the meaning of gestures”. (b) A long paper on sociological art. (c) a course of lectures on “les phénomènes de la communication.” (d) A collection of essays on “nature” versus “culture,” (the given versus the made). Ever since we left São Paulo in ’72, I published three books: “La Force du quotidien”, “Le monde codifié” and “Techno-imaginaire”, and numerous articles in various media, including some in the States.

Post-History

With this in mind, Post-History may be seen to sit at a divide in Flusser’s oeuvre. Written in the late seventies as a series of lectures to be delivered in Brazil, France, and Israel, the manuscript exists in multiple versions: two in Portuguese, two in German, and partial versions in

370 Ibid., 139.
371 Ibid., 143.
372 Also see articles like Vilém Flusser’s “Kitch and Post-History” in Natural/cultura 1 (Salerno, Italy, 1985): 22-25. Flusser Archive M22-NATCUL-01-718.
French and English.\footnote{Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, “Translator’s Introduction” in Post-History, xi. The book was first published in 1983 in Portuguese as Pós-História – Vinte instantaneous e um modo de usar by Duas Cidades, the São Paulo publisher that also published Natural: Mind. But many of the ideas had been sketched out in different essays over the years. For instance, in “Line and Surface,” published in Main Currents in 1973, Flusser included a section titled “Toward a Post-Historical Future.” See Vilém Flusser, “Line and Surface,” Main Currents 29, no. 3 (New Rochelle, NY: Center for Integrative Education, 1973): 100-106. An abstract of the essay was later published in The Philosopher’s Index 7, no. 4 (1974). Flusser’s correspondence with Don Stacy, a U.S. artist and board member of Main Currents should also be mentioned. It fills two binders in the Flusser Archive.} Many of the ideas and concepts that occupied Flusser over previous decades are here, but the book is also a leaping-off point for the technical image writings. \textit{Post-History} addresses knowledge, religion, science, ideology, politics, progress, education, nature, culture, art, and history, but using concepts from fields like cybernetics, communications, information, and game theory and terms like “program,” “codes,” “functionary,” “instrument,” “noise,” “redundancy,” “input,” “output,” and “apparatus.” The other significant factor that Flusser formulates his arguments in relation to other thinkers—although these figures are not actually identified in the text. In a letter to Milton Vargas dated October 22, 1980, Flusser outlined the thinkers confronted in each essay: Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, Rudolf Carnap, Karl Marx, Karl Popper, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Abraham Moles, José Ortega y Gasset, Jürgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, Marshall McLuhan, A. Rappaport,\footnote{Probably Anatol Rapoport (1911-2007), the Ukrainian-born theorist. A similar error appears in the Patrick Tschudin interview with Flusser in The Freedom of the Migrant—only corrected in that book. Flusser states, “Until the middle of the twentieth century we thought that that people’s ability to make decisions was some sort of pinnacle … But there are people who have really cudgeled their brains over such concepts. And among these people—Rupperport,* to name one—there are those who have asked, ‘Can this be formalized? What does it mean to make a decision?” Flusser, The Freedom of the Migrant, 97. At the bottom of the page, the asterisk is explained: “Presumably the transcription of the interview should read ‘Rappoport’ or ‘Rapoport.’ According to his widow, Edith Flusser, Flusser is referring to Anatol Rapoport (1911-), an emeritus professor of mathematics and psychology and of peace studies at the University of Toronto who has published prolifically on game theory, among numerous other topics,” (ibid.).} Edmund Husserl, Ernst Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, “Translator’s Introduction” in Post-History, xi. The book was first published in 1983 in Portuguese as Pós-História – Vinte instantaneous e um modo de usar by Duas Cidades, the São Paulo publisher that also published Natural: Mind. But many of the ideas had been sketched out in different essays over the years. For instance, in “Line and Surface,” published in Main Currents in 1973, Flusser included a section titled “Toward a Post-Historical Future.” See Vilém Flusser, “Line and Surface,” Main Currents 29, no. 3 (New Rochelle, NY: Center for Integrative Education, 1973): 100-106. An abstract of the essay was later published in The Philosopher’s Index 7, no. 4 (1974). Flusser’s correspondence with Don Stacy, a U.S. artist and board member of Main Currents should also be mentioned. It fills two binders in the Flusser Archive. Probably Anatol Rapoport (1911-2007), the Ukrainian-born theorist. A similar error appears in the Patrick Tschudin interview with Flusser in The Freedom of the Migrant—only corrected in that book. Flusser states, “Until the middle of the twentieth century we thought that that people’s ability to make decisions was some sort of pinnacle … But there are people who have really cudgeled their brains over such concepts. And among these people—Rupperport,* to name one—there are those who have asked, ‘Can this be formalized? What does it mean to make a decision?” Flusser, The Freedom of the Migrant, 97. At the bottom of the page, the asterisk is explained: “Presumably the transcription of the interview should read ‘Rappoport’ or ‘Rapoport.’ According to his widow, Edith Flusser, Flusser is referring to Anatol Rapoport (1911-), an emeritus professor of mathematics and psychology and of peace studies at the University of Toronto who has published prolifically on game theory, among numerous other topics,” (ibid.).
Bloch, The Hudson Institute. This list includes some of the thinkers Flusser grappled with during his teenage years in Prague (Marx, Buber); during his traumatic wartime and existential postwar years (Kafka, Ortega y Gasset, Sartre, Heidegger, Arendt); during his immersion in language philosophy (Carnap, Wittgenstein); and during his engagement with communications theory (McLuhan).

How, then, do communications and information theory inform traditional philosophy and create new concepts and arguments in Post-History? The opening section, “User’s Manual,” offers some clues. The title of this section reflects both the instruction manuals that come with consumer products, but also Life, a User’s Manual, a novel published by Georges Perec, a member of Oulipo, which used information theory to think about narrative structure. Flusser writes:

The sequence of the essays is random: they can be read in any order. Nevertheless there is a discursive thread that orders the essays. This is a discourse that runs from despair toward hope, however tenuous. Whoever follows this course must have read the text in the correct order. Although an equally useful method would be to read the text in leaps, like the movement of the knight on a chessboard. This method will allow the unmasking of the methodical tricks (paraphenomenological), to which the author appealed.

In “Our Program,” addressed to Rudolf Carnap, Flusser writes that the notion that the world and human existence are programmed is relatively new. Nonetheless, this ends up

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376 A conservative think tank founded in 1961 by Herman Kahn and colleagues from the RAND Corporation.
379 Flusser, Post-History, 2.
380 Ibid., 19.
affecting everything from ideology and history to art, politics, and human freedom, because programs are systems based on chance, in which “every virtuality, even the least probable, will be realized of necessity if the game is played for a sufficiently long time.”\(^{381}\) In this programmed world, the worker described in the essay “Our Work” becomes a functionary and society is transformed into a cybernetic system composed of functionaries and apparatus.\(^{382}\) Knowledge and the idea of progress are affected—see “Our Knowledge” and “Our Health”—because science has become a game for programmers and, more importantly, an apparatus.\(^{383}\) In “Our Communication,” written in response to Moles, history is influenced by changing modes of discourse and dialogue, particularly in the way discourse switches from “theatric” (schools, theaters, etcetera) and “pyramidal” (state, party, etcetera) to the “networked” dialogues characterized by the mass media, which produces feedback rather than new information.\(^{384}\) In “Our Inebriation,” written in response to Heidegger, Flusser looks at the “ontological position of

\(^{381}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{382}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{383}\) Ibid., 42.

\(^{384}\) Ibid., 57. Furthermore, “A second comment in Flusser’s fifth lecture, ‘Du discours scientifique à la démagogie’ [from the unpublished lecture series Les phénomènes de la communications, written in the mid-seventies], provides a direct link between Flusser’s notion of amphitheater and McLuhan’s idea of a global village. Flusser is critical of McLuhan’s ‘global village’ metaphor here: ‘Notre société est devenue un amphithéâtre cosmique, un cirque cosmique, et non un village cosmique comme le dit McLuhan.’ (‘Our society is derived from a cosmic amphitheater, a cosmic circus, and not a cosmic village according to McLuhan.’) He would have been sympathetic to McLuhan’s preferred metaphor which was the ‘global theater’ – a notion of mediation referring to what Canadians experienced daily from their southern neighbors: the spectacle of American media culture. For Flusser, however, the problem with McLuhan’s notion of ‘global village’ or even global theater, for that matter, is the fact that it implies a sort of harmonic unity and does not deal explicitly enough with the problem of unidirectional communication. In fact, the ampitheatrical media do not allow for dialogical forms of reaction because they function, above all, as distributive communication devices.” Marchessault and Guldin, “Introduction,” Flusser Studies 06, 3-4.
drugs”\textsuperscript{385} and the “narcotic media,”\textsuperscript{386} but also “a specific drug called ‘art.’”\textsuperscript{387} If drugs are characterized by an “ontological viscosity,”\textsuperscript{388} a similar phenomenon exists in art, and the artist becomes “the inebriate who emigrates from culture in order to reinvade it.”\textsuperscript{389} This is not to say that art is a free or revolutionary space, in the nineteenth-century or romantic sense. As Flusser points out in “Our School,” a response to John Dewey, the industrial model of education produced fine art academies that crippled and amputated artists’ “political and epistemological dimension.”\textsuperscript{390} But art can still serve as a model because “creative inebriation,” occurs within every discipline, turning private experience into a public declaration that can transform apparatus.\textsuperscript{391} Flusser writes:

\begin{quote}
Notwithstanding: art is a kind of magic. As it publishes the private, as it “turns conscious the unconscious,” it becomes a mediation of the immediate, a feat of magic ... And culture cannot forego this magic: because without this source of new information, however ontologically suspect, culture would fall into entropy.\textsuperscript{392}
\end{quote}

This is a political gesture, of course. Flusser argues that “to publish the private is the only type of engagement in the republic that effectively implies the transformation of the republic

\textsuperscript{385} Flusser, \textit{Post-History}, 132.
\textsuperscript{386} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{387} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{388} “Given its ambivalence, the ontological position of drugs is slippery. Drugs are a medium for overcoming cultural mediation in order to reach immediate experience. Drugs are the mediation of the immediate.” Flusser, \textit{Post-History}, 132. Italics in original text.
\textsuperscript{389} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{390} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{391} This argument echoes those made by political theorists from Jacques Rancière to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who posit art as a field where the political imaginary can flourish.
\textsuperscript{392} Flusser, \textit{Post-History}, 137.
because it is the only one that informs.” But other terms take precedence over politics: “doubt,” to which we have seen Flusser devote considerable time, and “ideology,” for which he maintains a special reservoir of scorn. Ideology is intermittently a form of “pseudo-knowledge,” a stubborn “insistence on one point of view,” and, in the case of political ideologies, a type of madness that characterizes “history in its last stages.”

The term that dominates Post-History however, and which predicates Flusser’s turn toward photography and the technical image in the nineteen-eighties, is apparatus. In the first essay in Post-History, “The Ground We Tread,” written as a dialogue with Hannah Arendt, Flusser describes Auschwitz as the place where “the Western tendency toward objectification was finally realized and it was done so in the shape of an apparatus.” After Auschwitz,

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393 Ibid., 138.
394 In Post-History, doubt and critique are almost synonymous: “as Kant used to say, critique or doubt, is not a dwelling,” (ibid., 68).
395 Flusser, Post-History, 39.
396 Ibid., 101. These statements on doubt and ideology will be repeated in Towards a Philosophy of Photography: “The act of photography is that of ‘phenomenological doubt,’ to the extent that it attempts to approach phenomena from any number of viewpoints. But the ‘mathesis’ of this doubt (its deep structure) is prescribed by the camera’s program. Two aspects are decisive for this doubt. First: Photographers’ practice is hostile to ideology. Ideology is the insistence on a single viewpoint thought to be perfect. Photographers act in a post-ideological way even when they think they are serving an ideology. Second: Photographers’ practice is fixed to a program. Photographers can only act within the program of the camera, even when they think they are acting in opposition to this program. This is true of all post-industrial acts: They are ‘phenomenological’ in the sense of being hostile to ideology, and they are programmed acts. Thus it is a mistake to talk of a drift towards ideology on the part of mass culture (e.g. on the part of mass photography). Programming is post-ideological manipulation.” Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 38.
397 Flusser, Post-History, 95.
398 Ibid., 6. In a footnote, translator Rodrigo Maltez Novaes writes: “When using the term ‘apparatus’ in English, Flusser always used the term in its Latin form for both the singular and the plural forms. In English it is possible to use both apparatus and apparatuses for the plural, but
apparatuses sprang up “like mushrooms after a Nazi rain, from the ground that has become rotten.” Some claim to be “friends of mankind,” like scientific, technical and administrative apparatuses. But, Flusser argues, such labels and ideologies are deceptive and serve only to cover up the essence of apparatus: “They are all just like Auschwitz, black boxes that function with complex inner-workings in order to realize a program … such apparatus function, all of them, toward the annihilation of all their functionaries, including programmers. Exactly because they objectify and dehumanize man.”

In succeeding essays, Flusser teases out the nature of apparatus. It is not just “intelligent instruments”—echoing later writers like Manuel De Landa—but a game with rules that need to be explained. There is not one, but multiple apparatuses, and they are all synchronized: the transport apparatus with the industrial apparatus, and the administrative apparatus with the entertainment one. There can be smaller apparatuses: art, cinema, the supermarket. What is important to note is not just their existence, but their effect: they’ve produced an upheaval of

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399 Flusser, Post-History, 9.

400 Ibid.

401 Ibid., 25 and 76-79. “Intelligent instruments are instruments that are equipped with mini-memory and mini-programs that execute specific tasks automatically. They cook dinners, cut grass, write letters, and assemble cars. They are robots in every sense; they are not anthropomorphic, to the contrary as predicted by all the preceding science fiction. Because these miniatures, far from being anti-apparatus, are themselves apparatus; and they work within and in function of gigantic apparatus. Therefore the de-alienating pretention of the defenders of miniaturization seems doubtful,” (ibid., 76-77). Italics in original.


403 Flusser, Post-History, 59.
history resulting in the migration of peoples and the reshuffling of space and time.\textsuperscript{404} Moreover, the relationship between humans and apparatus does not flow in one direction; programming is not controlled by humans:\textsuperscript{405}

\textit{Apparatus always function increasingly independently from their programmer’s intentions.} And apparatus that are programmed by other apparatus emerge with increasing frequency. Their initial purpose always recedes farther beyond the horizon, and becomes less interesting. Human programming is itself increasingly programmed by apparatus.\textsuperscript{406}

Flusser is emphatic on this point:

We must \textit{neither anthropomorphize nor objectify apparatus}. We must grasp them in their crtinuous concreteness, in their programmed and absurd functionality, in order to be able to comprehend them and thus insert them into meta-programs. The paradox is that such meta-programs are equally absurd games.\textsuperscript{407}

What he concludes is that we must learn is to accept the absurd, if we wish to emancipate ourselves: “Freedom is conceivable only as an absurd game with apparatus, as a game with programs … whether we continue to be ‘men’ or become robots depends on how fast we learn to play: we can become players of the game or pieces in it.”\textsuperscript{408} In this, and throughout \textit{Post-History}, one can see allusions to thinkers like Ortega y Gasset and Adorno and their engagement with \textit{Kulturkritik} (cultural criticism)—particularly in essays like “Our Dwelling” and “Our Clothes,” written in dialogue with Ortega y Gasset and Adorno, respectively. More significant here are

\textsuperscript{404} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{405} Here we see a distinct overlap with De Landa, who in the early nineties wrote about an imminent future in which pilotless aircraft and unmanned tanks would be “intelligent” enough to choose their own targets and the blurring distinction between the “advisory” and “executive” capabilities of military applications of artificial intelligence. See De Landa’s \textit{War in the Age of Intelligent Machines}, 1.

\textsuperscript{406} Flusser, \textit{Post-History}, 25.

\textsuperscript{407} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{408} Ibid.
connections to thinkers who have written about apparatus itself: Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and more recent scholars like Giorgio Agamben, Philippe Ortel, Suzanne Pagé, Samuel Bianchini, Jean-Louis Deotte, Alexander Galloway, and radical groups like Tiqqun. It is also important to note that the term “apparatus” has potentially different meanings and linguistic nuances from the French “dispositif” (Foucault’s term) and that

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409 One of the most famous twentieth-century thinkers to use the term “apparatus” is " Althusser. See Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 121-176; originally published as “Idéologie et appareils idéologique d’État (Notes pour une recherché)” in La Pensée 151 (June 1970): 3-38. Althusser’s concept of apparatus was more topographical (spatial) and theorized in relation to Marx and the economic base (superstructure) as an edifice and social formation, particularly in the context of the postwar French Communist Party. Flusser approached apparatus in a more technological sense. And while Althusser sees the apparatus as repressive, a tool of the ruling class, Flusser sees it as something that pervades all of society and ultimately reproduces or programs itself.


Agamben has disputed its translation as “apparatus.” Flusser’s editors and translators have also pointed out that the Portuguese *dispositivo* is commonly translated as “apparatus” or “device,” which is more technical, while *dispositivo*, like the French *dispositif*, carries the original meaning of the Latin *dispositio*, which in classical rhetoric was a system used for organizing arguments.

More important for this dissertation is how apparatus is connected with a theory of photography and technical images. In the essay “Our Images” in *Post-History*, written with Marshall McLuhan in mind, Flusser writes that technical images are different from traditional images in that traditional images are produced by humans and technical images by apparatuses. Moreover: “Apparatus[es] are black boxes that are programmed to devour symptoms of scenes and to spew out these symptoms in the form of images. Apparatus[es] transcode symptoms into images … The message of technical images must be deciphered, and such decoding is even more arduous than that of traditional images: the message is even more ‘masked.’”

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412 See Giorgio Agamben’s lecture “What is a Dispositif?” presented at the European Graduate School in 2005, accessed May 26, 2014, http://www.egs.edu. Part One begins: “For reasons that will become clear in the course of my lecture, I am not satisfied with the current English translation of ‘dispositif’ as procedure or apparatus. And I would prefer to keep nearer to the French original. This is why I have proposed a probably monstrous translation as dispository. The term is in the English Oxford dictionary. It is an astrological term, the law of the sign and its relation to other planets. Thus the depository being the lord of the astrological sign embodies all the forces and influences that the planet exerts on the individuals restraining them in all possible ways. This is perhaps a good translation for Foucault’s *dispositif*. By the way, questions of terminology are important in philosophy. Even if we do not reduce philosophy to technology like Schlag proposes, terminology is extremely important. As a philosopher whom I respect very much used to say, ‘Terminology is the poetical element of philosophy,’” (ibid.).


For historians of photography, the statement that “apparatus are black boxes” hardly goes unnoticed since the camera is (or was at the time of Flusser’s writing) a black box.\(^{415}\) The Portuguese version of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* even includes the term in its title: *Philosophy of the Black Box*.\(^{416}\) For Flusser, the black box is an expansive metaphor: media are black boxes;\(^{417}\) the family can be a black box.\(^{418}\) The cinema, examined in the essay “Our Rhythm,” which is dedicated to Marcuse, is a black box that is both literal and metaphoric. It is also an apparatus that produces “optical fraud” in the form of projected illusion, where receivers collaborate in their own “annihilation as subjects.”\(^{419}\) In this essay and “Our Images,” in particular, Flusser sketches out some of the fundamental elements of his technical image theory. However, he also traces the path through which technical images lead to altered consciousness and “post-history.” In the final essay in the book, “Our Return,” which is dedicated to Kafka, Flusser argues that while industrial societies are transitioning into post-industrial societies, linear and historical thinking founded on texts is being challenged by the “post-textual codes” found in technical images. This creates a new type of consciousness that is difficult to characterize:


\(^{418}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{419}\) Ibid., 62-63.
“Current times are marked by the discrepancy between the established social forms, thought structures, and levels of consciousness.”

One of the key elements distinguishing Flusser’s theory from other photographic theories is simply that it includes all technical images—film, television, video, photography—and comes with the caveat that we still can’t adequately read or analyze them yet:

The gesture to codify and decipher technical images takes place at a level that is one step away from the level of writing and two steps away from the level of traditional images. This is the level post-historical consciousness. This is a level that is still difficult to sustain. It is far too new in order for us to occupy it, unless for fleeting moments. We tend to constantly fall back into the level of historicity. We are, in relation to technical images, the same as the illiterate are in relation to texts.

Flusser argues that our ability to read these images will be developed through “technical imagination” informed by “informatics, cybernetics, and game theory” rather than aesthetics, literary criticism, or other methodologies adopted to interpret photography. This Einbildungskraft, or new technical imagination, would become Flusser’s theory for deciphering

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420 Ibid., 159.

421 Ibid., 95.

422 Flusser, Post-History, 98. The importance of games for Flusser cannot be overstated: “In the post-industrial society, ‘theory’ will very probably be a game strategy,” (ibid., 34). Games and game theory were also important to twentieth-century artists as diverse as Marcel Duchamp, the Situationists, and Adrian Piper, who cites R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa’s Games and Decisions (New York: John Wiley, 1957) in an important 1990 essay: “Artistic success in the contemporary Euroethnic art world is perceived by all as the payoff of a zero-sum game, in which one player’s win is another player’s loss.” Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists,” reprinted in Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford, England and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 61. For Flusser, however, games are theory, and vice versa; “Programs are games,” Post-History, 99. Similarly, programmers are players, such that “our environment reveals itself as a context of games that are co-implied, and whose rules are co-implied. In such an environment we are all played players, Homines ludentes, and pieces of the game: an absurd situation,” (ibid., 104). In terms of philosophy, “games are our ontological ground and all future ontology is necessarily game theory,” (ibid., 105).
images. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. His ideas were essentially in place in the seventies; they just weren’t employed in the service of a distinct “theory of photography.” In that sense, one might say that Flusser’s writings from this period comprise a theory looking for a context. He would find an appropriate context in European photography and media theory—but also, to a lesser degree, in the U.S. art context, which was engaged with images, but also with biotechnology, biogenetics, and other fields that were having a profound effect on human consciousness and society.
Chapter Three: The Technical Image Writings and Other Texts

Photography Theory in the Seventies

By emigrating to Europe in the seventies, Flusser was finally moving to a center and away from the intellectual periphery he had lamented throughout the fifties and sixties. Photography writing and scholarship was flourishing in the seventies and Flusser gravitated towards it in the same way he had migrated toward the art world in São Paulo in the sixties and early seventies. Interviewed three days before his death in 1980, Roland Barthes noted, “there does seem to be a kind of ‘theoretical boom’ in photography … People who are not technicians, historians, or aestheticians are becoming interested in it.”

Geoffrey Batchen has written that, by the time Barthes’s Camera Lucida was published in 1980, Susan Sontag and Michel Tournier had just published books on photography (Sontag’s is in Barthes’s bibliography); the University of Aix-Marseille had recently accepted a proposal for a doctoral program in photography; and the Musée d’Orsay in Paris had established a photography collection. Further, Cahiers de la photographie published a special issue in 1981 and in 1982 the Centre de la Photographie was created in Paris.

The increase of interest in photography coincided with a number of phenomena. Industrialized societies were awash in images—what Germans would call the Bilderflut, or


424 Ibid.
“image flood.”

In the U.S. and Europe, a canon of photography theory was being formed. Virtually all of it was written in Europe, England, or the United States. Primary among these texts—although written decades earlier—are Walter Benjamin’s essays, particularly “A Little History of Photography” (1931) and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” (1936), which were translated and disseminated in English only in the late sixties and seventies. Also important was the proto-Frankfurt School figure Siegfried Kracauer and his essay “Photography” (1929), as well as film critic and theorist André Bazin, whose essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945) was influential in both the film and photography scholarship. The sixties and seventies signaled a distinct shift in practice, too. As Batchen writes, it became possible to study for a master of fine arts degree in art photography in the United States in the mid-sixties, and by the late seventies photography, “whether as historical


426 Despite Asia’s embrace of photographic technology in the nineteenth century and the development and manufacture of electronics and digital technology in Asia and the subcontinent in the last century, little photographic theory has been written that has made its way westward. Part of this may have to do with photography’s Western origins: writing on the Indian photographer Raghubir Singh, Ashley la Grange has argued, “had Indians invented photography, the theoretical and artistic problems seen by Western photographers concerning color would never have arisen” since “Indian artists did not see in black and white before colonialism and photography. Their tradition of drawing was unlike the Western one and was filled with color.” Ashley La Grange, Basic Critical Theory for Photographers, (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2005), 159. Interestingly, although she includes figures like Bertrand Russell and Italo Calvino, Flusser’s writings are not included in her anthology. Also see Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., Photography’s Other Histories (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

object or professional practice, had become fully institutionalized, having at last found a secure
niche in universities, art schools, art museums, and the marketplace, as well as the culture at
large.**428

Artists who didn’t identify as photographers, *per se*, were increasingly adopting video
and photography to document performances or make conceptual works and the idea of “making”
rather than “taking” pictures was exemplified by artists later identified as the “Pictures
Generation.”**429 The sense that photography was the primary visual language of the contemporary
era also resulted in what Batchen has described as a “newly invigorated critical writing.”**430 In
May 1968, A.D. Coleman’s first column appeared in the *Village Voice*, signaling the perceived
need for a dedicated photography critic.**431 In 1976, Coleman’s writings were included in a

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**428** Batchen, “Palinode,” 17. Prior to the 1960s, the center for photography instruction in the
United States was the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, set up
by the former Bauhaus instructor László Moholy-Nagy and originally called the New Bauhaus in
1937. Aaron Siskind taught there from 1951 to 1971, Harry Callahan from 1947 to 1961, and
other faculty included György Kepes and Arthur Siegel. See “L. Moholy-Nagy and the Institute
of Design in Chicago,” *Everyday Art Quarterly* 3 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, Winter 1946 –
ed. David Travis and Elizabeth Siegel (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago and University of
Chicago Press, 2002). Otherwise, black and white photography was often taught in painting
departments – for instance, as early as 1951 at the Rhode Island School of Design, which hired
Harry Callahan to start a Masters of Fine Arts degree in photography in 1963. See RISD’s

**429** See Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*
(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of
Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-
1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and

**430** Batchen, “Palinode,” 17.

**431** A.D. Coleman, *Light Readings: A Photography Critic’s Writings, 1968-1978* (New York:
special issue of *Artforum* devoted to photography, edited by John Coplans and Max Kozloff, a critic for *The Nation, Artforum, and the Voice* who would discover Flusser and recommend him to *Artforum*. Also in 1976, the journal *October* was founded by former critics at *Artforum*, signaling a shift in art discourse that helped put photography at the center. In a special 1978 issue of *October* devoted to photography, the editors noted that the practice of photography was expanding and solidifying at the same moment as painting and sculpture were “in a state of low tension” in the U.S., and they called for a “radical sociology of photography” to counter the market-driven tendency of both photography collecting and scholarship. The same *October* issue mentions the artist Allan Sekula as an exception. In 1975, Sekula had published “The

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435 Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, “Introduction” (signed by “The Editors”) in “Photography: A Special Issue,” *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 4. The issue included essays by Rosalind Krauss, Hollis Frampton, Hubert Damisch, Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Jean Clair, and Thierry de Duve, and an historical text by the photographer Nadar. A closer look at this issue also reveals theses and arguments that would later manifest in *October*. For instance, Clair’s article, “Opticeries,” on Marcel Duchamp and Krauss’s use of Duchamp for her argument about photography as “indexical.” The critical postmodernism of these writers was an antidote to formalism. However, as Jae Emerling has recently noted, the stance represented by *October* was limited in that it arose primarily to the discourse epitomized by Clement Greenberg or, in the curatorial sphere, John Szarkowski. Jae Emerling, *Photography: History and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Invention of Photographic Meaning” in *Artforum*. Borrowing from Roland Barthes, Sekula was bent on “denaturalizing” the narrative of art photography as propagated historically by figures like Alfred Stieglitz, among others. In order to make photography into an art form, Sekula argued that, “a clear boundary has been drawn between photography and its social character.”


438 “The photograph is imagined to have a primitive core of meaning, devoid of all cultural determination. It is this uninvested analogue that Roland Barthes refers to as the denotative function of the photograph. He distinguishes a second level of invested, culturally determined meaning, a level of connotation. In the real world no such separation is possible. Any meaningful encounter with a photograph must necessarily occur at the level of connotation.” Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” 455. Sekula’s model was Lewis Hine, the sociologist who employed photography for social reform. Sekula felt Hine stood “outside the discourse situation represented by *Camera Work,*” (ibid.) Also see the posthumous “Special Issue: Allan Sekula and the Traffic in Photographs,” *Grey Room* 55 (Spring 2014).


ubiquity of photography, but also focuses on photographic evidence, idealization and aggression, on voyeurism and on how cameras are like guns and cars: “fantasy-machines whose use is addictive.”\textsuperscript{441} Morality, ideology, ethics, bureaucracy, cataloguing, eroticism, pleasure, and compulsion are central in Sontag’s theorization. Interestingly, she often reads photography through film, while focusing particularly on films whose narratives pivot around photographs or the act of photographing. Despite the fact that Sontag was never part of the \textit{October} cabal (her exclusion from the 1978 special photography issue, a year after the publication of her book, is notable), she shared its outlook in two respects: the idea that film was eclipsing literature as the vital art medium and the claim for critical postmodernism’s turn away from aesthetics and formalism toward a social reading of photography. Subsequent essays in \textit{On Photography} look at how nations and ideologies are shaped through photography;\textsuperscript{442} at how Surrealism “lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise”;\textsuperscript{443} and at issues of mimesis and technology wherein the camera figures as a machine of “fast seeing.”\textsuperscript{444} Sontag acknowledged the writings of Walter Benjamin, but dismissed his idea of “aura” by noting that, “exhibition in museums and galleries, has revealed that photographs do possess a kind of authenticity.”\textsuperscript{445}

\textsuperscript{441} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{442} “[Diane] Arbus’s work is a good instance of a leading tendency of high art in capitalist countries: to suppress, or at least reduce, moral and sensory queasiness. Much of modern art is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible.” Sontag, \textit{On Photography}, 40.

\textsuperscript{443} Ibid., 52. Here Sontag shows a distinct overlap with Rosalind Krauss, whose career has been partially devoted to Surrealism, which her erstwhile mentor Clement Greenberg despised.

\textsuperscript{444} Ibid., 124.

\textsuperscript{445} Ibid., 140. The brief “Anthology of Quotations” at the end of \textit{On Photography} is also interesting as a postmodern pastiche in which citations from Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein and photography specialists like Helmut Gernsheim are printed alongside advertisements for Minolta and Polaroid cameras. See Sontag, “A Brief Anthology of Quotations,” \textit{On Photography}, 183-208.
The era included other important writers and discourses, however. In 1975, Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen argued, similar to the *October* writers, that photography criticism was impoverished and that Szarkowski’s formalism was the problem—although they also objected to Rudolf Arnheim’s idea of photography as a purveyor of authenticity and truth. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, writers for the British journal *Screen*, overlapped with Bazin, Arnheim, and others in considering photography alongside film. Wollen’s “Photography and Aesthetics” (1978) argued that photography automatically produced “information”—knowledge that is different from painting and traditional aesthetic forms—and saw Benjamin as a precursor to creating a photography theory that could produce both photographic knowledge and art.

Meanwhile, Laura Mulvey’s extraordinarily influential “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) took a comparable tack to Sekula’s, denaturalizing the world of film, the gaze of the viewer, and the way images in the filmic context create “order and meaning”—except Mulvey followed a psychoanalytic approach, citing Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality* and *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, as well as Lacan’s mirror stage. Victor Burgin’s 1977 essay “Looking at Photographs” is even closer to Sekula’s example, using Barthes’s *Elements of Semiology* (1964) to compare how language, which seems “natural,” can be compared to photographs, which

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circulate freely ("naturally") through our environment.\textsuperscript{449} One could also mention the British writer John Berger, whose book \textit{Another Way of Telling} (1982) followed up his television show and the subsequent book, \textit{Ways of Seeing}, and, significantly, focused on photography.\textsuperscript{450} Argentinian filmmaker Raúl Beceyro published the still untranslated \textit{Ensayos sobre fotografia} in Spanish in 1978\textsuperscript{451} and in France Pierre Bourdieu’s \textit{Photography: A Middle-brow Art} had been published in 1965.\textsuperscript{452} Using a sociological approach, Bourdieu argued that photography offered a good ground on which to study French society and its class divisions, leading to his best known text, \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste} (1979).\textsuperscript{453}

The towering figure in photography theory from this period, however, is Roland Barthes. Barthes started writing about photography in the fifties and sixties. In essays like “Photography and the Electoral Appeal” and “Shock-Photos”—both included in \textit{Mythologies} (1957)—as well as “The Photographic Message” (1961) and “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), Barthes used methods drawn from structural linguistics, semiotics, and Brechtian Marxism to demonstrate how everyday images function like sign systems, containing ideological messages that aren’t immediately apparent. Drawing from Ferdinand Saussure’s writings on linguistics, which he had


used to examine everything from literature to the fashion system, Barthes described different levels of photographic meaning: the *denotative* level, which was essentially descriptive, and the *connotative* level, which created a “rhetoric of the image” that both relies on and bolsters particularly cultural and historical contexts. Later, in “The Third Meaning: research notes on some Eisenstein stills” (1970), which was published in a 1974 issue of *Artforum*, Barthes examined how film stills go beyond the connotative and denotative orders to something more “obtuse”: exceeding signification but rooted in the materiality of the filmic medium.

**Roland Barthes’* Camera Lucida***

In 1980 Barthes published *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, his only book dedicated to photography, and the one that has dominated worldwide photography discourse at the end of the twentieth century. Influenced by Benjamin—particularly Benjamin’s 1936 essay

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455 “By contrast with the first two levels, communication and signification, this third level - even if the reading of it is still hazardous – is that of *significance*, a word which has the advantage of referring to the field of the signifier (and not of signification) and of linking up with, via the path opened by Julia Kristeva who proposed the term, a semiotics of the text.” Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 54. This concentration on the ontology of the image and its similarities to and differences from film connects Barthes to André Bazin, who also approached photography in relation to cinema. See Bazin’s “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), in Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 237-268.

“A Little History of Photography,” which he used as a template—and Sontag, it was a slim volume resulting from a commission by *Les cahiers du cinema*. The book signals a move away from structuralism toward poststructuralism—and beyond. In the back is a list of references that includes Sontag, Beceyro, Bourdieu, and Freund, as well as Italo Calvino’s short story “The Adventure of a Photographer” (1958) and an essay by Jean-François Chevrier, which appeared along with the Calvino story in a special 1978 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur* devoted to photography;457 literary figures like Proust and Valéry; Sartre’s *L’Imaginaire* (to which Bazin, interestingly, was also responding);458 recent theorists like Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Jean-François Lyotard, and the lesser known (in the U.S., anyway) *Tel Quel* figure Jean-Joseph Goux.459 Also mentioned in the back of *Camera Lucida* are two books that reveal Barthes’s late interest in Buddhism: by Chögyam Trungpa and Alan Watts.460 The French edition of *Camera Lucida* even includes a Buddhist quote on its back cover, taken from Chögyam Trungpa, that was removed in the English edition:

Marpa was very stirred when his son was killed, and one of his disciples said, ‘You always say to us that all is illusion. Isn’t the death of your son then an illusion? And Marpa responded, ‘Certainly, but the death of my son is a super illusion.’461

457 See Italo Calvino, “L’apprenti photographe” and Jean-François Chevrier, “Une inquiétante étrangeté” in *Le Nouvel Observateur, Spécial Photo*, no. 3 (June 1978).


461 “Marpa fut très remué lorsque son fils fut tué, et l’un de ses disciples dit: ‘Vous nous disiez toujours que tout est illusion. Qu’en est-il de la mort de votre fils, n’est-ce pas une illusion?’ Et Marpa répondit: ‘Certes, mais la mort de mon fils est un super-illusion.’ *Pratique de la voie tibétaine.*”
Perhaps the most interesting overlap between Barthes and Flusser, although it will not be explored at length in this dissertation, is around phenomenology. Not only did Barthes cite Lyotard’s work on phenomenology, but he also lists Husserl’s *Aspects of Phenomenology* in his references, “as cited by” the French psychiatrist Arthur Tatossian. Beyond this, *Camera Lucida* is a strongly autobiographical response to photography—arguably representing even a return to the humanism Barthes’s earlier structuralist and semiotic work critiqued. Following the writing method used in *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), it also represents the development for Barthes of a “third form” of writing—what scholars have called “paracriticism” or “paraliterature.”

*Camera Lucida* begins with an extremely French anecdote: a personal encounter with a photograph of Napoleon’s youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852, and the effect it has on Barthes as the viewer: “I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.” Barthes discusses a range of photographs, from photojournalism to pornography with a heavy emphasis on the French: Niépce, Daguerre, Lartigue and Nadar. Kertész appears while Avedon and Mapplethorpe

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are the recurring U.S. photographers. Most important, however, is the apocryphal “Winter Garden” photograph not reproduced in the book: a snapshot of his mother as a child which may or may not exist and which serves as a marker for memory, vision, death, and the power of photographs. As is standard for Barthes, Camera Lucida is structured around a number of binary oppositions: photography “in opposition” to cinema, and the famous studium, or subject of the photograph, versus the punctum or “prick”: an accidental detail unintended by the photographer that creates an idiosyncratic locus of signification that may differ from one viewer to the next. There is also the binary of the Operator (photographer) and the Spectator (ourselves) and one contained in photography’s eidos or noeme, its essence: the idea that photographs represent an “anterior future,” a camera lucida rather than a camera obscura—that is, a prism rather than a “dark passage” or chamber.

Criticisms of Camera Lucida are legion: the text is limited in its application because Barthes focuses primarily on photographs of people and particularly on the apocryphal Winter Garden photograph, creating a personal theory of photography with a mythical object at its center. Moreover, Barthes’s fidelity to realism is anachronistic at a moment when truth in

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465 Ibid. Italics in original.

466 One might also mention the binary of the “denoted message” and “connoted message” found in earlier texts like “The Photographic Message” (1961): what is depicted in an image and its style or reception, respectively. The punctum has become one of the most popular terms in photography criticism. See Michael Fried’s “Barthes’s Punctum,” Critical Inquiry 31, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 539-574.

467 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 106.

photography was being questioned—by artists, but also by photojournalists and post-Vietnam-era audiences. In many ways, *Camera Lucida* feels like an extension of the *Mourning Diary*, linking Barthes’ mother’s passing with the demise of the chemical medium to create a kind of death-theory of photography. In a 1977 interview Barthes called every encounter with photography “a contact with death” and “a fascinating and funereal enigma.” In another interview the following year he said:

In the final analysis, what I really find fascinating about photographs, and they do fascinate me, is something that probably has to do with death. Perhaps it’s an interest that is tinged with necrophilia, to be honest, a fascination with what has died but is represented as wanting to be alive.

Despite its idiosyncrasies and limitations, *Camera Lucida* is a benchmark of photography theory: arguably “the most quoted book in the photographic canon.” It also fed into particular

More important for Gallop, Barthes is an author who “never talks about sexual difference,” (ibid., 400).

469 “Photography’s referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation …. It’s not optionally real; it’s necessarily real … Every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76. Similarly, “Every photograph is a certificate of presence. This is the new embarrassment, which its invention has introduced into the family of images,” (ibid., 87).


472 Ibid.

debates in U.S. art history and criticism, from the formalist critical writing to which October writers were reacting to U.S. art history’s embrace of postwar trauma narratives. A larger round up of photography theory during this period might cite authors such as Christian Metz, Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Martha Rosler, Jeff Wall, Georges Didi-Huberman, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Ariella Azoulay. To these we must add Flusser since, while his position in the canon of German photography theory is secure, he has yet to be acknowledged in the United States within the discourse of contemporary photography theory.


Flusser’s Writings on Photography: The Technical Image Trilogy

Even before entering the Anglo-European discussion on photography, Flusser was writing about the technical image. To say that he was writing about *photography* before the eighties, however, is to make a slightly complicated claim. Many narratives of his work—particularly the German and Brazilian ones, which currently dominate the Flusser literature—incorporate Flusser’s photography writings into his media theory or describe them as a theory of communications, and his work is still read primarily by media and communications scholars.\(^{476}\) Meanwhile, most of the art historians who have approached Flusser are interested in his connections with artists such as Mira Schendel or with the São Paulo Biennial. What is important to stress is that, while Flusser’s best known text, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, includes the word “photography” in its title and he wrote criticism and essays for photography journals, he was clearly aware of entering photographic discourse as a specific field, and using it as a platform for larger ideas. In this sense, one might compare Flusser’s adoption of photography theory to the U.S. art world’s embrace of certain strains of French philosophy that couldn’t find a home elsewhere.\(^{477}\) The French theory boom was facilitated particularly in the U.S. through the


figure of Sylvère Lotringer; Flusser found a similar champion in Andreas Müller-Pohle, editor of *European Photography*.

