

Rodrigo Duarte

Auschwitz as Philosophical Device:

An Adornian Heritage in Flusser's Thought?

References to Auschwitz in the first phase of Flusser's thought

Biographical events strongly influence a person's existential position and, if he/she is an intellectual, those events will almost certainly resonate in some measure in his/her writings, depending evidently on the gravity of the occurrences. Vilém Flusser was not an exception. Not only because he was Jewish, but mainly because his whole family was murdered in Nazi extermination camps (his father in Buchenwald, his mother and sister in Theresienstadt – Bernardo and Guldin 2017: 59ff), Flusser focused on the Nazi dictatorship since his early work, even while writing about topics that would not have an immediate connection with the events of that terrible time. Throughout Flusser's oeuvre, the Nazi regime and the brutality of the concentration camps – condensed in the figure of Auschwitz – appear as a philosophical device, articulating for Flusser the relationship between progress and Western culture.

As early as the 1960s, in *The History of the Devil* (2014), Flusser developed the implications of Nationalism in the Nazi regime. Each chapter approaches one of the seven deadly sins, as if they indicate together the several, consecutive strategies of the Devil. This figure stands for time and transience and tries to rule over God, his visceral enemy, who symbolizes timelessness and eternity. In the very first of the deadly sins (in his own list) – Lust – Flusser comes to grasp the phenomenon of the Nazi tyranny under the title of “Nationalism.” According to Flusser, Lust is a universal procedure of living beings to preserve them under the auspices of temporality. The very first duplication of a cell could be considered a highly lustful act, which has its sin's content gradually increased from the simpler to the more complex species up to the most sinning of them, humankind. Its sexuality nevertheless reaches some unbounded peaks in its first stages, which makes it necessary that it be stabilized and pacified at a certain point as a kind of courtly love. But this affect reveals itself as a very tiresome and compromising one, so that the already very sublimated courtly love directed from a gentleman to a lady tends to be once more sublimated in the form of the love an individual devotes to “his people,”

which gives birth to nationalism, a typical phenomenon of the twentieth century, whose most radical occurrence was exactly the Nazi dictatorship. According to Flusser, “‘The people’ is thus of the highest value, and individual existence is subordinated to the supreme ‘reality.’ The individual’s existential project is only a sub-aspect of the ‘basaltic’ or ‘monolithic’ project of the people (as the *Führer* used to say). I will have practically overcome death through my integration into the immortal, beloved people” (Flusser 2014: 74-5).

Despite the explicit mention to “the *Führer*,” it is worth noting that just thereafter the critical references to the Nazi regime became even more direct and sharp, as it occurs, for instance, in Flusser’s extended essay, recently published in two volumes, in Portuguese, *The Last Judgement: Generations* (2017). Its editor Rodrigo Maltez Novaes informs in the preface of the book that Flusser started writing it just after he finished the translation into Portuguese of the German manuscript of *The History of the Devil*, with its subsequent publication in 1965, hence suggesting a strong thematic connection between these two important works of the author.¹

The Last Judgement is, however, a much more pretentious project, wherein Flusser critically analyzes the Modern Age of Western civilization in its cultural, scientific, philosophical and political aspects, from the Renaissance up to the first half of the twentieth century. As for this last period, there are a lot of mentions concerning totalitarian regimes like National Socialism and the Russian dictatorship after Lenin’s death, including the alliance of both regimes through the 1940s Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of non-aggression, about which Flusser, taking into account the notion of progress he was just criticizing, questioned: “And is not the Hitler-Stalin agreement the summit not only of the age in consideration, but also of all and every progress? Is it possible to imagine anything that goes beyond the extermination of Jews and Stalin’s cleansings?” (Flusser 2017a: 35).

A more precise philosophical understanding of the significance of both states of exception comes only after Flusser introduces and discusses his concept of “apparatus,” whose entire development will appear and receive all its meaning after 1980, in the period in which Flusser worked on his media philosophy, mainly in books *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) and *Post-History* (1983), among others. But even in its first formulation, which appears also in essays of the same period such as “Do Funcionário” [On the Functionary], Flusser applies his notion of apparatus to criticize phenomena of recent times (Flusser 2002a: 83ff). In the case of *The Last Judgement*, he focuses on the connection between Nietzsche’s notion of the *Übermensch* and the theory of the apparatus to chastise

¹ Cf. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes 2017: 9ff.

Nazism as well as Stalinism: “Both Hitlerian and Stalinist apparatuses, with their sub-human functionaries and their over-human efficiency are the first realizations of the Super-man. Other ones are reserved to us” (Flusser 2017b: 65).

