

Introducing *Flusser Studies*

The idea behind Flusser Studies

The present project of an e-journal about Vilém Flusser's works and theories and the interdisciplinary approaches they have inspired started at the annual Modern Language Association meeting in Philadelphia in 2004. Anke Finger had organized a special session on "Print History, Post-history, and Vilém Flusser," with Rainer Guldin, Mark Poster, and Andreas Ströhl, the editor of Flusser's English anthology *Writings*, presenting. Quite unexpectedly, the panel was very well attended. According to members of the audience, Vilém Flusser is swiftly becoming a known "entity" around the world, and his work is appearing in translation in many different countries and in highly visible publications, for example in *Critical Inquiry*, one of the premier English-language journals in the Humanities.

This marks a new development in the study of Flusser's works and ideas. Flusser's success as a philosopher and writer used to be linked to the technological euphoria of the early nineties, a short period in which new means of communication such as the Internet and cell phones merged with the process of globalization. Flusser's reception surfed that wave, and – for a short time – his texts seemed inspiring, if not prophetic. With publications such as *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* Flusser appeared to promise a "revolution" triggered by the computer age, by a new era of images, and by international dialogue. This dialogue was enhanced via computerized networks and assured reconceptualizations of society, human interaction, democracy, and identity. After his death in November 1991 – at the height of his career – his lively reception slowly began to slacken and shifted to a more muted canon of quasi post-romantic or post-idealist positions on the promise of the Internet and computer technology. However, many readers from a considerable variety of disciplines have since recognized and acknowledged the limited treatment Flusser's works have received; in fact, it could be argued that Flusser's reduction to a media philosopher and to a media "prophet" of the early nineties has gravely sidelined other and perhaps more important topics and texts of his prolific career.

In essence, Flusser's oeuvre presents a daunting case of undiscovered territory: not only has he published in different genres, in different disciplines, and on different topics, but he also wrote in four different languages. To speak of a fragmentation of scholarship in Flusser's case is to understate the problem or the challenge. Flusser's various texts have become "disciplined" and "na-

tionalized” to a degree that it will require serious dialogue and interdisciplinary work on an international level to create what may be called Flusser Studies: the media theorist, the cultural historian, the art critic, the Brazilian Flusser, the German philosopher, and the Jewish writer – to name but a few – need to meet. We, Rainer Guldin and Anke Finger, agreed – post-MLA-panel and pre-dinner – that an international and critical scholarly reception of Flusser’s multi-faceted oeuvre has yet to commence and we began to discuss a possible venue.

In the past, venues have not been lacking. On the 21st-22nd March 1992, a group of friends met in Strasbourg to create a network entitled “*Angenommen*” (suppose that), also a title of one of Flusser’s later books. The group’s aim was to keep Flusser’s interdisciplinary and multilingual thinking alive. Around the same time the Flusser-Archive was founded in Den Haag under the direction of Edith Flusser, Flusser’s widow. In December 1992, the Goethe-Institute in Prague organized the first of a series of international symposia dedicated to the memory of Flusser: “Vordenker der Nachgeschichte.” Additional symposia followed: Antwerp (October 1993), Graz (1st-2nd October 1994 – “Erfahrung und Unschuld”), Munich (October 1995 – “Telepolis. Stadt am Netz”), Tutzing (18th-20th October 1996 – “Realität und Virtualität im Anschluss an Vilém Flusser”), Budapest (15th-19th March 1997 – “Intersubjectivity: media/metaphors, play & provocation”), Bielefeld (26th-29th November 1998 – dedicated to Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*), Puchheim (5th – 7th March 1999 – “Anthropologische Ansätze bei Vilém Flusser”), São Paulo (12th-13th April 1999 – “Vilém Flusser no Brasil: uma apresentação”) Tokyo (2000 “Zukunft denken. Der Kommunikationsphilosoph Flusser”). The last one so far was held on the Monte Verità in Ascona (26th – 28th October 2001 – “Mehrsprachigkeit und Übersetzung. Vilém Flusser, Philosoph des Vielfältigen”). Unfortunately, the tradition of the annual symposia stopped after that, although there is a possible revival in sight: for October 2006 the University of Mainz in Germany is planning a meeting on the ‘Brazilian’-Flusser. More detailed information about this upcoming event will be available soon on our news-page.

14 years after his death, the “disciplining” and “nationalizing” of Flusser is related to his numerous publishers as well. Many different publishers have printed his books and essays, and a variety of editors have issued anthologies, interviews, and letters. His work is scattered, though: in Germany, for instance, Hanser, European-Photography, Fischer, Philo, Bollmann, Steidl, and orange press all adopted Flusser into their programs. In Brazil, Annablume, Relume-Dumará, Edusp, and escrituras publish different Flusser texts. This prohibits easy access to any definitive text by Flusser. Scholarly work is further complicated by the uncertain future of the – incomplete and yet to be fully catalogued – Flusser archive at the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne, Germany. Attempts to publish a critical edition of his collected works have failed so far, for financial but also for editorial problems, including copyrights. As a result, academic research on

Flusser poses problems and is scarce; monographs on Flusser are few and far between, with Rainer Guldin's *Philosophieren Zwischen den Sprachen* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005) being the latest, and a lot of the research is relegated to papers presented at meetings and symposia in part, too, because of Flusser's ambiguous status in a discipline-conscious academy. Of the 11 international symposia held so far only three – Bielefeld, São Paulo and Ascona – have published their papers, thanks to the private initiative of the organizers: Gottfried Jäger (ed.), *Fotografie denken. Über Vilém Flussers Medienmoderne*, Bielefeld 2001; Gustavo Bernardo and Ricardo Mendes (ed.), *Vilém Flusser no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro 2000; Rainer Guldin (ed.), *Das Spiel mit der Übersetzung. Figuren der Mehrsprachigkeit in Vilém Flussers Werk*, Tübingen und Basel 2004.