Since the seventies, Flusser had lectured and taught at the School of Art and Architecture in Marseille-Luminy, the School of Art in Aix-en-Provence, and presented papers at many conferences in France and Germany. The most important connection he made, however, was history, see Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

Lotringer was a scholar based at Columbia University and co-founder of the press Semiotext(e), which introduced figures such as Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, among others, to North Americans. For the U.S. invention of the concept “French Theory,” see Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, eds., *French Theory in America* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

meeting Müller-Pohle at a symposium held in Mickeln Castle in Düsseldorf in February 1981, where Flusser delivered a paper titled “How Are Photographs Deciphered?” Müller-Pohle would go on to publish many Flusser texts, including what is commonly referred to as the technical image trilogy: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985), and *Does Writing Have a Future?* (1987). He would also publish the German versions of *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* and *The History of the Devil*; a posthumous book of collected photography writings and one of interviews; *Supposed: A Sequence of Scenes (Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge)*; and Flusser’s correspondence with Alex Bloch. Flusser also

published numerous articles in *European Photography* magazine\(^{481}\) and was given his own column, “Reflections,” in *European Photography* in 1988.\(^{482}\)

**Towards a Philosophy of Photography**

In his *Kunstforum* tribute to Flusser, Müller-Pohle recounts that, after meeting Flusser in Dusseldorf in 1981, he asked him to write a book about photography and Flusser responded: “We’ll call it ‘Towards a Philosophy’ of Photography. We’ll organize it in a focused way, let’s say, in nine chapters. That makes sixty pages. Do you agree?”\(^{483}\) Flusser wrote the essays in nine months. The German edition appeared in 1983 and Flusser’s English translation was published in


1984. A Portuguese edition, also translated by Flusser, appeared in 1985 and eventually the book was translated into over twenty languages.

The universe explored in Towards a Philosophy of Photography is the “photographic universe” (Das fotografische Universum) the permanently changing environment in which one “redundant” image replaces another and we live in a shifting field of images so familiar we are often not even aware of them. Flusser describes it thusly:

“It is precisely this steady change which has become habitual for us: one redundant photograph replaces another redundant photograph. It is change itself which has become habitual and redundant; and it is ‘progress’ itself which has become uninformative and ordinary. What would be extraordinary, informative, and adventurous in our situation would be a sudden stagnation: every morning the same newspaper on the breakfast table, and every month the same poster in the shop window. This is what would shock us and surprise us. The photographs which replace each other steadily and according to program are redundant, precisely because they are always new ones. They are the realizations of the virtualities of the photographic program, and they are automatic realizations of these virtualities. This is the challenge of the photographic...

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484 A later translation by Anthony Mathews, published by the British publisher Reaktion in 2000, is the edition with which most English readers are familiar, due to the limited availability of the European Photography version. Furthermore, the European Photography edition is full of idiosyncrasies and poor editing. Quotation marks are printed in reverse, like German quotation marks (“photography“ instead of “photography”) and there are typographical errors.


486 “It is precisely this steady change which has become habitual for us: one redundant photograph replaces another redundant photograph. It is change itself which has become habitual and redundant; and it is ‘progress’ itself which has become uninformative and ordinary. What would be extraordinary, informative, and adventurous in our situation would be a sudden stagnation: every morning the same newspaper on the breakfast table, and every month the same poster in the shop window. This is what would shock us and surprise us. The photographs which replace each other steadily and according to program are redundant, precisely because they are always new ones. They are the realizations of the virtualities of the photographic program, and they are automatic realizations of these virtualities. This is the challenge of the photographic...
To find oneself within the photographic universe is to experience, to know and to evaluate the world as a function of photographs. Each single experience, piece of knowledge or value may be separated into single photographs as they have been seen and taken advantage of. Each single action may be separated into the single photographs as they have been used as models of action.\textsuperscript{487}

But first, we must understand the components of the photographic universe. Flusser doesn’t actually specify the “foundations” of photography until the end of the book, although they are invoked throughout the essays.\textsuperscript{488} The four key terms, defined in a “Lexicon of Basic Concepts” at the back of the book, are image, apparatus, program, and information.\textsuperscript{489} “Image” is defined in the lexicon as “a meaningful surface within which the elements relate magically.”\textsuperscript{490} The first essay in the book is also titled and devoted to “The Image,” in which we learn that images are “significant surfaces.”\textsuperscript{491} That is, meaning rests on their surfaces and it may be “seized at a glance” by scanning the image rather than reading in a linear fashion, as we do written text. Unlike Barthes, who described photographs as having both a connotative and a

\textsuperscript{487} Ibid., 51.

\textsuperscript{488} Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{489} In the “Introductory Note” at the beginning of the book Flusser writes: “In order to preserve the hypothetical nature of the essay, I have abstained from quoting previous works on related subjects. For that same reason, there is no bibliography. Instead, I have included a short lexicon of terms basic to the essay or implied in it. The definitions proposed in it are not meant to claim any general validity; they purpose themselves, in a sense, and should function as working hypotheses for those readers who may wish to go further along the line of reflection and analysis offered here. Hence the purpose of the essay: not to defend an extant thesis, but to contribute to a discussion about the subject ‘photography’ in a philosophical spirit.” Flusser, \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} (EP), 5.

\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., 60.

\textsuperscript{491} Ibid., 6.
denotative meaning, Flusser disputes this—but by comparing images to numbers, mirroring cybernetic and information theory.\footnote{\textsuperscript{492}}

The discussion of images opens the way for thinking about how image culture, or the photographic universe, operates differently from the era of historical consciousness ruled by text, which Flusser argues came to an end in the nineteenth-century with the invention of technical images. He argues that texts were created in the second millennium B.C. as “meta-codes” of images: to refer to and explain images and “to transcode image elements and ideas into concepts.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{493}} Now, however, we have technical images which are produced by apparatus and discussed in the second essay, “The Technical Image.” Flusser calls technical images the “indirect products of scientific texts,” which possess magical effects.\footnote{\textsuperscript{494}} This is not hard to envision when one thinks of the light projected from a film projector or the transfixing glow of a television or images on a computer screen. These don’t possess the same prehistoric magic as, for instance, cave paintings, though—which clearly relates to Benjamin’s idea of “aura,” which the Frankfurt School writer argued was eclipsed in the age of mechanical reproducibility.

Instead, where prehistoric magic entailed a “ritualization of myths,” technical images are for Flusser a “ritualization of programs,” which he defines as “models transmitted in writing by

\footnote{\textsuperscript{492}} “The path followed by our scanning eyes is complex, because it is formed both by the image structure and the intentions we have in observing the image. The meaning of the image as it is disclosed by scanning, then, is the synthesis of two intentions: the one manifest in the image itself, the other in the observer. Thus, images are not ‘denoting’ symbol-complexes such as numbers, for instance, but ‘connoting’ symbol-complexes: images offer room for interpretation.” Flusser, 	extit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} (EP), 6.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{493}} Ibid., 8.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{494}} Ibid., 10.
authors who are ‘functionnaires,’ [functionaries] that is, people who stand within the communicative process._tv

Technical images are produced by an apparatus, which is the subject of the next essay, “The Apparatus.” In the lexicon Flusser defines an apparatus as “a toy which simulates thought”—a curious and enigmatic definition unless you consider it within the context of his interest in game theory. But here is also a place to clarify how Flusser was inspired by Heidegger. It seems odd that Flusser, whose entire family was killed in the holocaust, would admire a philosopher who was affiliated with the Nazis. Flusser addresses this in one interview, with a French publication. It should also be noted that, in addition to Heidegger’s 1927 opus Being and Time, the writings important here are also the later ones: “The Age of the World Picture” (1938), “The Turning” (1949), and “The Question Concerning Technology” (1955). In “The Apparatus,” Flusser includes an etymological explanation of apparatus:

495 Ibid., 12. In the lexicon at the back of the book, “Program” is defined as “a game of combinations with clear and distinct elements.” Kombinationsspiel, or “combination play,” as Flusser writes in the German version, makes more sense: it is in soccer, for instance, the synchronized passing of the ball between two or three players (ibid., 61).

496 Ibid., 60.

497 “Heidegger was suspected of having maintained murky or perhaps even too clear relations with Nazism. I knew that when I first encountered his thought. It was during the war, I was in Brazil, forced by the events in Germany. My whole family had been exterminated there. I did not know that yet, but I suspected it. You can thus imagine that I opened the first book of Heidegger that I stumbled upon with great reservation; I would even say with utmost antipathy. But the effect the reading had on me was so profound, it has so much changed my vision of things that it became difficult for me to remember my initial doubts when I encountered this thought.” Vilém Flusser, “Heidegger et le Nazisme: ‘Nous sommes face à l’expression la plus importante de la pensée de notre siècle,’” Calades 86 (February 1988). Quoted in Sjouke van der Muelen, “Between Benjamin and McLuhan: Vilém Flusser’s Media Theory,” 198.

The Latinate term “apparatus” stems from the verb “apparare,” which is “to prepare.” Latin also contains the verb “praeparare,” however; the difference is one of prefixes: “ad” and “prae.” The most available translation for “apparare” in English would be “to make ready.” In this sense, an apparatus would be an object which makes itself ready for something, while a “preparation” would be an object which patiently waits for something. The camera makes itself ready to take pictures, tries to ambush them, is on the lurk for them. This lying-in-wait for something, this predatory character of the apparatus, must be understood in our attempt to define “apparatus” etymologically.499

Looking at “The Question Concerning Technology” (1955), one can see how Heidegger performs a similar operation on the word “technology,” which deserves quoting at length:

The word stems from the Greek. Technikon means that which belongs to technē. We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this word. One is that technē is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. Technē belongs to bringing-forth, to poiēsis; it is something poietic.

The other point that we should observe with regard to technē is even more important. From earliest times until Plato the word technē is linked to the word epistēmē. Both words are names for knowing in the widest sense. They mean to be entirely at home in something, to understand and to be expert in it. Such knowing provides an opening up. As an opening up it is a revealing. Aristotle, in a discussion of special importance (Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. VI, chaps. 3 and 4), distinguishes between epistēmē and technē and indeed with respect to what and how they reveal. Technē is a mode of alētheuein. It reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way and now another. Whoever builds a house or a ship or forges a sacrificial chalice reveals what is to be brought forth, according to the perspectives of the four modes of occasioning. This revealing gathers together in advance the aspect and the matter of ship or house, with a view to the finished thing envisioned as completed, and from this gathering determines the manner of its construction. Thus what is decisive in technē does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that technē is a bringing-forth … Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence [West] in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where alētheia, truth, happens.500

499 Ibid., 15. In the German edition Flusser says in this passage, “in German,” and suggests the word “fürbereiten” (to pre-prepare) (Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie, 20; in French, the word suggested is “apprêter” (Pour une philosophie de la photographie, 24); in Portuguese, Flusser elides the specific language translation altogether, simply providing the Latin terms.

Compare this also to Flusser’s etymological breakdown of the word “technology,” which appears in an essay titled “About the Word Design”:\(^{501}\)

Another word used in the same context is “technology.” The Greek *techne* means “art” and is related to *tektion*, a “carpenter.” The basic idea here is that wood (*hyle* in Greek) is a shapeless material to which the artist, the technician, gives form, thereby causing the form to appear in the first place. Plato’s basic objection to art and technology was that they betray and distort theoretically intelligible forms (“Ideas”) when they transfer these into the material world. For him, artists and technicians were traitors to Ideas and tricksters because they cunningly seduced people into perceiving distorted ideas.

The Latin equivalent of the Greek *techne* is *ars*, which in fact suggests a metaphor similar to the English rouge’s “sleight of hand.” The diminutive of *ars* is *articulum* – i.e. little art – and indicates that something is turned around the hand (as in the French *tour de main*). Hence *ars* means something like “agility” or the “ability to turn something to one’s advantage,” and *artifex* – i.e. “artist” – means a “trickster” above all. That the original artist was a conjurer can be seen from words such as “artifice,” “artificial” and even “artillery.” In German, an artist is of course one who is “able to do something,” the German word for art, *Kunst*, being the noun *können*, “to be able” or “can,” but there again the word for “artificial,” *gekünstelt*, comes from the same root (as does the English “cunning”).\(^{502}\)

The overlaps here are obvious. Clearly, Flusser was sympathetic to Heidegger’s notion that “language is the house of Being”:\(^{503}\) that the *way* of philosophical inquiry, as it makes itself in and through language is as important as technology as an object of inquiry. Here one might quote the opening of Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology”:

> In what follows we shall be questioning concerning technology. Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is the way of thinking. All ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language


\(^{502}\) Ibid., 17-18.

in a manner that is extraordinary. We shall be questioning concerning technology, and in so doing we should like to prepare a free relationship to it. The relationship will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of technology. When we can respond to this essence, we shall be able to experience the technological within its own bounds.\textsuperscript{504}

But there is another area in which Heidegger pertains to \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography:} that of apparatus. I have already partially outlined the robust discourse around apparatus that stretches from Bertolt Brecht’s “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication” (1932) to Louis Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatus and more recent thinkers like Giorgio Agamben’s \textit{What is an Apparatus?} (2009) and Tiqqun’s “As a Science of Apparatuses” (2011).\textsuperscript{505} Flusser, of course, had thought of apparatus in natural terms, with the bird as a flying apparatus in \textit{Natural: Mind}, and how apparatuses produce technical images that are harder to


decode because the message is even more “masked” than in traditional images. In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser shifts from “technical images” to “photography”:

The camera constitutes a prototype for all the immense apparatus[es] which threaten to become monolithic (such as the administrative apparatus) as well as those microscopic apparatus which threaten to slip from our grasp (such as the chips in electronic apparatus)—and which determine the present and immediate future to such a high degree. Analyzing the camera helps to understand apparatus in general, in other words.

In photography, Flusser finds an exceptionally elastic mode (I will refrain from calling it a *medium*) for discussing apparatus. He can jump from the small and material to the larger and more abstract: “Considering the camera (or any apparatus, for that matter) …” There is also a Heideggerean excursion in the essay “The Apparatus” into considering apparatus as a “tool,” which Flusser quickly discards, since the idea of a tool relates to an earlier age of the Industrial Revolution. Returning to that lexical definition of apparatus as “a toy which simulates thought,” we can see how it relates to Flusser’s two other keywords, *information* and *program*—and how photography serves as a prototype and a vehicle for thinking about post-history (the same way Heidegger treated technology as determining the human condition). Flusser writes about the photographer, whose handling of the camera is not “work,” but who searches for “undiscovered virtualities in the camera program enabling him to produce new information.”

Here we see Flusser’s application of game theory—which coincidentally overlaps with certain

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508 Ibid., 18

509 Moreover, “apparatus are indeed a result of industry, but they point towards a post-industrial complex. This is why an industrial analysis (such as a Marxist one) is no longer valid where apparatus is concerned,” Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (EP), 17.

510 Ibid., 19.
Dadaist and Duchampian ideas about art making—but also the idea of photography as an emblem of the post-industrial (post-historical) age. As he writes in “The Apparatus,” power has shifted from ownership to programming and this “shift of power from the object to the symbol is the true mark of the ‘information society’ and of an ‘information imperialism.’ Japan may serve as an example: the country does not possess great resources of raw materials or of energy; its power is based on programming, data processing, information, symbols.” Flusser’s proposal is radical. In the eighties, reading photography through information and software might have seemed counterintuitive since these were the very technologies challenging photography. But while the production and dissemination of photography was changing, the idea of apparatus and program didn’t go away. Photography runs on a program: fashion photographs, art

511 “Such an activity is not dissimilar to playing chess. The chess player is also in search of new virtualities within the chess program: he looks for new moves, and new results. A chess player plays with chess figures; a photographer plays with the camera. The camera is not a tool, but a toy, and the photographer is not a worker as such, but a player: not ‘homo faber,’ but ‘homo ludens.’ Except: the photographer does not play with, but against, his toy. He crawls into the camera in order to discover the tricks hidden there. The pre-industrial craftsman was surrounded by tools, and the industrial machine was surrounded by workers, but the photographer is within the camera, intricated in it. This is a new kind of relationship, where man is neither the constant nor the variable, but one where man and apparatus form a single function-unit. This is why the photographer should be called the ‘functionnaire’ of an apparatus.” Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography (EP), 19.

512 Ibid., 22. The essay shows its date in that last example: both in the Japanese allusion and because natural resources have continued to be a source of power and conflict. Moreover, as more than one writer has pointed out, the move from tools to software does not remove power from owners. See also See Sean Cubitt’s review of Vilém Flusser’s The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Writings, and The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism in Leonardo 37, no. 5 (2004): 405.

513 As Flusser wrote in a later essay, “Computers are apparatuses that process information according to a program. This is the case for all apparatuses anyway, even simple ones, such as the camera. . . . In the case of the computer, however, this condition is particularly clear: when I purchase a computer, I have to buy not merely the apparatus (hardware) itself but also the programs (software) that go with it.” Vilém Flusser, “Kunst and Komputer” [Art and Computer] in Lob der Oberflächlichkeit (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1993), 259. Quoted in Sjoukje van der
photographs, war photographs—all are identifiable by certain “programmed” markers in the images, as well as by how they are disseminated and displayed. Regarding the distinction between *apparatus* and *program*, Flusser writes: “Evidently, there can be no such thing as an ‘ultimate’ program for an ‘ultimate’ apparatus, because each program must have a meta-program above it.”

To make this clear, Sjouke Van der Meulen compares Flusser to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. While the Frankfurt School writers’ theorization of the culture industry relied on the notion of a flood of images (before the term “image flood” [*Bilderflut*] was introduced), she points out that Flusser uses the term “program” in the place of “industry” and the term “postindustrial” over “industrial”—which places him closer to information theorists like Norbert Weiner, an observation which I will discuss in the next chapter. And while the term “functionary” carries distinct Kafkaesque overtones that tie Flusser to an older model of apparatuses and administrative control (and Flusser does indeed mention Kafka in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*), there is the important addition of game theory: the question of not just who controls the program, but how one can be both a programmer and a functionary of the program.

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516 Van der Meulen elucidates this clearly: “In English, this term would be translated as ‘official’ or ‘clerk,’ but in German the term is derived from the verb *funktionieren*, ‘to function. Thus the German term has bureaucratic connotations: a *Funktionär* is an employee in a bureaucratic
While Flusser doesn’t cite or describe specific photographs in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, and there are no illustrations, he does distinguish *photography* from *technical images* in the book, which he doesn’t in *Post-History* (1983). Technical images reside in the photographic universe of Technicolor images, while photography has its roots in black and white images. These are all abstractions, or “theoretical” images—although here we run into problems, because color photography, for Flusser, is *more* abstract than black and white photography: the difference between the green of a lawn, for instance, and how it is represented in a color photograph, is more complex than the obvious coding of information in black and white photographs. In this mischievous analysis we can see the influence of Heidegger’s essay “The World Image,” which I will get to shortly when considering the essay “The Photographic system who executes orders. The photographer’s first responsibility, according to Flusser, is not to become a function of his or her camera, or the apparatus’s clerk.” Van der Meulen, “Between Benjamin and McLuhan,” 197. She compares this with the protagonist of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*, but the author whom Flusser most often and consistently invokes, throughout his career and in the photography books, is Franz Kafka.

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518 “Early photographs were black/white, unmistakably attesting to their origins as being abstracted from some theory of optics. With the progress of another theory, chemistry, color photographs became feasible. It appears as if early photographs were able to re-introduce color to the world. In fact, however, color photographs are at least as theoretical as black/white photographs. For example, the ‘green’ of a photographed lawn is an image of the concept ‘green’ as it occurs in some theory of chemistry (say, additive as opposed to subtractive color). The camera (or the film fed into it) is programmed to translate the concept ‘green’ into an image of ‘green.’ Naturally, there is an indirect and roundabout connection between the photographic ‘green’ and the green of the lawn ‘out there,’ because the chemical concept of ‘green’ is based on some image of the world ‘out there.’ There is, however, a very complex series of successive coding processes between the photographic green and the green ‘out there,’ a series which is more complex than the one linking the photographic gray of a black/white photograph with the green of the real lawn. The lawn photographed in color is a more abstract image than the lawn photographed in black-and-white. Color photographs are on a higher level of abstraction than black/white photographs. Black/white photographs are more concrete, and in this sense, are ‘Truer’ than color photographs. Or the other way around: the ‘truer’ the colors of a photograph become, the more mendacious they become. They hide their origins as theory more effectively.” Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (EP), 30-31.
Universe.” But we can also see here one of the elements of photography that was particularly disputed during the seventies and eighties: its reputation as a purveyor of the real. In Flusser, the fidelity to realism that haunted Barthes and other theorists is gone. Photography is now an apparatus that transforms phenomena into codified information.\textsuperscript{519} This is not to say that Flusser totally ignored the idea of the real as it presented itself in the concept of index. In a passage in\textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} he wrote that, “to all appearances” technical images “do not have to be decoded since their significance is automatically reflected on their surface—just like fingerprints, where the significance (the finger) is the cause and the image (the copy) is the consequence.”\textsuperscript{520} This functions like a trick, however, since observers end up looking at photographs not as images but as \textit{windows} into the world (in the same way the television was a new window in the 1974 essay “Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television”). The purported “objectivity” of technical images is an illusion; they are “metacodes of texts” rather than records of reality.\textsuperscript{521} Flusser writes that the traditional distinction between realism and idealism is overturned, such that “it is not the world ‘out there’ which is real, nor is it the concepts ‘in here’ within the apparatus program; what is ‘real’ is the image as it comes about.”\textsuperscript{522}

\textsuperscript{519} Moreover, as Steven Shaviro points out, unlike other critics who approached images through the concept of \textit{simulacra}, “Flusser evidences no nostalgia. He has no Baudrillardian yearning for a ‘real’ that would have supposedly existed prior to photographic reproduction.” See Steven Shaviro’s blog “The Pinocchio Theory,” entry on Flusser, accessed July 7, 2014, http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=266.

\textsuperscript{520} Flusser, \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} (Reaktion), 14.

\textsuperscript{521} Ibid., 15. Shaviro points out that Flusser explicitly criticizes the Frankfurt School for “the humanist nostalgia behind its attempts ‘to unmask the [class] interests behind the apparatuses.’ Such approaches merely seek to reinstate the humanistic subject that photography and other post-industrial technical apparatuses have destroyed once and for all.” Shaviro, “The Pinocchio Theory.”

\textsuperscript{522} Flusser, \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} (EP), 26. Furthermore, “the world and the apparatus program are but premises for the realization of photographs; they are virtualities to be
But this development comes with two additional caveats. One is that the photographic universe is not just a world of images we inhabit, but also a universe that is becoming automated, in which apparatuses program themselves. Here one can see echoes of Heidegger’s world picture. In “The Age of the World Picture,” originally delivered as a lecture in 1938, Heidegger argued that, when we reflect on the modern age, we see ourselves as “in the picture”—that is, not a “picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture.” Moreover, “the world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age [der Neuzeit].” Heidegger compares the modern idea of “representing” to the Greek idea of “apprehending.” For him, humanism first arises with the “modern essence of representedness,” in which the human sees herself as subject and other things (including humans—Heidegger uses anthropology as a touchstone) as objects, particularly for study: “Science comes out of this, and research, as well as the calculating, planning, and molding of all realized in the photograph. What we have, then, is an inversion of the vector of significance: ‘real’ is not what is signified, but what is significant, the information, the symbol. This inversion of the vector of significance characterizes everything that has to do with apparatus, and thus, with the post-industrial in general,” (ibid.).

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523 Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 115-154. In the preface Lovitt writes, “The lecture was given on June 9, 1938, under the title ‘The Establishing by Metaphysics of the Modern World Picture,’ as the last of a series that was arranged by the Society for Aesthetics, Natural Philosophy, and Medicine at Freiburg in Breisgau, and which had as its theme the establishing of the modern world picture.” Ibid., x.


525 Ibid., 130.

526 Ibid., 132.
things.” For Flusser, “The Photographic Universe”—citing here the penultimate essay in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*—is the condition in which one is “to know and to evaluate the world as a function of photographs,” where the images in our world change so quickly they become redundant. To experience a static state, from this standpoint, would be “extraordinary.” Within this universe, beyond the “representedness” of Heidegger’s modern age, are apparatuses which emulate Cartesian thought in that they are composed of clear, distinct elements. For photography, this means that each photograph corresponds to a specific combination of elements within the camera program, and there is “is a kind of bi-univocal relationship between the universe and the program, in which each program point corresponds to a specific photograph, and each photograph to a specific program point; in this way, the apparatus is omniscient and omnipotent in its universe.”

It is here that Flusser finally defines “program,” putting aside all human intervention with programs to focus on the “automatic program,” as “a game of combinations based on accident, on chance.” To exist in the photographic universe, surrounded by these chance realizations of program options is to exist in flux with one redundant photograph replacing another. (One only need think of the urban environment, of city streets or subway systems where advertisements and announcements change constantly and we have limited or no control). However, there are photographers who can play against the photographic program, creating informative rather than redundant photographs and therefore breaking through the boundaries of the photographic

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527 Ibid., 135.
528 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (EP), 47.
529 Ibid., 49.
530 Ibid., 49.
universe to create situations not inscribed in the program, the “game of combinations.” Here one might think of the urban interventions of the Lettrist and Situationist International—particularly the practice of détournement, in which media images might be disfigured or defaced, altered like collages “turned against themselves”—graffiti, or art that is somehow not recuperated back into the art “program.”

For Flusser, the other important area for disrupting the program is criticism. However—and this is where Flusser parts ways with many other theorists—for him the problem in using a “humanistic” approach is that it is necessary to see photography within its apparatus condition: “Apparatus were invented with the intention of their being automatic, which means ‘independent of future human intervention.’ The intention producing them was to exclude man from their functions, and no doubt this intention has been fulfilled.” Or, as he wrote in Post-History (italics his): “Apparatus always function increasingly independently from their programmer’s intentions.” The humanistic critique of the intentions behind the apparatus thus falls short because the critic now must “dive into the confines and the darkness of the black boxes themselves” rather than examining “the input”—or, to put it in other terms, their

531 Ibid., 50.

532 One current example of art inspired by Flusser and yet reinscribed back into the art program is that of Christopher Williams. Williams has repeatedly cited Flusser as an influence and used his ideas to create photographs that depict deconstructions of the “apparatus” (the camera, for instance). In his recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he tried to reveal the museum apparatus by a variety of interventions: changing the wall text, the height of the pictures, and so on. I would argue that these initiatives are not “playing against the program” so much as representing the program (ergo more Heideggerean than Flusserian). For a particularly incriminating statement in which one can see Williams twisting uncomfortably to make a “critical” argument—that is, a sort of institutional critique—see his “500 Words” in Artforum (Summer 2014), accessed August 20, 2014, http://artforum.com/words/id=47543.

533 Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography (EP), 52.

534 Flusser, Post-History, 25.
representations.\textsuperscript{535} Photography is no longer a representation or a reflection of the world but a programmed and programming part of it; an apparatus in a universe of apparatuses. At the end of this essay, Flusser lays his cards on the table:

The task of a photographic philosophy is to reveal this struggle between man and apparatus in the realm of photography, and thus to contribute to a possible solution to the conflict. The hypothesis sustaining this essay is that, if such a philosophy of photography were to succeed in its task, this success would be of importance not only in the realm of photography but also for post-industrial society in general. The photographic universe is only one among many apparatus universes, and it is not the most dangerous one at that. The following chapter will attempt to show that the photographic universe may serve as a model for post-industrial existence in general, and that therefore, a philosophy of photography may serve as a point of departure for any philosophy which has the current, as well as the future form of human existence as its subject.\textsuperscript{536}

This leads to the other caveat, already acknowledged in \textit{Post-History}: our ability to interpret technical images and apparatuses is still rudimentary. As Flusser writes in \textit{Post-History}, “we are, in relation to technical images, the same as the illiterate are in relation to texts”; we need to develop a “technical imagination” to help us decipher them.\textsuperscript{537} In the final essay of \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography}, “The Need for a Philosophy of Photography,” Flusser dives into the black box of photography. In the first paragraph—again, this is the last essay of the book—Flusser finally provides a definition of photographs:

They are images which have been produced and distributed by automatic and programmed apparatus according to a game based on chance informed by necessity, and have been distributed by these same methods; they are images of

\textsuperscript{535} Flusser, \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} (EP), 52.

\textsuperscript{536} Ibid., 54.

\textsuperscript{537} Flusser, \textit{Post-History}, 95. Underscoring this, is a recent remark by Diarmuid Costello about the limitations of photography criticism and scholarship within the art history context: “Whenever we begin to talk about photography outside the art historical frame of reference, it’s as if the conversation just dies. We don’t know what to say, or how to proceed.” Quoted in Jae Emerling, \textit{Photography: History and Theory}, 7.
magical situations, and their symbols promote an improbable behavior in their receivers.  

But then, playing the philosophy game in true Heideggerian fashion, Flusser abruptly reverses himself: “The definition proposed here has that curious advantage for philosophy: it cannot be accepted.”  

That is, if we accept the definition of photography Flusser has proposed, we cannot accept “man as a free agent,” one of the springboards for philosophy. In his afterword to the Reaktion edition of *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, Hubertus von Ameluxen links the book with Flusser’s earlier writings: “*Towards a Philosophy of Photography* is a work of doubt and concern … a work of indecision characteristic of the photographic universe in which one still has to come to terms with a history steeped in photographs … the act of photography, according to Flusser, is one of ‘phenomenological doubt.’”  

If Flusser’s *On Doubt* was a challenge to Descartes’ *cogito*, signaling for Flusser an end of certainty and Enlightenment rationalism—with concrete poetry as the model for a new language and a “new structure of reality”—in the eighties Flusser’s model was now photography and the technical image. We are living in a new structure of reality, which is no longer historical and linear. Therefore, we can no longer look for *casual* answers to our questions.  

Heidegger readers will remember a famous section of “The Question Concerning Technology” given over to a discussion of causality: the “four causes,” or ways of being responsible—*causa materialis, causa formalis, causa finalis*, and *causa efficiens*—and the

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539 Ibid.


conclusion that causality itself has changed in the modern period. Flusser picks up this thread, writing at the end of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, “we must take leave of causality.” Heidegger’s discussion of causality altered by the modern world eventually leads into his discussion of freedom, and Flusser will go there, too. But Flusser brings in terms that have been essentially forbidden in photography discourse and academic philosophy—such as “magic”:

Such space-time as reconstructed from images is proper to magic, where everything repeats itself and where everything partakes of meaningful context. The world of magic is structurally different from the world of historical linearity, where nothing ever repeats itself, where everything is an effect of causes and will become a cause of further effects. For example, in the historical world, sunrise is the cause of the cock’s crowing; in the magical world, sunrise means crowing and crowing means sunrise. Images have magical meaning.

The humans who invented writing in the second millennium B.C. “transcoded the circular time of magic into the linear time of history.” Our magic is different from theirs in that it conjures tricks with abstractions: particles that make up technical images. Prehistoric magic dealt with myths; post-historical magic with programs. In the lexicon at the back of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, magic is defined as “existence in a world of eternal return,” emphasizing the circular, feedback loop of post-history and the end of linearity.

This provocative use of the term “magic” may be one of Flusser’s greatest contributions to current photography theory. For instance, interviewing Michael Taussig for *Cabinet* magazine

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543 Ibid., 7.
544 Ibid., 7.
545 Ibid., 60.
and referring to Taussig’s book *The Magic of the State* (1997), photography writer David Levi-Strauss comments:

> I take permission to use “magic” first from Vilém Flusser’s groundbreaking work in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, and move from that into the “science of images” developed in the Renaissance, especially by Giordano Bruno, to theorize the current state of image politics. Anyone living in Bush & Co.’s United States cannot help but draw parallels between the spirit-possession politics and image magic of *The Magic of the State* and the current situation here.⁵⁴⁶

Similarly, one can see in art of the last decade and a half a proliferation of interest in the term “magic.” There has been a return of interest in spirit photography, in ghostly avatars on the Internet, and in the “magic” of photograms, which, like Talbot’s images, “draw themselves.” Exhibitions like “Strange Magic” (Luhring Augustine, New York, June – July 2007) and “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” (Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, June – August, 2006), curated by artists Justine Kurland and Dan Torop referenced this specifically. The latter was accompanied by this statement:

> This is a photography exhibition about magic. For us, the photographer is a seeker of mystery and the act of photographing casts a spell that turns the banal into the supernatural. The works displayed here propose a history of photography which emphasizes the spiritual over the rational.⁵⁴⁷

So much here reeks of Flusser, who uses the word “spell” as much as “magic” throughout *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, suggesting that the effect of existing in the photographic universe is to be caught up in the magic spell of images. However, unlike the artists who address scientific rationality, Flusser’s immediate concern is causality and the structuring of time and

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consciousness. Causality has been altered and Flusser feels that the photographic universe has programmed us to think functionally instead; reasoning now happens the same way it occurs in other fields like psychology, biology, linguistics, cybernetics, and informatics.548 We, as humans, produced tools modeled after our own bodies—then the tools became models for us and society. (Although, Flusser quickly reminds us, photography is not a tool: it is a game.) So, if we take photography as a model for a changed structure of reality and thought, we are confronted with a problem: not the “classical problem of alienation,” but an existential revolution for which we don’t have historical precedents: “to put it brutally: what is involved here is the challenge of reconsidering the problem of freedom in an entirely new context. This is what a philosophy of photography would really address.549

Here we are a long way from thinking about photographs as images and the contexts—art historical, museological, etcetera—in which they have historically been studied. In this chapter I have placed Flusser’s writing alongside that of authors such as Barthes, purposely withholding a discussion of the writers with whom he is most often compared: Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, and others. In this last passage, however, one can see how a “philosophy” of photography differs from a “theory”: it moves beyond ontology or Barthes’s eidos to a reconceptualization of causality and freedom. In the next chapter I will consider Flusser in this latter context. But to finish with Towards a Philosophy of Photography: if we have left the linear world of causality, how do we pose the question of human freedom? Or: if “everything comes about by chance, and if everything comes to nothing, where is there any room left for human

548 Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography (EP), 56.
549 Ibid., 57.
The simple answer is within the gesture of photography, or within the work of those experimental photographers who work against the program to outwit the “stupidity of the apparatus” and produce something unexpected and informative instead of redundant. Freedom is “playing against the apparatus.” Flusser stresses that photographers do not generally acknowledge their activities in this light. But he concludes:

The task of a philosophy of photography is to analyze the possibility of freedom in a world dominated by apparatus; to think about how it is possible to give meaning to human life in the face of the accidental necessity of death. We need such a philosophy because it is the last form of revolution which is still accessible for us. For Müller-Pohle, writing in Kunstforum after Flusser’s death, what Flusser’s “photophilosophy” meant was establishing an “ethos of photography.” However, in view of Flusser’s previous writings, this puts too much emphasis on photography, per se. Rather, it seems better to take Flusser at his word: photography provides a prototype, a model for examining society shaped and conditioned by apparatus, which he explored further in the last two books in the technical image trilogy.

Into the Universe of Technical Images and Does Writing Have a Future?

Flusser had been prognosticating since the seventies about an Einbildungskraft or “visualization”: a photo-criticism in the form of an expanded technical imagination that would

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550 Ibid., 57.
551 Ibid., 58.
552 Ibid., 59
553 Müller-Pohle, Kunstforum, no. 117 (1992): 86
become a new faculty for deciphering images.\textsuperscript{554} However, his forecast in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985), the second book in the technical image trilogy, was that “photography is about to become redundant as a technology.”\textsuperscript{555} In this book he focused instead on the universe of technical images, which could be defined as abstractly as “envisioned surfaces”\textsuperscript{556} or “mosaics assembled from particles,”\textsuperscript{557} and as concretely as photographs, films, videos and television screens. Moving closer to the emerging field of computer technology, technical images are defined in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* as anything made with a technical apparatus, but also as “computations of concepts”\textsuperscript{558} born into a “computed universe in which particles are assembled into visible images.”\textsuperscript{559}

The book follows the standard Flusser format, with short essays that develop parts of a larger idea—although here the essays are titled by different verb infinitives: “To Abstract,” “To Imagine,” “To Make Concrete,” “To Touch,” “To Envision,” and so on. German infinitives can also stand as nouns, which gives Flusser’s titles an added valance that is lost in translation. Also, where the larger implications of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* were withheld until the

\textsuperscript{554} See texts such as Vilém Flusser, “L’irruption du techno-imaginaire,” *Interférences*, no. 7, 3\textsuperscript{rd} trimester (1977): 45-47; and “Ora Aprenda a ler Televisão, Fotografia …” in *Especial* (December 1979): 50-55.


\textsuperscript{556} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{557} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{558} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{559} Ibid., 10.
final essay, here they are laid out in a “Warning” at the beginning of the book, in which Flusser raises the prospect of a “future society that synthesizes electronic images.” He continues:

Seen from here and now, it will be a fabulous society, where life is radically different from our own. Current scientific, political, and artistic categories will hardly be recognizable there, and even our state of mind, our existential mood, will take on a new and strange coloration. This is not about a future floating in the far distance. We are already on its cusp. Many aspects of this fabulous new social and life structure are already visible in our environment and in us.\textsuperscript{560}

Flusser then raises the stakes even higher, stating that the society we live in is a “utopia”—except it is a “groundless utopia,” without reference points, and which could move in two directions: toward the negative, totalitarian control society or the more positive “dialogic” one. In the same way \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} shows the profound influence of Heidegger and the idea of living in a world picture adjusted for the cybernetic age, Martin Buber’s dialogic philosophy colors Flusser’s conception of a new utopia. One can also see the echoes of Thomas Kuhn’s \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions} from 1962, which popularized the idea of scientific “paradigm shifts,” and which influenced Flusser’s thinking.\textsuperscript{561} I will pick up this thread, of the dialogical, later. But first, to return to the title and the universe of technical images: Flusser now separates technical images from photography, stating that the new utopia “will no longer be found in any place or time but in imagined surfaces” that “absorb geography and history.”\textsuperscript{562} Although surfaces were mentioned in \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography},

\textsuperscript{560} Flusser, \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}, 3.

\textsuperscript{561} See Thomas S. Kuhn’s \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). There is disagreement about whether Kuhn took his idea of the paradigm shift from Michael Polanyi, whose lectures he attended. Also see Michael Polanyi’s \textit{Science, Faith and Society} (London: Oxford University Press, 1946) and \textit{Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), both of which argue that personal judgment colors and affects scientific research and methodology.

\textsuperscript{562} Flusser, \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}, 4.
they were not among Flusser’s four primary elements. This sets *Into the Universe of Technical Images* apart: images are no longer snapshots or billboards, but non-physical objects; something in a sense predicting the digital files we circulate via the Internet or social media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram.