The several mentions to topics related to Nazi tyranny, like the ones on the *functionaries* Eichmann and Himmler and the idea that “all apparatuses are gas chambers” (Flusser 2017b: 187), culminate in a very impressive passage, in which Flusser asks: “How can one speak about human dignity after Auschwitz?” (Flusser 2017b: 203). In the same page, in which he discusses Auschwitz openly, apparently for the first time, he associates this fact with the end of the Modern Age: “With the World War II the modern cycle, which is a humanist cycle, is closed. In this negative sense, World War II is a return to the starting point of the Modern Age. After World War II, every humanism is going to be anachronism, simply a longing that seeks to ignore the fact of Auschwitz.” (Flusser 2017b: 203). Before the beginning of the 1980s, when Flusser devoted an entire chapter in *Post-History* to his discussion of Auschwitz, which I analyze below, this is the most explicit and sharp reference to the infamous event. It would be nevertheless necessary to track the development of Auschwitz as a philosophical concept or, more precisely speaking, a “device.”

A Summary of Adorno’s Viewpoint on Auschwitz

According to Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/1996), the saga of humankind – especially in the Western world – was characterized by a continuous narrowing of the use of reason aiming at the achievement of its immediate goals at the expense of the ultimate purpose of happiness, which Aristotle once called *en daimonia*. Against the reified, positivistic, self-comprehension of modern society, which intends to establish a sharp conceptual separation between its quite successful science and the supposedly outdated realm of mythology, Horkheimer and Adorno point polemically to a visceral, reciprocal relationship between the former and the latter. On one hand, they state that “the myths which fell victims to the Enlightenment were its own products” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1996: 8), since from the beginning they intended, as science itself does, to explain, to compute, to register, and to manipulate. On the other hand, the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* observe that some of the most typical procedures of modern science reproduce the sameness and repetition that once characterized the myths, so that, according to them, “enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew to elude” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1996: 27).

In regard to the structure of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is outstanding that its first chapter, “Concept of Enlightenment” focuses on the general epistemological and ethical presuppositions of modern science and its consequences in terms of the reification of consciousness, with reflections on human culture as a whole, including not only its scientific but also its artistic, ethical and religious aspects. In the subsequent chapters these reflections are developed and discussed under the viewpoints of the history of culture (Homer’s *Odyssey* and modern times writers and thinkers like Sade, Nietzsche and Kant), mass media, and Anti-Semitism. But already in the first, more conceptual chapter Horkheimer and Adorno draw attention to the fact that these cognitive aspects of contemporary scientific knowledge prefigure forms of social and political domination: “Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1996: 9).

This statement makes the idea suggested at the beginning of the first chapter even more explicit, according to which, “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1996: 3). The idea of the “enlightened earth,” including nature as well as society, also suggesting a reified intertwining of both, evokes a very inspired expression, used by Adorno, to designate this state of things. In a text considered a continuation of the chapter on culture industry of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, titled “Das Schema der Massenkultur” [The Schema of Mass Culture],² the expression appears as: “a natural disaster of society” [*Naturkatastrophe der Gesellschaft*], meaning both the rise of totalitarianism and the manipulation of the masses by the culture industry, with their well-known disastrous social and political consequences. The passage in which this expression appears is very eloquent and revealing, taking into account the goals of this exposition: “The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from earth. It depends upon human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to be actual as long as men believe in it.” (Adorno 2001: 96)

² The German version of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* explains: “The section on culture industry finishes in 1947 edition with the note - suppressed in 1969 – ‘to be continued.’ The 1944 mimeo edition reads: ‘the sections on <culture industry> is even more fragmentary than the others. Big parts, long ago formulated, need still an ultimate redaction.’ Such a continuation, which Adorno occasionally refers to as an ‘unprinted remained part of the culture industry chapter’ was found in his estate. This text, which was finished in October of 1942, was put in appendix in this volume.”

Just some few years later, Adorno began to use the term “Auschwitz”, which appears at least fifty times in his work as a whole, to designate this terrible state of things, especially under the viewpoint of the previously unimaginable political oppression and the war crimes perpetrated by the Nazi dictatorship. The first time in which the word “Auschwitz” appears in Adorno’s work is in *Minima Moralia*, in its third (and latest) part, which was supposedly written after 1946, although in previously formulated aphorisms like “Out of the firing-line” (from 1944) one can find phrases like the following: “Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself” (Adorno 2005: pos. 752).

The best known of Adorno’s remarks on Auschwitz, to be sure, are in the third part of *Negative Dialectics*, termed “Meditations on Metaphysics,” not to mention the famous passage of Adorno’s essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1951), in which he states that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno 1997: 34). Although particularly the aforementioned part of *Negative Dialectics* contains some of the most lapidary formulations on the singularity of the historical fact of Auschwitz and its repercussions on culture and philosophy. For the purposes of this exposition, it is more suitable to focus on the aphorism “Don’t exaggerate” (“*Halblang*” in German original), from the third part of *Minima Moralia*, where, as already said, Adorno alludes for the first time to the infamous concentration camp.