In most cases, failed publication is due to lack of funding. It is, however, most lamentable that these contributions were not made available in other form. Therefore, one of the aims of *Flusser Studies* is to publish these and other papers to consolidate the abundant foci of international and multilingual Flusser scholarship and to begin a dialogue between disciplines as well as nations and institutions.

Creating a network

In his later works, Vilém Flusser conceived of human relationships as a network in which each individual represents a knot: his notion of the telematic society which he formulated in the late 1980's, well before the advent of the Internet. In this possible future society everybody is technically linked with everybody else and therefore part of a collective dialogue spanning the entire world. Flusser saw this dialogical net already realized, if only in embryonic form, in the telephone system where everyone can call another participant or be called by him or her. He considered this bi-directional exchange the only democratic form of communication in opposition to the one-directional functioning of television. With television, communication is not structured to form a net of equal participants conversing with each other by exchange and transformation of information. Television works like an amphitheatre: information is produced at the centre and then sent to the periphery which does not have the possibility to respond to or actively contradict the program so as to influence and change it. With the Internet, a global interchange in the sense of Flusser's telematic society is now becoming possible, depending on the accessibility of computer technology. This global interchange is also our goal: *Flusser Studies* has been created among other things to construct nets and networks of the most various kind: between all those scholars and readers interested in Flusser's work and life, that is, between people living in different countries and on different continents; but also between his early work in Brazil in the 60s and 70s and his later work of the 80s and early 90s, mostly written and published in German. Indeed, the strong

centripetal tendency mentioned previously regarding the editorial fragmentation of Flusser's writings cannot be separated from Flusser's own life and work: his life and work in between different continents and languages, in between philosophy, essayism, literature, history, zoology, media and communication theory. Even if the general interest in Flusser's work is not as strong as ten years ago, it is not waning; in fact, it has spread away from his media philosophy and from concentrating in Germany to include and make space for his many other ideas and texts and to include the ideas and works of scholars and readers from many other countries. In order to consolidate and connect these various and manifold readings and receptions of Flusser, we need a focal point, an international platform from which to coordinate and further research and academic interest in Flusser throughout the world.

Aims

Flusser Studies seeks to pick up the thread of the earlier *Angenommen*-network by systematically expanding and coordinating academic research across geographical and linguistic borders; by trying to foster international interest in Flusser's ideas; and by focusing on the richness of his texts as well as on the shortcomings and inner contradictions of his thought. The e-journal is not intended as an enterprise devoted to the work of one author only. Flusser's philosophical heritage is going to be used as a starting point from which to investigate new areas of thought, with particular stress on interstitial aspects of theory-making, that is, the various converging and contaminating processes originating at the borderlines of different disciplines. In this sense, the articles to be published do not have to be specifically about Flusser himself, but can also explore areas related to his thought or carried out in his spirit.

Contents of the inaugural number

Flusser Studies will publish a wide range of contributions, including book-reviews and conference-reports. For this first issue we have comprised three different kinds of texts: an English version (previously unpublished) of a 1964 paper in Portuguese by Vilém Flusser himself, two essays written especially for this issue and two other papers, one of which was presented on a different occasion but has not been published so far.

In his short unpublished English text *Thought and Reflection* Flusser explores the two contradictory and complementary sides of thinking. This essay is the English version of a speech delivered in Portuguese at the Public Library of São Paulo on December 5th 1963 at the end of a series of lectures. *Pensamento e reflexão* was published twice, in *Revista Brasileira da Filosofia* – volume 14,

number 53, January/February /March 1964 – and in a collection of essays *Da religiosidade* (São Paulo, 1967) that has been recently reedited (São Paulo 2002).

Paola Bozzi rereads Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* in the light of Vaihinger's 'Philosophie des Als-ob'. Phillip Gochenour shows the relationship between Flusser's concepts of the self and dialogue with analogous concepts in contemporary systems theorists such as Niklas Luhmann, Humberto Maturana, and Francisco Varela. Ricardo Mendes comments upon the exchange of letters between Flusser and Rouanet revealing new and unexpected sides of Flusser's thought. In his text "Flusser und der Dialog," finally, Andreas Ströhl explores the relationship between the philosophy of Martin Buber and Flusser's concept of dialogue.

This issue will also feature two pictures by the German photographer Michael Najjar whose work has been inspired by Vilém Flusser's thought.

Looking ahead

The May issue will be open to general articles, and we are now actively seeking submissions (please see Notes for Contributors). For November 2006 and May 2007 we are planning two special editions, the first focusing on "Flusser and Brazil" (Guest editor: Gustavo Bernardo Krause) and the second on "Flusser and his Czech Origins" (Guest editor: Katerina Krtilova). While the first seeks to present current work on and/or with Flusser in Brazil, the May 2007 issue will present research from the "Vilém Flusser Center for Media and Culture" at the Charles University in Prague and print the excerpt of an interview with Edith Flusser.

At this point, we would like to invite all of our readers to send us feedback and to suggest topics for future issues. We seek to connect Flusser scholars in any country and Flusser readers with each other, and we would be grateful for information on Flusser scholars as well as for information on the publication of Flusser texts in various languages. Depending on the response to *Flusser Studies*, we may also implement a listserv to facilitate easy dissemination of this information. In short, *Flusser Studies* seeks to initiate a dialogic community in the sense of Flusser's telematic society and – to borrow terms from Flusser's essay included in this inaugural edition – to support both doubt and risk in order to make us "thinking things."

Rainer Guldin / Anke Finger

Lugano (CH) and Storrs, CT (USA), November 2005