In the first essay, “To Abstract,” Flusser distinguishes traditional two-dimensional images from technical images, which are “mosaics assembled from particles … posthistorical, dimensionless.” We already know that technical images are made by apparatuses, but Flusser now clarifies the difference between traditional images, which are made by hands and fingers and perceived by eyes, and technical images, which can code abstract and invisible particles (photons and electrons, for instance) into information that reads as an image. In other words, with technical images, the abstract is made visual. In subsequent essays Flusser describes how technical images circulate. The essay “To Touch” delves into the world of keyboards and keys. Flusser considers the difference between a chimpanzee sitting at a keyboard and a human—and ultimately, artificial intelligence. “To Envision” moves from the simple gesture of key-pressing to creation. “When I write, I write past the machine, toward the text,” Flusser says (bearing in mind that he was famous for using a portable Olympia AEG typewriter at the same moment as personal computers were becoming available); “when I envision technical images, I build from the inside of the apparatus.” Near the end of this essay Flusser lays out the stakes: “Perception theory, ethics and aesthetics, and even our very sense of being alive are in crisis.” For the first generation to “command the power to envision,” Flusser sees this as a major shift in human

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563 Ibid., 6.
564 Ibid., 36.
565 Ibid., 38.
consciousness in which the “search for deep coherence, explanation, enumeration, narration, and calculation, in short, and historical, scientific, and textually linear thinking is being surpassed by a new, visionary, superficial mode of thinking … The power to envision is the power of drawing the concrete out of the abstract.”566

The essay “To Signify” picks up the arguments about abstraction and the dimensionless image. Where traditional images needed walls (cave walls, or people’s houses), technical images have “no such tangible substrate”—except, for the time being, the paper photographs are printed on.567 Furthermore, technical images are not depictions but projections that capture “meaningless signs that come to us from the world (photons, electrons) and code them to give them a meaning.”568 Flusser argues, in concert with McLuhan at this point, that it is not what is shown in the technical image but rather the image itself that is the message. Unlike McLuhan, however, Flusser is more interested in the “vector” of meaning: the direction in which the image points rather than the medium itself. He writes that we live in a world of “commandingly outstretched index fingers”569 whose direction we follow, and which reach into both public and private space, turning everyone into receivers, creating a closed feedback circuit between people and images. Everything, including history, is sucked into this circuit in order to feed the technical image.570

The turning point for our discussion might be the essay “To Scatter,” nearly midway through Into the Universe of Technical Images, in which Flusser states that, “the present cultural

566 Ibid., 38.
567 Ibid., 47.
568 Ibid., 48.
569 Ibid., 50.
570 Ibid., 55.
revolution is technical, not ideological,” and “today’s revolutionaries are not Kaddaffis or Meinhofs but rather the inventors of technical images.”\textsuperscript{571} The destruction of traditional social groups comes about by the invention of technical images: television, but also “the young Californians who sit in isolation at their computer terminals with their backs to one another have no social awareness.”\textsuperscript{572} And yet, “dialogic threads”—cables, videophones, and conferencing video—could open up “the fascist tissue of the rising society.”\textsuperscript{573} Flusser doesn’t cite the popular example of hackers. Instead, he introduces the term \textit{telematics}. In \textit{Post-History}, he described the difference between a “discursive” and a “dialogic” society (discursive knowledge speaks of objects and the dialogic speaks of Others; discourse moves in one direction and is dictatorial whereas dialogue is about mutual interaction and exchange). Western society, he wrote, is currently marked by a predominance of the discursive over the dialogic: “dialogues” created by the mass media, where we get the bulk of our information, exist as a feedback loop rather than a democratic dialogue.\textsuperscript{574} In “To Discuss,” he proposes \textit{telematics} as a possibility for breaking this impasse. The word comes from “telecommunications” and “informatics” and links images and telegraphy—what have become in our age fairly common simultaneous transmissions of word, image and sound.\textsuperscript{575} Part of what marks \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images} is that Flusser

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{571} Ibid., 63.
\item\textsuperscript{572} Ibid., 62.
\item\textsuperscript{573} Ibid., 64.
\item\textsuperscript{574} Vilém Flusser, “Our Communication,” \textit{Post-History}, 51-58.
\item\textsuperscript{575} “We have only very recently become aware of the principle of calculating and computing, that we have only recently realized that the same principle applies to both communication through the radiant streaming of particle elements (telecommunication) and the grasping of particle elements as new information (the production of technical images) . . . Thanks to the telegraph, information is instantly accessible everywhere. And yet it didn’t occur to anyone at the time that photographs could be telegraphed.” Flusser, \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}, 79.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
himself was questioning the separation of different senses and modalities: “I have excluded everything to do with ear and mouth, with sounds and words, from my thinking. I have omitted the audiovisual character of the universe of technical images.”

What I am more interested in here is how Flusser’s idea of telematics as dialogic rather than discursive links back to Martin Buber, and how telematics might be utopian in the “positive” way Flusser proposed at the beginning of *Into the Universe of Technical Images.*

Regarding the first point, Flusser writes that “the convergence of images and telecommunications is so new that we experience it as a technical phenomenon and not yet as a cultural one.” However, as apparatuses become more “user friendly,” he argues that they will be more prone to dialogue: children will be able to use them, for instance, and unlike newspapers, with their one-way transmission of information, images will be sent by individuals. (One might think in this context of blogs or various forms of social media.) Flusser also predicted the “empty chatter and twaddle on a global scale”—“isolated, distracted, key-pressing human beings”—that often results from such conversations. But he saw “possibilities for real dialogue of unprecedented richness.” Where “telematic gadgets” such as videos, videogames, videodisks, and cassettes were programmed to distract users, Flusser imagined a future society

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576 Ibid., 164. In this, Flusser replicates the bias of art history toward the visual, which has been challenged by writers from W.J.T. Mitchell and Martin Jay to Jonathan Sterne and Brandon Joseph, who write about sound and sound art, respectively. This is an omission to be taken up in further scholarship just getting underway. Conferences like “The Status of Sound: Writing Histories of Sonic Art” at the CUNY, Graduate Center, November 30, 2012 are evidence of the burgeoning interest in sound within art history departments. Accessed August 22, 2014, http://centerforthehumanities.org/conference/status-sound-writing-histories-sonic-art.


578 Ibid., 86.

579 Ibid., 83.
that might use Buber’s ideas to enact a dialogic “reordering of society.” Taking the principle of Buber’s most famous text, *I and Thou*, and the idea that an “I” only exists in relation to a “you,” Flusser imagined applying this to the production and circulation of technical images. Near the end of *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser asks, “What do I actually mean when I say of telematics that it permits a dialogical programming of image-producing apparatuses?” He predicts that there will be no centralized senders, but individual image makers sitting before their terminals, able to program their own apparatuses, “enriching and correcting one another.” There will be an ongoing “dialogical programming of all apparatuses by all participants” and people of the future will “program rather than be programmed,” calling into being “that which Buber called ‘dialogic life.’”

Flusser overlooks a few things, of course. One is the idea of ownership, which has become a central debate with regard to the Internet. The other is the idea of “self.” Earlier in the book, Flusser stated that his conception of “I” is as “a nexus point in a dialogical web” in the superbrain of networked society. In the final pages of *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, however, he says that he is thinking of “one’s own” and “another” in terms of programing, just “as Heidegger did in *Identity and Difference* and as the debate between Sartre and Foucault tried

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580 Ibid., 93.


583 Ibid.

584 Ibid.

585 Ibid., 92.
He then heads off into a somewhat obscure argument about how Judaism forbade the production of images and Christianity and Islam followed a similar path because human-made images obscure the “true image,” which is the face of another human being, through which we encounter God:

All pretelematic images, from Lascaux to video, are discursive, broadcast images, projected against the other, obscuring his face. They are forbidden. They lead the wrong way, away from God. Telematic, dialogically synthesized images, on the other hand, are media between one human being and another, through which I may see the face of the other. And through this face I may see God.\textsuperscript{587}

Flusser concludes that, perhaps through telematics we can find our way back to being “genuinely humane”: engaged in purposeless play that produces a “school for creativity, a school for freedom.”\textsuperscript{588} It is an argument that seems both prescient—and vapidly utopian. And yet, Flusser called his writing a critique of the present rather than a prognostication, and as David Crouch pointed out recently, when reviewing the English translation of the book:

Just four years before the text’s publication, MS-DOS and the first IBM-PC were invented. In 1985 photographs were taken on the Minolta 7000, motion picture films were still coiled in rolls of celluloid, and the highest grossing picture at the cinema box office for that year was, somewhat fittingly,\textit{ Back to the Future}. This was a time in which the Commodore 64 was popular and the year in which the Atari ST and Amiga were released.\textsuperscript{589}

Crouch finds in Flusser’s text “a sense of eerie prescience.”\textsuperscript{590} It is a work of speculative philosophy, but Flusser himself warned at the end of \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}.

\textsuperscript{586} Ibid., 154.

\textsuperscript{587} Ibid., 156.

\textsuperscript{588} Ibid., 171.


\textsuperscript{590} Ibid.
against forecasting and predicting, invoking Heidegger: “All prediction damages the future.”

Flusser then summons two nineteenth-century philosophers: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Rather than endorsing Schopenhauer’s divided “world of will,” as represented by music, and a “world of representation,” Flusser argues for a merger of the two in the universe of technical images, enacted through the Nietzschean will to power that makes representation concrete, eternally recurring and reproducible—in which the nineteenth-century philosopher’s concept of a superman can be reconfigured for the contemporary age as a “cybernetic superbrain.”

The penultimate paragraph in the book reads like a cross between Surrealism and science fiction, suggesting a “dream world in which the dreamers seem exceptionally alert,” because:

> to press the buttons that produce pictures, the dreamer needs to calculate and compute clear and distinct concepts. It is a dream world, then, that does not lie below waking consciousness but above it, conscious and consciously constructed, a hyperconscious dream world.

The “Summary” includes a numbered list of the “problems” encountered and addressed by the preceding essays: “What are technical images?”; “How do technical images function as models?”; “What does a society so fully in the thrall of images look like? How can we make images dialogically?”; “In [telematic dialogue], how does one learn to distinguish creativity from imitation, information from redundancy?”; “How could such a cerebral society cope with bodily human individuals?”; “How can we ignore the human body when we live and die with it?”; “How can anyone so removed from everything physical (all work and all suffering, all activity and passivity), anyone so focused on pure information, live, and would such a life be worthy of

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592 Ibid., 166.

593 Ibid.
the name? In these questions, Flusser posed some of the basic questions of our technologized era. One can also see overlaps with the work of then-contemporary artists who became interested in the body during the peak of the AIDS crisis, but also with theorists like Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and N. Katherine Hayles, whom I will discuss in the next chapter.

In the meantime, I will spend less time on *Does Writing Have a Future?*, the third book in the technical image trilogy. This is not to imply that the book is unimportant—although the text might be more relevant to scholars of literature, language, and translation. The thrust of the book is spelled out in the introduction:

Writing, in the sense of placing letters and other marks one after another, appears to have little or no future. Information is now more effectively transmitted by codes other than those of written signs. What was once written can now be conveyed more effectively on tapes, records, films, videotapes, videodisks, or computer disks, and a great deal that could not be written until now can be noted down in these new codes. Information coded by these means is easier to produce, to transmit, to receive, and to store than written texts. Future correspondence, science, politics, poetry, and philosophy will be pursued more effectively through the use of these codes than through the alphabet or Arabic numerals. It really looks as though written codes will be set aside, like Egyptian hieroglyphs or Indian knots. Only historians and other specialists will be obliged to learn reading and writing in the future.

In predicting an end to writing Flusser invokes a major cultural shift. In his narrative, the alphabet was invented to replace images (pictograms) and it was only in the eighteenth century, after a three-thousand year struggle, that texts succeeded in “pushing images, with their magic

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595 In her translator’s note, Nancy Ann Roth points out that it isn’t a coincidence “that the most comprehensive study of Flusser’s work to date, Rainer Guldin’s 2005 *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen* is organized around the concept of translation.” In Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 166. Also see Rainer Guldin’s *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen: Vilém Flussers Werk* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005).

596 Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, 3.
and myth, into such corners as museums and the unconscious.” Writing represents a “transcoding” of thought: translating images that exist on two-dimensional surfaces into one-dimensional linear codes. Now, however, writing is being replaced by a new kind of image: the technical image. And like other forms of culture, writing is becoming automated. Soon everything that was mediated by text will be transmitted more effectively and more creatively through informatic media. Rather than privileging memory, we will have to learn how to forget, to erase the alphabet from our memories and store the new codes. We will no longer have to think critically, along the lines of the Enlightenment model, because historical consciousness has run its course.

A couple of things need to be pointed out. One is that the first edition of Does Writing Have a Future? was published digitally, appearing on a floppy disk in 1987—an attempt to translate alphanumeric text into algorithmic code. Flusser considered the publication of a traditional book version in 1989 a “failure” signaling the continuation rather than the eradication

597 Ibid., 147.
598 Ibid., 15.
599 Ibid., 61.
600 Ibid., 149.
601 Ibid., 92. Here Flusser directly attacks the Frankfurt School, arguing that the Enlightenment project of critical reading, which started with writers like Kant and Rousseau, has ended: “All texts, even critical ones, have become critically decipherable, and all lines are turned against themselves, like Ouroboros, to swallow their tails,” (ibid.). David Crouch challenges this conclusion: “Text itself seems far from on the wane but ever more imbricated with image. Perhaps text has been worn-out by its relations with technical images, corrupted into the contractions and codes of ideograms, pictographs, cyberjargon, webspeak, texting and tagging, but it persists nonetheless. And what of the continued, if crippled, production and consumption of literary works? If not on paper, at least linear narratives are still enjoyed on one or other kind of reading apparatus. Texts appear to infect images evermore, and this more nuanced relationship is not adequately addressed by Flusser’s conception of a clean break between text and image.” See David Crouch, “Back to the Future.”
of writing. And yet, he conceded, how does one discuss the demise of writing in a manner other than writing? (Flusser was a gifted orator and his lectures serve as another medium.) Another point is that, Does Writing Have a Future? appeared a few years before Hypertext and the moment when certain authors and scholars were declaring an end to books. As early as 1973, Flusser was announcing an end to “written lines”—only in earlier essays he was arguing in terms of surfaces rather than images, with the temporally quicker mode of “surface thought” replacing “linear thought.” By the late eighties, words like “digital,” “recoding,” and “information” dominated his argument. And while photography is barely mentioned in Does Writing Have a Future?, the book serves as an important component of Flusser’s argument for the triumph of technical images over written text.

Flusser’s Other Writings: Photography Texts

Flusser’s reputation as a photography writer blossomed in Europe after the publication of Towards a Philosophy of Photography. Browsing through binders in the Flusser Archive in Berlin, one encounters a multitude of documents relating to photography conferences in which Flusser participated in Germany, France, and Spain, as well as correspondence with artists and curators like Joan Fontcuberta, Joachim Schmid, Gottfried Jäger, Peter Weibel, Eduardo Kac,

602 Flusser, Does Writing Have a Future?, 164.


George Gessert, and Max Kozloff. Flusser used lectures and presentations to develop papers which he would publish in multiple forms and languages. For instance, for a photography conference at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin in 1985, he delivered the paper “Die Fotografie als nach-industrieller Gegenstand,” which would become “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object,” published in Leonardo, which I will discuss shortly. For Practical Psychology, a journal based in Bochum, Germany, he would write essays such as “Perception” and “The World of Art as a Mirror and/or Concealment of Human Intention.” Flusser was also writing photography criticism—or some version of it, since the pieces were often more similar to his essays or short philosophical pieces published in Brazilian newspapers in the sixties than conventional art criticism. There were writings published in Camera Austria, a handful of essays in Kunstforum—he was given a column there shortly before his death—and, of course, contributions to European Photography, where he wrote about artists like Roland Günter, Jiří Hanke, Paolo Gioli, Boyd Webb, Lizzie Calligas, Henri Lewis, Herlinde Koelbl, Herbert W. Franke, Nancy Burson, Astrid Klein, Gerd Bonfert, and Bernard Plossu.

Two essays I would like to discuss here both started as German essays and were translated into English by Flusser and published in the U.S. journal Leonardo. The Czech-born, Canadian artist Jan Zach recommended him to Leonardo, a journal in Berkeley, California.

605 Within the binders devoted to conferences in the Vilém Flusser Archive are interesting exchanges—for instance, between Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta, with Fontcuberta asking Flusser if he can speak in Spanish at “Photographic Springtime,” a festival in Barcelona in March 1984. Flusser responds [the correspondence is in English], “I can lecture in Portuguese slightly adapted to Spanish. And in that case I shall speak slowly. But I can also lecture in English, French or German, with Spanish interpolations. Given the close similarity between Portuguese and Spanish, there will be no linguistic problems.” Letter from Vilém Flusser to Joan Fontcuberta, German Conferences Binder, No. 22, Vilém Flusser Archive.

devoted to the use of contemporary science and technology in the arts. In July 1985, *Leonardo* Coordinating Editor Pamela Ryan-Grant wrote to Flusser in Robion, asking him to contribute to the journal.\textsuperscript{607} Flusser replied that he would like to publish “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object” because he had just translated the essay from German to English and was about to deliver the German version at a symposium (the Karl-Hofer Symposium in Berlin). There is more correspondence around this essay than most in the Flusser Archive because it was for a peer-reviewed journal and because, as Flusser wrote to his friend Felix Philip Ingold, some of the readers and editors were struck by Flusser’s “peculiar style.”\textsuperscript{608} The manuscript reviews are often, perhaps unintentionally, rather humorous:

The author writes well; he has chosen an interesting topic; and he has something interesting to say. But it is just not possible to publish a paper without any references whatsoever dealing with a topic which has been so much discussed. I sense references to Heidegger on technology, and certainly more generally to Continental philosophy; he should be looking, also, at the large literature on photography, especially the essays by Joel Snyder which exactly touch on his topic. Otherwise he is in the position of reinventing the wheel … Obviously the author has done some reading; he needs to indicate that fact.\textsuperscript{609}

In a letter back to Lisa Bornstein at *Leonardo*, Flusser writes:

The reviewer of my text wants me to quote from the large literature on photography, which is exactly what I wanted to avoid, since I believe that the current writing on this subject (especially Roland Barthes and his followers), misses the point I am driving. Indeed, I want the reader to think that I reinvented the wheel, although in an ironical way … Indeed, I have done some reading (as the reviewer so kindly says), but that fact should come out from the text, not from

\textsuperscript{607} Letter from Ryan-Grant to Vilém Flusser, July 27, 1985, *Leonardo* Correspondence Binder, No. 6, Vilém Flusser.

\textsuperscript{608} Quoted in Sander, *Sources*, 24.

\textsuperscript{609} Manuscript review, dated October 11, 1985, in the *Leonardo* Correspondence Binder, No. 140-141, Vilém Flusser Archive. In the section on this form where it asks, “Should manuscript be published?” the anonymous reviewer has checked “Yes, if revised” and above that typed “radically.”
pseudo-academic footnotes. If there is anything an essay should avoid (in opposition to a scientific treatise), it is precisely this sort of preciousness.⁶¹⁰

Eventually Flusser did make changes to his essay, shortening it (Leonardo requested it to be under 2,500 words) and including a sort-of-bibliography that, rather than listing specific texts, explained how the paper is based on four “essays:” *Natural: Mind, Post-History, Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, and *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, as well as an essay in progress (evidently *Does Writing Have a Future?*). The bibliography also states, almost as if responding to the manuscript reviewer’s specific points, that the first section of the essay devoted to objects is influenced by Heidegger’s analysis of “Thing” (“Ding”) and “Stuff” (“Zeug”) and Abraham Moles’s critique of Marxist dialectics; the section dealing with chemical photographs (“the usual type”) is in response to Barthes and Benjamin, but applying information theory to the analysis of photography; the section dealing with “electromagnetic photos (the new type)” is a synthesis of Sedlmayer’s new criticism and Buber’s analysis of intersubjective existence; and the last section was written in preparation for a discussion with Jean Baudrillard on German television scheduled for February 26, 1986.⁶¹¹

The essay itself is divided into ten sections identified by Roman numerals: Objects; Cultural Objects; Industrial Objects; Post-Industrial Objects; Photos; Apparatus; Three Types of Photos; Electromagnetized Photos (with three subsections: Memory, Total Art, Dialogue);

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⁶¹⁰ Letter from Vilém Flusser to Lisa Bornstein, December 18, 1985, Leonardo Correspondence Binder, No. 10., Vilém Flusser Archive.

⁶¹¹ Vilém Flusser, “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs,” Leonardo 19, no. 4 (1986): 331-332. Also published as “Die Fotografie als nach-industrieller Gegenstand” in FotoKritik 21-22 (November 1986): 14-17. Although he does not specify, one assumes Flusser is talking about Hans Sedlmayer, the Austrian art historian who was, somewhat ironically, an early member of the Nazi party. Sedlmayer adopted and modified Alois Reigl’s idea of the *Kunstwollen*, that the intention of the artwork could be objectified. Intentionality, while discarded by post-formalist critics, is a term that comes up frequently in Flusser’s own writings.
Dialogue; “Les Immateriaux,” which takes its title from a recent exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, curated by Jean-François Lyotard; and Intersubjectivity. Many of these terms and ideas are familiar from Flusser’s oeuvre, although in this essay he pulls the object-oriented writing of the seventies into his eighties technical-image argument. Hence, the essay starts with a phenomenological description of the difference between subject and object and how objects gain value by having work injected into them. Flusser makes the distinction between industrial objects, which were the products of artists and artisans, and post-industrial objects, which are shaped by apparatus. “Post-industrial objects,” he writes, “will differ from industrial ones in that they will become almost ‘value-less’ supports for programmed information.” The influence of Heidegger can be felt at the end of this section, where Flusser argues that soon humans will no longer be “true” subjects because they can be replaced by apparatus, which will confront the objects for them. Culture will no longer be a store of values, but of memories.

In the fifth section, “Photos,” Flusser finally addresses photography. This is the section Flusser mentioned in the bibliography—as in his letter to Lisa Bornstein—that was a response to Barthes, whom Flusser felt was “missing the point.” It is a provocative section. Flusser declares photographs “practically worthless supports of information” and a few sentences later amplifies this point: “Photos and printed matter have the following in common: both can become a nuisance by creating waste material. However, in printed matter a human subject, an ‘author,’ elaborates the information (unless a word processor is used), while in the photo an apparatus does.” Instead of focusing on images, Flusser argues that post-industrial culture in general can be grasped better by focusing on the camera and apparatus, which he describes in the next

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613 Ibid.
section as a “machine that calculates probabilities.” And here, Flusser identifies a philosophical problem: if culture was created to hedge against the entropic death or decay (in his terms “loss of information”) of nature and its objects, what happens when apparatuses appear that can create this information? What happens to value? (A concept that, not coincidentally, also is central to art history.)

To tease this out, Flusser looks at three kinds of photographs: fully automated ones (e.g., NASA satellite photos), amateur photographs, like snapshots, and “experimental” photographs in which the photographer works against the program of the camera. None of this is new. But here Flusser highlights the “inner dialectic of freedom” that occurs when, instead of creating value, humans are committed to deviating from value. The last sections of the essay are given over to suggesting how the new electromagnetic photos—examples are in “Les Immateriaux,” which showcased satellite images, holograms, and other types of digital images—will do away with material support, creating new forms of memory and a “total art” in which science and art are reunited, classification systems are discarded, and human dialogue becomes possible through the exchange of particle-based images. Humans will no longer be subordinate to objects but instead live in a culture of immaterial information in which “useful activities” can be performed by apparatus and humans are free to exist as knots within a social network, becoming universal artists. Flusser acknowledges that this is a utopian forecast. It is, nonetheless, technically feasible for the first time.

Two points are expanded upon in two other essays, regarding memory and immateriality. “On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)” was also published in Leonardo and based on a talk

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614 Ibid.

615 Ibid., 331.
Flusser was about to give at the Ars Electronica symposium in Linz, Austria in September 1988. What is interesting about “On Memory” is that it essentially recasts much of the argument of “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object” into the idea of “electronic memory.” Read alongside his photography writings, it is interesting to see how Flusser changes the terms of photography from remembrance (Barthes continually refers to Proust, although he argues the photograph is more a resurrection of the dead than a “remembrance”) to information storage. Electronic memories are also described as “simulations,” which puts Flusser much closer to Jean Baudrillard, as I will discuss in the following chapter. “A simulation here means an imitation that exaggerates a few aspects of the original while disregarding all the other aspects,” he writes. “Thus, a lever is a simulation of the arm: it exaggerates its power to lift while disregarding all the other aspects of the arm.” Similarly, electronic memory is a simulation of the memory functions of the human brain, but it will free up the human brain to perform other functions.

Another essay, “Immaterialism,” recently published for the first time in the British journal Philosophy of Photography, elaborates on the ramifications of new images lacking material support, which are composed of particles instead “oblige us to rethink eternal problems.” For instance, if electronic memories relocate our memory outside of bodies, the immaterial nature of electromagnetic images suggests similar cataclysmic change: “The very

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616 Vilém Flusser, “On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise),” Leonardo 23, no. 4 (1990): 397-399. The correspondence in the archive shows that Flusser had also submitted other essays to Leonardo, including “Plant Life” and “Grandmother,” neither of which were accepted.

617 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 82. Furthermore: “Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of the Photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.” Ibid., 91.


pillars of Occidental culture, ‘matter,’ ‘spirit,’ and ‘form’ have fallen … but a mystery now
envelops the concepts of ‘energy’ and ‘probability’ instead. If one throws metaphysics out
through the door, it comes back through the window.” This idea of digital immateriality has
been disputed to some extent by later media writers, as well as by photographers who have
pointed out that digital photography labs are more “material” (filled with hardware and
expensive to maintain) than chemical ones, and that much photography has been lost in recent
decades in the frantic transition from one format to another.

However, what sets Flusser apart from other photography theorists of this moment is his
emphasis on a future of images rather than an end of photography, and an insistence on present
and future images as electromagnetic. In keeping with this future-looking perspective, Flusser
was concerned that we would need to learn how to read or “decipher” these new images.
Echoing Benjamin, who famously decreed that in the future literacy would consist of the ability
to read photographs, Flusser wrote in another recently published essay that, “the present is

620 Ibid., 219.

621 “Digital media is degenerative, forgetful, eraseable. This degeneration makes it both possible
and impossible for it to imitate analog media. It is perhaps a history-making device, but only
through its ahistorical (or memoryless) functioning, through the ways in which it constantly
transmits and regenerates text and images.” Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “The Enduring Ephemeral,

622 “Digital technology seems to offer greater potential for storage of and easy access to images,
but I think that the effect may be quite the opposite after a period of time … For example, I have
no problem making prints from my own 30-year-old negatives that are comparable to prints from
100+-year-old glass plates. But I cannot access my digital image files from 6-8 years ago. These
files were made on computers with now-obsolete chips and obsolete versions of software (both
operating and specific programs) then stored on media (Syquest drives, Zip disks, etc.) that are
no longer supported by available hardware.” Bob Thall, Chair of the Photography Department at
Columbia College in Chicago, Words Without Pictures (New York: Aperture; London: Thames &
Hudson, 2010), 340-342.
marked by our post-historical illiteracy.” What is needed is a criticism for technical images that addresses production as much as the image. Similarly, in an essay titled “Photo Criticism” published in *European Photography* in 1984, he argued that the task of a “correct” photography criticism is to “render explicit the complex co-implications between man and apparatus that result in photographs.” More specifically, the critic should ask: “What sort of camera has produced the photograph? In what part of the world, with which techniques, and against which cultural, political and historical backgrounds, was this camera produced, and in what ways does it differ from other cameras available on the market? … To what degree did the camera program deviate the photographer from his intention?”

Finally, “The City as Wave-Trough in the Image-Flood” (1988), is a rich and visionary essay that takes proposes technical images formed from particles as new models for the city, contrasting this “topology” with geography in which cities were represented on flat surfaces, such as maps. (The essay also uses the term *Bilderflut*, which, although it doesn’t figure largely in the essay, became a popular term in German media studies signifying the deluge of mass media images.) Rather than relying on the ancient division of the city into Economy (marketplace), Politics (public sphere), and Theory (sacred space), for Flusser the new image of...

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625 Ibid., 24.

626 Ibid.

the city is a net of relations in which the threads of the net are channels through which information flows. Within this net, human subjects are like knots and their relations are the different densities on the net, with the denser places developing into “wave-troughs” (*Wellental*) that oscillate back and forth. Every wave becomes a flash point for “intersubjective virtualities” and the wave troughs are called cities. The new image of the city is thus immaterial: a network of wires and cables. It is not “geographically locatable; on the contrary, it is everywhere where humans open up to one another.” Here, of course, you can see the continued echoes of Buber—but also the very clear outlines of Internet sites and social media in which communities are formed and subjects exist merely in relation to one another as they enter this realm. In the sixties, Flusser wrote about masks in carnival in Brazil, and here he retrieves that example, citing how we don masks—essentially different identities—to participate in cities: “One dances in the mask of a television image (identifies oneself with and within it), in the mask of a Party member, an academic title, a family relationship, an artistic orientation, a philosophic intention.” But Flusser is now also beyond Buber in thinking about human subjectivity, writing that this image of humanity also corresponds to “ecology (organisms are knottings together of ecosystems); molecular biology (phenotypes are knottings together of genetic information); or atomic physics (bodies are the knottings together of the four field strengths).”

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628 Flusser, “The City as Wave-Trough,” 325.

629 Ibid., 326.

630 Ibid., 327.

631 Ibid., 326.

632 Ibid., 325.
This is an important jumping off point. Because, while I have attempted to isolate Flusser’s photography and technical image writings in order to clarify his ideas and contextualize them within photography theory and scholarship, Flusser’s writings were themselves net-like: various knots and nodes formed around particular subjects, but he eschewed classification and disciplinary categories—and these categories were in flux anyway, particularly in newly formed fields like media studies. In his introduction to “The City as Wave-Trough,” translator Phil Gochenour compares Flusser to Gregory Bateson rather than Marshall McLuhan, and the comparison is apt, given Bateson’s use of cybernetics and information theory to reconceptualize anthropology and human relationships. Gochenour also compares Flusser’s thinking about technology and human subjectivity to that of media theorists like Niklas Luhmann, Norbert Bolz, Friedrich Kittler, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Heinz von Foerster, and Ernst Glaserfeld, as well as the Radical Constructivist movement (a term coined by Glaserfeld) in German cybernetic theory. For these thinkers—particularly von Foerster—technology and subjectivity must be thought in terms of epistemology and biology, which we will shortly see was central to Flusser’s writing and thinking. Here, considering information theory, biology, and epistemology, we are a long way from traditional photography theory. And yet, it is exactly this wide-ranging, net-like thinking that makes Flusser’s writings exciting: rather than looking back with nostalgia at chemical photography, he used digital images as a model for theory and as another knot in the complex relationship between technology, humans, and other species.

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633 Ibid. Gochenour also distinguishes Flusser from Jurgen Habermas, whose idea of the public sphere assumed an autonomous subject entering that space rather than one dialogically formed, and the Frankfurt School, who treated technology and the media as indoctrinating, mediating, and alienating rather than dialogic.

634 Ibid., 321.
Flusser’s Other Writings: *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*

An important text to mention in this context is Flusser’s science-fiction philosophy or “parabiology” text *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, which was published in German in 1983, the same year as *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. French artist Louis Bec provided illustrations and authorship is attributed to both of them. Meanwhile the Portuguese version—translated by Flusser himself, but unpublished during his lifetime—is attributed solely to Flusser. There are differences between the two editions: the German version is fifty pages shorter and in the Portuguese version Flusser stretches out and draws more conclusions. The Portuguese version also includes an important discussion of apparatus at the end. Flusser had, of course, written about the natural world and its intersection with humans in *Natural: Mind*. Now, however, he discovered a creature about which little was known: *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, or the “vampire squid from hell,” the sole species in the Order Vampyromorpha, which has features of both octopods and squid, and which he used to write a fable about evolution, history, and human...

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636 The Portuguese version cited here was translated from an unpublished manuscript in the Vilém Flusser Archive. See editor’s preface, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (Atropos, 2011), 13. A text by Abraham A. Moles was also discovered in the archive and included as the foreword to the English translation of the Portuguese text. Regarding Bec’s contributions, he was a visual artist and founder of the surrealist-sounding Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste. Many of his drawings in the book are of invented species—a practice similar to the photographic work of Joan Fontcuberta, the Spanish conceptual photographer with whom Flusser corresponded and occasionally lectured or collaborated.
existence. “Vampy,” as Flusser called the creature in his correspondence with Milton Vargas, Abraham Moles, and Dora Ferreira da Silva, in which he developed ideas for the essay, is approximately a foot long and lives in the mesopelagic zone of the ocean, between half a mile and several thousand feet deep, in tropical and temperate regions of the world. Most important for Flusser’s purposes is that it is an aphotic (lightless) habitat, a high-pressure, oxygen minimum zone (OMZ) where humans cannot exist. Vampyroteuthis has existed nearly unchanged for over three hundred million years, making it a kind of living fossil, or what biologists call a “phylogenetic relic.” Its body is reddish-brown body and it has large blue eyes, eight arms and two retractile filaments that are used to capture food, although it subsists primarily on “marine snow,” the organic detritus that drifts down through the ocean. Vampy also possesses light-emitting organs called “photophores” and under duress it releases a bioluminescent mucous with glowing blue light particles that confuse predators and prey. The animal can turn its body nearly inside out, either as camouflage or to trap prey, although mainly for the former purpose.

Flusser had not seen a vampire squid. In fact, very few people had until recently. The cephalopod was first named in 1903 by the German naturalist Carl Chun; later biologists called it Cirroteuthis macrope, Watasella Nigra, and Retroteuthis Pacifica, but Chun’s name—perhaps


638 In Central California, where Hoving and Robison studied Vampyroteuthis, it was found throughout the 600 to 900 meter depth range.

Images of Vampy were only recently captured by ROVs (remotely operated underwater vehicles), including 170 specimens between 1992 and 2012—well after Flusser wrote his book—and one was displayed in a public aquarium for the first time in 2014.641 According to Klaus Sander, Flusser visited the Natural History Museum in London and aquariums in Monaco and Banyuls-sur-Mer for research. In his correspondence, Flusser also mentions three examples of *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* fished out of the South China Sea, from which he presumably took his inspiration.642 The lack of information available on Vampy was of little concern. It allowed Flusser greater freedom to imagine the habits and nature of the animal and “despite the barrier that separates us, Vampyroteuthis is not unknowable.”643 As a fable, it was “an attempt to critique our vertebrate existence from the molluscan point of view. Like every

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640 See Carl Chun’s *Aus de Tiefen des Weltmeeres* (Regensberg, Germany: University Library of Regensburg, 1900).

641 Although “Thirty-six trawled specimens were collected between 1964 and 1971 by R/V Velero IV off southern California and northern Baja California; four were collected in 1967 in Mexican waters off northern and central Baja California by R/V Velero IV. These 40 specimens are accessioned in the collections of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Another three specimens were collected off the California coast in 2011 by cruises of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography as part of the California Current Ecosystem Long-Term Ecological Research (CCE-LTER) programme.” Hoving and Robison, “Vampire squid,” 2. In order to keep the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* in captivity, well above the OMZ, Hoving and Robison write that they had to keep young specimens in plastic bags and older ones in circular kreisel tanks.3 The specimen shown in captivity was at the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, May 2014, accessed September 12, 2014, http://montereybayaquarium.tumblr.com/post/84435959998/now-on-exhibit-two-rare-deep-sea-cephalopods-we.


643 Ibid., 23.
fable, this one shall also be mostly about men, although an ‘animal’ will serve as its pretext.”

He wrote the book primarily in 1981.

Flusser was clear on his intent: to disrupt the hierarchy which places humans above animals. In doing so, he invokes Saint Francis of Assisi, who preached of an integrated world in which humans and animals (and the environment) were God’s equal creations: “This fable shall follow the Franciscan example, and shall seek to overcome anthropocentrism during its contemplation of life’s current. It shall seek to grasp evolution from a vampyroteuthian point of view. To oppose the human Darwin with a vampyroteuthian Darwin.”

One can already see Flusser setting up a series of dialectics: Vampyroteuthis infernalis and humans; the watery, low-oxygen “abyss” where Vampy lives and the land on which humans reside; how one organism’s paradise is another one’s hell. Vampy becomes the paradigmatic “Other,” harking back to writings like The History of the Devil, since its phylogenic name consigns it to “hell”—although Flusser just as often prefers the term “abyss.” Furthermore, Flusser often examines Vampy “from a cybernetic point of view,” spending many pages outlining the anatomy and behavior of the organism, but also imagining its nervous system as a network.

What is key here is that, in the same way as Flusser explored the nature-culture dialectic in Natural:Mind and found it to be false, in Vampyroteuthis infernalis he finds the hierarchy humans have set up, placing themselves above other species, specious. After all, Vampy can do things like emit light and survive in a low-oxygen habitat, which we cannot. In typically Flusserian (or Heideggarian)

644 Ibid., 27-28.
645 Sander, Sources, 25.
647 Ibid., 34.
fashion, he steps back from this narrative to show how scientific objectivity itself is flawed. Viewed from the “objective” standpoint of science, Vampy exists in the “zoology of cephalopods”; and yet: “The search for scientific objectivity is revealing itself in its continual advancement not as a search for ‘purity,’ but as pernicious madness. The present demands that we give up the ideal of objectivity in favor of other intersubjective scientific methods.”\textsuperscript{648}

For Flusser, one of the primary culprits in establishing “scientific objectivity” within biology is Charles Darwin. As Flusser has shown in earlier writings, the idea that species evolve ever upwards, with humans exemplifying the pinnacle of biological success is a suspect theory when one considers the “rationalized” hells of Auschwitz and other mechanized extermination camps. Flusser stresses instead the game-theory nature of evolution: its randomness and the permutations produced by programs—“unimaginative automation”—which are usually wrong: that is, creatures are unable to survive in their habitats and perish.\textsuperscript{649} Here Flusser draws a parallel between Vampy and humans: we are both products of pure chance. Vampy is a mirror that shows our imperfections and in this mirror we can recognize what we are both negating: “We are opposing spirits that negate the same ‘world.’”\textsuperscript{650} This spirit, he points out, is not like the one theorized in eighteenth-century philosophy as Geist. Instead, it is a Freudian one—or, more precisely, a Reichian one: referring to the radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who theorized vital energy through the concept of “orgone,” as well as a fusion of the mouth and the anus, a synthesis of the dialectic of Eros and Thanatos. Flusser considers Vampy much closer than humans to this “orgasmic” evolutionary model. And considering how Darwinian and

\textsuperscript{648} Ibid., 38. Italics mine.

\textsuperscript{649} Ibid., 47-48.

\textsuperscript{650} Ibid., 49.
Lamarckian concepts of evolution—driven by heredity and environment, respectively—led to concepts like *species* and *race*, which culminated catastrophically in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.\(^651\) Flusser argues that this is where philosophy and biology meet. Theoretical reason becomes for humans what the web is to the spider:

> The web works for the spider to catch flies, and theoretical reason works for man to catch generalities. A certain biologically-based Kantianism (every species has its own web of specific “categories”) definitely does not work to solve the epistemological problem. Because biology is itself a product of the human “web.” It catches everything within the categories of theoretical reason, including reason itself, and not only the spider’s web. The biologically-based Kantianism does not resolve the problem, it only transfers it to another level. And it is not in this way that we will be able to reformulate the problem of reformulating the question of *the origins of species*.\(^652\)

Flusser suggests two “meta-models” for avoiding this impasse in which biology is caught in the web of Kantian reason: Wilhelm Reich and game theory. In Reich’s model, an explosion of energy in the universe results in the divergence and then concentration of condensed energy or “orgone” in which complex objects emerge: organisms which, rather than evolving, “repress” certain characteristics, thereby avoiding the antimony of “origin of species.”\(^653\) In the games-theory model the universe becomes a “progressive realization of virtualities” contained in a program that asserts itself via permutations of chance: a game in which “the ‘hereditists’ emphasize the pawns of the game, and the ‘environmentalists’ the game board, but these are two aspects of the same game of chance.”\(^654\) At this point Flusser brings up phenomenology, which

\(^651\) Ibid., 59-60.

\(^652\) Ibid., 61. Italics in original.

\(^653\) Ibid., 62.

\(^654\) Ibid., 63. In the back of the English translation of the Portuguese version is a letter from Milton Vargas from January 23, 1981, found in the Vilém Flusser Archive, in which Vargas sent Flusser an article on the theory of evolution [Roger Lewin, “Evolutionary Theory Under Fire,” *Science Magazine* 210, no. 21 (November 1980)]. Vargas summarizes the article and concludes:
returns us to the world in which we exist: a world of relations in which “organisms are abstractions of a particular relational fabric, and their environment is another abstraction of the same fabric,” and the argument between “hereditists” and “environmentalists” is itself abstract speculation. This is particularly pertinent in studying Vampy—or at least during Flusser’s moment, when few examples of Vampyroteuthis infernalis had actually been seen—because we cannot study him in his habitat. Instead, we are forced to use intuitive methods that implicate our epistemological position as much as explain the animal. Flusser teases this out further: seventy percent of the earth is covered with water, “brimming with life” which we only partly know. Vampy thus becomes an analogue for the earth itself, and his “uninhabitable” infernalis must be viewed as a paradise, since he has survived there for millions of years—much longer than humans have existed on earth.

Flusser uses this as a springboard for demonstrating how we need to liberate ourselves from our models, and particularly with regard to the philosophical concept of the subject. If existence has been treated as a “being-in-the-world” consisting of a subject in relation to objects and objects in relation to subjects (here he cites Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, and Descartes in their various ways of describing the human world view), then Vampy forces us to rethink this model. A “vampyroteuthian epistemology,” not predicated on “resolving problems” but on discriminating between influences and impressions assists this. (In the German version of

“However, says the author, in several cases the fossils do not document a smooth transition from old to new morphologies … Is this perhaps a flaw in paleontological data? If that is so, this could be resolved by new findings and research, as there are thousands of geological formations still unknown. But this poses the doubt: is this a true characteristic of evolution – which is not really smooth and continuous, but full of convulsions and distortions in its aim? I believe that if this is so, then the nature of chance and probability would be affirmed, which since Mendel has been linked to evolution.” Flusser, Vampyroteuthis infernalis (Atropos), 132-33.