The interpretation of this aphorism is very difficult, because its close reading reveals three voices manifesting their different viewpoints: the first one is Adorno himself as someone who denounces the two other voices as expressing diverse aspects of the predominant ideology. The second voice seems to be the one of a conventional conservative, whose general opinion is that the horrors of contemporary history – including the concentration camps – add nothing to all the genocides committed since the older historical records of humankind. The third voice resembles the one of a side-minded dialectical partisan, who does not deny the existence of the horrors, but seems to consider the death of millions of individuals irrelevant facing the inexorable march of history towards the resolution of all its antagonisms.

At the beginning of the aphorism Adorno complains about the fact that even the slightest criticism of tendencies in modern society is promptly “countered by the argument that things have always been like this” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3755), revealing therefore the viewpoint of the conventional conservative. He or she goes further to proclaim the “invariability of history” and to accuse the complainer of a kind of “self-aggrandizement” that is defeated by the facts themselves and does not draw the attention of anyone, since “the grounds for his indignation are common knowledge (...), so that no-one can be expected to waste his interest on them.” Adorno’s voice comments on the reactionary

trait of this position, also pointing to the danger it contains of being simply apologetic of the actual state of things, being willing to accept any worse to be coming out of it as well: “The obviousness of disaster becomes an asset to its apologists – what everyone knows no-one need say – and under cover of silence is allowed to proceed unopposed. Assent is given to what has been drummed into people’s heads by philosophy of every hue: that whatever has the persistent momentum of existence on its side is thereby proved right. One need only be discontented to be at once suspect as a world reformer.” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3755)

According to Adorno, attributing to its opponent a reactionary and untenable theory of decline would be a trick, aiming at discrediting his wholly reasonable criticism of the *status quo*, a criticism that – even under the presupposition of an increasing barbarism – could be supported by the undeniable fact of the absence of scientifically planned and technologically mediated murder in the slaughters of the older times: “neither Timor nor Genghis Khan nor the English colonial administration in India systematically burst the lungs of millions of people with gas” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3763).

Adorno’s voice insists hence that there is not an invariable quantity of suffering, but a constant “progress towards hell”, what points out to an “intensification of antagonisms” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3763). The until now silent voice of the side-minded dialectical partisan manifests itself for the first time, defending a position, according to which the systematically planned and executed mass murder of Jews and other minorities during the Nazi dictatorship should not be over-dramatized, since it was inscribed in the inexorable process of developing of the productive forces: “He who registers the death-camps as a technical mishap in civilization’s triumphal procession, the martyrdom of the Jews as world-historically irrelevant, not only falls short of the dialectical vision but reverses the meaning of his own politics: to hold ultimate calamity in check. Not only in the development of forces of production but also in the increasing pressure of domination does quantity change into quality. If the Jews as a group are eradicated while society continues to reproduce the life of the workers, then the argument that the former were bourgeois and their fate unimportant for the great dynamic of history, becomes economic sophistry, even in so far as mass-murder is indeed explicable by the falling rate of profit.” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3763)

Adorno’s voice retakes the pulpit, beginning to introduce his ultimate position in the debate, according to which this period of human experience, when the worse never stops to happen, however surprisingly its new forms could be, seems to be previous to the course of history strictly speaking: “Horror consists in its always remaining the same – the persistence of ‘pre-history’ – but is realized as

constantly different, unforeseen, exceeding all expectation, the faithful shadow of developing productive forces” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3772). That explains why both positions confronted by Adorno – the reactionary and the blindly dialectic evolutionary one – are wrong. The former for its denying of historical changes that introduce unexpected facts, the latter for assuming the historical move as an inexorable process, in which its particular moments are swallowed without leaving any trace. According to Adorno, the correct absorption of historical experience sheds light in its aspects both of continuity and of discontinuity, as can be seen, for instance, in the comparison between the extermination camp with forms of barbarism in the ancient world: “Auschwitz cannot be brought into analogy with the destruction of the Greek city-states as a mere gradual increase in horror, before which one can preserve tranquillity of mind. Certainly, the unprecedented torture and humiliation of those abducted in cattle-trucks does shed a deathly-livid light on the most distant past, in whose mindless, planless violence the scientifically concocted was already teleologically latent.” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3772)

Adorno himself takes into account that what is at stake here is a complex relationship between identity and non-identity in the course of history, whose preliminary discussion in *Minima Moralia* prefigures the aforementioned impressive passages of *Negative Dialectics*, in which the main aspects of the *factum Auschwitz* are considered under the auspices of a full developed concept of non-identity.