655 Ibid., 64.
the text Flusser calls this the “vampyroteuthian Dasein” rather than the “vampyroteuthian epistemology,” invoking Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world.\(^{656}\) In a letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva, Flusser invoked three additional models and aims for his text:

Plato’s *Symposium*, with the myth of the perfect man as an eight-armed sphere, [Hieronymous] Bosch, and Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. And I follow these three aims: 1. To attain enough distance from the human condition to be able to observe it, but a distance that is not transcendent. 2. To write a fable that is simultaneously scientifically exact and mad fantasy (*fantasia esatta*). 3. To face Evil intentionally with the spirit of “transvaluation,” but in reality, convinced that it is Evil as such that is the real religious problem.\(^{657}\)

A vampyroteuthian critique of human culture offers the following examples: Vampy’s concepts of sexuality, family, and freedom show that it is “better programmed for socialization than man”,\(^{658}\) its “social unconscious” and ability to recognize itself in the Other is more articulated than in humans; hence, *contra* Darwin, Vampy might be better adapted for survival than humans. We can even use Vampy as a model for art, since his emitting of light as a form of duplicitous messaging is a “total art” in which deceit reigns. (This overlaps not only with Flusser’s description of art history, a “history of misunderstandings” that is being modified by communications theory in which the gesture of art making is becoming more “conscious and disciplined,” but also with his concept of design as deceit, which I will discuss shortly.\(^{659}\)

Photography makes a brief appearance late in the book in a section titled “Vampyroteuthian art.” Here Flusser considers how humans pass on acquired knowledge and


\(^{659}\) Ibid., 112.
information by imprinting it onto objects, hoping these objects will outlive them.\textsuperscript{660} This attempt to store information in objects—one can see here echoes of Flusser’s writings from the seventies on objects—also affects humans: the “resistance of objects” (materials and media), creates a feedback loop between humans and objects that ultimately modifies humans. Vampy’s “object” is the sepia cloud which he emits to ward off predators, but more importantly to \textit{deceive} them. For Vampy then, “art” and “deceit” are synonyms, an argument Flusser will reiterate in \textit{The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design}.\textsuperscript{661} But for Vampy, the most important “information storage” is genetic, and this genetic information “will not only outlive all books, buildings and paintings, but also the species itself, although in a mutated form.”\textsuperscript{662} Similarly, for humans, the information age provides a new awareness, that objects will not suffice to hold information. Rather, “Our communicational structures are becoming fundamentally transformed, in the sense of becoming constituted by ephemeral and transient media that allow the Other to be informed without the need for objects. It is as if humanity, after a multi-millennial turn through the objective world, had now reencountered the vampyroteuthian path.”\textsuperscript{663} First came the printing press, which stored information itself, rather than books (here, one can see Flusser’s allegiance to the apparatus over the object), then cybernetic programs within apparatus which imprint information onto tools and objects: mass culture in the form of myriad gadgets, but also photography. In photography, the object (photographic paper) is less interesting than the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{660} “\textit{Vampyroteuthis also resorts to several types of objects (colors, lights, sepia clouds), which he manipulates in order to transmit information to other Vampyroteuthes. The difference is only that men trust the permanence of objects more so than Vampyroteuthes.”} Ibid., 106.
\item \textsuperscript{661} Ibid., 111.
\item \textsuperscript{662} Ibid., 111.
\item \textsuperscript{663} Ibid., 113.
\end{itemize}
information transmitted. Or, in vampyroteuthian terms: the photographic paper is for the photographer what the skin is for Vampyroteuthis: “a medium for colorful messages.”\textsuperscript{664} Moreover, since Vampy emits information, the organism itself may function as apparatus.\textsuperscript{665} This serves as a model for humanity—although this could be a good thing or a bad thing: apparatus and function could be integrated, but this could also result in a “totalitarianism of integrated apparatus” which is invisible and imperceptible.\textsuperscript{666}

In his foreword to the Portuguese version of \textit{Vampyroteuthis infernalis}, Abraham Moles reflects on Vampy as a scientific essay, but one that distorts “the rules of the game.” Part fiction, part “hard” science, it might be “the spark of a new method of philosophical thought.”\textsuperscript{667} Flusser himself argues that texts like \textit{Vampyroteuthis infernalis} aren’t necessarily “science fiction,” but “fictitious science” in which scientific objectivity is overthrown in the service of “a concretely human knowledge.”\textsuperscript{668} At the end of the book Flusser argues that biology as the source for his fable is significant because it is a model in flux. Where the “fable” told by biology used to be that an original cell contained every possible life form on earth, biotechnology and genetic engineering will change the rules of this game. As Flusser wrote to his friend Milton Vargas:

> New species may emerge artificially by crossing different phyla. These are such fantastic things that the imagination fails … the challenge is not biological but

\textsuperscript{664} Ibid., 115.  
\textsuperscript{665} Ibid., 116.  
\textsuperscript{666} Ibid., 116.  
\textsuperscript{667} Abraham Moles, “Foreword,” \textit{Vampyroteuthis infernalis} (Atropos, 2011), 20. This forward was probably intended for a French version of the book, but it was included posthumously in the Portuguese edition.  
\textsuperscript{668} Flusser, \textit{Vampyroteuthis infernalis} (Atropos, 2011), 123.
epistemological; to rethink evolution not in “causal” terms or “finalistic” terms, but in “programmatic” terms.\textsuperscript{669}

Two final points: Vampy is our Other (Flusser also called him our “antipode” and our “brother”),\textsuperscript{670} here again are echoes of Martin Buber—although taken to an extra-human level. Second, Vampy becomes part of the contemporary conversation around climate change since, as a biologist who studies the animal argued recently, it is threatened by ocean warming, decreasing oxygen, pollution, overfishing, industrialization, and dozens of other changes.\textsuperscript{671} Although Flusser’s parabiological fable predates much companion-species literature, which pushed anthropocentric liberation philosophies to their logical conclusion, there is important overlap between Flusser and thinkers like Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti, who looked at biotechnology, human/animal relations, post-humanity, and the Anthropocene. I will discuss this in the next chapter. If Flusser’s dialectic between Vampy and humans seemed

\textsuperscript{669} Letter from Vilém Flusser to Milton Vargas, January 28, 1981, found in the Vilém Flusser Archive. Quoted in \textit{Vampyroteuthis infernalis} (Atropos, 2011), 136. In other letters, Flusser and Vargas discussed how biological engineering also reached back to the Nazis and their dreams of creating a superman.

\textsuperscript{670} “Our astronomy is his geology. Our conscious mind is his subconscious. Our logic is his deep psychology, our sex his geometry. His ‘spoken language’ (he speaks through the skin) has a sexual syntax. Our theory is his orgasm. Our culture is stored in manipulated objects; his memory (treacherous, that is: artistic) is ephemeral, and only stored in the cerebral memory of its participants … For us the world is splendid (reflects sunlight). For him the world is made to shine by his bioluminescent organs. For us the ‘truth’ is the discovery of the reality behind appearances. For him, it is the feat of making appear what the eternal night hides. For us ‘to think’ is to organize concepts, that is: the outlines of objects felt by the fingers (begreifen des vorhandenen). For him ‘to think’ is to discriminate between the influences of the world, all of them experienced sexually, since Vampyroteuthis grasps, smells and absorbs by means of sex. Our thought is mechanical, his cybernetic.” Letter from Flusser to Dora Ferreira da Silva, January 29, 1981, quoted in \textit{Vampyroteuthis infernalis} (Atropos, 2011), 137-38.

farfetched in the eighties, the common fate of all species in what is now called the Anthropocene shows the prescience of his text.

Flusser’s Other Writings: The “Curie’s Children” Column in *Artforum*

Thinking about Haraway, Hayles, biotechnology and climate change leads nicely into discussing Flusser’s largest body of texts published in the U.S. during his lifetime: the “Curie’s Children” column he wrote for *Artforum* between 1986 and 1991.672 In a recent interview, David Frankel, who edited the column at *Artforum* and is now Editorial Director in the Department of Publications at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, said that he was not familiar with Flusser’s writings when he began editing them in 1986 and he sensed no one else at the magazine was either.673 Max Kozloff recommended Flusser to *Artforum* and Frankel’s sense was that “the columns are nice little things, but they are far from his most important work.”674 This is

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672 Flusser did not come up with the title for the column, although he did not challenge it. In a letter to Charles Miller, then the new Managing Editor of *Artforum*, Flusser writes from Robion, “On my return from Brazil I find your issue containing my contribution on Light Metaphors (which you called ‘Curie’s Children’). I should like to express my thanks for the prompt and efficient way in which you handled the matter. It is indeed a pleasure and an honor to be collaborating with your excellent publication.” Letter from Vilém Flusser to Charles Miller, September 1, 1986, *Artforum* Correspondence Binder, No. 7, Vilém Flusser Archive.

673 Telephone interview with David Frankel, September 9, 2014. The correspondence between Flusser and *Artforum* in the archive supports this. In a letter to Flusser, Tracy Tullis wrote: “I am enclosing a letter from an *Artforum* reader in Canada who, as you can see, is interested in knowing where else he may find your work. It would be helpful for us to have this information, in case others write to us with similar questions, as they occasionally do with various authors. (For that matter, I would be interested to know myself—I love your columns, and would like to see anything else you have written.) If you could send us a list of some kind at your convenience, I would be very grateful.” Flusser, of course, obliged, sending a one-page list of publications. Letter from Tracy Tullis to Vilém Flusser, November 6, 1986, *Artforum* Correspondence Binder (unnumbered), Vilém Flusser Archive.

674 Telephone interview with David Frankel, September 9, 2014. Max Kozloff gave the *Artforum* editors a Flusser essay, “Taking Leave of Literature,” and the first letter Flusser received was from Kathryn Howarth, Managing Editor, informing Flusser that they were holding the essay for
true to some extent, although Flusser had great hopes for the collaboration. He described himself and his interest in *Artforum* in a December 1986 letter to Charles Miller, who had started as Managing Editor the previous summer:

> For quite a number of years I have been working on a series of essays which try to consider our present crisis from a variety of angles … There is an inner logic to this series of investigations: each essay approaches the crisis from a different point (from the exact sciences, from history, from technology, from aesthetics, from codification). The five essays [*Natural: Mind, Post-History, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Into the Universe of Technical Images, and Does Writing Have a Future?*] (which took 20 years to compose), thus imply each other. (I tell you all this, because you seem to take interest in my work.)

> I have now reached a stage where I must try to synthesize the various threads, and to come to some sort of conclusion. It so happens that our contact coincides with this turning point in my writing. This is very important for me: not only does our contact suggest to me that I might have found an editor which “controls” me, but it also opens up for me the American stage, with which I had so far almost no relation. These two things are important for the following reasons: (1) One writes for one’s editor, and only through him for others. My German editor [Andreas Müller-Pohle] is an excellent thinker and friend, but I feel to have taken up too much of his thinking. My Brazilian editor is too much under my influence to be really critical of my writings. I have a feeling that you might take a different place in my work, if we could establish this precious relationship “editor:author.” (2) I write everything in four languages (Portuguese, German, French, and English), to control my ideas, but so far have published very little in English. I know of course America is the most important place where to publish, because it is there where most new ideas are born.\(^{675}\)

Flusser’s letter is important because it describes how his philosophy is a system connecting history, technology, aesthetics, and codification (information). But the letter also shows how at this point the urge to “synthesize” was paramount. In another letter to Miller, Flusser wrote that he felt the author-editor dialogue was “one of the most precious

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\(^{675}\) Letter from Vilém Flusser to Charles V. Miller, *Artforum* Correspondence Binder, No. 17, Vilém Flusser Archive.

Letter from Kathryn Howarth to Vilém Flusser, June 8, 1986, *Artforum* Correspondence Binder, No. 1., Vilém Flusser Archive.
intersubjective relations.” Miller would not become Flusser’s editor, however. Instead, Frankel inherited Flusser. He describes his experience working with Flusser on “Curie’s Children”:

One thing about the columns is that they came in very badly written. They were written in English and the text had to be deciphered. It was always kind of a puzzle. There were always things that had to be unraveled. Some [essays] were very elegantly constructed. They were like little games that had sequences in which things had to be connected.

Frankel echoes what is obvious in the Artforum correspondence: Flusser was happy with the texts that resulted from Frankel’s editing. The “Curie’s Children” essays generally follow the pattern of his short essay form and, in “Communication,” “Discovery,” “Science,” “Future Architecture,” “An Unspeakable Future,” “Books,” “Popes,” and “The Term Design” pick up

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676 Letter from Vilém Flusser to Charles V. Miller, January 27, 1987, Artforum Correspondence Binder, No. 20, Vilém Flusser Archive.

677 Telephone interview with David Frankel, September 9, 2014. Furthermore, Frankel recounts, “The pieces weren’t very long. They would arrive—I don’t remember what medium [fax]. I would get them and edit them. The text came in and it wasn’t clear or simple and I would unravel them. I would call [Flusser] and read the edit from beginning to end, line by line. He would listen and say “excellent, excellent.” That was a kind of a refrain. He wasn’t a very patient guy, though; if you got something wrong, he got irritated very quickly. There was a certain amount of conversation about the meaning. Sometimes there were things I couldn’t figure out. I would ask him about them, so we’d have conversations about this sentence or that sentence. I always liked talking to him. There was a certain sense of urgency about these texts. I would telephone and his wife would answer and she would run to get him and he would run to the phone. There was an eagerness,” (ibid.). And Flusser wrote to Kathryn Howard at Artforum, “It is my custom to write excerpts from essays on which I am working, and to publish them in European and Brazilian media. If you agree, I shall send you English translations of those articles as they come out from my typewriter. But I shall have to ask you to be indulgent with my English. (I write in Portuguese, German and French). You will get a paper within the next few weeks, which will permit you to judge its pertinence within the context of your publication.” Letter from Vilém Flusser to Kathryn Howard, June 9, 1986, Artforum Correspondence Binder, Vilém Flusser Archive.

678 Although Flusser wrote to Charles Miller with one criticism: “You are doing an excellent job, and I thank you for it. There is, however, the following point we have to discuss in the future: You will have noticed that everything I write has an ironic twist to it. This is eliminated by your reformulation. I understand that this has to do with your general editing policy, but still: we must talk about this in detail.” Letter from Vilém Flusser to Charles V. Miller, September 4, 1987, Artforum Correspondence Binder, No. 27, Vilém Flusser Archive.
ideas from the last two decades of Flusser’s writing. For instance, the series “On Discovery” (published in *Artforum*’s September 1987, October 1987, March 1988, April 1988, and March 1989 issues) examines knowledge and belief, considering models from Aristotle to Galileo and finally biotechnology and artificial intelligence. Circling back to the arguments in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, Flusser describes the “stupidity of biological ‘evolution,’” in which information is changed by chance, “amplified, in Darwin’s terms, by natural selection” and how this has been eclipsed by “biotechnics,” which allows biological information to be manipulated, injected into living matter, and passed on to future generations.\(^679\) Exciting as always for Flusser were the epistemological and aesthetic ramifications of genetics and biotechnology:

> We now possess a technique that permits us to create the foundations of mental processes that have never before existed, processes for which words like “sensation,” “perception,” “desire,” “thought,” and “decision” are inappropriate, since they describe only processes we know. In short, the statement that we can now create new forms of life implies that we can now create “spirits” that we are incapable of understanding.\(^680\)

For Flusser this functioned as a new art of living in which “originals”—dubiously romantic when applied previously to art forms—could be literalized.\(^681\) The next “Discovery” installment (*Artforum*, April 1988) looked at pictures and the new ability to make images on computer screens. The article echoes Flusser’s previous writing on technical images, but the ideas were not familiar to *Artforum* editors or the majority of its readers, and although the correspondence suggests the columns were popular with readers, to someone familiar with Flusser’s *oeuvre*, they feel a bit flat. The essay attempts to move past a description of “old” images toward “new” ones and the “technical imagination” proposed in earlier writings; the


\(^{680}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{681}\) Ibid.
word “apparatus” appears fleetingly, although it is not elaborated upon; and a somewhat new idea of photography is spelled out in which the camera is described as a “primitive computer.” Within this new mode of picture making the human imagination “withdraws” into programming: “Old pictures are orienting tools within the world: they point at the world, they show it, they mean it. The new ones are projections of calculating thought: they point at thought, they show it, they mean it.”

More important for Flusser at this point is how the new images affect epistemology and cognition, as thoughts rather than representations: “We now possess the ability to calculate the world as a field of virtualities, and to compute some of those virtualities into simulations of realities according to our own program. This is the new imagination.” The consequence of this is that we are no longer “sub-jects,” but “pro-jects” who possess a new imagination and ability to “dive into a field of virtualities.” The overlap with Jean Baudrillard is notable here, although Flusser is characteristically positive about technology, whereas Baudrillard and most French thinkers were not.

The “Discovery” essay in the Summer 1988 issue picked up where the preceding month’s column left off, considering how new technology and biotechnology affect art and thought. Art becomes not a gesture of imitation (mimesis) but invention (poeisis), and this can be extended to biology: we can have a “geep,” a goat crossed genetically with a sheep, and plant


683 Ibid.

684 Ibid.

685 Ibid.

and animal hybrids in the future: wheat with eyes and horses with leaves. Entropy and chance enter when we consider differences between art and computer programming; Flusser concludes that “there remains a residual reluctance” for computer programmers to see their work as a “medium of expression”—although from his standpoint, art and science are both “infused with spirit.”  

“Science” in the October 1988 issue of *Artforum* looks at programming species, such that the Walt Disney of the future might be a molecular biologist and the future Disneyland a landscape in which art informs nature. The December 1988 installment, also titled “Science,” considers color—something Flusser had addressed in earlier essays, but here also using the terms “denotative” and “connotative” familiar to readers of Roland Barthes (though Flusser’s vocabulary is derived more from communications theory than structuralist linguistics). Flusser argues that colors might become a form of thinking, an Esperanto that could complement or substitute for written and spoken language and perhaps bridge the realms of art and science.  

“Discovery” (March 1989) starts with the idea of counting numbers and typing as “stuttering.” Using Max Planck’s idea of oscillating atoms absorbing and emitting energy in quanta rather than a continuous flow (quantum physics rather than classical physics) as proof of a “stuttering” universe, Flusser argues that alphanumeric code should be abandoned for computer code. This is really just an elaboration of his end-of-writing argument, but it also suggests that our thinking is structured by technological developments (rather than us shaping and structuring the world) and

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687 Ibid., 18. It is important to note that Flusser invokes the language of communications theory to describe these inventions: these “transcendental creations” are like “noise” within a preexisting system.


689 This essay also appears in different form as “Why Do Typewriters Go ‘Click?’” in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, 62-65.
that the shift from linear writing to binary code leads to “synthetic” thinking because to count is to “assemble” while to write is to “analyze.” Ultimately, Flusser shapes an argument against the negative view of simulation—but also against technological development as completely Orwellian:

Those who vilify counting insist that those projected worlds [holograms] are nothing but fictitious simulations of the true world. Perhaps they are right, but for the wrong reasons. For those projected worlds are computations of calculations, but so is our “true” world, as our nervous system receives point-like stimuli that our brain computes into our perceptions of the world. Thus, either the projected worlds are just as true as the true one, or the true world is just as fictitious as the projected world. The marvelous thing about counting is that it enables us to project alternative worlds, we need no longer be subject to a single one. 690

“Future Architecture” (April 1989) picks up on arguments from earlier Flusser essays about how the communications revolution changes our environment, with the house being perforated like Swiss cheese by cables, wires, and antennae. 691 “Wondering About Science” (Summer 1989) looks at concepts of wonder impacted by the Enlightenment, philosophy, and science and at how contemporary science is more about producing rather than explaining “wonders.” Flusser concludes by arguing that chance and deliberation are integral to our understanding of nature (evolution) and culture (art/science), and how it might be more appropriate to understand science and technology as “absurd gestures” rather than deliberate, rational ones. 692 “An Unspeakable Future” (March 1990) considers images produced by artists versus computer programmers, while “Future Architecture” (May 1990) returns to houses, but


this time theorizing them as “knots” in the human network and shelters which are less about keeping out the rain than negotiating the “hail” of mass communication.693

“Popes” (October 1990) argues that art critics and popes are in the same business, building bridges between words and images and heaven and earth, respectively, and how computers and artificial intelligence could change all of these: images, words, and faith.694 “Art and Politics” (December 1990) makes a similar claim: artists and politicians both make things to be exhibited in public—except they have switched places in the programming age, with artists effectively “governing the city.”695 “Three Times” (February 1991) looks at time, entropy, and absurdity and “Three Spaces” (May 1991) at different concepts of space: human, virtual, vital, “real,” and cosmic.696 “Books” (November 1991) suggests that the material value of books is worthless and that in the future letters will be transcoded into images and books will disappear.697 Finally, the posthumously published “The Term Design” (March 1992) recycles the essay “About the Word Design,” which appeared in several places, including the book The Shape of Things.698 This last essay was accompanied by an editor’s note announcing Flusser’s death and stating that Artforum was holding a number of columns by him, which would appear in


future issues. Only one more appeared: “Progress” in the June 1992 issue, which reflected upon Flusser’s complicated relationship with that Enlightenment term.

The “collaboration” with *Artforum* was fruitful, particularly since it leaves a more substantial record of Flusser’s writing in English than any other, and within an art context. But it was not a perfect fit. For instance, the illustrations often seem to reflect New York art world interests and tastes more than Flusser’s ideas. (According to David Frankel, in keeping with most magazines’ policies, the images were generally chosen by a photo editor.) Flusser’s April 1988 essay, “Discovery,” for instance, focused on “new” technical images but was illustrated by an undated Garry Winogrand photograph of the Los Angeles Airport. While an airport might be considered as a Flusserian “non-space”—to put it in Marc Augé’s later term—Winogrand was more of a traditional photographer than what Flusser had in mind when he thought of new “programmed” images. Works by Nancy Dwyer, Rodney Graham, Maura Sheehan, Peter Nagy, Matt Mullican, Tom Radloff, Ana Mendieta, Jessica Diamond, and Glen Baxter were also used to illustrate Flusser’s texts. While these names are all familiar to a certain audience, they reveal the gap between Flusser’s writings and the U.S. art world. (More appropriate perhaps were reproductions of work by Philippe Starck and Nam June Paik.)

However, the *Artforum* editors could be astute in their handling of Flusser. In 1990 David Frankel sent Flusser a copy of Avital Ronell’s *The Telephone Book*, asking him to review it for the magazine. Flusser responded with enthusiasm, particularly because he saw that the book

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699 See Marc Augé’s *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 2009). Interestingly, in the same “On Discovery” essay, Flusser uses the world “nonplace” to describe imagination: “When making a picture, we not only observe but imagine. We step back from the world into ourselves, into somewhere not so much a place as a nonplace. Our imagination is our capacity to withdraw from the world to that nonplace.” Flusser, “On Discovery,” *Artforum* (April 1988): 14.
“repeatedly refers to my friend Friedrich Kittler’s ideas.”700 (Although, later Flusser found Ronell’s book “hard to swallow” and asked for an extension until Spring of 1992—by which time he had died in a car accident outside Prague).701 In 1991, however, Charles Miller made the mistake of sending a letter to Andreas Müller-Pohle, Flusser’s editor and close friend, complaining, “Can’t think why you allow Flusser’s scientistic [sic] inebriation into your pages, especially since you probably haven’t room for a refutation.”702 Ever faithful (Flusser even bequeathed a house in the Czech Republic which he had regained after the war to Müller-Pohle), Müller-Pohle delivered the letter to Flusser, who responded angrily to Miller:

Andreas handed me your (not very kind) letter of the 10th with your reply to my “Habits” essay. I shall not go into your refutations of my hypothesis, because they are so common sense as not to be interesting. But I am writing this letter because it strikes me that we touch on an important point when you speak of my “scientistic inebriation.”703

Flusser then proceeded to explain the difference between modern “exact” sciences and *Geisteswissenschaften* (two cultures: art and science) and how he thought this division was now over—that the exact sciences are themselves cultural phenomena since scientific objectivity has been eclipsed by notions of inter-subjectivity. Flusser concluded: “You are quite right: this is indeed an inebriating vision. Because if you do away with the distinction between science and art (between truth and fiction), you open up spaces for the creation of alternatives to this sorry

700 Letter from Vilém Flusser to David Frankel, *Artforum* Correspondence Binder, No. 86, Vilém Flusser Archive.

701 *Artforum* Correspondence Binder, Nos. 84 and 93, Vilém Flusser Archive. See Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology-Schizophrenia-Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989).


scheme of things we are in. Thank you for having given me the opportunity to say so in a brief letter.”

Miller wrote back, arguing that he felt the “value of the intersubjective and exact is overrated,” and his position was “approximately that” of Hilary Putnam, whose 1981 book *Reason, Truth, and History* challenged the notion of scientific thinking as “rational.” Miller and Flusser might actually have been in agreement, although the “Curie’s Children” essays show how there were many ways in which Anglo-American and European thinkers diverged. This partially explains why—even though Flusser was published in *Artforum* and the correspondence in the archive suggests an enthusiastic reception—he lacked U.S. champions, such as thinkers like Foucault and Baudrillard had found in Sylvère Lotringer, and why Flusser’s writings ultimately didn’t have much traction in the U.S. art world. In 1989 he was commissioned to write an essay for the exhibition “The Image of Thinking in Visual Poetry” at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The Flusser Archive holds correspondence, including Flusser’s revisions to the text he submitted, “The Imagination of the Second Order.” The exhibition was never mounted, however. Flusser’s name fell into relative obscurity and his writings have been little acknowledged in the U.S. art world until very recently.

Flusser’s Other Writings: *Kommunicologie, The Shape of Things,* and Other Texts

Among Flusser’s other monographs, few contribute to a theory of the image as much as the writings I have already mentioned. *Supposed: A Sequence of Scenes,* on futuristic models of

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704 Ibid.


706 Canceled Conferences Binder, Nos. 53-72, Vilém Flusser Archive.
society, was published in 1989.\textsuperscript{707} \textit{Gestures} came out in 1991, gathering together ideas from his lectures and phenomenology projects of the seventies.\textsuperscript{708} \textit{Bodenlos}, the autobiography he began in the early seventies, was published in 1991. It has not been translated into English yet, although there are versions in Portuguese and Czech.\textsuperscript{709} One interesting book relating to technology, although not a monograph, is \textit{Philosophies of the New Technology}, which resulted from a symposium of the same title in Linz, Austria on September 14, 1988. It includes essays by Flusser, Jean Baudrillard, Friedrich Kittler, Peter Weibel—an important Flusser supporter—Hannes Böhringer, and Heinz von Foerster.\textsuperscript{710} Flusser’s essay, “Memories” (“Gedächtnisse”) is essentially similar to “On Memory,” published in English in \textit{Leonardo}. Kittler lectured on “Fiction and Simulation”; Baudrillard on “Video World and Fractal Subject.” Most interesting perhaps is seeing these thinkers grouped together, since Baudrillard was embraced in the U.S. art world and Kittler’s media theory had become popular in the preceding decade, particularly after the English publication of \textit{Gramophone, Film, Typewriter}.\textsuperscript{711}


\textsuperscript{710} Vilém Flusser, Jean Baudrillard, and Hannes Böhringer, \textit{Philosophien der neuen Technologien} (Berlin: Merve, 1989).

The books published posthumously by Stefan Bollmann, along with Edith Flusser, need to be mentioned. Many of them gather writings previously published in one form or another, like Volumes One through Four in the Bollmann series: *In Praise of Superficiality: Towards a Phenomenology of Media* (1993), *Post-history: A Revised Historiography* (1993), *From Subject to Project: Incarnation* (1994), and *Communicology* (1998).\(^{712}\) *Communicology* collects Flusser’s media writings and has been important in Germany in establishing Flusser as part of the eighties media-theory canon, alongside Kittler, Siegfried Zielinski and others. Flusser developed an idea of “communicology” while teaching communications in Brazil and the book is composed largely of his lectures at the University of São Paulo (translated here into German)—but also lectures written in French and given at the School of Art and Architecture at Marseille-Luminy in 1977 and the Center for Theater in Aix-en-Provence in 1986 and 1987.\(^{713}\) Looking more closely at the individual sections, one can see headings and concepts covered in earlier works. Different forms of communication like theater, amphitheater, discourse, and dialogue appeared in *Post-history*. Sections are devoted to photography, film, video, and television (one thinks here of Kittler’s book, with its examples of gramophone, film, and typewriter) and a section given to “techno-imagination,” Flusser’s idea of a new form of criticism inspired by technical images. What *Communicology* does is bring together ideas from *Post-history* and the

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\(^{713}\) Flusser, *Kommunikologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2007), 353.
technical image trilogy and deliver them in a manner that establishes Flusser within media and communications theory.

The most important book to mention at this juncture, however, is *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, which is Flusser’s most read and cited text in English, after *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*.\(^{714}\) Originally published in German in 1993—although in somewhat different form than the English text mentioned here—it has been translated into French, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and Czech.\(^{715}\) It includes essays already mentioned, such as “About the Word Design” (published in *Artforum*) and “With As Many Holes as Swiss Cheese,” which revises and conflates several essays by Flusser concerning architecture changed by technology, in which walls are perforated by cables and the house becomes “the nucleus of an interpersonal network.”\(^{716}\)

Design is important within Flusser’s oeuvre. Not only does it intersect with the writing on objects he did in the seventies, but it also runs parallel to the technical-image writings, since design is applied technology and intricately linked with human relations and ethics. For Flusser, design is defined as a form of deception. It is linked with mechanics and machines, and these can be traced etymologically back to Greek words like *mechos*: “a device designed to deceive—i.e.,


\(^{716}\) Flusser, *The Shape of Things*, 83.
a trap—and the Trojan Horse is one example of this." Design includes things like levers, which are meant to trick gravity. Design can also function as a rather broad term, incorporating art, science, and engineering. In the essay “Form and Material” ancient canals, Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon, and Mirage fighter jets are all included under the rubric of “design.”

The question of ethics appears in essays like “War and the State of Things,” where Flusser slyly asserts that good design means technology that kills effectively, such that people who are anti-war are also anti-design: “Such people are prepared, in the interest of peace, to accept bad design.” (The Nazi technicians who built the gas chambers, for instance, had to apologize for their poor design: that is, they didn’t kill people quickly enough.) “The Factory,” an essay originally written in 1964, and which reflects Flusser’s own employment in a factory in São Paulo in the fifties, tracks the development of human history and manufacturing. It also includes a famous Flusser shorthand formula for historical development: “hands, tools, machines, robots.” In this version of history, human existence changes as tools are acquired and our relationship with the environment changes because “tools are empirical, machines are mechanical, and robots are neurophysiological and biological.” If God was the original designer/creator, displaced in the Renaissance, we are now embarking on a new era of design as

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717 Ibid., 17.
718 Ibid., 27.
719 Ibid., 32.
720 Ibid., 44.
721 Ibid., 46.
objects are divorced from material, becoming information and “non-objects” like software. Architecture changes (thinking in terms of topology instead of geography is once again invoked) and a new set of ethics comes into play. The Nazis represented one iteration of this; the “post-industrial” weapons of the (first) Gulf War another, as he writes in “The Ethics of Industrial Design.” For Flusser, the dystopias of eugenics and unethical design are a wake-up call, as he describes in the science-fiction-like essay “Submarine”: “If we do not manage—by going beyond ideology—to find a way of approaching a solution to the ethical problems of design, then Nazism, the Gulf War and similar events will go down in history as merely the opening stages of a period of destruction and self-destruction. The fact that we are beginning to wonder about such questions gives reason for hope.”

Flusser’s writings on migration and nationalism should also be mentioned. These connect Flusser’s biography with his intellectual investment in technology and politics. The fifth volume of the Bollmann writings, *Brazil, or the Search for a New People: Towards a Phenomenology of Underdevelopment* is important, as well as *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, also edited posthumously by Stefan Bollmann. The *Freedom of the Migrant* includes essays like “The Challenge of the Migrant,” “On the Alien,” “We Need a Philosophy of

722 “A computer memory is a non-thing. Similarly, electronic images and holograms are non-things. These are non-things because they cannot be held in the hand.” Flusser, *The Shape of Things*, 91.

723 Ibid., 66-69.

724 Ibid., 69.

Emigration,” and “Thinking about Nomadism,” several of which include references to Flusser’s (not particularly active) Judaism and the stereotype of the wandering Jew, along with the idea of heimat—home, homeland, and region—and his own loss of heimat. Additionally, however, Flusser’s disillusionment with Brazil and its failure to exist for him as heimat is addressed, as well as a critique of nation states in general. In an interview at the end of the book, he says, “You know, I believe that patriotism is the greatest obscenity. And I have just returned from a trip to Israel, and I’m a Jew.” In the same interview, however, he mentions Buber, revealing how the great Jewish thinker influenced his philosophy of technical images:

Thanks to Buber I also came to understand the Jewish prohibition against graven images. I don’t know whether it shares roots with Islam’s injunction. Humankind is made in the image of God. When I look into the face of another person, I open my own face to his gaze, that is the only form in which I can know God. If I then make images on the side, I then obstruct my path to the other, and in so doing to the completely Other. It became clear to me from these two sides that the concept of an “I” was not merely an ideological blinder but the sin in the Jewish-Christian sense. The Church might say the sin against the spirit.

The Freedom of the Migrant addresses nomadism in multiple forms, from refuges to tourism and artists, and how technology relates to this. Although Flusser doesn’t state it, the

726 “The guiding principle is that nationalism, this invention of the enlightened seventeenth- and eighteenth-century bourgeoisie, has proved to be a catastrophic crime and that when giant nation-states are abolished, people will be able to enter into freely chosen associations. These might include work and leisure-time communities instead of national communities. As Goethe put it, relationships of choice rather than of blood.” Flusser, “Reunification or Networking?” in The Freedom of the Migrant, 73.


728 Ibid., 94.

729 “The nomad who emerges from the nineties will more likely be an artist than a hunter or herdsman. Out of dispersed potentials he will artfully compute concrete realities (effects rather than realities).” Flusser, “Nomads,” The Freedom of the Migrant, 53.

730 “(1) It is information and not possessions (software not hardware) that empowers, and (2) communication, not economics, now forms the substructure of the village (society). What this
logical conclusion is that one might find the Other in technical images like the dialogic ones offered by the Internet and later social media. But as Flusser states in an interview with Patrik Tschudin included at the end of the book, “individual and society are all abstractions. What does exist is an interpersonal relationship, a networking, an intersubjective field of relations, from which I may extrapolate society or the individual.” This leads to an end of politics, a vision of utopia stemming from technology. Flusser emphasizes near the end of the interview:

“Fear” is not the emotion that characterizes my writings; hope is! I believe that we have reached a technological threshold that will allow us to live differently with each other than was heretofore possible. Don’t underestimate technology! I think that for the first time we now have the technical ability to overcome geography and history and to relate to each other based on competence and not what one has received. And I am tremendously enthusiastic about this! I am very enthusiastic! I don’t believe in this utopia; I don’t think it will be followed through to completion, but that doesn’t really matter.

And here I will end this chapter, since the interview, recorded on September 30, 1991 serves as an apt summary of all the threads suggested above: from technical images to networks and society reconfigured in theoretical terms along inter-subjective, post-historical, and post-political lines. Less than two months later, on November 27, 1991, Flusser died from injuries sustained in a car accident near the Czech border, after giving a small seminar at the Goethe two-part formulation makes clear is that the settled form of existence—home—and a fortiori the stable, field, hill, and stream are no longer functional. In effect, we have begun to be nomadic.” Flusser, “Thinking about Nomadism,” The Freedom of the Migrant, 43.

731 In the same interview, however, Flusser describes his migration over to art and technical images thusly: “Decent human beings are interested in mathematics; when they get old, they begin to be interested in art. That was how it was with me as well. That was how I became involved with the Biennale and with such silly things as photography and video et cetera.” Flusser interview with Patrik Tschudin, The Freedom of the Migrant, 92.

732 Ibid., 102.

733 Ibid., 106.
Institute in Prague, at the invitation of Andreas Stöhl. He was buried in the New Jewish Cemetery in Prague.
Chapter Four: Flusser’s Reception and Context

Flusser and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Husserl, and Heidegger

This chapter will discuss Flusser as a twentieth-century thinker: his European—and particularly Central European—upbringing and enduring interest in the philosophy of that region; his status as a media philosopher and technical image theorist; and his relevance for the current moment. As I stated in the first chapter, writers such as Andreas Ströhl have argued that Flusser saw himself as an Old European, and I want to examine this first, looking at the philosophers Flusser referenced most frequently. For instance, Flusser wrote that when he read the first sentence of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) it resulted in a “moment of transformation.” But Wittgenstein’s influence continued to the end of Flusser’s life: his first and second books, *Language and Reality* and *The History of the Devil*, were structured in what Flusser called a “caricature of the Wittgensteinian method,” mimicking the numbered, philosophical propositions in the *Tractatus*; Flusser reviewed a new German edition of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* for the *Revista Brasileira de filosofia* in 1966, in which he called Wittgenstein a “gigantic figure” and “one of the major thinkers;” and


Flusser was still quoting Wittgenstein in texts like *Gestures*, a German version of which he was preparing shortly before he died in 1991.\(^737\)

For Wittgenstein, the primary problems of philosophy rested on “the misunderstanding of the logic of the language.”\(^738\) This included cleaning up philosophical language, since he felt that most philosophers do not understand the logic of language and thus fall into making nonsensical propositions. (Similarly, he wrote in the preface to the *Tractatus* that he would not cite sources—a notable feature of Flusser’s mature writing.)\(^739\) For Flusser, the importance of Wittgenstein can be felt most obviously in *Language and Reality*, although some writers have argued that he was reading Wittgenstein against the grain in this text.\(^740\) Wittgenstein provided a grounding in language, and *Language and Reality* reflected this insistence that not only does language create reality, but thinking itself is limited by language. Flusser would later borrow from Wittgenstein the idea of *Sprachspiele* or language games as laid out in the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which different forms of language function differently (Wittgenstein provided an exhaustive list, therefore Flusser writes, “Wittgenstein said, ‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.’” Vilém Flusser, “The Gesture of Speaking,” *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 31. Also see Karlheinz Ludeking, “Pictures and Gestures,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30.3 (July 1990): 218–232.

\(^737\) Regarding “problems that refuse to be grasped in words and words that refuse to be spoken,” Wittgenstein noted that “the great works of [Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob] Frege and the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell” had stimulated his thought.


\(^739\) “What I have here written makes no claim to novelty in points of detail; and therefore I give no sources, because it is indifferent to me whether what I have thought has already been thought before me.” Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 23. Although in the next paragraph of the preface Wittgenstein noted that “the great works of [Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob] Frege and the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell” had stimulated his thought.

from reporting an event to making up a story, asking, thanking, translating, or telling a joke.\textsuperscript{741} The Wittgenstein of \textit{Tractatus} argued that, “the object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.”\textsuperscript{742} Similarly, Flusser would often set aside the word “theory” in quotation marks (as he did many terms) and push this further to indicate that theory and philosophy were a kind of game: “everything is art, language, including that utmost game: \textit{ars moriendi}. It must be translated between games, including the game of death.”\textsuperscript{743} But if language itself was a “game,” it could be simplified rather than complicated: the late Wittgenstein emphasized ordinary language over formal logic, and this reliance on simple language can be felt throughout Flusser’s \textit{oeuvre}.\textsuperscript{744} Moreover, Wittgenstein’s idea that the “picture is the model of reality” could be seen as an early seed for Flusser’s thinking, not only because it reveals Wittgenstein’s attitude that language is un-representable, but because it suggests the importance of technical images within a new post-historical reality in which writing is eclipsed.\textsuperscript{745}

In terms of important European philosophers, Flusser also cites members of the Vienna Circle, who were influenced by the \textit{Tractatus}—particularly Rudolf Carnap, whose logical positivism concerned the distinction between philosophy and science, as well as Ernst Cassirer. Michael Hanke extends the list to include Otto Jespersen, Fritz Mauthner, Max Black, A. Waag,\textsuperscript{741} Ludwig Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953). For a discussion of \textit{Sprachespiele} with regard to literary interpretation, see G. L. Hagberg, \textit{Meaning and Interpretation: Wittgenstein, Henry James, and Literary Knowledge} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 9–44.

\textsuperscript{742} Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, 52.

\textsuperscript{743} Flusser quoted in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, \textit{Vilém Flusser: An Introduction}, 59-60.

Nicolai Hartmann, Russell, Whitehead, and Wilhelm Dilthey—along with Husserl and Heidegger. Flusser’s essay “On Edmund Husserl” went through several iterations and serves as a testament to his enduring debt to Husserl, the principal founder of phenomenology. With Husserl, knowledge takes precedence over the subject and the object, creating what Flusser calls a “dynamic net” of “concrete intentionalities” in which experience is concrete and subject and object are abstract. Nothing is known without being experienced and evaluated and the world becomes a “pure and concrete field of relations.” One can discern in this premise the idea of the “photographic universe,” which is “to know and to evaluate the world as a function of photographs.” But one can also see the overlap with Buber, who was more interested in human relations—intersubjectivity—than in knowledge, per se. Flusser writes that, “under phenomenological vision, society will be seen as a net composed of intersubjective intentional relations. The knots in the net are what used to be called ‘individuals’ … Since Husserl, there


747 Vilém Flusser, “On Edmund Husserl,” Philosophy of Photography 2, no. 2 (2011): 234-38. This version is from an unpublished manuscript, written in English, in the Vilém Flusser Archive., document No. 723. It is interesting to note that Husserl was also Central European—and was, moreover, a Moravian Jew who later converted to Protestantism—whose mentor was Thomas Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. Flusser’s father, Gustav, wrote a biography of Masaryk.


749 Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography (EP), 51.

750 “Husserl was of Jewish origin, but there seems to be nothing especially Jewish about him. Unless, that is, we consider his ‘epoche’; this attempt to step back from the ‘Lebenswelt’, and to keep silent so that it may speak for itself. There is something deeply unsatisfactory, even mystical, about this. It is, in fact, a religious attitude, and it may be considered a Jewish one (although Husserl would probably disagree). It is very like the attitude that characterizes the Sabbath. I suspect that Jewish mystics would, with some reservations, accept Husserl as one of their own. This is a paradox worth consideration.” Flusser, “On Edmund Husserl,” 238.
can be no such thing as an ‘I’ that is unrelated. In fact, I am the sum of my relations.”\textsuperscript{751}

Furthermore, “there is no such thing as ‘a society.’ If the knots are unknotted, the net will collapse and disappear: it comprises the knots. ‘I’ and ‘society’ are abstract extrapolations from concrete intersubjective relations.”\textsuperscript{752}

The concept of the photographic universe can be linked even more strongly to Heidegger. Flusser’s friend Vicente Ferreira da Silva was credited with bringing Heidegger to Brazil and Dora Ferreira da Silva, the poet and wife of Vicente, dedicated an issue of the literary journal \textit{Cavalo Azul}, to which Flusser was a frequent contributor, to Heidegger in 1968.\textsuperscript{753} Flusser dedicated “Our Inebriation” in \textit{Post-History} to Heidegger, whom he claimed had “changed my vision of things.”\textsuperscript{754} One can discern in Flusser’s concept of the photographic universe Heidegger’s \textit{Dasein} or “being-in-the-world,” as laid out in \textit{Being and Time}, in which we’re immersed in a situation—time, history, context—of which we are not fully conscious.\textsuperscript{755} \textit{Dasein} is always rooted in time, but also vaguely aware that the world is \textit{ungrounded} (the familiar word

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{751} Ibid., 237.
\item\textsuperscript{752} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{754} See Vilém Flusser, “Heidegger et le Nazisme: ‘Nous sommes face à l’expression la plus importante de la pensée de notre siècle (Heidegger and Nazism: ‘We are facing the most important expression of thought of our century,’” \textit{Calades} 86 (February 1988). Quoted in Sjouke van der Muelen, “Between Benjamin and McLuhan,” 198.
\end{enumerate}
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Bodenlos; Flusser also used the term *Dasein*, untranslated). Flusser follows Heidegger in attempting to create a language appropriate to this state of affairs. If Heidegger felt like philosophical language was unsuited to describing *Dasein*, Flusser set about fashioning philosophy that would reflect shifts in translation, but also *Dasein* in a world in which technology determines the human condition. (I have already noted how Heidegger’s essays “The Age of the World Picture” (1938), “The Turning” (1949), and “The Question Concerning Technology” (1955) relate to Flusser’s writings on the technical image, as well as Flusser’s use of etymology to explain terms like “apparatus” and “technology.”)

Heidegger is also important for Flusser in considering history. For Heidegger, historical epochs represent different ways of being in the world: Greeks, Christians, and modern humans each had their own *Dasein*. For Flusser, the formulation of “hands, tools, machines, robots” addresses a similar situation in which there are no universal structures and our *Dasein* is mediated through technology.\(^{756}\) Heidegger’s philosophical presupposition that technology determines our human condition is central to *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*—but *Into the Universe of Technical Images* takes this even further.\(^{757}\) For Heidegger, history has changed from antiquity to the present, culminating in a technological state of being that dominates the planet. For Flusser, we have entered *post-history*, an epoch of technological images in which writing, which created history, doesn’t have a future. Heidegger saw our version of being at a

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\(^{757}\) Van der Meulen, “Between Benjamin and McLuhan,” 198.
dead end: nihilism. But in technology Flusser sees optimism and a way of creating a telematic society. Following the later work of Heidegger, thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida attempted to deconstruct the definition of being or the subject, deploying a genealogical analysis of the trajectory through which “the subject” was constructed and legitimized, not just in philosophy (by Descartes, for instance), but in the political, juridical, educational, and ethical realms—and adapted idiomatically in various languages. For Flusser, writing near the end of his life in From Subject to Project: On Becoming Human, the human subject becomes “project”: a projector of possible lives and alternative worlds.758

Invoking Derrida also helps in thinking about Heidegger and nationalism. In a 1992 interview at Oxford University, Derrida discussed how we think of philosophy as a universal discourse while it has always been linked to specific cities and languages—particularly in the nineteenth century, when European nations were being formed.759 For Derrida, deconstruction was a project aimed at reaffirming “singularity” without giving rise to violent forms of nationalism; an attempt to reaffirm difference while respecting the Other’s difference. Heidegger, of course, represents the “bad” sort of nationalism: the recent publication of his “Black Notebooks,” journals he kept between 1931 and 1941, confirm his anti-Semitism and unmistakable rather than naïve allegiance to Nazism.760 However, many Jewish philosophers

758 Vilém Flusser, Vom Subjekt zum Projekt. Menschwerdung (Bensheim and Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1994).


have been influenced by Heidegger; Derrida, like Flusser, was Jewish—and heavily indebted to Heidegger. As with Derrida’s approach to philosophy and nationalism, one might say that Flusser found his strongest weapon in writing texts like The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism, which both “use” Heidegger and critiques nationalism.\footnote{761}

Flusser and Philosophy: Martin Buber, Franz Kafka, and José Ortega y Gasset

When Flusser left Europe in 1939, the only books he had with him, to reiterate, were Goethe’s Faust and a small Jewish prayer book his mother gave to him at the last moment.\footnote{762} I have already mentioned the impact upon Flusser of seeing Martin Buber lecture in Prague and how the circulation of technical images in a “dialogic” society might be seen as a secular version of Buber’s “I” and “thou” relationship. For Flusser, however, “dialogical life” was transformed into “dialogical programming” in which each image-maker sitting before her computer can program her own apparatus, rather than being programmed. The “I” becomes a knot in a dialogical web of networked society.\footnote{763} In other places, Flusser synthesizes Husserl’s notion of the life-world as a network of concrete intentionalities\footnote{764} with Buber’s transcendental, existential version of dialogue: “A telematized society will be exactly that network of pure relationships that


\footnote{763} Flusser, \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}, 92.

Husserl defines as the concrete structure of the social phenomenon … Instead of the individual man being the supreme value, it is now the dialogue between men that becomes the supreme value, or what Martin Buber, whose thought was profoundly influenced by Husserl, called the ‘dialogical life’ (das dialogische Leben).” For Flusser, Buber’s dialogical life spoke not “of” God but “to” God, with “the Judeo-Christian tradition breaking through the technological surface.”

If Buber served as a beneficent link between Flusser and Prague, Andreas Ströhl calls Franz Kafka Flusser’s “threatening older brother”: the one whose God stranded him absurdly at the edge of nothingness. Like Flusser, Kafka (1883-1924) was from the German-speaking Jewish minority in Prague. In “Waiting for Kafka,” an essay written in the sixties and published in Portuguese and German, Flusser addresses this: “Kafka’s thoughts are determined by the structure of German grammar. Kafka had German thoughts, and everything he thought was structured a priori by the grammar of this language. When [his writings] are translated into other languages, Kafka’s thoughts are structurally distorted. Thus, any alleged sympathy with these translated thoughts may actually be based on errors.” Flusser was freed from the “sterile” High

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766 Vilém Flusser, from “Dialogische Medien” in Kommunikologie (295), quoted in Writings, xv.
768 Ströhl, “Introduction,” Writings, xvi.
German of Kafka, which originated as an artificial literary language in the chancellery offices of the Emperor Charles IV of Prague.  But his tone and approach became part of Flusser’s thinking and writing—particularly with regard to irony:

Because of this idiom, Kafka’s message possesses the aura of ridiculously absurd pedantry so characteristic of him. The language of Prague oscillates between the poles of pedantic artificiality (historically embodied by the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy) and ridiculous language mixes (for example, historically embodied in the Czech, semi-German Officer Schweik). Because this language structures Kafka’s thoughts \textit{a priori}, they automatically oscillate within this dialectical tension. The overcoming of this tension leads directly to a malicious irony, which we usually call Kafka’s irony.

Flusser argues that Kafka used this “climate of inauthenticity” to create an ironic authenticity. Kafka’s search is like that of the mystics: a search for God. But what Kafka ultimately accomplishes is the “existentialization of Nietzsche” in which God is a “pedantic, over-organized, ridiculously incompetent God” who is “sick and tired of himself.” The result of this is that human progress is progress in the direction of nothingness, leading through various hierarchies that illustrate “experiences of nothingness.” Amplifying this even further is the way Kafka’s “message”—the language of information theory pervades the essay—was ultimately delivered: through his protégé, Max Brod, who disobeyed Kafka’s orders to destroy his writings and published them anyway. This historical fact contributes to the reception of Kafka’s message, heightening our doubt concerning its authenticity and leaving Flusser himself

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\textit{\textsuperscript{771}} Ibid.

\textit{\textsuperscript{772}} Ibid., 152.

\textit{\textsuperscript{773}} Flusser, “Waiting for Kafka” (1967), \textit{Writings}, 152. One can also hear the echoes of Heidegger’s concept of “authenticity.”

\textit{\textsuperscript{774}} Ibid., 158.

\textit{\textsuperscript{775}} Ibid.
in limbo: waiting for Kafka—or, more precisely, “an authentic answer to Kafka”\textsuperscript{776}—while looking for a way to escape the “incompetent bureaucratic apparatus” by confronting other forms of apparatus.\textsuperscript{777}

I have focused so far on German-language thinkers, but the last European I want to mention is Spanish: José Ortega y Gasset.\textsuperscript{778} One might imagine that, since Flusser formulated an idea of post-history, he might be drawn to Ortega’s “History as a System,” in which the Spanish writer challenged Cartesian rationality, faith in science, the Western concept of “nature” and history as a “science of the present” in need of a contemporary reassessment.\textsuperscript{779} Ortega also questioned concepts like liberalism and nationalism, which would be important for Flusser. Near the beginning of “In Search of Meaning,” however, Flusser writes that Ortega’s \textit{Revolt of the Masses}, which he read during his formative years in Prague, helped him discover “that vast world vaguely called ‘Existentialism,’” and led him back to Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{780} Ortega’s “mass-man” is a bourgeoisie-educated figure who is incapable of leadership, leading to a rudderless existence and foreshadowing the existentialists. (Albert Camus called him, “after Nietzsche, perhaps the greatest European writer.”)\textsuperscript{781} One could also imagine Ortega’s idea of a historical rupture

\textsuperscript{776} Ibid., 159.

\textsuperscript{777} Ibid., 154.

\textsuperscript{778} Flusser also mentioned, on occasion, the Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno.


\textsuperscript{780} Flusser, \textit{Writings}, 199. The material that makes up \textit{Revolt of the Masses} was originally published in 1929 as a series of articles in the newspaper \textit{El Sol}, which foreshadows Flusser’s own philosophical journalism. José Ortega y Gasset, \textit{The Revolt of the Masses} (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932).

\textsuperscript{781} Quoted in Pedro Blas Gonzalez, \textit{Ortega’s Revolt of the Masses and The Triumph of the New Man} (New York: Algara, 2007), 8.
having a lasting effect on Flusser’s thinking. In the last essay of *Revolt of the Masses* Ortega wrote that, “Europe is now reaping the painful results of her spiritual conduct. She has adopted blindly a culture which is magnificent, but has no roots.” Like Kafka the “prophet,” as Flusser called him, Ortega was a prognosticator. Flusser himself grew famous in certain realms for predicting a society glued to and communicating through its computer screens. Per Ortega’s predictions, Europe’s character defects would shortly be exposed, and Flusser himself would be profoundly affected.

**Flusser and Information Theory: Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon**

If the Nazis hadn’t occupied Prague, Flusser might have finished his degree at Charles University and become a philosopher in the vein of the Vienna Circle—or even Husserl or Heidegger. Instead, he ended up in Brazil, lecturing on communications. His oeuvre is most often compared with those of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard, but it is important to note that Flusser’s earliest manuscripts, *The Twentieth Century* and *Language and Reality*, do not cite information or media theory. And before considering McLuhan and Baudrillard, it seems fruitful to consider two other figures: Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon. Wiener coined the term *cybernetics* in the summer of 1947, from the Greek word *kubernetes* for “steersman”; the word also appears in Plato’s *The Alcibiades*, meaning to self-govern. Wiener’s work in

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782 Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses*, 189-190.

783 The German edition of Wiener’s *God and Golem* was in Flusser’s library. A spreadsheet of the library’s contents is available through the Vilém Flusser Archive website, accessed January 16, 2015, https://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/185810/49e7668ee095a7e96e5d87e67f1cfdd9.pdf.

784 Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: Wiley, 1948). In 1834, André-Marie Ampère used the term “cybernétique” to describe the sciences of government in his classification system of human knowledge.
cybernetics stemmed from his research during World War II and the development of an “antiaircraft (AA) predictor”: a device that used electrical networks and data from previous pilot missions to predict the position of enemy aircraft. Although Wiener’s AA predictor wasn’t employed in the war, it served as a prototype for subsequent feedback systems. Moreover, Wiener felt that cybernetics, which he defined as “the science of control and communication in the animal and machine,” could do everything from explaining human behavior to serving as a model for the universe. Cybernetics set up a new understanding of the human-machine relation in which self-regulating machines such as the AA predictor, which could self-correct, did not differ from human intentionality.

One could cite many progenitors for cybernetics: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientists like André-Marie Ampère, who invented the galvanometer and worked with electromagnetics; Charles Babbage, who invented a mechanical computer; the multiply authored telegraph, which changed communications; British mathematician Alan Turing’s *On Computable Numbers with Reference to the Entscheidungsproblem* (1937) and his 1936 Turing machine, a proto-computer developed out of cryptology and his effort to decode German messages during World War II; Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver’s theories of information, published in the book *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949); Warren McCulloch, the neurophysiologist whose brain theories contributed to cybernetics—also a founding member of the American Society for Cybernetics; and the Hungarian-born mathematician John von

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785 Instead of adopting Wiener’s AA predictor, the military adopted a geometric predictor invented by Hendrik Bode that calculated a plane’s trajectory. See Peter Galison, “The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 228-266.
Neumann and other participants, such as Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, in the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation Conferences.  

Many of these figures were already connected. Wiener taught Claude Shannon mathematics at MIT. Shannon wrote a short review of Wiener’s *Cybernetics* for the *Proceedings of the Institute of Radio Engineers*. During the war, Weaver headed the U.S. government’s applied mathematics research division, which oversaw Wiener’s AA predictor project, and Weaver helped Shannon’s mathematical theory of communication to become more accessible in their co-authored book of 1949. Vannevar Bush, Wiener’s colleague at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, would head the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD) during World War II, which included the Manhattan Project. (Wiener had written to Bush to see how he could help with the war effort.) Wiener and von Neumann were both in a group called the “Teleological Society” in the forties, an early integrated research program that harnessed neurology, mathematics, and engineering to study human intention alongside machines. Wiener, along with Bateson, Mead, McCulloch, and von Neumann, would participate in the Macy Foundation conferences, which attempted to integrate information theory

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786 Started by Kate Everit Macy in memory of her father, Josiah Macy, Jr., the one hundred-sixty conferences held between 1941 and 1960, were attended by various scholars and meant to promote dialogue across scientific disciplines and restore unity to science. (The Macy Foundation’s particular concern was the isolation of research in medical science; some of the conferences were devoted to such topics as infancy, childhood, aging, blood clotting, blood pressure, liver injuries, and so on.)


and feedback, applying them to fields like medicine, sociology, psychology, and anthropology.\textsuperscript{789} Von Neumann, along with Oskar Morgenstern, wrote a classic text on game theory, \textit{Theory of Games and Economic Behavior} (1944), which he initially described as the “mathematics of incomplete information.”\textsuperscript{790} (Flusser did not cite von Neumann and Morgenstern, but he frequently used the term “game theory.”)

In addition to cybernetics, Wiener helped popularize terms such as “information,” “message,” “feedback,” and “control.”\textsuperscript{791} Cybernetics became an amalgamation of engineering, computation, mathematics, and behavior psychology, and like Flusser’s view of apparatus, Wiener’s theory was intermittently optimistic and nihilistic: cybernetics had the capability to save, enslave, or destroy humanity.\textsuperscript{792} Cybernetics for Wiener was about control and command, which influenced a wide range of thinkers, such as Baudrillard and Deleuze, who saw mechanization as a way of controlling human society. For Flusser, however, borrowing from cybernetics as well as Martin Buber, intersubjective relations were paramount. The universe of technical images was cybernetic in that the images are composed of particles (“computed”), but these did not have to work merely as mechanisms of control. Near the end of \textit{Into the Universe of}

\textsuperscript{789} Ibid., 255.


\textsuperscript{792} Galison, “The Ontology of the Enemy,” 254.
*Technical Images*, Flusser describes the control scenario as a recalibration of Nietzsche’s will to power, “interpreted as a negatively entropic disposition,” in which the superman is transformed into a “cybernetic superbrain.” And yet, ever mindful of how new technology disrupts relationships and society, he writes, “I believe, however, that the current tendency to read Nietzsche as a prophet should be taken with a grain of salt, for otherwise, there is a risk of losing one’s grasp of what is new in current developments.”

Then there is the term “apparatus,” which was so central to Flusser’s philosophy. It appears in Wiener’s writings, but generally in the common usage of the term: the AA predictor was an apparatus—although it later became the prototype for the human nervous system in the same way as for Flusser cameras became models of political and cultural apparatuses. Where this comparison becomes particularly interesting is in the use of the term “black box.” For Flusser the camera was the archetypal black box, along with the cinema and the theater—but then apparatuses themselves became black boxes. Auschwitz was a black box; so was the media and the family: “Every relation has innumerable emotional, cultural, economic, political, biological, and ethical aspects that are inexhaustible. In sum: the family reveals itself as a black box never entirely explainable, and graspable only if we concentrate our attention on its input and output. It then reveals itself as cybernetically manipulable.” Compare this with Wiener’s use of the “black box,” a term that originated as a descriptor for prosaic physical objects. Peter Galison writes that black-speckled boxes were used in the MIT Radiation Laboratory during the war to encase radar electrical equipment such as amplifiers, receivers, and filters. After the war, Wiener

793 Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 166.

794 Ibid.

used the term “black-box” to describe a unit “designed to perform a function before one knew how it functioned.” Cybernetics treated humans and machines as interchangeable: humans could be described as “behavioristic black boxes” and to others looking at Wiener’s work, the human brain was a black box.

Cybernetics became a model not just for humans, but also for all biological systems. Darwin blurred the boundaries of human and animal; Wiener blurred human with machine. Flusser set out to examine *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* “from a cybernetic point of view,” imagining the animal’s nervous system as a “network.” Moreover, *Vampy* served as a science-fiction fable in which Western traditions might be overturned and taxonomy replaced by a “less linear and more ‘cybernetic’ (informative)” model. The rise of biotechnology gave this a sense of urgency, but it was also an epistemological issue: biology is a human-created science and to rethink biology is to suggest a seismic shift: “the challenge is not biological but epistemological; to rethink evolution not in ‘causal’ terms or ‘finalistic’ terms, but in ‘programmatic’ terms.”

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797 Ibid., 265.
798 In a 1951 letter to Wiener, W. Ross Ashby, who later authored a book titled *An Introduction to Cybernetics* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1956) wrote: “When I consider how psychologists have been trying to solve exactly this problem [what a human being is] for decades (if not centuries), the black box being the brain, and when I think how little attention they have given to the principles involved, my opinion of psychologists falls to a new low … For this reason I regard it as highly complimentary when I saw that your study of the ‘black box’ problem is a first step towards a scientific psychology!” Quoted in Galison, “The Ontology of the Enemy,” 252.
799 Ibid., 245-46.
800 Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, 34.
801 Ibid., 136.
802 Ibid.
using cybernetic theory rather than traditional natural philosophies. Wiener focused rather on control: messages were not about knowledge acquisition, *per se*, but what you did with the information once you received it. For Flusser, everything was always a philosophical question.

But where Wiener and Flusser particularly overlap is around the question of ethics, even if neither used the term regularly or explicitly. Following the war, Wiener had a crisis of conscience in which he saw his scientific work as a primary concern. Wiener wrote to a friend:

> Ever since the atomic bomb fell I have been recovering from an acute attack of conscience as one of the scientists who has been doing war work and who has seen his war work as part of a larger body which is being used in a way of which I do not approve and over which I have absolutely no control. I think the omens for a third world war are black and I have no intention of letting my services be used in such a conflict. I have seriously considered the possibility of giving up my scientific productive effort because I know no way to publish without letting my inventions go to the wrong hands.

For Wiener it was the world of Belsen and Hiroshima; for Flusser it was the apparatus of Auschwitz: slightly different—and particularly in their sense of agency, since Flusser was a holocaust survivor while Wiener was part of the war machine. Wiener would go on to write books like *God & Golem, Inc.* (1966), based on a series of lectures at Yale, in which humans are to machines as God is to Golem, the embryonic Adam; that is, creators that may or may not take responsibility for their progeny: “We who make cyborgs are, in the end, like gods.”

For Flusser ethics underpins everything, since apparatus can be used either to enslave or exterminate

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people, or in the cause of human freedom. Moreover, the intersubjective relationship of senders and receivers echoes Buber’s description of the “I” and “Thou” relationship of humans to God: we look into the face of the other (using technical image screens) and there we find God.

Looking briefly at Claude Shannon, where Wiener is associated with the term cybernetics, Shannon is seen as the father of information theory. (Wiener used “information theory,” too, but more broadly.)807 Both Wiener and Shannon were coming out of mathematics; Wiener was briefly Shannon’s professor at MIT and they published somewhat qualified reviews of each other’s books in professional journals. Shannon was employed by Bell Labs during the war and involved in cryptology; he and Alan Turing both worked at Bell Labs in the U.S. during 1943 as cryptanalysts.808 Large portions of Shannon’s famous 1948 paper, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” were derived from a declassified cryptography report. And although Shannon said that he had been influenced by Wiener’s work during the war, they approached the problem of information differently. Wiener was interested in feedback systems, filtering, and the rate of transmission of information while Shannon was interested in messages, noise, and coding problems.809 For Shannon, meaning could be divorced from semantic content. The important issue was how much information could be transmitted over a noisy channel. Wiener filtered signals representing messages (information) from noise while Shannon coded messages into


808 Gleick, The Information, 204.

signals in order to transmit information in the presence of noise.\textsuperscript{810} “Entropy” was also a key term for both scientists and one that has been widely confused and contested during its history. Originating in thermodynamics, along with the rise of the steam engine in the 1860s, entropy meant the unavailability of energy or its uselessness for work. But then it became its opposite: the energy that can be converted into mechanical work—and a host of other definitions: dissipation, disorder, and in information theory, a measure of uncertainty about a message.\textsuperscript{811} In 1948, Shannon wrote to Wiener about their equations for entropy, which differed by a sign:

\begin{quote}
I do not believe this difference has any real significance but is due to our taking somewhat complementary views of information. I consider how much information is produced when a choice is made from a set—the larger the set the more information. You consider the larger uncertainty in the case of a larger set to mean less knowledge of the situation and hence less information.\textsuperscript{812}
\end{quote}

Wiener agreed with this analysis. But how does this all relate to Flusser? In his writings, Flusser used the vocabulary of cybernetics and information theory rather freely: messages, codes, decoding, transmission, entropy. Flusser was using information theory to look at photography and technical images. One could say that Roland Barthes was in the same territory since, in “The Rhetoric of the Image,” he famously defined photography as a “message without a code”—although Barthes stressed that the first message in a photograph yielded a “substance that is linguistic” and the notion of denotative and connotative messages in the images similarly revealed his allegiance with semiotics and structural linguistics.\textsuperscript{813} Some writers have drawn parallels between semiotics and information theory, arguing that pragmatism in the United

\textsuperscript{810} Kline, “What is Information Theory a Theory Of?,” 17.

\textsuperscript{811} Gleick, The Information, 270-280.

\textsuperscript{812} Quoted in Kline, “What is Information Theory a Theory Of?,” 17. Italics in original.

States, with its close ties to Rudolf Carnap and the Vienna Circle, served as a foundation for the invention of the computer. However, the U.S. computational model synthesized information theory, cognitive (behaviorist) psychology, and language science, while in France Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes were using the linguistic model for anthropological work and cultural studies, respectively. Applying the same tools to photography and technical images, Flusser included definitions for “code,” “decode,” “entropy,” “information,” “memory,” “program,” and “redundancy” in his lexicon at the back of Towards a Philosophy of Photography. In “The Photograph,” he described photographs as images which “signify concepts

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814 Brian Lonsway, Making Leisure Work: Architecture and the Experience Economy (London: Routledge, 2009), 58. Lonsway writes that Wiener’s 1948 Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and Machine, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver’s 1949 The Mathematical Theory of Communication, and Noam Chomsky’s 1955 Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory all borrowed heavily from semiotic research. Moreover, “Cybernetics advanced the objective theorization for human-environment as well as human-machine interactions. Information Theory provided a semantic framework for the numerical encoding of non-numerical (spatial, graphic, etc.) information. And semiotic patterns provided a mechanism for the logical-symbolic interpretation of space as well as a theoretical framework for the understanding of space, architecture, and cities as communication systems,” (ibid., 58-59).

815 Ibid., 59. This is not to say that Barthes was ignorant of information theory. In the introduction to Elements of Semiology he wrote: “There is no doubt that the development of mass communications confers particular relevance today upon the vast field of signifying media, just when the success of disciplines such as linguistics, information theory, formal logic and structural anthropology provide semantic analysis with new instruments.” Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 9. The other thinker I would look at more closely, if space permitted, would be Umberto Eco, since he employed both semiotics and information theory—and, more importantly, Flusser cited him favorably (as opposed to Barthes, whom Flusser felt got it “wrong” on photography). In The Open Work (1962), Eco cited Wiener and Shannon and Weaver and applied information theory to thinking about Petrarch. But he also argued that the penchant in contemporary poetics for audience participation, ambiguity, disorder, and indeterminacy—characteristics of the “open work”—could benefit from the tools provided by information theory. Eco cited Flusser’s friend Abraham Moles and his collection of essays Information Theory and Esthetic Perception, in which Moles applied information theory to music. See Umberto Eco, “Openness, Information, Communication,” The Open Work (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 44-83 and Abraham Moles, Information Theory and Esthetic Perception (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968).
in a program” and rely on coding and decoding. He defined the photographer’s challenge as an attempt to “oppose the flood of redundancy with informative images.” But the language and philosophy of information theory works particularly well when applied to the transmission of photographs, which prefigures our own era of the Internet and social media in which images have become largely divorced from material supports (except, of course, in the art world). In “The Distribution of Photographs,” Flusser writes that, while information disintegrates progressively in nature, humans struggle against this “natural entropy” by receiving, storing, passing along, and deliberately creating information, resulting in culture: “improbably formed, informed objects.” Communication is divided into two phases: information is created then it is distributed to be stored. The first phase is called dialogue; the second, discourse. Photographs can be dialogic, but they can also be discursive. When photographs are not electromagnetic, they become post-industrial because of their reproducibility (echoing Walter Benjamin). But once they become electromagnetic, such as films and television, they can be processed by the receiver as pure information and channeled—although photographs can slip from one channel to another: from science to advertising or advertising to art. The channel determines how the photograph is “coded.” The critic needs to be aware of this. Here is where Flusser overlaps with Barthes and other writers in his call to highlight the systems in which photography exists, since channels conceal their function; if critics fail to do this they end up “as a function of the channels.”

816 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Reaktion), 41.

817 Ibid., 65.

818 Ibid., 49.

819 Ibid., 49.

820 Ibid., 55.
Marshall McLuhan

As more than one writer has pointed out, Marshall McLuhan’s “medium”—as in his famous catchphrase “the medium is the message”—is actually a reconfigured or renamed version of the “channel” from information theory: Shannon’s channel capacity, computed mathematically to measure the rate at which information can be transmitted over a noisy channel. For McLuhan, this meant that the medium often overwhelms the “content” of the message, which was not Shannon’s conclusion—or Flusser’s. In Flusser’s seventies writings, everyday objects function as screens between the outer world, messages through which we can decipher meaning by analyzing their phenomenological nature, while in the eighties technical images are examined as “windows,” surfaces and screens.

McLuhan entered communications theory as a literary scholar trained at Cambridge, but also as a Canadian looking at the spectacle of mass media developing just south of the border. In the journal Explorations (1953-1959), which he edited with the radical anthropologist Edmund Carpenter821 and in books like The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (1951), The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (1961), and Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964), McLuhan and his collaborators lay the foundations for—some say invented—media theory.822 Flusser claimed to have less in common with McLuhan than with

821 Stemming from the interdisciplinary Culture and Communication Seminar at the University of Toronto, which ran from 1951 to 1953.

Husserl or Buber; Ströhl and Janine Marchessault and Rainer Guldin have supported this claim, arguing that McLuhan and Flusser were writing not only from “polar ends” of the Americas, but also different theoretical ends. Ströhl, “Introduction,” Writings, x.

McLuhan was a “formalist,” theorizing the gradual disappearance of the human body in the electronic age, while Flusser was interested in feedback between objects and the phenomenological messages they provide. Marchessault and Guldin point out that Flusser did reference McLuhan in the early seventies—particularly in his communications seminars and resulting essays—although Flusser didn’t mention specific titles and references to McLuhan thereafter increasingly disappeared.

So where do McLuhan and Flusser overlap and where do they diverge? It seems important to point out that they were both a) interested in communications and b) looking in from the outside (or periphery) at the United States. McLuhan found a Canadian community of like-minded individuals—George Grant, Harold Innis, and Eric Havelock—and Flusser taught communications in Brazil and corresponded with Milton Vargas and Abraham Moles. Neither were adopters of the media they wrote about, but both were seen as prognosticators—although both insisted they were writing about the present rather than predicting the future. Both collaborated with other writers and academics and saw artists as the carriers and translators of


media society. McLuhan called artists the “antennae of society” and wrote that, where ordinary people attempt to numb their perceptions against the impact of new experiences, artists delight in novelty and study “the distortion of sensory life” produced by new environmental programming. McLuhan even saw his own work as an art form, and Flusser saw the artist as the greatest hope for reprogramming the apparatus, both of photography and society. (To reiterate: Flusser also recommended McLuhan’s son Eric as an artist to the São Paulo Biennial and organized a section of the 1973 Biennial around a communications, rather than a national pavilions model.) Both McLuhan and Flusser were interested in cities, using them as metaphors for their media theories and analyzing how electronic and digital media changed conceptions of the urban landscape. For McLuhan, there was the famous “global village” in which the world shrinks to the size (or conditions) of a village and which influenced thinkers like Henri Lefebvre. For Flusser, the “wave trough” represented the new, immaterial image of the city, a network of wires and cables that is not topographical or geographically locatable, and both

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828 “In social terms the artist can be regarded as a navigator who gives adequate compass bearings in spite of magnetic deflection of the needle by the changing play of forces. So understood, the artist is not a peddler of ideals or lofty experiences. He is rather the indispensable aid to action and reflection alike.” Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 238.


envisioned epic spatial models: McLuhan’s Gutenberg Galaxy and Flusser’s universe of technical images.

And then there was writing. Both McLuhan and Flusser theorized media in terms of historical epochs marked by writing. At Cambridge, McLuhan worked with F.R. Leavis, the literary critic and scholar associated with New Criticism and later cultural studies, and his doctoral dissertation focused on Thomas Nashe, an Elizabethan poet and playwright who was also a pamphleteer writing cheap printed works that could be widely disseminated, thanks to the invention of the printing press. (McLuhan’s work is also often seen as a prototype for cultural studies because it argued that mass media were as worthy of scholarly analysis as literary texts.) McLuhan argued that the Gutenberg press changed the conditions of reading, writing, and cognition and moved culture away from an oral mode to a visual one. History for Flusser was marked by the invention of writing in ancient Mesopotamia, which brought on a long period of “textolatry” broken only by the invention of photography and technical images. For both writers, electronic media signaled the end of linear thinking, as Flusser argued in Does Writing Have a Future?, where numbers in the form of computer code eclipsed writing.

So where do Flusser and McLuhan diverge? McLuhan was only nine years older than Flusser, but he died in 1980, before Flusser published most of his technical image writings, in which he actively distanced himself from McLuhan.\textsuperscript{831} “The medium is not the message,” Flusser insisted in Kommunikologie; the eidos of the medium was less important than the way it was used.\textsuperscript{832} McLuhan’s error, from Flusser’s standpoint, was in seeing the medium itself as transformative technology: “McLuhan is wrong with his assumption that ampitheatrical media,

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\textsuperscript{831} Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, \textit{Vilém Flusser: An Introduction}, 100.
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like the press or TV, can transform the world into a cosmic village: they will transform it into a cosmic circus.” Sjoukje van der Meulen argues that, while Flusser’s work is unthinkable without McLuhan, Flusser believed that an entirely new form of critical theory, not just “understanding” media, is crucial. She quotes a 1973 letter from Flusser to René Berger: “Maybe one day we can make (the two of us) a communication theory of media against McLuhan: you from the point of view of the media, and I from the point of view of the (phenomenologically conscious) receiver.” Because, where McLuhan saw electronic media eradicating various languages, Flusser was living in a different world: writing and speaking in multiple tongues and arguing, in a classically postmodernist way, that language affects meaning. (Yara Guasque suggests that Flusser might have read McLuhan in more than one language, although we don’t have sufficient evidence of this.) Hence, Flusser’s approach to media was a subversive reprogramming of apparatuses instead of one in which people were passive or active receptors of “cool” or “hot” media that determined a unitary response. For McLuhan, writing in 1964, language was the “technology of human extension,” separated by the Tower of Babel. But with computers, we would soon be able to translate “any code or language into any other code or language” and through technology achieve a “Pentecostal condition of universal understanding

833 Flusser, Kommunikologie, 274. Quoted in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vilém Flusser: An Introduction, 100.

834 Van der Meulen, “Between Benjamin and McLuhan”: 186.

Flusser felt this was wrong because it focused on the way computers could be used: either discursively or dialogically. And Michael Darroch argues that McLuhan’s Catholic, “Pentecostal” unity contrasts sharply with Flusser’s nomadic, migratory thinking. Instead, Darroch compares Flusser to Derrida, for whom translation was the place where a constant play and deferral of signifiers made fixed meanings impossible. Translation—one of Flusser’s primary activities—points to the instability and impossibility of an “original” text or a common origin of all languages.

In the end, what most decisively distinguishes Flusser’s thought from McLuhan’s is the work from the last decade of Flusser’s life. McLuhan was couched in the midcentury technology of television, but Flusser had to be agile, converting to different languages and technologies as he moved around the globe and inserted himself into different intellectual discourses. He was hardly a young man when he became immersed in the world of digital technology, biotechnology, networks, cyberspace, and artificial intelligence. If the city can be described as “fractal” in “The City as Wave-Trough,” the human subject itself was disintegrating, becoming a projection and merging with other species. Where McLuhan wrote about the global village, Flusser imagined a “dreaming global brain controlled cybernetically through technical

836 McLuhan, Understanding Media, 83-84.

Theorizing an end to linear thinking meant thinking about media in terms of time as well as space, but also reconceptualizing the human subject in a world where it would no longer be differentiated from other life forms, or technologies.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Jean Baudrillard

Flusser’s contemporaries were also defining themselves in contrast to McLuhan. Both Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Jean Baudrillard launched attacks on McLuhan, although from different positions. Enzensberger participated in the “Open Circuits” conference at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1974 where Flusser presented “Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television.” Where Flusser’s primary concern is the phenomenological nature of television and how it provides a potential improvement over “traditional windows,” Enzensberger approaches television from a class perspective as a tool for “controlling the behavior of the population.”

Much of what Enzensberger says echoes the arguments in his best

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838 Flusser, Into the Universe of Technical Images, 125. More recent writers have challenged McLuhan’s idea of the global village and representations of the internet as a disembodied space in which nation, race, and gender were transcended. See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005) and Tara McPherson’s “U.S. Operating Systems at Midcentury: The Intertwining of Race and Unix” in The Visual Culture Reader, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2012), 591-604. McPherson argues that operating systems recreated the social “modularity” of postwar neoliberalism and felt McLuhan promoted a “mystique of the media,” rather than seeing the ways in which it supported capitalism, and how critical theory itself has function as an “operating system.”

known essay, “Constituents of a Theory of the Media” (1970), in which he argued that the media was an industry that shapes consciousness, but which might be mobilized if wage earners took control of the means of production—for instance, if they took tape recorders and cameras to work and recorded events there or in places where social conflict occurs. Enzensberger was concerned with a “reversibility of circuits”: if a socialist strategy was applied to the media, one might be able to change network communications. Examples of this included a mass newspaper, written and distributed by its readers or a video network of politically active groups. In these suggestions, Enzensberger was more interested in cultural revolution led by the masses rather than artists, as McLuhan and Flusser proposed. Recalling Bertolt Brecht’s “Theory of Radio” (1932) and addressing American imperialism and the use of the media in Latin America, the Nixon administration, Vietnam, and Fidel Castro’s appreciation for media’s revolutionary potential, Enzensberger had nothing but scorn for the “symbolical expression” of artists. In this reliance on form over activism, McLuhan was deeply implicated. Enzensberger argues that the phrase “the medium is the message” tells us that the bourgeoisie holds the means of production, but in an “ideologically sterile” state in which it doesn’t intend to make “socially

censorship, and feedback. English Correspondence Binder No. 55, Document No. 15, Vilém Flusser Archive. I thank Daniel Irrgang for pointing this out to me.


“It is the desire for a new ecology, for a breaking down of environmental barriers, for an aesthetics which is not limited to the sphere of ‘the artistic.’” Enzensberger, “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” The New Media Reader, 268.

Ibid., 269. As examples, he cited Warhol’s films, in which “everything can happen at once or nothing at all,” and John Cage’s 1959 “Lecture on Nothing.”
necessary” use of them: “It wants the media as such and to no purpose.” 

Unlike Flusser, Enzensberger felt that it was “extremely improbable” that writing would disappear in the near future, even if it was an antiquated bourgeois medium, a “secondary technique” which became merely a means of transcribing orally recorded speech. Enzensberger and Flusser often seem worlds apart in their view of the media, although Flusser could also be skeptical of art and in Enzensberger’s idea of a media controlled by the superstructure (Marx’s political systems, religion, etcetera) one hears echoes of Flusser’s apparatus—only, divorced from Marxism or, as Flusser would say, ideology. Enzensberger and Flusser do agree on the liberating potential of the media, however. It was Jean Baudrillard, who responded directly to Enzensberger and who wasn’t so optimistic.

Initially, Baudrillard also wrote from a Marxist position. Heavily influenced by Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class (1899), Baudrillard supplemented Marx with semiology to analyze postwar culture and consumer society. Marx’s “use-value” of commodities now could be read in terms of “sign-value,” evident in everyday signifying systems: the rules, codes, and logic of fashion, sports, and the media. In “Requiem for the Media,” which appeared in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972), Baudrillard criticized McLuhan as well as Enzensberger, arguing that: “There is no theory of the media. The ‘media revolution’ has remained empirical and mystical, as much in the work of McLuhan as with his opponents.” This is because McLuhan created a bourgeois political

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844 Ibid., 271. Italics in original.
845 Ibid., 274.
economy of signs and their production that extended the commodity form to all domains of social life, creating a “class-bound theoretical discipline.”  

Enzensberger was similarly guilty, since his theory was tied to “official” rather than “radical” Marxism, which saw the media as a transmitter of content rather than as ideological in its very form and operation. (However, Enzensberger accused the Left of being media phobic: in May 1968, rather than taking over the French monopoly-run radio and television headquarters [ORTF], protestors in Paris regressed to “artisanal” means by using hand-printed signs to distribute their slogans.)

For Baudrillard, the media are not co-efficients, but effectors of ideology: “they fabricate non-communication” since they don’t allow for reciprocal modes of a communication: speech and response. Anticipating the concepts he became most associated with, simulation and the simulacra, Baudrillard writes that the existing communications theory model is “rooted in a simulation model of communication. It excludes, from its inception, the reciprocity and antagonism of interlocutors, and the ambivalence of their exchange.” Baudrillard proposes instead using structural linguistics as the model for communications theory, since the arbitrarily assigned signifier and signified in Saussure’s sign system can be more agilely exchanged. He also cites symbolic exchange relations in which there is no transmitter or receiver and Eco’s hypothesis about modifying codes (Baudrillard suggests the “smashed” codes of graffiti), but he is ultimately pessimistic about media as a liberating force. For him, the “megasystems” of media programming include circuits of “reversibility”—letters to the editor, polls, etcetera—but their “very operation is censorship”; any attempt to unfreeze the system ends in deadlock, unless it

847 Ibid.
848 Ibid., 169. Baudrillard cites Roland Barthes, who in S/Z laid out a similar non-reciprocity in realist literature between text producer and user, owner and customer, author and reader.
849 Ibid., 179.
“radically checkmates the dominant form.”

Baudrillard would soon step away from Marxism, developing a theory of simulation and the simulacra that was ardently pessimistic. Leading up to this were *The Mirror of Production* (1973) and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), which drew from Georges Bataille, Marcel Mauss, and Alfred Jarry. His 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulations*, published in English in 1983 would most impact the U.S. art world, though. The first essay, “The Precession of Simulacra,” opens with an allusion to Borges’s micro-short story “On Exactitude in Science,” in which cartographers draw up a map so detailed that it covers the exact territory of their Empire. For Baudrillard, the map as an allegory of simulation, which could be defined as the “generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal”; a territory that “no longer precedes the map.” Echoing Eco’s “Travels in Hyperreality” (1975), which looked at the United States through holograms, superheroes, and amusement parks like Disneyland, Baudrillard described the simulacrum—the copy with no original, in which signs of the real

850 Ibid., 183-184.


stand in for the real itself—as existing in a state of hyperreality.\textsuperscript{855} Experiences of entertainment, information, and communication technology that are more intense and absorbing than everyday life are examples of hyperreality—but they also structure human thought and behavior.\textsuperscript{856}

In “The Ecstasy of Communication” (1983), which was reprinted in Hal Foster’s \textit{The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture}, another book that helped define postmodernism for U.S. art audiences, Baudrillard argues that production and consumption have given way to networks, contacts, feedback, and communication.\textsuperscript{857} The screen and the network are hallmarks of our new existence: an “interrupted interface.”\textsuperscript{858} Rather than communication, however, Baudrillard sees this as a “private telematics” in which the television is still paradigmatic.\textsuperscript{859} We are no longer in a “drama of alienation” but an ecstasy of communication that is “obscene”; speech is free, but we are less free than before. Nodding to McLuhan’s ideas of “hot” and “cold” media, Baudrillard writes that “the message already no longer exists; it is the medium that imposes itself in its pure circulation … the hot, sexual obscenity of former times is succeeded by

\textsuperscript{855} “Holography could prosper only in America, a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a ‘real’ copy of the reality being represented.” Umberto Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality,” \textit{Travels in Hyperreality}, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 4.


\textsuperscript{858} Ibid., 126-127

\textsuperscript{859} Ibid., 128.
the cold and communicational, contractual and motivational obscenity of today.” In a formulation overlapping with those of writers like Deleuze and Guattari, this produces a schizophrenic subject who is “now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.” One can see the similarities with Flusser in terms of telematics and screens. However, whereas for Flusser the screen was an intersubjective medium where we see the face of the other—predicting communication platforms like Skype or FaceTime—for Baudrillard the screen is the site of a “private telematics” in which the television is paradigmatic. Baudrillard’s totalizing regime, the hyperreality of images, also sounds somewhat like Flusser’s universe of technical images, although Flusser didn’t believe that images replaced the real. In fact, he distinctly disagreed with Baudrillard’s diagnosis, arguing that the known world has always existed as a simulacrum and that reality as a whole cannot be known.

The similarities between Baudrillard and Flusser run deeper, however. Like Flusser, Baudrillard had also written about objects: in 1968 he published The System of Objects. Unlike Flusser’s phenomenological approach, Baudrillard’s analysis was from a Neo-Marxist perspective, drawing on Freud and Saussure to offer a critique of the commodity in consumer society, particularly of functional and non-functional and “schizofunctional” objects, which aligned him with thinkers like Jacques Ellul, Jurgen Habermas, and Guy Debord. Both Flusser and Baudrillard have visionary writing styles, heavy on irony, and both are given to prognostication. Flusser called his writing “science fiction philosophy,” while Baudrillard’s has

860 Ibid., 131.
861 Ibid., 133.
862 See Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, Vilém Flusser: An Introduction, 110.
been called science-fiction hyperreality.\(^\text{864}\) (Baudrillard even served as inspiration for actual science fiction: a copy of *Simulations* appears at the beginning of the movie “The Matrix.”)\(^\text{865}\) Both also worked in what later might be called a “para-academic” mode: often (particularly for late Baudrillard) outside the academy.\(^\text{866}\) Both Flusser and Baudrillard critiqued history, or called an end to it: Flusser’s rupture pivoted around text (history) and image (post-history) while Baudrillard’s progressed from pre-modern (“primitive”) societies organized around symbolic exchange to modern societies organized around production to postmodern societies organized around media and simulation. For Baudrillard, television, cyberspace, and virtual reality were the postmodern; technology (images and information) replaced capital and simulation and the play of signs replaced the production of commodities.\(^\text{867}\) In Flusser, we saw the progression from idolatry to “textolatry” and finally the world of technical images. In Baudrillard there are successive phases of the image: first it is the reflection of a basic reality; then it “masks and

\(^{864}\) Writing about the the U.S. publisher Sylvère Lotringer and his press Semiotext(e), Tim Griffin argues that Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault sounded like “science fiction in Europe but were the stuff of everyday life in the United States.” Tim Griffin, “Theoretical Physic,” *Artforum* (April 2010), accessed January 5, 2015, http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201004&id=25161.

\(^{865}\) Cusset, *French Theory*, 254, 259.

\(^{866}\) For instance, both Flusser and Baudrillard are included in a reading list for an ongoing “Para-Academia” workshop at the Public School, itself a kind of para-academic organization (“a framework that supports autodidactic activities”) that functions both online and in cities across the globe. The “Manifesto” for The Para-Academia Series states “The para is the ‘alongside,’ that which comments on the official or normative. While academics debate the finer points of Shakespeare and Kant, para-academics aggregate around shadow-commentators whose works do not so much categorize (strate) and enlighten (bring light into) difficult terrain, but produce that terrain, creating obscure spaces and nebulous discourses that are immune to traditional academic approaches” accessed December 25, 2014, http://thepublicschool.org/node/3753.

pervers a basic reality”; then it “masks the absence of a basic reality”; and finally, under the regime of hyperreality, “it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”

Baudrillard was also a practicing photographer, although he claimed it was merely a “diversion or hobby.” His writings on photography are also somewhat odd. Although he participated in a 1978 French conference with Flusser on the image, he didn’t write much on photography until later in the eighties. In essays like “Xerox and Infinity” and “Radical Exoticism” he claimed photography’s “affinity with everything that is savage and primitive, and with that most essential of exoticisms, the exoticism of the Object, of the Other,” but in keeping with his theories of hyperreality, he constructed photography as an illusion, a fiction. He wrote: “Today it is very hard indeed to find a subject—or even an object—that does not collude with the camera lens,” and proclaimed the “great game” of photography over. And yet, he attempts to spin a theory out of this, suggesting that, “photography is our exorcism. Primitive

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868 Baudrillard, Simulations, 11. In the next paragraph, Baudrillard elaborates: “The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.” Ibid., 12.


870 French Conferences Binders 3 and 4, Vilém Flusser Archive.


872 Ibid., 152.
society had its masks, bourgeois society its mirrors, we have our images.”873 Unlike Flusser, Baudrillard does not factor the digital revolution into his formulations. However, in an interview Baudrillard suggested that, if had he spent more time thinking about photography, it might have affected his thinking around technology, a site that instigates an “inversion of the relationship between the subject and the object.”874

For U.S. writers and artists in the eighties, however, Baudrillard’s apocalyptic vision was key. This is another area where Baudrillard and Flusser overlap: both were adopted by the U.S. art world—and particularly by *Artforum* magazine—except that Baudrillard became one of the most important voices in U.S. art of that period while Flusser’s impact was minor. François Cusset argues that, in the late seventies and early eighties, there was not much French art in U.S. art magazines, but lots of French theory.875 According to Sylvère Lotringer, the 1983

873 Ibid., 153.

874 “I offer a very critical account of technology and of technology’s impact on the world. I’m not the only one to do this—everyone speaks of technology this way. But now, having reconsidered technology in terms of photography, I’m beginning to formulate another hypothesis—I’m asking myself if technology isn’t the site of an inversion of the relationship between the subject and the object. Rather than thinking of technology as the site of a subject which, by means of technology, masters the world, captures the world and so on, I’m beginning to wonder if—almost ironically or paradoxically—technology may not prove to be the site where the world or the object plays with the subject. In other words, there’s a difference of vision. Let’s say that the rather critical or pejorative vision of technology represents a first position. But now, from a second position, I’m more interested in seeing technology as an instrument of magic or illusion—an illusion of the world, but also a positive kind of illusion or play of illusion. Perhaps this is the ultimate kind of playing with reality.” Baudrillard interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, “The Ecstasy of Photography,” *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artifact*, 38.

875 Cusset, *French Theory*, 231. “From Soho, which was already on its way to becoming institutionalized, to the improvised galleries and militant bohemian squats in the East Village, a few key texts were being circulated: Barthes’s *Mythologies*, for an understanding of how brands and labels functioned as social myths; *The Mirror of Production* (which had a significant impact on the socioeconomic artist Barbara Kruger) and *The Consumer Society* by Baudrillard, to glean the tools provided by a critical semiology; and even Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, to see oneself reflected in his political theory concerning the margins of society,” (ibid., 234). The
promotional tour for *Simulations* attracted only a handful of students at universities, and so they considered targeting curators and artists. Soon everyone was reading Baudrillard and “using him in their work.”

Cusset writes that this reception of Baudrillard represented an “American understanding” or “reactivation” of his ideas, although it could be a “literalism.”

For instance, the relatively apolitical Baudrillard was made into a political figure through art that addressed the AIDS crisis and threats against reproductive rights. His enthusiastic reception was also, from Cusset’s perspective, “the beginning of a misinterpretation that was to leave its mark on the New York art scene” and “remain in the annals of the tormented relationship between artistic practice and theoretical discourse.”

The New York art-world’s embrace of Baudrillard climaxed, however, with two lectures—one at the Whitney Museum and one at Columbia University—in 1987, in which Baudrillard denounced his U.S. followers, claiming that simulation “couldn’t be represented” and that U.S. artists were misrepresenting his ideas.

Meanwhile, the collective Group Material organized an exhibition at White Columns titled “Anti-Baudrillard (Resistance)”

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strains of art most associated with French theory include Appropriation, Neo-Geo, and Neo-Expressionism.

876 Ibid., 235.

877 Ibid., 238-239.


879 Cusset, *French Theory*, 235. What Cusset is referring to specifically is the championing of Baudrillard by artists like Peter Halley, a painter who wrote and lectured on Baudrillard whom Cusset describes as a “Baudrillard specialist,” (ibid., 239).

880 Cusset, *French Theory*, 238. Baudrillard had also been put on the masthead of *Artforum* as a contributing editor, without being consulted—when he wasn’t even particularly familiar with the magazine.
accompanied by a press release that argued Baudrillard was the figurehead for “leisure-class theory” that was “operatively submissive,” in which activism is perceived as “illusory.” The exhibition functioned as a form of resistance to such a stance, born of “necessity and genuine day to day existence.”

Baudrillard’s 1991 book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* was a symptom of his “apolitical”—or perhaps tone-deaf—stance. In it, he argued that the war took place through the mediation of television screens—that in the new era of war, the fight was basically virtual: images rather than events were “real.” In some ways, the Gulf War reflected earlier developments like the Vietnam War, the first televised conflict—but also subsequent wars in which we see images on television that have become sanitized for a mass viewing audience.

Ultimately, Baudrillard’s position seemed itself a kind of exhausted position. As one biographical assessment states: “Baudrillard has had a particularly poor record as a social and

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881 A press release accompanying the show stated: “A theoretical jungle surrounds us. Overgrown from inactivity, this jungle harbors real dangers—the dissolution of history, the disfiguration of any alternative actuality, and the attempt to disown practice. Activism is perceived as illusory in an illusory culture. In this self-imposed confinement art becomes comfortable, criticality becomes style, politics becomes idealism, and ultimately information becomes an impossibility. Group Material refutes this operatively submissive philosophy with this proposed exhibition, “Anti-Baudrillard (Resistance).” “Anti-Baudrillard (Resistance)” is a collection of art objects and images that depict an undeniable political reality and form a picture of widespread, international resistance. This resistance denies the self-indulgence of leisure-class theory. It is resistance born from necessity and genuine day to day existence.” Press release for “Anti-Baudrillard (Resistance)” at White Columns, February 6 - 28 1987, accessed December 27, 2014, http://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/93#.

political analyst and forecaster. As a political analyst, Baudrillard has often been superficial and off the mark.”

Flusser tended not to tie his theories to specific political events. The one contemporary event he wrote about was the 1989 Romanian coup and televised assassination of Nicolae Ceaușescu—not to claim that it was an illusion or didn’t take place, but to underscore what he had previously argued: that text culture (“history”) was being eclipsed by image culture, marking the beginning of post-history, and that the televised execution of Ceaușescu was evidence of this unfolding, increasingly, on television. To reiterate, Flusser never had the same status as Baudrillard did in the United States, however, and it is the French pessimism, or “apocalyptic” thinking, that has been more influential in academia—at least until very recently, with the rise of activism in the U.S. and movements like Occupy Wall Street. Baudrillard has served as a precursor to newer strains of apocalyptic thinking, like Accelerationism, which I will discuss shortly, particularly with his idea of “implosion” or “collapse”—a favored term amongst contemporary theorists of social codes (economics, politics, culture, sexuality) prevailing under

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modern society. Nonetheless, Baudrillard has been left out of some of the initial surveys of that literature.  

Paul Virilio and Gilles Deleuze

Two other French thinkers who ought to be mentioned in this context are Paul Virilio and Gilles Deleuze. Flusser is often compared to Virilio, partly because Virilio, who trained as an architect, was steeped in phenomenology and ideas of perception and the body—but also because Virilio argued, as Flusser did in “War and the State of Things,” that military conflict drives technological innovation and has epistemological effects. Virilio initially viewed this phenomenon in terms of speed. In Speed and Politics (1977), he put forward the term dromology, the phenomenon of speed, arguing that speed more than technology, per se, has impacted society and history—and particularly the speed of transmission in technologies from transportation to communication. Speed is not merely a theme; it’s a structuring principle in how we experience

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885 Eight issues of the independent philosophy journal Collapse (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic) have been published since 2005 and include writers like Nick Land and Reza Negarestani, associated with Accelerationism. Also see #Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2014).


space and the world. Virilio’s writing style even reflects this, since he often omits articles and capitalizes significant terms, in the same way Flusser used quotation marks to emphasize important words and phrases. In The Vision Machine (1988) and Negative Horizon (1984) and later works like The Information Bomb (1998), Virilio focused on the way new technologies, from television to satellites and video surveillance, change our understanding and experience of space. Like Flusser, Virilio drew on phenomenology. However, if Flusser’s project initially involved treating everyday objects as phenomenological interfaces, Virilio focused on how our experience of space is inseparable from the positioning and movement of the body in relation to its environment. This extended to art. Unlike Flusser, who was involved with art as a critic and commentator (and, very briefly, a curator), Virilio was a practicing still life painter, early in his life. However, unlike Flusser, who drew inspiration from abstract art (one senses this in Flusser’s

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890 James, Paul Virilio, 13.
descriptions of technical images as made up of abstract particles), Virilio eschewed abstraction, drawing instead on Gestalt theories and arguing that “there is no abstraction, everything presents a figure.”

For Virilio, accelerated speed leads to a loss of immediate presence and alters lived, bodily experience—the opposite of the Futurists who celebrated speed and technology. Instead, speed leads to a “decline in existence” and a crisis of dimensions and representation. Like Baudrillard, Virilio focused more on virtuality and the fact that new technologies separate the visual from what we can touch, inaugurating an “aesthetic of disappearance,” in which stable images like painting or sculpture give way to “unstable” images such as those of cinema, which restructures our perception in ways we can’t always identify. The making of an image without an object becomes a loss of spatial reference and embodiment.

Interestingly, both Virilio and Flusser compare television to a window in a house. But where, for Flusser, television could potentially become an “improved window” for communication, for Virilio television was an emitter of “false daylight” that alters our perception of time and space and produces a misleading impression of proximity and a disconnect between direct and indirect information and experience. An example arrived to support Flusser’s argument two years before his death: the 1989 Romanian revolution, in which citizens took over state-controlled television. (The events of December 1989 are depicted in Harun Farocki’s 1992 documentary film, “Videograms of a Revolution,” made from hundreds of hours of Romanian


892 Quoted in James, Paul Virilio, 46.


894 Ibid.
footage.) By comparison, Ian James cites Scott McQuire’s example of the television coverage of Nelson Mandela being released from prison in 1991 as “echoing Virilio”: the world’s major networks showed up to broadcast Mandela’s release, but the event was delayed. Instead of a celebratory event of political liberation, what was aired was “dead time”: a wasted moment of global connectivity with broadcasters scrambling to fill empty space and time.

For Flusser, technology offered new forms of communication that could potentially lead to the “reprogramming” or dissolution of repressive apparatuses. For Virilio, technology resulted in a “market of synthetic perception” in which virtual reality dominates over actual experience, leading to a diminished existence in phenomenological space and time. Moreover, the screen, one of Flusser’s favorite motifs, in which we might encounter the face of the Other, becomes for Virilio the site of spectacle. It is where an endless war driven by technology is played out and “the attention of each is mobilized, whether he likes it or not. The horizon of the control monitor supplants both the military communiqué and the press, that mainstream press still necessary for analysis and reflection.”

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897 This also relates to Virilio’s conception of war, laid out in *Bunker Archeology*, in which concrete Nazi bunkers on the Atlantic coast of France built during World War II conveyed how “real” space and territory were the sites of conflict. Now, war is ongoing, not temporally or geographically confined. See Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archeology*, trans. George Collins (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994).

The word “control” is also central to another French thinker with whom Flusser is rarely compared, but who begs mention here. Gilles Deleuze is perhaps best known in U.S. art and art history for his books co-written with Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Part II* (1980), which reconsidered the human subject and cultural structures, approaching them as networks of control, and for his idea of “multiplicity,” outlined in multiple works, which laid the ground work for writers like Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. For artists and art writers, the most popular of Deleuze and Guattari’s formulations has been the *rhizome*, derived from biology and emphasizing the expanding roots of a plant as an organizational model rather than the historically privileged genealogical tree. The *rhizome* was used to describe non-hierarchical, heterogeneous, and decentered states and has been applied frequently to computer networks—although Deleuze and Guattari actually used it to discuss books. I will not linger on Deleuze’s notions of the rhizome or control here; instead, these will be discussed in the section on U.S. media theorist

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Alexander Galloway, who has drawn heavily from Deleuze. Rather, I want to propose some connections with Flusser’s thought that might be fruitful for future study: Deleuze’s *Difference and Difference* (1968), considered in philosophy circles his magnum opus,901 Deleuze and Guattari’s attempt to fuse nature and culture and their emphasis on the nomadic character of knowledge and identity; their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975);902 Flusser’s philosophy of the technical image in relation to Deleuze’s books *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* (1983) and *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (1985);903 and Deleuze’s idea of the actual and the virtual.904 Furthermore, although it is not central to this discussion, it is perhaps notable that Deleuze and Flusser shared a comparable trauma in their youth. During World War II, Deleuze’s


brother was arrested by the Nazis in Paris for resistance-related activities and died on a train while being deported to Auschwitz.

Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* might be seen as an analogue to Flusser’s *On Doubt*: a similar, 1960s critique of Western philosophy and its grounding in the concept of reason. In the same way as Flusser wanted to overturn Descartes’s *cogito*, a mode of thought based in certainty, *Difference and Repetition* was a rewriting of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), with an attempt to prioritize difference over identity.905 Deleuze’s goal was to reposition Kant’s universal experience in actual, grounded, concrete experience— influenced, notably, by Husserl’s phenomenology. Deleuze’s argument also involved critiquing Kant’s notion of genesis—an idea also addressed in his book *Bergsonism* (1966), on the French philosopher who had written *Creative Evolution*, and which serves as an analogue to Flusser’s critiques of evolution in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* and other texts. In *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari put forth a more complex critique of the nature-culture split that has been central to Western thought for several centuries. Written in a visionary style, it echoes Flusser’s science-fiction philosophy (with a similar interest in games and game theory), although with a Freudo-Marxism that Flusser eschewed. “Everything is a machine,” Deleuze and Guattari write in the opening section of *Anti-Oedipus*. “Celestial machines, the stars or rainbows in the sky, alpine machines—all of them connected … There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self

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and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.” In his preface to Anti-Oedipus, Michel Foucault wrote that the book exhorts us to “prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems” and to “believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.” This is close to the Flusser of Natural: Mind, but also the Vampyroteuthis infernalis, who inhabits the flows of the ocean’s pelagic zone. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari’s project in Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateus is to upend not just history, but the “bureaucrats of pure reason” of Western philosophy. In doing so, they frequently mention the State apparatus and the Oedipal apparatus—even the “perverse writing apparatus” of Kafka, who would occupy their interest in Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature.

Flusser’s relationship to Kafka has been discussed throughout this dissertation, as that of a kind of “younger brother” to the earlier Prague writer. Deleuze and Guattari pick up from Walter Benjamin’s essays “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” and “Some Reflections on Kafka,” in which Kafka’s rejection of traditional family ties and the state become points of political interest. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka’s oeuvre is firstly “a rhizome, a


907 Michel Foucault, “Preface,” Anti-Oedipus, xiil.


909 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 3.

burrow” that can be entered in multiple ways and “prevents the introduction of the enemy, the
Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation.”911
He serves, then, as a device for disrupting the reign of structuralism and semiotics in French
cultural interpretation. Where Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis overlaps with Flusser is in the
frequent description of Kafka’s writing as a “machine of expression” that is capable of
disorganizing its own form and content: individual authors give way to a “collective machine of
expression.”912 Kafka accomplishes this by using animals who break down the nature-culture
divide, in stories such as “The Metamorphosis,” or more broadly in the “deterritorialization” of
language. Like Flusser, who felt that Kafka’s “inauthentic” German highlighted the absurdity of
apparatus, Deleuze and Guattari focus on how Kafka’s German becomes a mere written “paper
language,”913 a marginal position that begs a number of Flusserian-sounding questions:

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or
not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are
forced to serve? … How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in
relation to one's own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk
the tightrope.914

Deleuze’s two books on cinema, Cinema I: The Movement-Image (1983) and Cinema II:
The Time-Image (1985) should also be mentioned, although their approach differs considerably
from Flusser’s writing on the technical image. For Deleuze, cinema provides a model for
philosophy, much the way François Laruelle, an heir to Deleuze in contemporary French
philosophy, has used photography as a philosophical model, arguing that objectivity, as posited

911 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 3.
912 Ibid., 18.
913 Ibid., 19.
914 Ibid.
by traditional photography narratives, does not exist. \(^{915}\) Drawing from C.S. Peirce and Henri Bergson, in *Cinema I* Deleuze argues that film is a “composition of images and signs,” a “pre-verbal intelligible context (*pure semiotics*)”\(^ {916}\). What is important here, however, is his concept of the “movement-image”: how cinema’s movement affects us perceptually. Rather than the ancient succession of images in static pictures, with film we fuse with the light and movement of the image such that, even when the film is over, we are still perceptually in motion. Hence, although film is immaterial, it can affect us materially. In *Cinema II*, Deleuze expands upon this. Only, now the movement-image is described in its postwar context as a “time-image”: the “coexistence of distinct durations” whereby a single event can belong to “several levels” or “sheets” of the past, coexisting in non-chronological order. \(^{917}\) These sheets of the past, mixed with the present, result in the “virtual” and the “actual.” (Different from “virtual reality” in its conceptual rather than technical nature.) The virtual is defined in *Cinema II* as a “series of scattered images which form a large circuit,” that functions like a mirror image to the “actual” present. \(^{918}\)

Deleuze’s concepts of the actual and the virtual preoccupied him until his death. In a draft for an essay titled “The Actual and the Virtual”—perhaps a chapter for a last, unfinished book—Deleuze circles back to ideas put forward in *Difference and Repetition*, but also in the cinema

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\(^{916}\) Deleuze, *Cinema I*, ix.

\(^{917}\) Deleuze, *Cinema II*, xii.

\(^{918}\) Ibid., 79.
books. If the virtual, in the sixties, was formed of “multiplicities” involving relations among heterogeneous components, by the nineties the actual is that which “surrounds itself in a cloud of virtual images,” and this cloud is “composed of a series of more or less extensive coexisting circuits, along which virtual images are distributed.” Moreover, these “virtuals vary in kind as well as in their degree of proximity from the actual particles by which they are both emitted and absorbed.” Using the language of information theory and physics to describe how philosophy functions, Deleuze intersects here with Flusser, who used the word particles to describe images, as well as arguing that geography had been transformed into a topographical “wave trough.”

While the legacy of Deleuze has been more prominently absorbed into Laruelle’s “fractal” philosophy, the interplay between Deleuze’s late formulations of the “actual object and the virtual image” and Flusser’s trajectory from a phenomenology of objects to a theory of immaterial images might be further explored. (This is particularly true in the age of internet transmission and three-dimensional printing, in which images become objects, and vice versa).

Finally, their approach to critique: if Flusser felt that the Frankfurt School had turned into the Ouroboros that has “eaten its own tail,” Deleuze was similarly bent on critiquing critique. In Nietzsche and Philosophy (1962), he argued that while critique restricts or undermines one thing, it should also reveal or release another, getting at the genesis of what it critiques. Similarly,

920 Ibid., 148.
921 Ibid.
922 Ibid., 151.
923 “Kant merely pushed a very old conception of critique to the limit, a conception which saw critique as a force which should be brought to bear on all claims of knowledge and truth, but not on knowledge and truth themselves; a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to
while Flusser’s techno-utopianism has been criticized for being naïve or overly optimistic, he argued for alternatives to the apparatus of reason and the sorts of technology that culminated in Auschwitz: communications media as liberating, based in models like the televised Rumanian revolution, rather than technology leading to totalitarianism, or a diminished phenomenological existence.

German Media Theory and Friedrich Kittler

While Flusser was present in the U.S. art world, particularly with his “Curie’s Children” column in *Artforum*, he was embraced more fully during his lifetime and after his death in Germany. I have already stated that his writings are well represented in German photography-theory anthologies and *Kunstforum* devoted a long section to Flusser, memorializing his death. Virtually all the major monographs and publications on Flusser in German relate to media and communications theory: Elizabeth Neswald’s *Media Theology: The Work of Vilém Flusser* (1998); Oliver Fahle, Michael Hanke, and Andreas Zimmermann’s *Technical Images and


Communicology: The Media Theory of Vilém Flusser (2009); and Andreas Ströhl, Vilém Flusser: Phenomenology of Communication (2013). Oliver Bidlo’s Vilém Flusser: Introduction (2008) and Nils Röller and Silvia Wagnermaier’s Absolute Vilém Flusser (2003) are also related mostly to media and communications theory. Two exceptions are Rainer Guldin’s Philosophy Between Languages (2005), which reads Flusser through the practice and philosophy of translation, and Marcel René Marburger’s Flusser and the Arts (2011), the self-published dissertation of a former supervisor of the Flusser Archive in Berlin. Flusser’s archive is in Berlin and currently overseen by the German media theorist and scholar Siegfried Zielinski. In Zielinski’s books such as Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means, one can see the influence of Flusser—particularly Flusser’s idea that “media” can be everything from everyday objects to technical images and stretch back, past the industrial revolution to ancient tools. Zielinski has also developed the concept of “variantology,” which opens up media and communications studies to art, music, theology,


926 Oliver Bidlo, Vilém Flusser: Einführung (Essen, Germany: Oldib Verlag, 2008); Nils Röller and Silvia Wagnermaier, eds., absolute Vilém Flusser (Freiburg, Germany: Orange Press, 2003).


natural science, and other fields, and overlooked precedents, particularly in the Middle East.


First, however, I will provide some background.

Phil Gochenour, who translated one of Flusser’s essays for Leonardo, compares Flusser to media theorists like Niklas Luhmann, Norbert Bolz, Heinz von Foerster and Ernst von Glasersfeld. Luhmann—who studied at Harvard University with Talcott Parsons, a sociologist interested in the work of Norbert Wiener—developed a strain of systems theory, while Bolz, like Flusser, predicted the disappearance of the book in the wake of the digital revolution. Heinz von Foerster and Ernst von Glasersfeld were associated with the radical constructivist movement and second-order cybernetics, which argues that knowledge is non-transferable and humans are essentially closed-circuit beings.\footnote{Phil Gochenour, Introduction to Vilém Flusser, “The City as Wave-Trough in the Image-Flood,” Critical Inquiry 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 320-21. Luhmann wrote more than seventy books and nearly four hundred articles, most of which have not been translated into English. An essay by Flusser appeared in Zeichen der Freiheit (Bern, Switzerland: Benteli, 1992) along with Niklas Luhmann and Charles Daniel; Norbert Bolz, Weltbürgertum und Globalisierung (Munich: Fink, 2000); Medien (Opladen, Germany: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1987).} Von Foerster is perhaps the most apt of these comparisons,
since he knew or worked with a variety of the postwar figures already mentioned: John von Neumann, Norbert Wiener, Gregory Bateson, and Margaret Mead. Gochenour suggests as other possible touchstones the Chileans Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, who studied biology and cognition.

The German media theorist with whom Flusser is most often compared, however, is Friedrich Kittler. Flusser met Kittler, who started off as a literary scholar, at the Ars Electronica festival in Linz, Austria in 1988, where Baudrillard and von Foerster were present for a conference on new technology, as well. Following that meeting, Kittler invited Flusser to the University of Bochum. It would be Flusser’s first—and, unfortunately, his last—guest professorship in Germany. At the time, Kittler was a young professor who had just published *Discourse Networks 1800-1900* (1985) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986). Influenced by sixties pop and counter-culture and French poststructuralism, Kittler was an anomaly for a

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German academic: using thinkers like Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault in the context of media scholarship, Kittler was accused of promoting nonsense; incomprehensible “Derridada.”

Kittler’s shift from literature to media wasn’t accidental. During Goethe’s era, German literature was partially the product of a new common German language, which came with a multitude of political (and burgeoning nationalist) associations: Harold Innis, Walter Ong, and McLuhan all argued that media have their own “messages” and biases which must be accounted for, and Kittler was coming out of a specifically German position with regard to methodology: a critique of the hermeneutic tradition exemplified by his thesis advisor Gerhard Kaiser and books like Manfred Frank’s *What is Neostructuralism?* However, where Frank felt that French theory was promoting the “dream of a subjectless machine,” Kittler picked up Lacan’s idea of human consciousness as a camera that captures and stores images, even when no one else is present. He was also interested in Lacan’s references to circuits and feedback, the mainstays of cybernetics and information theory.

Flusser was older and working in a more “para-academic” mode. But both were exploring what might be called “technological epistemologies.” For instance, one of the major sections

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of *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* is given over to an exploration of the typewriter, and Flusser had written about the typewriter as a phenomenological medium that serves as an interface between us and the world.\(^{939}\) (It should also be pointed out that McLuhan had a chapter on the typewriter in *Understanding Media* to which Kittler was responding—but Heidegger also meditated on the typewriter, and Nietzsche was the first German professor of philology to use a typewriter, which Kittler considers in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.\(^{940}\) One senses in Kittler and Flusser a similar antipathy toward McLuhan, albeit with a grudging acknowledgment of the Canadian’s contribution to communications theory and his idea of technology as prosthesis. However, in attempting to add rigor to McLuhan’s “medium as message” idea, Kittler turned to recent French theory—Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida—while Flusser looked to earlier models like Husserl, Heidegger, and Buber. Kittler is also more like the apocalyptic French writers already mentioned, declaring that, “understanding media—despite McLuhan's title—remains an impossibility precisely because the dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and its illusions.”\(^{941}\)

And yet, Kittler and Flusser agree about memory and storage as places where machines and the human body converge. As Kittler wrote, “blueprints and diagrams, regardless of whether they control printing presses or mainframe computers, may yield historical traces of the unknown


\(^ {941}\) Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, xl.
called the body. What remains of people is what media can store and communicate." Kittler
and Flusser might also be seen in partial agreement around the importance of war and
technology. For Kittler, war is the “father of all things”: the origin of most technology. (This puts
him closer to writers like Miguel De Landa.) Flusser wrote that to be anti-war was to be anti-
design, because, as he points out in “War and the State of Things,” progressive design stems
from war; the goal of good design is to kill effectively: to reiterate, the technicians had to
apologize to the Nazis for their gas chambers not being good enough—i.e., not killing their
‘clients’ quickly enough,” revealing “what is lying in wait behind the notion of good design.”

There is also an interesting overlap between Flusser and Kittler in thinking about writing.
As Winthrop-Young and Wutz point out, one of Kittler’s early essays, “Authorship and Love,”
looked at romantic literature from the perspective of the body. Manuscripts such as Dante’s tale
of Paolo and Francesca, which was meant to be read aloud, represent for Kittler a different
“body-medium” from works like Goethe’s tale of Werner and Lotte, which was intended to be
read by the solitary reader. Kittler would not, as Flusser did, predict an end to writing. In fact,
in a later essay, Kittler disagreed with him about the nature of writing and its linearity:

Media theorists, specifically Marshall McLuhan and, succeeding him, Vilém
Flusser, draw an absolute distinction between writing and the image that
ultimately rests on concepts of geometry. They contrast the linearity or one-
dimensionality of printed books with the irreducible two-dimensionality of
images. Simplified in this manner, it is a distinction that may hold true even when

942 Ibid.
943 Ibid., xli.
945 Winthrop-Young and Wutz, “Translators’ Introduction,” Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,
xviii. See Friedrich Kittler, "Autorschaft und Liebe," Austreibung des Geistes aus den
Geisteswissenschaften: Programme des Poststrukturalismus (Paderborn, Germany: Schöningh,
1980), 142-173.
computer technology can model texts as strings, as it does today. But it suppresses the simple facts emphasized long ago and, not coincidentally, by a *nouveau romancier*, Michel Butor: the books used most often—the Bible, once upon a time, and today more likely the telephone book—are certainly not read in a linear manner.\(^{946}\)

But Kittler and Flusser both used information theory to analyze how writing is approached as a medium, and periodized. What interested Kittler was the *Mediengründерzeit*, a term derived from *Gründerezeit*, or the early days (literally, “founders time”) in the first decades of the Second German Empire, founded in 1871, which coincided with the age of technological media.\(^{947}\) Edison was Kittler’s primary touchstone. For Flusser, history and post-history were marked by the advent and impending end of writing. Furthermore, in terms of their respective writing styles, Flusser’s para-literary, science fiction philosophy was developed partly through working as a journalist, engaging with concrete poetry, and channeling Kafka and João Guimarães Rosa. Kittler pushed the boundaries of German academic writing, employing the jump-cuts of cinema and using free association and automatic writing. Kittler’s writing drew criticism, being called a “theoretical fantasy literature” that read as if he was writing “not to communicate, but to amuse himself.”\(^{948}\) Kittler has been adopted recently within U.S. academia, particularly following the translation of *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* in the late nineties. In terms of Flusser’s German legacy, he continues to exist through the work of people like Zielinski, which I will discuss further in the next section.

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\(^{946}\) Friedrich Kittler, “Perspective and the Book,” trans. Sara Ogger, *Grey Room*, no. 5 (Autumn 2001): 38-52. One thinks here of Avital Ronell’s *The Telephone Book*, which Flusser agreed to review for *Artforum*—and never did, because of his death—and which considers the telephone as a primary instrument for the Nazis, but also alongside Heidegger’s notion of “the call.”

\(^{947}\) Ibid., xxvii.

\(^{948}\) Ibid., xxxii.
Donna Haraway and Technological Feminism

The last contemporary thinker I want to mention is one who is also rarely seen in the Flusser literature, although I think she and her peers very much belong there. Donna Haraway is best known for her 1985 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” a critique of the second wave “goddess” feminism that placed women within or in alliance with nature, and against technology. Like Flusser and many so-called postmodern writers, Haraway based her essay on fiction and irony, arguing that this was a “rhetorical strategy and a political method” adopted to show how “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.”949 That is to say, contemporary science fiction was full of cyborgs, creatures who are both animal and machine, but, ultimately, “we are all cyborgs … chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.”950 Haraway’s motive was to move feminism away from a regressive, essentialist direction in which women were seen as tied to the earth and sexual reproduction, and toward a post-gender society. Technology, rather than being merely patriarchal and repressive, might be used as a liberating model in which “nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world.”951

Flusser wasn’t a feminist. This was not to say he was not a feminist, but that he was an Old World intellectual who didn’t think in terms of gender. In the essay “Our Dwelling” in Post-


950 Ibid., 292.

951 Ibid., 293.
History, for instance, Flusser considers how the historical migration of peoples has been built upon exploitation, particularly of women of color:

If we contemplate the suffered [sic] faces of these young women of color, we recognize in them the triple rape of which they are victims; by their own men, by the society in which we take part, and by apparatus. We recognize thus in such a face, our own past: our own crimes. The face of the future has traces of our past. And that is the real reason why we, the “bourgeois,” are on the move. We are running away from our past. Our past chases us. The waves of babies with sick bellies that spring from theuteruses of the young women of color propel us toward progress.952

Over all, Flusser’s thinking runs more toward a merger of humans and technology that is similar to Haraway’s. He is generally not thinking of a gendered (or post-gendered body); in fact, he is often thinking backwards from the body to the machine. “Machines are simulated organs of the human body,” he writes in “The Lever Strikes Back” in The Shape of Things.953 For him, thinking forward is imagining how computer code can bridge the cultural gap between East and West, as well as human and robot.954 And yet, in the same way as feminists have both mined and critiqued Foucault, who was interested in the origins and loci of power, Flusser’s writings on photography and apparatus are similarly pertinent for feminism inasmuch as they hold the idea of power at their center:

It is not the person who owns a photograph who has power but the person who created the information it conveys. It is not the owner but the programmer of the information who is the powerful one: neo-imperialism. The poster is without value; nobody owns it, it flaps torn in the wind yet the power of the advertising agency remains undiminished nevertheless - the agency can reproduce it. This obliges us to revalue our traditional economic, political, moral, epistemological and aesthetic values.955


955 Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, 52.
The text where one can draw particularly distinct parallels between Flusser and Haraway, however, is *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. If Flusser’s text on the giant squid was an attempt to “overcome anthropocentrism,” Haraway’s cyborg feminism was a way of short-circuiting gender domination—but also the distribution of power amongst the species. In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” she argued:

> Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture. Biology and evolutionary theory over the last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science. Biological-determinist ideology is only one position opened up in scientific culture for arguing the meanings of human animality. There is much room for radical political people to contest the meanings of the breached boundary. The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.\(^{957}\)

Haraway was still concerned with what “counts as nature,” in this essay, as well as with the “transgression” (a very postmodernist term) of boundaries. Cybernetics is mentioned several times in the essay, as well as feedback between different polarities—which might eventually be dissolved. The polar nature of Haraway’s essay was one caveat: N. Katherine Hayles has criticized her cyborg for being “not networked enough”—which is to say, concerned enough with relations between humans, animals, gender, and technology.\(^{958}\) (For her part, Haraway has rejected the term “posthuman,” which Hayles has adopted.)\(^{959}\) Peter Galison critiqued Haraway

\(^{956}\) Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, 31.

\(^{957}\) Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 293.


on the grounds that her reading of cybernetic feedback was more utopian than what Norbert Wiener had outlined in his human-machine relationship, which “saw power and control as absolutely central to the very definition of cybernetics.”

But Haraway would move away from the cyborg project into something different: companion species. In books like *Primate Visions* (1989) and *When Species Meet* (2008), she would enact something similar to what Flusser attempted in his para-biological essay: bringing together species in a way in which neither dominated. Haraway’s later work has placed her alongside writers like Peter Singer, Foucault in his biopolitics, late Derrida, Bruno Latour and Carolyn Merchant, as well as feminists like Hayles and particularly Rosi Braidotti. Rather than technology, Haraway saw “animality itself which deconstructs political coherence, stability, and positioning, uprooting the political from its roots in Enlightenment humanism.”

In addition to their concern with animals, however, it is important to stress both


Haraway’s and Flusser’s adoption of science fiction as a model for rethinking history, science, and gender. Some writers have argued that, along with Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, Haraway helped legitimize science fiction and its study in the eighties,\(^{964}\) and that her writing attempts to create the same “cognitive estrangement” in order to reevaluate normative conceptions of science, nature, and the human.\(^{965}\) In *Primate Visions* (1989), Haraway borrowed from the science fiction of author Octavia Butler, whose *Xenogenesis* series featured an African-American Lilith and her children, who were saved by extraterrestrials that were able to unify their own genders and share genes with other species. This is similar to what Flusser imagines in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* and essays like “Cows,”\(^{966}\) and “On Memory” (1990), in which “electronic memories” force us to see memory as a process involving computer hardware, as well as our bodies.\(^{967}\) In the same way as Haraway hoped the cyborg would trigger a reconceptualization of gender, nature, and species, Flusser writes in “On Memory” that “the most pernicious ideology was the one that led us to believe that we have (or are) something opposed to nature. The invention of electronic memories has given us a critical distance from this ability; we may now expect a more conscious use of it.”\(^{968}\)

**Flusser and Artists**

Among the artists who read and digested Flusser’s writings, there are many in the

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\(^{964}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{965}\) Ibid., 128.


\(^{967}\) Flusser, “On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise),” 399.

\(^{968}\) Ibid.
European and Brazilian art world. In his book, *Flusser and the Arts*, Marcel Marburger looks, generally quite briefly, at many of the things I have discussed here: Flusser’s relationship with the São Paulo Bienal and artists like Samson Flexor and Mira Schendel; his move from communications into technical image theory and participation in “Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television” (1974), the conference at MoMA that included critics, curators, and media theorists, as well as artists; his involvement and relationships with René Berger, Fred Forest, Max Kozloff, Joan Fontcuberta; and his writing on photography for journals like *European Photography*, as well as “Curie’s Children” for *Artforum*. Perhaps most importantly, Marburger points out that Flusser essentially confined himself to the visual arts—although he did remark occasionally on the fact that he had focused nearly exclusively on the visual aspect of technical images rather than thinking of sound, too.969 Flusser also had an impact on so-called new media artists like Fred Forest, for whom he wrote “The Sociological Art of Fred Forest” in 1975. I have also outlined some of his correspondence with artists in the sixties and seventies. In this chapter I am more interested in how Flusser’s technical image writings impacted art—and vice versa. I will focus on a few examples to highlight how his ideas have been adopted, illustrated, celebrated—even misused—by artists.

The Flusser Archive in Berlin holds a great deal of correspondence with artists and curators like Joan Fontcuberta, Joachim Schmid, Gottfried Jäger, Peter Weibel, Eduardo Kac, George Gessert, and Max Kozloff. Kozloff would serve as the liaison between Flusser and *Artforum*, but as I have written, the art used to illustrate Flusser’s “Curie’s Children” essays was

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969 Marcel René Marburger, *Flusser und die Kunst* (Cologne, 2011; self-published dissertation). Flusser’s writings are rarely included in histories of music and sound, but The Salzburg Festival, July 27-August 30, 2011, included Flusser’s “The Gesture of Listening to Music” in their magazine (17-23). Moreover, *Flusser Studies* 17 (June 2014), edited by Marta Castello Branco, Annie Goh, and Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, was devoted to “Music and Sound in Vilém Flusser’s Work.”
generally North American (and very specific to the arguments I laid out in the Baudrillard section of this dissertation). There was little evidence of conversation between U.S. artists either about their work and Flusser’s writings or little of Flusser’s writings in their work, as opposed to the Peter Halley situation in which Baudrillard accused Halley of misusing or misreading his work.

The case of Spanish photographer and curator Joan Fontcuberta is particularly fruitful after thinking of Haraway, however, since his work in the eighties was concerned primarily with truth in photography and its application in scientific fields. With a background in communications and advertising (similar to his U.S. “Pictures” counterparts in the seventies and eighties), Fontcuberta grew up under the reign of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, an experience which he cited as a major influence on his work. His series Herbarium (1984) included everyday objects photographed to look like exotic plants, while Fauna (1987) was premised on a fictional “lost” archive of the German zoologist Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen. In Constellations (1993) Fontcuberta photographed insects and other debris stuck to the windshield of his car, which looked like abstract images of outer space. Later series centered on faked histories or fabrications of fictional space missions, mermaid fossils, military photographs, historical figures, and Google images. Although inspired by Michel Foucault, Fontcuberta was also clearly thinking about Flusser’s ideas of apparatus and photography’s role in creating both political and natural histories, as well as supporting dictatorial apparatuses like Franco’s regime. While Norbert Wiener’s “black box” originated in storage cases for radar and other military equipment, for Flusser and Fontcuberta, both of whom had lived under repressive dictatorships, the black box had overtones of the geladeira or “refrigerator”: the torture device used by the

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970 This information was drawn from the Joan Fontcuberta entry on Oxford Art Online, which I wrote in 2013, accessed January 5, 2015, www.oxfordartonline.com.
Brazilian government (although possibly invented in Britain or the United States) in which a person was placed in a five-by-five foot windowless box where the temperatures were turned down to freezing or up to intolerable heat.971 While Fontcuberta is in certain ways a traditional photographer—taking black and white photographs and exhibiting through the gallery and museum apparatus—his application of Flusser, if one might call it that, is to disrupt the comfortable “truth” of photography, starting with his own images and theoretically infecting any image the viewer might subsequently see.

It is not entirely clear how Fontcuberta and Flusser met.972 As I have described above, Fontcuberta asked Flusser to speak at the “Photographic Springtime” festival in Barcelona in March 1984 and Flusser agreed to do so, either in Portuguese, “slightly adapted to Spanish” or in English, French, or German, with Spanish interpolations.973 The two remained friends afterwards. Flusser wrote to Foncuberta in English and Foncuberta responded in English or French, over a dozen letters between 1984 and 1988. Sometimes they addressed each other as “Dear Friend.” Foncuberta, also a writer and curator, included a few lines about Flusser’s photo-philosophy in the Spanish encyclopedia *Suplemento Annual Enciclopedia Universal Espasa-Calpe* (1981-1982) and photographed Flusser’s portrait during Flusser’s visit to Barcelona for


973 Letter from Vilém Flusser to Joan Fontcuberta, German Conferences Binder, No. 22, Flusser Archive.
the “Photographic Springtime” festival in 1984. In a letter dated January 1, 1986, Flusser wrote, along with New Year’s salutations, “Angelo Schwarz [photography critic and historian] just left here, and he told me that you are one of the most important photographers, because you understand what photos are about: to document something which does not exist. Do you agree?”

Flusser wrote the introduction to Fontcuberta’s German and English edition of Herbarium (1987)—as well as two unpublished essays, “Releaser” and “Counter-vision” for Foncuberta’s journal PhotoVision and a short philosophical fiction titled Bibliophagus convictus which he intended for Artforum and for which he asked Fontcuberta to create some photographs.

Flusser uses the introduction to Herbarium to exercise his ideas on multiple fronts; luckily, they dovetail nicely with Fontcuberta’s work. The short essay starts:

“Information” has become a crucial concept in various and quite distinct disciplines. And one may easily observe how these distinct disciplines tend to converge in that concept. For example, both biology and photography are basically concerned with information. Biology may fundamentally be considered the study of successive changes in genetic information from the beginnings of life on earth up to the present. This study is now beginning to give way to a technology “gentech” – which may in the future allow us to manipulate genetic information and ultimately produce entirely new species of plants and animals, including new “homo” species.

Here one can see evidence and echoes of Flusser’s interest in information theory and how it inspired the technical image writings—but also the concerns around history and biology expressed in Vampyroteuthis infernalis and in biotechnology that would manifest in “Curie’s Children.” (Although Flusser sees biology and photography as entirely distinct, many

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974 Letter from Vilém Flusser to Joan Fontcuberta, Artists Correspondence Binder, No. 66, Vilém Flusser Archive.

photography scholars contest this notion.\textsuperscript{976} Even though Fontcuberta’s plants are “not real,” Flusser sees a way in which they are similar to biology, since new genetic information comes about by error, “some defect in the transmission of information from one support to another.”\textsuperscript{977} Mutations give rise to new species, but now they are being manipulated such that “nature”—new species of wheat or cherries or yeast—are “artificial.” The difference represented by Fontcuberta’s photographs, then, is that they are symbolic rather than useful, operative, or pragmatic. And this, Flusser writes, “poses an epistemological problem: Is there any sense in holding to the idea that the models of biological information are ‘truer’ than Fontcuberta’s pictures? Or, is botany not a kind of reasonable (i.e., bourgeois) Fontcuberta?”\textsuperscript{978} Flusser concludes that, given sufficient time, nature will produce the kind of plants Fontcuberta photographs. So, his photographs not only problematize the category of “scientific knowledge,” but also highlight “our present tragic disappointment with science and with nature.”\textsuperscript{979}

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\textsuperscript{978} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{979} Ibid. In addition to Fontcuberta, there is the New Zealand photographer Boyd Webb, who staged tableaux, which he photographed, not unlike artists like James Casebere. Flusser wrote about his staged space photographs in \textit{European Photography}: “One laughs because the picture shows, in its comic way, what one actually knows already: all of the scenes which magicians believe, and all of the events in which historians believe, have been staged … But magicians and historians ‘forget’ that it is ourselves (people like Boyd Webb) who did that staging … This is why the picture is not a simulation, not a metaphor, but a conclusive proof of the fact that all the pictures we make of the world and of ourselves are nothing but simulations and metaphors (staged scenes) – be those pictures ‘artistic’ ones or ‘scientific’ ones.” Flusser, “Boyd Webb:
Flusser’s last meeting with Fontcuberta was in September 1991, when Flusser, Fontcuberta, and Müller-Pohle attended the Third Israeli Biennale of Photography in Harod and went on a day trip through the occupied territories and into Jerusalem. Fontcuberta reportedly gave to Müller-Pohle negatives of the few pictures he had taken of Flusser on this occasion. In 1997, Fontcuberta also dedicated his book *The Kiss of Judas: Photography and Truth (El Beso de Judas. Fotografía y Verdad)* to the memory of Flusser.

Few artists had such a rich affiliation with Flusser—except, of course, Andreas Müller-Pohle. Müller-Pohle was a photographer, but he was best known as the editor of *European Photography* and the publisher of Flusser’s photography and technical image writings in the eighties. He was absolutely instrumental in facilitating Flusser’s texts to appear in German; he gave Flusser a forum and the support—critical and editorial, if not financial—for Flusser to write and publish *Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Into the Universe of Technical Images*, and other texts. Fontcuberta said in an interview, “If Vilém was a teacher to me, he was a guru for Andreas.” Flusser also wrote a text for Müller-Pohle’s *Transformance* (1980-1981) series, black and white photographs made by holding a camera and waving a hand blindly. The idea is interesting even if the blurry photos, which show parts of a woman’s body, an oblique landscape, or the slice of a room, aren’t particularly scintillating. Flusser began his essay, also titled “Transformance,” with this observation:

> The camera dictates a particular and specific coordination of eye and hand, of

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Vom Inszenieren/On Staging” (German and English versions), *European Photography* 38 (April 1989): 39.


981 Ibid., 1-2.

982 Ibid., 8.
intention and act, of theory and practice. It dictates that the photographer first see, then act; that he first look in the camera and through it at the world, then press the button. In this way, the camera poses two distinct problems of coordination: for the manufacturer of the camera, its programmer, the problem is how to coordinate photographer and camera; for the photographer himself the problem is how to coordinate eye and hand within the camera program.  

Remember, Flusser’s edict for the photographer was to change the camera’s program—and for the photo critic to acknowledge the make of the camera and the photographer’s “intention” rather than judging the image itself (as I have just done). Flusser follows up his analysis this way:

Müller-Pohle's photographs are on a level of being other than that of photographs made according to the usual photo-program. In the normal picture-making process, the photograph tends hypothetically to be “perfect” as soon as the shutter is released … Müller-Pohle uses the opposite criterion … “Gestalt” by way of using the camera as it has been programmed has deferred to a search for these things by way of contemplating the photographs only after they have been made. Eye-hand has become hand-eye.  

One could argue that street photographers use the same process of “contemplating”—or editing—photographs after they have been made. My point, however, is to acknowledge how Flusser attempted to put his own philosophy into practice as a photography critic, particularly around ideas of program and apparatus. He did this for other artists, too, publishing criticism—generally “reflections” rather than critical reviews—in Camera Austria, Kunstforum, ...

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984 Ibid., 5-6.

985 Flusser ends his short essay on Müller-Pohle’s work with this statement, which highlights both apparatus and human freedom: “Thus, Müller-Pohle's photographs subvert: they subvert the ontology of photographs. And they subvert the normal meaning of ‘freedom.’ This book, then, opens a perspective onto what life in a world dominated by cameras and similar machines might be: a deliberate, creative informing of the accidental products of apparatus.” Ibid., 7.
and *European Photography* on artists like Roland Günter, Jiří Hanke, Paolo Gioli, Boyd Webb, Lizzie Calligas, Henri Lewis, Herlinde Koelbl, Herbert W. Franke, Nancy Burson, Astrid Klein, Gerd Bonfert, and Bernard Plossu. For *European Photography*, he also reviewed the now-classic art film by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, “The Way Things Go” (1987), in which objects are set up in a chain reaction, thinking about how the objects are “programmed,” making the film into a “machine.” Similarly, in his review of Gerd Bonfert, who manipulated photographs of his own body so that they looked distorted, almost like the figures in Francis Bacon paintings, Flusser asked, “What is ‘information?’” He continued: “Bonfert submits the information available within the photo to a processing which renders it improbably, and he then ‘imagines’ this new information in the photo. Thus: he transforms his own body into something improbable (something which is no longer a ‘condition,’ but has become a ‘product’).”

I would like to single out a few more artists, starting with Nancy Burson, whose work dovetails beautifully with Flusser’s writings. Burson began using new computer technology in the seventies to manipulate photographs digitally, merging faces to create composites of politicians, celebrities, people of different nationalities and ethnicities and genders—as well as animals and humans. Along with computer scientists Richard Carling and David Kramlich, Burson designed a computer program that would track the aging process in faces, which she

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986 Taken from Klaus Sander’s *Sources*, widely considered the most comprehensive Flusser bibliography. Flusser’s column for *European Photography* was titled “Reflections,” and looked at the work of a single photographer, generally that dovetailed with the arguments and concerns he’d laid out in the technical image trilogy of books.


exhibited in museums, and which the Federal Bureau of Investigation used to locate missing children. In “Nancy Burson: Chimeras,” originally published in European Photography and later in the book Photography After Photograph: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age, Flusser mused that Burson’s photos were “chimeras” of a new world: fabulous beasts, like the Chimera in ancient Greece, which Homer described as having a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail—except of the digital variety, created out of pixels, by the computer, and exhibiting both “telematic” and “biotechnical” tendencies. The first tendency dissects the world into bits of information; the second, into genes which can be rearranged. Because her works are photographs, they are models for future genetic manipulations. They show us what we might become.

Following that line of thinking, Flusser was also in contact with the Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac, who taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and would later—that is, nearly a decade after Flusser’s death—create Alba, the GFP Bunny (begun 1999; born 2000), a rabbit who was genetically altered to glow in the dark. Produced in collaboration with the French scientist Louis-Marie Houdebine, the rabbit was bred using the GFP gene found in jellyfish. When exposed to black light, she would glow a fluorescent green. The art work created a minor scandal, although Kac, using what sounds like pure Flusserian logic, declared to the The Boston

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Globe in 2000, “It is a new era, and we need a new kind of art … It makes no sense to paint as we painted in the caves.”

In 1991, Kac had contacted Flusser about something else. At the time he was teaching Computer Holography at SAIC and he wanted Flusser—who, one will remember, was a hologram enthusiast and used them as examples of technical images in his texts—to know that Towards a Philosophy of Photography (or Filosofia da Caixa Preta, the Brazilian version) was one of the few books he had brought with him to Chicago. Kac also alerted Flusser to a recent essay he had published in Leonardo and an exhibition of his work at the Holography Museum in New York. Flusser gamely wrote back, informing Kac that he was a member of the Holographic Society in Osnabrück (in Lower Saxony, Germany) and that he was very interested in Kac’s holographic activities. Kac responded that he had set up a holographic studio and apparently sent Flusser a text he had written on Baudrillard’s “Hologrammes.” Kac was inspired by communications theory and networks and in the eighties created a “telerobot” named Ornitorrinco that could be remote controlled. But Kac seems to overlap in particular with Flusser’s ideas around biogenetics: he even included Flusser’s essay “On Science” in his book Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond (2006). The

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994 Letter from Eduardo Kac to Vilém Flusser, February 27, 1991, Artists Correspondence Binder, No. 139, Vilém Flusser Archive.

opening paragraph of that seems, in retrospect, like a shockingly literal template for Kac’s work:

Why is it that dogs aren’t yet blue with red spots, and that horses don’t yet radiate phosphorescent colors over the nocturnal meadows of the land? Why hasn’t the breeding of animals, still principally an economic concern, moved into the field of aesthetics? … at the same time that the farms of North America and Western Europe are today producing more food than we can consume, we also, not coincidentally, have learned techniques that ultimately make conceivable the creation of plant and animal species according to our own program. Not only do we have mountains of butter and ham, rivers of milk and wine, but we can now make artificial living beings, living artworks. If we chose, these developments could be brought together, and farming could be transferred from peasants, a class almost defunct anyway, to artists, who breed like rabbits, and don’t get enough to eat.  

Many other artists could be read “through” Flusser in this way, some of whom were either in brief contact, like Joachim Schmid and Gottfried Jäger, or had a more significant relationship with Flusser, like Peter Weibel, who later became more of a scholar than an artist himself. Another U.S. artist who has often been discussed alongside Flusser is Lynn Hershman Leeson, whose work around video and invented identities, and her writing, was included in a volume with Flusser. One might also cite the Düsseldorf School of photographers—students of Bernd and Hilla Becher such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, and Candida Hofer—whose work might seem to use Flusser’s apparatus theory to fertile ends, although there is scant evidence that Flusser was read by these artists during their formative years, if at all. (Marcel Marburger notes that it is odd that Flusser didn’t know of the work of artists like Andreas Gursky.) I am thinking particularly about the way in which Gursky’s photographs marking the sites and circulation of global capital, like the trading floor of the Chicago Board of

996 Ibid.


998 Marburger, Flusser and the Arts, 90-91.
Trade, a luxury Prada Store, or a more humble store—represented in a digitally fabricated image—where every product is purportedly ninety-nine cents, represent the apparatus of global capitalism; or Candida Hofer’s photographs of libraries and other cultural institutions; or Thomas Struth’s portraits; or Thomas Ruff’s photographs of the cosmos.

Three other artists I want to discuss before moving to the current relevance of Flusser and his growing popularity and influence amongst younger artists are Harun Farocki, Peter Weibel, and Christopher Williams. To me, Farocki and Williams in particular represent two poles of Flusser’s influence during his lifetime. Farocki was a writer, artist, and documentary filmmaker who was particularly concerned about the apparatus of photography and cinema. He made films that analyzed how the Vietnam War was delivered to people via images (*The Inextinguishable Fire*, 1969; *Something Becomes Visible*, 1982). He also looked back at World War II in films like *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988), a montage of aerial shots taken by Americans of Auschwitz in 1944 in order to bomb factories nearby—showing how “visible” the camps were in what was later framed as a “hidden” history.

Farocki was aware of Flusser and engaged directly with him. In 1986, he made a twelve minute video, *Impact Images: A Conversation with Vilém Flusser*, in which the two men sat across from each other at a table in front of a ground-floor window. As pedestrians pass outside, they discuss the front page of the tabloid newspaper *Bild Zeitung*. Smoking a pipe and wearing two pairs of glasses (one propped on his bald pate, in lieu of bifocals) Flusser offers an analysis of the front-page layout: photographs “penetrate” the text (the arm of a person who has

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been shot giving the letters a “corporal character”); graphic obstacles are created to break up the linearity of writing. Our eyes move erratically around the page, scanning what Flusser calls a “deliberately manufactured chaotic situation.” It is a “kitschy” presentation, a “typical example of demagogy” in which presumably shared values are presented through photographs and text. However, the images and text work on a double level: “we” (readers and the newspapers) supposedly deplore violence—yet this assumption allows the paper to present “killing and hatred” with impunity, to satisfy a salacious interest. At the end of the video, Flusser breaks the fourth wall, pointing out that he and Farocki are discussing the newspaper on video, to broadcast. They need to urge viewers to employ their own critical faculties: otherwise he and Farocki are just implicating themselves.

Crista Blümlinger argues that the work functions as a “dialogic portrait,” using technical images to discuss Flusser’s theory of images. Farocki wrote an appreciative review of Flusser’s *Into the Universe of Technical Image* the following year. A later work, *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) is also sympathetic to Flusser’s thinking. Made with Andrei Ujica from hundreds of hours of footage shot during the 1989 Romanian revolution, the documentary runs over two and a half hours long. Flusser had written that what we see in live broadcasts of the Romanian revolution is not the traditional formula in which images serve as documents or “snapshots” of the historical process. Instead, images cause events to occur. Farocki and Ujica’s film illustrates this in a visceral and captivating way. What one sees in *Videograms of a Revolution* is the power of the camcorder: ordinary Romanians covertly videotaping

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demonstrations and making pronouncements to camera. Different types of camerawork are highlighted: amateur footage videotaped from a student dormitory; an official state camera pointed at the sky when protests erupt in a public space; a camera recording the Ceaușescus fleeing in a helicopter from an urban rooftop. Cameras themselves become “characters”: they are smuggled out of a repair room in the state television station and later we are told a camera is “waiting in the elevator,” almost like a person. Moreover, broadcast networks become instrumental as the state television quickly sides with the revolution. Inside the television station, revolutionaries proclaim, “We are victorious! The TV is with us!”

The idea of a liberated camera is underscored as activists drive around the streets of Bucharest, filming people celebrating. “Make room for the TV people!” a voice announces to a square filled with thousands of people, indicating that history cannot be made (or caused) without television. The resignation of the old government is broadcast, as well as arrests of former government leaders. Near the end of the film, people assemble in front of a television and a voiceover describes how film used to record history, but then a “flip” occurred: now, “if film is possible, history is possible.” The announcement finally comes on television: on December 25, 1989, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were tried by the military and found guilty of genocide, subversion of state power, destruction of public property, subversion of the national economy, attempting to flee the country, and embezzling money from foreign banks. They were sentenced to death and examined by a doctor (on television) and the evening news announced that, “the sentence was passed and carried out by firing squad.” The corpses are shown on television. “That’s him! There’s Elena!” the group assembled before the television exclaims. Then: “That’s it, then. Turn it off.”

I would posit Farocki as the “good” adopter of Flusser’s theories: using the lessons of
Towards a Philosophy of Photography and other texts to show how apparatuses can be reprogrammed for liberation, making us not just functionaries of the apparatus but active programmers. (More recent analyses have compared Videograms of a Revolution to the last moments of Saddam Hussein’s life, recorded with a telephone camera before he was killed, as well as to documenters of police brutality and state violence.)

The other European artist who was significantly influenced by and associated with Flusser in the eighties and early nineties is Peter Weibel, who started out working with performance and film—particularly the concept of “expanded cinema” proposed by Stan VanDerBeek, based partially on McLuhan’s writings—enlarging this to include photography in a book he co-edited titled Extended Photography (1981) and other digital media. Weibel is currently the director of ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, a major center of new media arts where a traveling Flusser exhibition, “Without Firm Ground: Vilém Flusser and the Arts: An Exhibiton” commenced in 2014.

Weibel is not prominent in the U.S.; his short video, “Casablanca II” (1983), in the collection of

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1004 See the biography at Peter Weibel’s website, accessed January 22, 2015, http://www.peter-weibel.at/. The exhibition opened August 14, 2015 at ZKM and will open on November 18, 2015 at Academy of the Arts in Berlin on November 18, 2015. The exhibition includes art and texts by Flusser, Fred Forest, Joan Fontcuberta, Mira Schendel, Andreas Müller-Pohle, Harun Farocki, Louis Bec, Samson Flexor, Nam June Paik, Abraham A. Moles, Brothers Quay, Haroldo de Campos, and others.
the Museum of Modern Art in New York, dovetails more with the concerns of U.S. artists in the eighties, particularly around appropriation, mass media, and consumer culture, since it uses digital techniques to manipulate scenes from the classic Hollywood film “Casablanca.”

But Weibel and Flusser were both central players in the emerging new media discussions of the eighties, and Weibel has become, in many ways, more of a curator and theorist of digital and interactive art than a practicing artist. Flusser and Weibel were at conferences together as early as 1981, and a binder in the archive is partially devoted to their correspondence. Flusser and Weibel participated in the same discussion on September 14, 1988, about philosophy and new technologies at Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria in 1989; Flusser spoke about “Memories” and Weibel about “Territory and Technology.” But Weibel had been involved in Ars Electronica

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1006 Both Flusser and Weibel presented at “Kritik und Fotografie, 2. Teil,” October 1981, in Vienna. See also Correspondence Binder, No. 94, Peter Weibel and Kurl Jechke, Vilém Flusser Archive. In a recent interview with journalist Florian Rötzer, another figure associated with Flusser, Siegfried Zielinski states, “In the 1980s, you [Rötzer] were an important part of a traveling intellectual circus (in a positive sense), that met frequently at various places in Europe and Germany and discussed the most current developments in thinking around media and with media. Baudrillard and Virilio were there, as were Friedrich Kittler, Gerburg Treusch-Dieter, Otto Rössler, Peter Weibel, Dietmar Kamper and Flusser. (“Du warst in den 1980er Jahren wichtiger Teil eines intellektuellen Wanderzirkuses (positiv gemeint), der sich in immer kürzeren Abständen an verschiedenen Orten Europas und Deutschlands traf und die aktuellsten Entwicklungen im Denken über die Medien und mit Medien diskutierte. Baudrillard und Virilio waren dabei, Friedrich Kittler, Gerburg Treusch-Dieter, Otto Rössler, Peter Weibel, Dietmar Kamper und Flusser.”) Prepared question by Siefried Zielinski in an interview with Florian Rötzer, Forum zur Genealogie des MedienDenkens 1: Siegfried Zielinski in Grespräch mit Peter Weibel, Joachim Paech, Thomas Elsaesser, Florian Rötzer, Elisabeth von Samsonnow, Hans Ulrich Reck, Boris Groys (Berlin, 2012-2013), eds. Daniel Irrgang and Clemens Jahn (Berlin: University of the Arts, 2013), 108.

1007 Vilem Flusser, “Gedächtnisse,” Philosophien der neuen Technologien (Berlin: Merve, 1989), 41-56; Peter Weibel, “Territorium und Technik,” Philosophien der neuen Technologien, 81-112. Baudrillard and Kittler were also included in this discussion and publication.
before, and continued writing about art, technology, the body, and virtual space.\textsuperscript{1008} In a 1989 essay in conjunction with Ars Electronica, published in \textit{Kunstforum}, Weibel and Gerhard Lischka wrote about interactive art using terms derived from information and cybernetic theory: systems, networks, knots, interaction, participation.\textsuperscript{1009} More importantly, they quote Flusser from \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}, writing about the new ability to “envision” with technical images. The entire section is worth quoting:

> This is exactly what is new in the emerging power to visualize, what is new about the consciousness that is dawning: scientific discourse and technical progress are seen as essential but no longer interesting in themselves, and we seek adventure elsewhere, in visual constructs.

> The inquiry into visualization therefore needs to be transferred from the gesture of the one who presses the buttons to the consciousness of the envisioner, as I tried to do with regard to writing with a typewriter. And there we found that the gesture of pressing buttons is the same in both cases but that envisioning requires a different consciousness. For this is about opaque apparatuses, not transparent machines. Envisioners don’t stand over apparatuses the way a writer stands over a typewriter; they stand right in among them, with them, surrounded by them. They are bound much more tightly to the apparatus than a writer to the machine. Envisioning is far more functional than writing texts. It is a programmed procedure. When I write, I write past the machine toward the text. When I envision technical images, I build from the inside of the apparatus.\textsuperscript{1010}

What Weibel and Lischka are picking up on—and what seems like the particular province of artists like Weibel, who was involved in performance and participation in the


sixties—is the way that technical images take the creative “gesture” and relocate it in a relationship between apparatus and body: one is no longer taking a picture (paraphrasing Flusser’s example of the writer and the typewriter), but acting “from the inside of the apparatus.” This would be important for artists working with digital media and wanting to activate a “different consciousness.” But it has political overtones, as well. Weibel served as the editor for the Merve book that collected texts on television’s role in the Romanian revolution; in the same section as Flusser’s essay on television is Weibel’s own essay on “Media as Mask: Videocracy.”

Christopher Williams, a decade younger than Farocki and Weibel, but in the same generation as the Düsseldorf School (Andreas Gursky was born in 1955; Williams in 1956), is a U.S. photographer who has channeled Flusser in ways that are canny, but feel sometimes at odds with the aims of Flusser’s project. Williams was not closely engaged with Flusser, although he now teaches at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, which puts him vaguely in Flusser territory. In North America, he is seen as an ur-conceptualist who tracks the histories of images and deconstructs (and reconstructs) their production. Over the course of his career he has (re)made journalistic images, science images, and publicity images. Increasingly, he has created images that painstakingly replicate the processes, fetishization, and look of advertising images and blur

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the divide between advertising products such as cars or dishwashing liquid, and art-cum-
“product.” There are overlaps with Fontcuberta and his Foucauldian, archeological project,
except Williams studied in California in the seventies with Michael Asher, often associated with
Institutional Critique, and Williams’s reading of Flusser leans in that direction. For instance, in a
2007 interview, Williams described how the Kodak reflecting guides or color bars that appear in
some of his photographs refer to the idea that the gallery is just one site among many potential
sites where these images could be seen. Williams continues:

Within the art context, we focus on the print within the museum or gallery as the
primary site of encounter, but especially now advertising, magazines, catalogues, websites or postcards also take on an important function. The Kodak three-point
reflection guide was copyrighted in 1968, which was a way for me to include the
idea of a moment of social change within this particular photograph. The guide is
both a referent to the photographic industry and to the kind of determinants within
the photographic program that Vilém Flusser describes in Towards a Philosophy
of Photography (1983). 1012

Here is a very flimsy reference to 1968; quite different from Farocki. But Williams also
uses Flusser to acknowledge how the photography program works differently within different
apparatuses: museum, advertising, politics, and so on. Williams continues: “My thinking about
photography is in part indebted to Flusser, who saw photography as a kind of institution with
rings of determination, serving programs of institutions beyond it and functioning itself to
program and perpetuate the production of photographs.” 1013 Like Farocki, Williams is an
eminent articulate artist. However, there is a difference. Over time, his work has grown slicker
and glossier, like the Düsseldorf School easel-size photographs that simultaneously “critique”
global capital and exist as prized commodities themselves, highly valued by the art market in a

1013 Ibid., 68.
way (art) film simply is not. In this sense, Williams’s works are illustrations of Flusser’s apparatus rather than an attempt to actually disrupt the photography program. He is, in a sense, threading the image back through the same apparatuses that privilege slick, glossy, seductive photographs. By the time of his career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2014, his rhetoric had ossified to the point where it sounded like a mannered version of Flusser. In a 2014 statement in *Artforum*, he said:

> I’ve worked almost my whole life as an artist to distance myself from the kind of role models traditionally associated with the idea of the photographer. Instead I have established a more mobile position, which allows me to move freely through the various aspects of photographic production, display, and distribution; I can alternately assume the position of camera operator, picture editor, exhibition designer, graphic designer, etc. For this exhibition, I wanted to thematize the conventions of display within the context of a monographic museum survey exhibition. A retrospective is, by its nature, a backward-looking form, putting on show that which has been, a condition that it shares with the basic material conditions of photography.¹⁰¹⁴

Simultaneously congratulating himself for his “mobility” and criticizing the “backward-looking” (read: backward) form of the monographic museum exhibition, Williams claimed in the same statement that he wanted to “destabilize” and “denaturalize” the survey show using multiple means: displaying small chunks of wall taken from different venues (there were three: Chicago, New York, and London) and exhibiting these in different exhibition sites; eschewing wall labels and hanging pictures at lower heights than usual to intensify “awareness of the different modes of presentation,” and ridding the exhibition catalogue of everything but the barcode and museum logos to “emphasize the book’s position as an object within a commercial system of display and circulation.” Finally, the exhibition was titled “The Production Line of Happiness” to “underline or highlight the cruel set of relations set in place by the managers of

culture.”¹⁰¹⁵

But this rings hollow. If Flusser’s ultimate goal was “human freedom” and his benchmark for evil apparatuses was Auschwitz, Williams’s efforts seemed like child’s play: rearranging the chairs at a party rather than disrupting the apparatus of a signal institution—namely MoMA, founded by scions of robber barons with trustees on its board who represent the highest echelons of today’s fractal, immaterialized capitalism. An essay by Flusser was actually included in the MoMA catalogue: “Photo Production (lecture given at the École Nationale de la Photographie, Arles, February 23, 1984).”¹⁰¹⁶ Flusser starts the lecture in a manner that sounds applicable to Williams’s deadpan approach:

I shall define ‘photograph’ as an image which is produced and distributed through apparatus, and which, being an image, carries information on its surface. Thus I shall be concerned, in this lecture, with the production of this information. This requires a cursory consideration of ‘communication.’”¹⁰¹⁷

Given not long after he wrote Towards a Philosophy of Photography, the lecture encapsulates many of Flusser’s ideas about photography, particularly concerning the camera as a black box (hardware) that contains a program (software), and the role of the photographer. Flusser’s description of the photographer dovetails in many ways with Williams self-positioning—which is likely why this essay was included in the catalogue. Flusser stated:

For the true photographer the camera is a tool for the production of improbable, unforeseen, unpredictable situations, for information production. This is his typically human commitment. The world outside is for him a mere pretext. He does not aim at “documenting” the world, but at giving the world a new meaning,

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid.


¹⁰¹⁷ Ibid., 120.
to be used by others in subsequent information production. He is not really interested in the world outside, but in hidden camera virtualities which he is trying to discover. This is characteristic for the apparatus situation: not to “know” the world, nor to “change” it (to work), is human commitment from now on, but to give the world new meanings (a posthistorical situation, where work is relegated to automatic machines, and where man is free to propose meaning to the world and his existence within the world).\footnote{\text{1018}}

Here, unlike the bid for “human freedom,” the “true commitment of the photographer” is to supply models for others, to “inform” others, to struggle against apparatus and automation.\footnote{\text{1019}} In this sense, Flusser would probably applaud Williams’s application of his theory, since it puts human intention at its core, rather than liberation (\textit{pace} Enzensberger). However, as I will argue in the next section, there are other, perhaps more urgent ways Flusser’s writings can be seen as relevant to the present moment.

\textbf{Flusser and the Current Moment}

In “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” Enzensberger wrote that, “revolution in the conditions of production in the superstructure has made the traditional aesthetic theory unusable, completely unhinging its fundamental categories and destroying its ‘standards.’”\footnote{\text{1020}} That was in 1970. On September 11, 2014, U.S. film and cultural theorist Steven Shaviro wrote on Twitter, “the theory toolbox of the twentieth century (From Freud to Adorno to Foucault) is unable to grasp the dilemmas we face in the twenty-first.”\footnote{\text{1021}} So why look to someone like Flusser?

Current interest in Flusser, including my own, could be partly explained by a renewed interest in

\footnote{\text{1018}} \textit{Ibid.}, 122.

\footnote{\text{1019}} \textit{Ibid.}

\footnote{\text{1020}} Enzensberger, “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” 271.

art and theory of the nineteen-eighties. I will also point back to a statement made by Mark Poster, which I quoted in the first chapter, in which he cited Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, Lyotard, Habermas, and Judith Butler and wrote that “the list could be extended considerably of major theorists from the nineteen-seventies onward who either paid no attention at all to the vast changes in media culture taking place under their noses or who commented on the media only as a tool that amplified other institutions like capitalism or representative democracy.” Flusser, with his emphasis on media and technology, was an exception. And unlike the case of Baudrillard, many of his prognostications have come true. The idea of seeing the “face of the other” in the surface or screen of the technical image sounded somewhat far-fetched in the eighties (although the capability for video conferencing existed from the near beginning of telephone technology), but we see it now in applications like Skype and FaceTime, and similar kinds of communication in social networks like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and others—the politics of which I will discuss momentarily. One of the earliest versions of this technology happened less than a decade after Flusser died: the peer-to-peer distribution revolution set off by


the music-sharing application Napster, which was often framed as a music-industry development
instead of a major shift in the nature of communications and technology.  

As I mentioned above, Flusser has continued to have traction in German media studies. Within the orbit of the Flusser Archive in Berlin, two recent publications demonstrate this. An Archive(s) (2014), conceived of by Siegfried Zielinski, is a collection of keywords and concepts fundamental to an “anarchaeology and variantology of the media” that rethink media “ecology” and the Enlightenment-scientific approach to technology. The idea of a media archaeology rather than an ecology obviously comes largely from Foucault, and entries in the book are dedicated to important terms developed by him: archeology, archive, discourse, apparatus, genealogy, biopolitics. (Zielinski actually borrowed the idea of “deep time” in media from the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, who used it to describe geological time.) But Flusser’s influence can also be felt throughout the book, from the first paragraph of the “Preface,” which mentions his idea of the “screen effect,” to Hans Belting’s entry on perspective. According to Belting, perspective is about looking through pictures: Flusser’s focus on screens and “superficiality” indicates a shift in media, perception, and epistemology. Moreover, as Zielinski writes in one of his entries:


1026 Konstanty Szydlowski, “Michel Foucault,” An Archive(s), 76-77.


1028 See Claudia Giannetti, “Preface,” An Archive(s), 12; and Hans Belting, “Perspective,” An Archive(s), 130-131.
The tradition of European modernism is cool and calculating. Thought through to the end, with respect to the relationship between the living (bios) and the mechanical (techne), which issued from divine reason (logos), it gives rise to the following hierarchy: at the pinnacle aion, self-moving time without beginning or end, the inexhaustible meta-machine that creates and maintains everything that moves.\footnote{Siegfried Zielinski, “Beast Machines,” \textit{An Archive(s)}, 54-55.}

In this short passage one can see many Flusserian ideas: the separation of nature and culture in modern European thought; the subsequent critique of logocentric Reason; the questionable hierarchy of humans above animals; and the importance of techne. In another recent German publication, released by the University of the Arts in Berlin, where the Flusser Archive is located, Zielinski interviewed a number of writers and thinkers about the genealogy of media thought; mentions of Flusser recur frequently.\footnote{Forum zur Genealogie des MedienDenkens 1: Siegfried Zielinski in Grespräch mit Peter Weibel, Joachim Paech, Thomas Elsaesser, Florian Rötzer, Elisabeth von Samsonnow, Hans Ulrich Reck, Boris Groys (Berlin, 2012-2013), ed. Daniel Irrgang and Clemens Jahn (Berlin: University of the Arts, 2013) and Forum zur Genealogie des MedienDenkens 2: Siegfried Zielinski in Grespräch mit Hans Belting, Wolfgang Ernst, Harmut Winkler, Henning Schmidgen, Claus Pias, Sybille Krämer (Berlin, Summer 2013), ed. Daniel Irrgang, Konstantin Daniel Haensch, and Inger Neick (Berlin: University of the Arts, 2013). The other thinkers who are mentioned frequently are Baudrillard, Foucault, McLuhan, and Virilio.} However, rather than linger on Flusser in Germany, I want to address how his writings overlap with contemporary U.S. media theory.

\textbf{U.S. Media Theory: Lev Manovich, Alexander Galloway, and Branden Hookway}

Flusser’s focus on mass media when other critics and theorists were ignoring it mirrors, to some extent, the situation in art history. However, art history has recently undergone a shift in interest from “medium” to “media.” In recent decades art historians have turned to figures like Kittler and Lev Manovich, whose book \textit{The Language of the New Media} (2002) uses McLuhan’s method of reading new media through old (or vice versa), by focusing on film and photography.
and how their formats prefigured the rectangular frame of new media. It should be noted that

*The Language of the New Media* was itself coming out of the first generation of Internet culture when, as Alexander Galloway observed, “the conditions of the production and distribution of knowledge were rather different than they are today.” But Manovich has also been merciless in his criticism of the art world as a new-media backwater:

[In] the 1990s the U.S. art world proved to be the most conservative cultural force in contemporary society, lagging behind the rest of the cultural and social institutions in dealing with new media technologies. (In the 1990s a standard joke at new media festivals was that a new media piece requires two interfaces: one for art curators and one for everybody else.)

Manovich argued that art and new media have different logics: art is based on solo authorship and exclusive distribution (through galleries, museums, auction houses) while new media are collective, collaborative, and given to network distribution. Manovich’s utopian recounting of new media could be disputed—except that he seems to do that himself several paragraphs later in the same text when he claims that the computer scientists who invented programming, graphical human-computer interfaces, hypertext, computer multimedia, and wired and wireless networking—he names J.D.R. Licklider, Douglas Engelbart, Ivan Sutherland, Ted Nelson, Seymour Papert, and Tim Berners-Lee—“are the important artists of our time, maybe

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1033 Lev Manovich, “New Media from Borges to HTML,” *The New Media Reader,* 14.

1034 Ibid.
the only artists who are truly important and who will be remembered from this historical period.”

In a more recent text, *Software Takes Command* (2013), Manovich further diagnoses what he sees as art’s problem. Including Clement Greenberg in his discussion of medium/media, and finding Greenberg’s notion of medium-specificity untenable, as it was applied to painting, Manovich argues for a “aesthetics of hybridity.” He defines software as a “metamedium,” citing Alan Kay and Adele Goldberg’s “Personal Dynamic Media” (1977), which used the term “metamedium,” and which posited a model for computers that could be used “by human beings of all ages,” and create active rather than passive users. One might also look at Kay and Goldberg’s colleague at MIT, Seymour Papert, who described in 1980 the differences in writing and digital coding in a manner that prefigured Flusser: “In print writing, the tools you generate are rhetorical; they demonstrate and convince. In computer writing, the tools you generate are processes; they simulate and decide.”

Where Manovich might be seen to correspond with Flusser is around the idea of interfaces, to which he devotes a section in *The Language of New Media.* Manovich looks at the computer interface in rather formalist terms, describing how its rectilinear nature “remained

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1035 Ibid., 15.

1036 See Lev Manovich’s discussion of the Dynabook, invented by Kay, Goldberg, and others working at Xerox Paolo Alto Research Center (PARC) in *Software Takes Command* and Alan Kay and Adele Goldberg, “Personal Dynamic Media” in *The New Media Reader,* 393-404. Also see Seymour Papert quoted in *The New Media Reader,* 392. The other overlap with Kay, Goldberg, Papert, and Flusser is in their emphasis on learning and children: children were the “user communities” for computer pioneers of in seventies and Flusser acknowledged in *Does Writing Have a Future?* that children would learn new media more easily and adults would have to “go back to kindergarten.” Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future,* 155.

true to the modernist values of clarity and functionality.” He also considers how work and leisure tend to coalesce around the same interfaces and how interfaces change notions of form versus content, making content “free-floating” instead of imbedded in their material sources. He still thinks of the interface as “another medium,” however, or a “new cultural metalanguage, something that will be as significant as the printed word and cinema” rather than a restructuring of consciousness.

The writer who has both picked up the concept of the interface in philosophical terms and acknowledged Flusser as a precursor is Alexander Galloway, author of Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization (2004) and The Interface Effect (2012), in which he considers how interfaces can either facilitate or impede communication. From 1996 to 2002, Galloway was involved with rhizome.org, a platform for new media arts, signaling his interest not only in digital media, but also the work of Deleuze and Guattari. In 2008, Galloway delivered the 25th International Flusser Lecture, “The Unworkable Interface,” which served as groundwork for

1038 Ibid., 63

1039 Ibid., 89.

1040 Ibid., 93. Mark B.N. Hansen argues in New Philosophy for New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004) that Manovich’s argument in The Language of the New Media, which opens with a consideration of the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, is overinvested in the cinematic—hence, he cannot think beyond the linear frame.


his subsequent book. Like Flusser, Galloway’s notion of interfaces includes windows and doors—phenomenological media—as well as video games, software, television, paintings, and other types of images. He criticizes Manovich’s idea of the interface as a medium, instead moving into Flusserian territory (also citing Gérard Genette’s idea of thresholds as “zones of indecision”) by considering the interface as a zone where objects and identities meet and which structures interaction. For Galloway, however, the interface is immanently political. From the beginning, he has viewed networks and interfaces through the filter of thinkers like Deleuze and the idea of control. In recent years, Galloway has become a commentator and analyst of contemporary French philosophy (and the pessimism traditionally associated with French

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1043 “The International Flusser Lectures is a project by the Vilém Flusser Archive, initiated at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne in 1999, and continued at the University of Arts, Berlin, since 2007. The idea behind the project is to keep the intellectual legacy of Vilém Flusser present, and to help transferring it into current scientific discourses. Selected lectures are published in German language (or exceptionally in English) by Walther König, Cologne. Current editors are Siegfried Zielinski with Daniel Irrgang and Marcel René Marburger. Former editors were Silvia Wagnermaier and Claudia Becker. Some texts were edited in cooperation with Thomas Hensel and Hans Ulrich Reck.” Quoted from the Vilém Flusser Archive website, accessed January 7, 2015, flusser-archive.org.

1044 Galloway, “What is New Media?,” 379. It is important to point out that interfaces is the operative term here; other writers, like Manovich, have focused on software as the important new media term; Kittler and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun have suggested that hardware is just as—if not equally—important; Tiziana Terranova and Eugene Thacker lean toward networks; and Geert Lovink and Yochai Benkler toward social media. One might also see Manovich’s distrust of digital interactivity and ideology as a product of his upbringing in the Soviet Union, in which he imagines the Internet as a communal apartment in the Stalin era where there is “no privacy, everybody spies on everybody else” and there is an “ever present line for common areas such as the toilet or the kitchen.” Lev Manovich, “On Totalitarian Interactivity (Notes from the Enemy of the People),” Manovich.net, accessed January 6, 2015, http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/015-on-totalitarian-interactivity/14_article_1996.pdf. Quoted in Galloway, “What is New Media?,” 381.


thought): his thinking has shifted away from the art-activist platform and toward arguing that networks are even tighter forms of control. Compared to pyramidal hierarchies, he argues, networks appear flimsy, ineffective and disorganized—but their asymmetry is precisely what makes them so robust. The Cold War model of decentralized systems of targets eventually became so hegemonic that the “distributed network is the new citadel, the new army, the new power.” In fact, for Galloway, the idea that networks have the potential to disrupt rigid structures and do away with hierarchies must be “resolutely resisted.”

Galloway cites Foucault’s concept of biopower, late Deleuze, and the “political failure” of bi-directional and emancipated media (Bertolt Brecht and Enzensberger) as touchstones at a moment when

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1048 Alexander Galloway, “Protocol,” Theory, Culture & Society 23 (2007): 317-320. It is important to note that Galloway is talking here about “the technology of organization and control operating in distributed networks.” Ibid., 317. But there is some overlap with his argument and Flusser. Galloway writes that protocol exists in contemporary computer networks as well as biological and bioinformatics networks, such as those Flusser wrote about in Vampyroteuthis infernalis and the “Curie’s Children” series in Artforum.

1049 Ibid., 318.

1050 “A new form of total saturation or organization, one that penetrated not only the institutions of modern life, but also the very networks of human interaction, be they domestic, familial, sexual, or even intra-human at the level of ‘raw’ biology.” Ibid., 318.

1051 In his references Galloway cites Deleuze’s Negotiations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), a book that tracks Deleuze’s trajectory from 1972 to 1990, Anti-Oedipus, and essays like “Control and Becoming” and “Postscript on Control Societies.” In a 2015 interview, Galloway also distinguishes between the Deleuze of “subjectivity” and the Deleuze of “control.” http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/forget-deleuze. For another recent view of control, see Seb Franklin, Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
“interactivity is one of the core instruments of control.” One could argue that asymmetry and de-hierarchization, in of themselves have been fetishized, and that structurelessness itself can contain its own tyranny. But Galloway’s reigning argument is that asymmetry—the “very tools of the former Left”—has been colonized by power.

One can see Flusser’s terms everywhere in Branden Hookway’s *Interface* (2014), even if Hookway does not cite Flusser. Hookway, who wrote a dissertation on the airplane cockpit, arguing that it is the “paradigmatic twentieth-century environment”—a dissertation from which this book emerged—describes the interface as both “ubiquitous and hidden from view,” a “form of relation,” and a liminal or “threshold condition.” Like Kittler and Zielinski, he uses Foucault as a touchstone for doing an archeology of the media, looking back to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and mid-twentieth century origins of terms: James Thomson (the interface and fluid dynamics); James Clerk Maxwell (who used “interface” rather than “surface” in his theoretical physics); Lord Kelvin (fluidity, turbulence, and control); Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener (entropy and control); and Michael Serres (turbulence). Most important here is the fact that,

1052 “This is the political tragedy of interactivity, that what was so liberating for Enzensberger is today the very site of informatics exploitation, regulation and control. Today, interactivity means total participation, universal capture.” Galloway, “Protocol,” 319.

1053 See Jo Freeman’s classic essay critiquing models of the 70s women’s liberation movement, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 17 (1972-73): 151-165. In the same way feminists have suggested that women arrived at many of Foucault’s arguments in the sixties, Freeman offers a critique of social networks formed around a politics of liberation—and gendered forms of power—that are often ignored by media theorists—except for Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, and in more recent years by Chun, Nakamura, and others.


1056 Ibid., ix.

1057 Ibid., 5.
Throughout the book, Hookway compares the interface to screens, surfaces, topology, apparatus, and game theory—terms all central to Flusser’s philosophy. (He also argues that the interface is a locus of power and control, but not as vigorously as Galloway; rather, for Hookway, it’s a “disputed site.”)\(^\text{1058}\) Hookway’s notion of apparatus differs from Flusser’s in that it is grounded in figures like Agamben, Lewis Mumford, and Foucault and his ideas about games are drawn from writers such as Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. His approach to games and technology is not dissimilar from Flusser’s, however, in that “becoming the user of an interface is like becoming the player of a game” (literally, when applied to video games).\(^\text{1059}\) Where Hookway particularly recalls Flusser, however, is when he explores the etymology of terms related to the interface and invokes Heidegger. “Interface,” Hookway explains, comes from the roots “inter-” (connoting relations that take place within a bounded spatial or temporal field) and “-face” (countenance, appearance, or bringing about).\(^\text{1060}\) This is reminiscent of Flusser’s concern with “seeing the face of the other” in the technical-image screen. Citing Agamben’s use of Heidegger’s *Gestell* or “enframing”—technology as a kind of *positioning*—in “The Question Concerning Technology” (1954), Hookway argues that the interface differs from apparatus in that it is “relational”: entirely dependent on context, on the positioning of human to machine, and thus reframes ideas of freewill (Flusser’s “human freedom”).\(^\text{1061}\) Hookway also cites Heidegger’s

\(^{1058}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{1059}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{1060}\) Ibid., 7-12.

\(^{1061}\) “This is not to say that the interface is context-independent, but rather precisely the opposite. While the overall operation of the interface as a form of relation is common to all of the various contexts of its instantiation, the event of its operation is in each instance defined and directed toward the actual and particular in the context or field in which the interface is situated … the interface actively produces behavior coherence or embodied intelligence, whether material or social, ludic or political, or as derived from the human sensorium or the workings of the
idea of readiness-at-hand (Zuhandenheit), discussed in “The Question Concerning Technology”: the quality of technology “being at our disposal,” and how this highlights a new phenomenology of experience: we might not know how an interface works, but we know how to use one and we particularly know when it breaks down.\textsuperscript{1062}\ In other words, the interface sets up what Flusser would call an epistemological or philosophical problem: it changes human experience and our \textit{being in the world}. Flusser did not live long enough to engage actively with interfaces or write about them, but his use of similar terms and sources, such as Heidegger and phenomenology, seems significant.

\textbf{Flusser and Contemporary Art}

European and Brazilian artists have continued to engage with Flusser or use his theories in some way to shift our understanding of art, culture, and society (or at the very least, the camera apparatus). They visit the Archive in Berlin, organize or contribute to conferences and symposia, curate exhibitions, and publish projects in \textit{Flusser Studies}—and the Flusser Archive is organizing an exhibition that will open in Berlin this year and tour several European cities, including artists and describing Flusser’s migratory trajectory across continents and the art world.\textsuperscript{1063}\ However, we are only on the cusp of artists in North America discovering Flusser in any significant way and employing his writings to greater ends. I have mentioned artists like...


\textsuperscript{1063}\ The plans for this exhibition were being finalized and not announced publically at the time of this writing, in January 2015.
Christopher Williams, a U.S. artist who recently relocated to Germany; another artist of his generation who mentioned Flusser in writing, although he hasn’t done much else, is John Miller, who cited Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* in a 2006 article on conceptual artist Douglas Huebler in *Artforum*. Miller considers Huebler’s *Variable Piece #70, (In Process) Global, 1971* (1971–present), in which the artist proposed to photograph every human on the planet and read this through Flusser’s ideas of program, game theory, and apparatus. Miller wonders, given the implicit failure of the project, if this turns Huebler into just another functionary of the camera program, or if it implies something else for the artist and photography:

> The role is performative and mimetic, nothing less than mummery. Documentation is only the pretext for such a charade—Huebler does not and cannot fully enact all the elements in the camera’s program. His enactments are reduced to gestures.1065

Miller looks at Allan Sekula’s essay “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labor and Capital” (1983), which argues that photography constructs an “imaginary economy” that represents imaginary relations between people, and compares this to Flusser’s idea of magic in which photography eroded the linear history constructed by writing with images that promote magical thought, which confuses cause and effect (does the cock crow because the sun rises or does the sun rise because the cock crows?). What one realizes in reading this essay is that Flusser is a canny choice for reading Huebler. Sekula’s “political” art and writing announce themselves, but Huebler’s work seems to be apolitical. Or is it? Miller concludes the essay with a nod to Flusser’s essay “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object,” which he has mentioned previously in the text:

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1065 Ibid.
What is perhaps most compelling about Huebler’s particular approach to photography—and Variable Piece #70 especially—is that its internal contradictions so clearly sharpen the larger contradictions of the entire photographic enterprise in the postindustrial era. The surface blandness of a world filled with more or less interesting objects shows itself to be nothing less than a topology for localized ideological struggle and ongoing economic transformation.  

A handful of younger artists—mostly in photography—have also adopted Flusser. Walead Beshty mentioned him in a 2008 essay that considered abstraction and the image—that is, both the rise of abstraction in post-millennial art photography and the idea of photography as itself an abstraction.  

Beshty quoted a passage in Towards a Philosophy of Photography that considers the universe of technical images as a place where every action loses its historical character and turns into a magical ritual—an “apocalyptic perspective,” in Flusser’s words, which resonated with Beshty, who wrote: “This is the apocalyptic becoming of the technological image in the form of the photograph, an inescapable conflation of the concrete with the likeness, an abstract gleaming dystopia where the real is a priori an image, and vice-versa.”  

Photographer Arthur Ou has organized two editions of a conference titled “The Photographic Universe” at Parsons School The New School of Design, which use Flusser’s idea as an umbrella for thinking about photography at this “pivotal” moment in history. And Ou and the photographer Shannon Ebner are putting together a book for which I am writing an essay.

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1066 Ibid.


1068 Ibid., 302.


Flusser’s writings continue to be of importance for designers and graphic design theorists—particularly in design-heavy countries like the Netherlands and in Scandinavia. They have also made their way into more interdisciplinary practices. Kenneth Goldsmith, a poet who has essentially followed the tenets of Appropriation, included a facsimile of Flusser’s typewritten manuscript for the essay “The Gesture of Writing” in his entry for a book project titled *Possible Content for 18 Pages: A performance research project about writing*.\footnote{*Possible Content for 18 Pages: A performance research project about writing*, ed. Franz Thalmair (Exhibition project for *This Page Intentionally Left Blank*, Akbank Art Center, Istanbul, March 19 – May 17, 2014).}

What is important to remember is that it is not just the photographer who can alter the program of the camera—or the critic. The *Einbildungskraft*, or *envisioner*—the philosopher of photography—is imperative, too, since, as the last sentence of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* argues, “such a philosophy is necessary because it is the only form of revolution
left open to us."\(^{1073}\) This is one area where Flusser might be fruitful for future generations of photography scholars. If so-called revolutionary artists have looked toward deconstructing the medium or the conditions of authorship, or towards adding revolutionary content to their work, applying Flusser to writing about photography might be a way of thinking about technical images in the current age. One of the operative questions within art these days is, how can the apparatus be changed in an age dominated by the art market? I have already described how Christopher Williams’s illustration of apparatus is in some ways the equivalent of Peter Halley’s application of Baudrillard’s idea of simulation: thoughtful, but ultimately in concert with the institutional art system rather a challenge to its program. There are other avenues, however, and it is with these that I will conclude this dissertation.

\(^{1073}\) Ibid., 82.
Conclusion

We are, in many ways, living in the world Flusser envisioned. Engulfed in a universe of technical images and unmoored by climate change, environmental disasters, and political upheavals that have spurred mass migration, we are on the cusp of developments that will change what it means to be human. We need new theories, not only for photography, but also for communication and living. One might ask: Why do we need theory? How will that solve any of these crises? However, as writers from bell hooks to Edward Said have pointed out, theory allows us to observe the world from new perspectives and ask how we might change it.\textsuperscript{1074} It allows us to make predictions based on possible outcomes and consequences. And Flusser was an avid prognosticator. He was prone to poking fun at theory, accusing it of being “detached” from the world and its phenomena, but he was also committed to theory as a form of ethics.\textsuperscript{1075} He wrote that if we do not find a solution to “the ethical problems of design, then Nazism, the Gulf War and similar events will go down in history as merely the opening stages of a period of destruction and self-destruction.”\textsuperscript{1076} Similarly, in a world dominated by automated, programmed and programming apparatuses, a philosophy of photography was “the only form of revolution left open to us.”\textsuperscript{1077}


\textsuperscript{1075} Flusser, “Design as Theology,” \textit{The Shape of Things}, 71.

\textsuperscript{1076} Flusser, “The Ethics of Industrial Design,” \textit{The Shape of Things}, 69.

\textsuperscript{1077} Flusser, “Why a Philosophy of Photography is Necessary,” \textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography} (Reaktion), 81-82.
In this dissertation I have tried to show how Flusser might open up new horizons for photography theory by considering not only images, but apparatuses and communication structures. Although Flusser died before the popularization of the Internet and social media, he was prescient in imagining how we would see ourselves “in the face of the Other” through technological screens and how we are bedazzled by the “magic” of technical images. He predicted a society of people communicating via screens and that writing would be eclipsed by computer code. Given current discussions around electronic publishing, it's clear that Flusser was not erroneous, just premature.

What Flusser opens up, for me, is a world in which art and images can be considered based on methods drawn from multiple disciplines and in which technology becomes integral rather than secondary to the process. There are other art historians who have taken this approach, such as Jonathan Crary, David Joselit, and Christiane Paul. I have also considered media thinkers such as Friedrich Kittler, Lev Manovich, and Alexander Galloway. But there are scholars, critics, artists, and writers working today whose work supports, if not Flusser directly, than his general arguments.1078 The idea that technology structures human experience has been picked up by Bernard Stiegler.1079 Subjectivity and objects—or things (versus Heidegger’s distinction with “objects”)—have become central to several strains of contemporary philosophy,

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1079 As Mark Poster writes, for Flusser, writing as a medium encourages a specific form of temporality: “The medium and the character of time are particular. This suggests that each medium might have an associated, special form of temporality. Flusser’s media theory thereby accounts for the specificity of each information technology.” Mark Poster, “Introduction,” *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, xv-xvi.
from the “Thing Theory” of literary critics like Bill Brown to Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Speculative Realism, which extend Heidegger’s philosophy to critique anthropomorphically-centered thought. (In 2013, Graham Harman, one of the central figures of OOO, gave the 35th International Flusser Lecture in Berlin, titled “Heidegger and McLuhan: An Imaginary Encounter,” later published as The Revenge of the Surface: Heidegger, McLuhan, Greenberg.) Accelerationism, a related philosophy, shares with Flusser a kind of outsider

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1082 The April 8, 2013 lecture, “The Revenge of the Surface,” was later published in German under the title Die Rache der Oberfläche: Heidegger, McLuhan, Greenberg (Berlin: Walther König, 2014). Also available online, accessed January 7, 2015, http://dar.aucegypt.edu/bitstream/handle/10526/3640/harman-1.pdf?sequence=1. Harman considered three thinkers who shared a “common opposition to the priority of the surface”: Heidegger read through phenomenology, McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” and Greenberg’s view of canvases and surrealism. Flusser is not mentioned at all, but his approach to surfaces (technical image screens) and his grounding in objects, as well as his debt to Heidegger and McLuhan strengthen the connection and the choice of Harman to deliver a lecture in this series.
status that has proven attractive to artists and thinkers looking for radical alternative models. Influenced by science fiction (the term comes from Roger Zelazny’s 1967 science fiction novel *Lord of Light*), and similarly speculative,¹⁰⁸³ some of its central figures have produced work similar to Flusser’s: Nick Land theorized cyberspace in the nineties, while Reza Negarestani gained attention for his “theory-fiction” book *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008), a mini-history and philosophy of oil that might be compared to Flusser’s *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*.¹⁰⁸⁴ And while Accelerationism’s ethos—centered on crisis, catastrophe, and the “accelerated” end of capitalism—contrasts with Flusser’s provisional optimism, their interest in the Anthropocene, an era in which humans cannot be seen as apart from the natural world, mirrors the nature-culture dialectic Flusser was trying to erode.¹⁰⁸⁵

François Laruelle is another philosopher concerned with eroding the binary nature of traditional philosophy in an attempt to produce a new utopian thought. Although Laruelle

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responds very much to French strains of philosophy—reacting to and rejecting Deleuze and Alain Badiou, among others—many of the terms discussed in Alexander R. Galloway’s recent book Laruelle: Against the Digital (2014) echo Flusser:1086 Laruelle’s interest in art (essays on James Turrell and August von Briesen); photography, framed for philosophical purposes as “non-photography” in the books The Concept of Non-Photography (2011) and Photo-Fiction, a Non Standard Aesthetics (2012);1087 and his formulation of philosophy as science fiction1088 or a “black box.”1089 Similarly, when Galloway writes that, for Laruelle, “utopia is a technique, not a story or a world,” one senses an intersection with Flusser.1090 Both attempt to redefine the human subject: for Laruelle it is a “generic” human in which positions of privilege and the subaltern are erased; for Flusser, the subject becomes a “project”—both projected and under development—as


1088 See Galloway, Laruelle, 160. He cites Laruelle’s book Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012). It should be noted that Univocal, a small independent press founded by artists who attended the European Graduate School (EGS), has also published translations of Flusser’s Portuguese texts, translated by their EGS classmate, Rodrigo Maltez Novaes.


1090 Galloway, Laruelle,
described in the late essays published posthumously as *From Subject to Project: Becoming Human* (1994).\(^{1091}\)

I have offered several reasons why, despite having a column in *Artforum*, Flusser has generally been excluded from North American discourse. But history is beginning to catch up with Flusser. He is now being cited in English as well as German photography histories and anthologies, from Hilde van Gelder and Helen Westgeest’s *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective* (2011) to Jay Emerling’s *Photography: History and Theory* (2012) and Oxford Art Online’s entry on photography theory.\(^{1092}\) As I mentioned in Chapter 3, terms like “magic,” which Flusser employed frequently in his photography writings, have become central to contemporary artists and curators: Charlotte Cotton’s just-published survey of contemporary photography, *Photography is Magic* (2015) has a title that would’ve been unthinkable two generations ago.\(^{1093}\) And many of Flusser’s prognostications have materialized: we do live in a world where people spend large amounts of time looking at screens; we are surrounded and controlled by apparatuses; and we increasingly describe ourselves as knots or nodes in a network rather than individuals in an existential landscape.\(^{1094}\)

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\(^{1091}\) Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt. Menschwerdung* (Bensheim and Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1994).


\(^{1094}\) Aside from Tiziana Terranova’s *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2004), one recent text that addresses networks is Christopher Vitale’s *Networkologies: A Philosophy of Networks for a Hyperconnected Age – A Manifesto* (Winchester, UK, 2014).
Part of embracing Flusser’s theory, however, means rethinking terms like “criticality”: as a form of imagination rather than Frankfurt School-derived “critique.” In “Towards a Theory of Techno-Imagination” (1980), recently published in Philosophy of Photography, Flusser wrote that developing new faculties for criticism should be based on “knowledge of those theories on which cameras are based,” which would apply “to all ideologies of all apparatuses.”

One of the new photography theorists who might be realizing Flusser’s concept of techno-imagINATION (or Einsbildungsgraf) is Ariella Azoulay, who argues not that photography is voyeuristic or a formal “index,” but that it sets up a “civil contract” in which the subject and the viewer of the photograph co-exist in a world beyond national borders—particularly in her examples where one group (Israelis) exist as “citizens” while inhabitants of the same territory (Palestinians) are treated as stateless subjects.

Within Azoulay’s theory of photography, looking into the “face of the other” becomes a profoundly political act, one in which we regain some sense of power while looking at photographs rather than merely participating in a voyeuristic spectacle.

But if Flusser was a techno-optimist of sorts, theorizing an expanded vision of photography, criticism, and intersubjective relations, wasn’t he wrong on many counts? Haven’t we descended into an “abyss” in which apparatuses control our every move and interaction? From Flusser’s perspective, the worst outcome—mass genocide facilitated by programmed apparatus—had already happened. Some might see his vision, based on World War II atrocities and drawing from Martin Buber and Heidegger, as a throwback to various forms of Old World humanism—or a new kind of humanism. Instead of returning to anthropocentric humanism, however, Flusser, like Donna Haraway, prefigured more recent theorists like Rosi Braidotti,

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1095 FINGER, GULDIN, AND BERNARDO, Vilém Flusser: An Introduction, 199.
whose book *The Posthuman* (2013) seeks to recreate a post-Humanities world with post-gender subjects and species.\(^{1097}\) Similarly, in *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (2013), Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, consider “alien” forms of communication: “not so much a post-media condition but rather a nonmedia condition … not so much a reinvigorated humanism, no matter how complicated or qualified it might need to be, but rather a glimpse into the realm of the nonhuman.”\(^{1098}\)

To place this in the contemporary political moment, Flusser’s theories seem particularly appropriate at a time marked by climate crisis, global uprisings, and migration, as well as a backlash against the idea that apparatuses constitute an infallible control society. The possibility of a control scenario, what he called an “imperialism of information,” existed for Flusser.\(^{1099}\) But he suggested two divergent possibilities: one moving towards a “centrally programmed, totalitarian society of image receivers and image administrators,” and the other “toward a dialogic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors”—the second one being a “positive utopia.”\(^{1100}\)

In “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object” (1986), Flusser imagined a dialogic society in which “everybody will become capable of collaborating in the elaboration of

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\(^{1099}\) Flusser, *Into the Universe of Images*, 155.

\(^{1100}\) Ibid., 4. While I am not going to address Flusser’s idea of a telematics society, in this essay, he defines it as “The technology that would enable the current discursive circuitry into dialogical circuitry … an amalgam of telecommunication and informatics,” ibid., 79. He also writes that a “telematics society would be a dialogic game in systematic search of new information,” ibid., 94.
information (within the limits imposed by automation)” and democracy had become “technically possible for the first time since the industrial revolution.”

This sounds quixotic, but individuals do participate in social media, in the production of information, and even in revolutions and the fall of totalitarian regimes. Where the circulation of written texts in the postwar period, such as Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), are often linked with liberation movements in the global South, social media has been cited as central to recent uprisings in, for instance, China, the Mediterranean, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement in North America. In *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser argued that, unlike Che Guevara or Ayatollah Khomeini, who appeared in spectacular images that turned them into “entertainers,” the true revolutionaries of our age do not actually appear in images, but through them, creating new dialogues, relationships, information, and consensus. The new

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1101 Flusser, “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object,” 331.

1102 This is significant with regard to “control” scenarios and Flusser’s theory of photography and technical images: “The cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School is an example of such second-order paganism: Behind the images it uncovers secrete, super-human powers at work (e.g. capitalism) that have maliciously created all these programs instead of taking it for granted that the programming proceeds in a mindless automatic fashion. A thoroughly disconcerting process in which, behind the ghosts that have been exorcised, more and more new ones are summoned up.” Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Reaktion), 64. However, van der Meulen points out that Flusser’s focus on technology and the idea that whomever controls the apparatus controls society “ultimately links Flusser to Marx’s materialist analysis of capitalism, which assumes that power is in the hands of those who control the technological modes of production, although in Flusser’s books adapted to the context of technology and the media of contemporary information society.” Van der Meulen, “Between Benjamin and McLuhan,” 204.

“revolutionaries can manipulate the images so that the people begin to glimpse the possibility of using these images to initiate previously unimaginable interpersonal relationships.”\footnote{1104} Flusser witnessed this in the 1989 Romanian revolution, but a recent parallel might be drawn with the Egyptian revolution of 2011, which writer and photographer Ahmad Hosni described as “inexorably linked” to Facebook, such that the role social media played in “initiating and maintaining a chain of mobilization, politicization, polarization, and eventual monopolization surpassed any role played by any single political individual or entity.”\footnote{1105} Manuel Castells reached a similar conclusion in \textit{Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age} (2012), in which he posited the argument that recent movements, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street began on the Internet and spread throughout the world, creating a “space of autonomy”—a bit like Azoulay’s citizenship of photography—where people around the world could create new forms of political participation.\footnote{1106} Similarly, in the introduction of

this dissertation, I mentioned the current migrations from Africa and the Middle East and the use of social media to communicate and organize.\textsuperscript{1107}

There are alternative possibilities, of course: the use of social media for gruesome ends, such as the Islamic State, which has used Facebook and YouTube to broadcast executions and recruit members.\textsuperscript{1108} There is, too, the case of Edward Snowden, who uncovered the abuses of the National Security Agency with regard to surveillance and communications technology. Flusser predicted the disparate uses of re-programmed apparatus. As he points out in his “Warning” at the beginning of\textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}, all these possibilities constitute a “utopia”: a “fabulous society” filled with alternative possibilities, not just for the definition and interpretation of images, but for new forms of consciousness, politics, and society.\textsuperscript{1109} In his essay “To Instruct,” in\textit{Into the Universe of Images}, he wrote:

\begin{quote}
A button pressing is under way, a noise that is becoming steadily quieter. The critics confirm that each time a button is pressed, an order goes to some medium to send out an image. They have the impression of having stumbled into the center of contemporary decision making, and this is in a double sense of “decision.” First, the senders appear to subjugate the society by attracting a higher and higher proportion of the people, turning them into functionaries. Second, the senders appear to use their buttons to prescribe what happens to the society, what
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{1109} Ibid., 3-4.
it is to do. This impression is mistaken because under current conditions, the
concept “decision” demands rethinking.\textsuperscript{1110}

This “rethinking” corresponds, however, to a shift in critical thought: a move toward
philosophical pragmatism,\textsuperscript{1111} the “post-critical,”\textsuperscript{1112} and away from the apocalyptical media
theorizations of writers like Virilio and Baudrillard.\textsuperscript{1113} Identifying a crisis is one thing, but
imagining a future is another. What made Norbert Weiner an enduring figure in the information
age was his own crisis of conscience after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki concerning
the “great engineer who never thinks further than the construction of the gadget and never thinks
of the question of the integration between the gadget and the human beings in society.”\textsuperscript{1114}
Flusser’s writing preceded what has been called an “ethical turn” in philosophy.\textsuperscript{1115} And while
Sjouke van der Meulen calls his political theory “amateurish,” she notes that Flusser is one of the

\textsuperscript{1110} Flusser, Into the Universe of Technical Images, 69.

\textsuperscript{1111} Molly Nesbit, The Pragmatism in the History of Art (Pittsburgh: Gutenberg Periscope, 2013).

\textsuperscript{1112} Hal Foster, “Post-Critical,” October 139 (Winter 2012): 3-8; Bruno Latour, “Why Has
Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” Critical Inquiry 30

\textsuperscript{1113} It is important to note that, rather than being a standard list of texts, the bibliography for
Flusser’s “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object” includes at the end this note: “I wrote its
last part in preparation for a discussion between Jean Baudrillard and myself on German
television, scheduled to take place on February 26, 1986.” Flusser, “The Photograph as Post-
Industrial Object,” 332. There is no evidence, in the archive or elsewhere, that this conversation
ever took place.

\textsuperscript{1114} Ibid., 71.

\textsuperscript{1115} See my essay “Ethical Criticism” in The Brooklyn Rail (May 3, 2013), accessed January 5,
2015, http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/05/art/ethical-criticism. See also Jacques Rancière, “The
Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory, ed. Todd F. Davis
few authors in the eighties to propose a concrete model.\textsuperscript{1116} For Flusser, the nature of choice and destiny had changed and decisions were determined in new ways:

We must \textit{neither anthropomorphize nor objectify apparatus} \ldots Freedom is conceivable only as an absurd game with apparatus, as a game with programs \ldots Whether we continue to be ‘men’ or become robots depends on how fast we learn to play: we can become players of the game or pieces in it.\textsuperscript{1117}

Within art criticism and art history, pessimistic strains of theory have usually reigned.\textsuperscript{1118} However, a recent issue of \textit{Artforum} with a special section devoted to risk and crisis—and which included Flusser’s essay “Cows”—signaled a shift. In the introduction, \textit{Artforum} editor Michelle Kuo placed crisis-thinking within an antiquated system of imperialist humanism, questioning whether systems of global control are seamless and totalizing:

\begin{quote}
to believe that such systems can’t fail—that they are infinitely powerful, adaptable, resilient, that even their collapse is premeditated—is to presume a kind of humanistic faith in man-made techniques of control. It is, in other words, to assume yet another kind of technological determinism: one that fails to understand the unexpected risks and ruptures, the accidents that may render received wisdoms about power and agency and causality obsolete \ldots we should
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1116} Van der Meulen stresses, “[\textit{Towards a Philosophy of Photography}] ultimately intersects with philosophy, or more precisely with ethics, because according to Flusser the essence of photography touches on the question of ‘freedom’ in the modern sense of the word since Kant’s \textit{Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals}.” Van der Meulen, “Between Benjamin and McLuhan,” 197. See also Chris Bateman, \textit{Chaos Ethics} (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), written by a game designer and self-professed “outsider philosopher.”


\textsuperscript{1118} A recent, celebrated example might be Jonathan Crary’s \textit{24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep} (London and New York: Verso, 2013), which posits sleep as the only remaining refuge or form of resistance left in the networked, instrumentalized, expanding, and non-stop world of twenty-first-century capitalism.
question any simplistic assumption of an all-seeing, omnipresent governmental or financial power.\textsuperscript{1119}

Kuo cites Michael Serres, the philosopher of science who has questioned the concept of human mastery around similar poles. For writers like Kuo and Serres, there is still the possibility of human agency. Flusser relied on older terms, like “freedom,” arguing that “human freedom no longer consists in being able to shape the world to one’s own desires (apparatuses do this better) but to instruct (program) the apparatus as to the desired form and to stop (control) it when this form has been produced. Here a new freedom arises, which apparatuses are supposed to serve.”\textsuperscript{1120} This “new freedom” has been greatly challenged. Over twenty years ago, Manual DeLanda argued that once “synthetic intelligence does make its appearance on the planet, there will already be a predatory role awaiting it,”\textsuperscript{1121} and recent theorists like Grégoire Chamayou and Derek Gregory have applied this to the use of military robots and drones.\textsuperscript{1122} Flusser, for his part, questioned the intelligence of machines:

\begin{quote}
Apparatuses are, in fact, exceptionally fast idiots that forget nothing, but they are idiots nevertheless. Therefore, although individual receivers and functionaries
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cannot take control of the apparatus, the society as a whole could. This is what the “unspectacular new revolutionaries” are trying to do.\footnote{Flusser, Into the Universe of Technical Images, 76. Furthermore: “In a telematics society, we will in fact be replaced, step by step, by automata as producers and critics of information, but we will maintain the right to say no. Human beings’ negatively entropic opposition to nature will proceed automatically, but not necessarily with their automatic participation. All human decisions will become unnecessary in the future and will have a disturbing or dysfunctional effect when they do occur, but they will always have the potential, theoretically at every moment, to stop everything. And this command to stop, this veto right, this right to say no is the negative decision we call ‘freedom.’” Ibid., 122.}

And this is where a theory of photography comes in. As Flusser wrote in Towards a Philosophy of Photography, the basic structures of our existence are being transformed: “We are not dealing with the classical problem of alienation, but with an existential revolution of which there is no example available to us. To put it bluntly: it is a question of freedom in a new context. This is what any philosophy of photography has to concern itself with.”\footnote{Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography (Reaktion), 79.} We have new theories of photography proposed by Azoulay—or perhaps Horst Bredekamp and his Bildakt,\footnote{Horst Bredekamp, Theorie des Bildakts (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010).} which uses the technical image as a basis; and artists like Hito Steyerl, Trevor Paglen, Walid Raad and others whom I have discussed in this dissertation. And we are living in a moment in which the semiotic or text-derived analysis of writers like Barthes or Krauss, and the focus on hermeneutics, representation, and reproducibility are giving way to an emphasis on apparatuses, gestures, immanence, and ontology\footnote{Galloway, Laruelle, 165-66.}—which partly explains why Flusser and Laruelle wrote books on photography that don’t analyze specific, individual images.\footnote{See also Geoffrey Batchen’s “Disseminating Photography,” The Brooklyn Rail (February 2013), which begins, “Picture a history of photography freed from the tyranny of the photograph. No longer confined to static objects or specific technologies, this history would instead engage the photographic image in all its various manifestations, wherever and in whatever form they}
Art and theory can work together. “Where is there space for human freedom?” Flusser asks at the end of Into the Universe of Technical Images, answering his own question: “Freedom is playing against the camera” with the “so-called experimental photographers” providing “a model for freedom in the post-industrial context in general.”

This, of course, puts the same onus on artists that earlier thinkers, from Greenberg to Adorno, did: to imagine a progressive, avant-garde society. The new touchstone might be the activist or hacker (or “hacktivist”) who reconfigures the program of apparatus. But increasingly, the hacker-artist might be any citizen—or non-citizen—who participates in the universe of technological images. I have argued here for a new study of photography drawn from, and perhaps merging with media theory. However, both fields have put out a call for a new type of theory. In 1997, Geoffrey Batchen, who had used Foucault’s archaeologies and Derrida’s deconstruction in an attempt to “disrupt prevailing views of photography,” wrote that, while postmodernist theory displaced the “nature/culture opposition erected by a modernist formalism,” it failed to address the “modern economy of power-knowledge-subject” within photography and, in fact, “reproduces at every level the same logocentric economy that sustains both formalist and broader formations of


1128 Ibid., 80-81.


oppression such as phallocentrism and ethnocentrism.”¹¹³¹ More than a decade later, Batchen would write:

> It is fair to say that we are now at a moment that sees itself as being after postmodernism but has yet to attract the burden of a proper name or the motivation of an enabling politics. The invention of such a politics and with it a mode of critical writing that is appropriate for the times in which we live therefore remains the most pressing task to face the present generation of photography’s interlocutors.¹¹³²

Similarly, Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark have written that “media theory requires not only a reconsideration of the object in question but also an upheaval at the level of method. In other words: not just a theory of the rhizome but a rhizomatic theory¹¹³³ … not so much a tactical media as a tactical media theory, one which poses just enough questions to get us going on a new path.”¹¹³⁴

Scholars in Europe, from Kittler to Michel Frizot, have deemed Flusser’s “radical” thinking generative. We are left to decide, of course, whether Flusser’s photo-philosophy is, as one writer has suggested, more of a provocation than a prescription.¹¹³⁵ As his editor Andreas Müller-Pohle put it shortly after his death, Flusser’s project was an investigation that reached far beyond photography, with the camera serving as a “prototype for the ontologically conditioning apparatuses of postindustrial society—an analysis that ultimately aims at the ethics of

¹¹³¹ Ibid., 200-201.
¹¹³³ Galloway, Thacker, and Wark, Excommunication, 4.
¹¹³⁴ Ibid., 9.
¹¹³⁵ Emerling, Photography: History and Theory, 196.
photography.” But it also provided a road map for the larger arenas of ethics, politics, and society, as well as our relationship with the environment and other species. I hope this dissertation continues that project in the present, and promotes its appraisal into the future.

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