The possible influence of Adorno’s viewpoint on Auschwitz in Flusser’s late work

Whereas this concept of non-identity might not have had any major influence on Vilém Flusser, the idea of “Auschwitz” as a philosophical device is a topic of undeniable Adornian inspiration in Flusser’s late thought. Through this influence, the previously formulated statements on Auschwitz, in the beginning of Flusser’s philosophical career, were strengthened and deepened. The ground for that conjecture is a presumable meeting of both philosophers in 1966, when Adorno was co-director of the Institute of Social Research and Flusser, during a tour of lectures in Europe, was received by him in Frankfurt. There is a letter from Flusser to Adorno, dated from November 23rd 1966, in which he thanks him for the reception in Frankfurt and mentions Adorno’s “new book,” which he wished to receive in order to review it in Brazilian newspapers (Flusser 1966). If we’re correct to assume that the

“new book” should be *Negative Dialectic*, it explains why, after a while, also in Flusser’s work “Auschwitz” became an important concept, at least in one of his most eloquent books: *Post-History*, first published in Portuguese in 1983 (Flusser 1983: 9ff).

In the chapter “The Ground We Tread,” Flusser starts by comparing our time with the Baroque period for its duality of rationality and irrationality. However, Flusser argues that the theatricality of the Baroque, even if it could be understood as a loss of faith,³ would not be as radical as the one which characterizes the present day: “Although comparable with the Baroque, in certain aspects, our situation is in fact incomparable to any other. That is because an incomparable, unheard of, never before seen event happened recently, which emptied the ground we tread. *Auschwitz*. Other posterior events; Hiroshima, the Gulags, are nothing but variations of the first. Therefore every attempt to grasp the present leads to the following questions: how was Auschwitz possible? How can we live after this?” (Flusser 2013: 4)

At first sight, the similarity between this passage and some of remarkable ones of *Negative Dialectics* is outstanding. Not only due to the perplexity facing Auschwitz but also for the almost textually identical question of Adorno’s book: “hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living” (Adorno 2007: 362-3).

But in spite of all similarities, if one reads Flusser’s texts attentively they meet with a considerable difference facing Adorno’s viewpoint on the matter: while, as we saw, the latter required very sophisticated conceptual tools to interpret the location of Auschwitz in Western culture, traditionally understood as a representative of rationality, Flusser tended to consider this event as something totally integrated in the “program” of Western civilization. To be sure, the word “program” is a concept in Flusser’s thought, meaning something similar to a software that enables the functioning of a suitable hardware. This is understood as an “apparatus,” which also depends, for its operation, on the existence of beings who manage it. This almost cybernetic conception of the operation of a computer system is often applied by Flusser to understand the functioning of our present reified societies, Auschwitz being a paradigm of the transformation of institutions in “apparatuses” and the metamorphosis of human beings in “functionaries” by means of an automatically playing program: “The unspoken in Auschwitz is not the mass murder, it is *not* the *crime*. It is the ultimate *reification* of people into amorphous objects,

³ “Loss of faith” is a technical term in Flusser’s description of the crisis in the Western world. Flusser discussed and developed the term in an essay (in German) entitled “Glaubensverlust,” written in 1978 but first published in *Lob der Oberflächlichkeit* (1993). Flusser himself made a Portuguese version, “A perda da fé,” first published in the anthology *Ficções filosóficas* (1998a).

into ashes. The Western tendency toward objectification was finally realized and it was done so in the shape of an *apparatus*. The SS were functionaries of an extermination apparatus, and their victims functioned in function of their own annihilation. The extermination camp's program, once it started functioning, developed in an automatic fashion, autonomous from the decision of the initial programmers, even if it contributed to the defeat of the programmers, as it effectively did.” (Flusser 2013: 5-6)

Flusser’s question – shared with Adorno – about the possibility of going on living after Auschwitz is everything but a rhetorical one: the inscription of this event in Western civilization has some practical consequences, as we shall see below. Like Adorno, Flusser considers Auschwitz a point of inflection in Western civilization, where “also in the increasing pressure of domination does quantity change into quality” (Adorno 2005: pos. 3771). To be sure, even while stressing other examples of betrayal of Western values perpetrated by Western societies themselves, strengthened by his experience of living in Brazil for over thirty years,⁴ Flusser not only recognizes the singularity of Auschwitz but also thinks that this event means the very self-destruction of Western culture: “The previous horrors committed by Western society against other societies and against itself (and there are many) were *crimes*. They were violations of Western models of behavior: anti-Christian, anti-human, irrational. Thus it is possible to condemn them and continue to be Western, even if the horror is so colossal, such as the enslavement of Africans. However, it is not possible to condemn Auschwitz and continue to adhere consciously to the West.” (Flusser 2013: 7)⁵

Until this point Flusser’s view about this matter seems to be quite close to Adorno’s one. But there is a considerable difference between the two positions: For Flusser, Auschwitz is not a point outside the curve of Western civilization, but the very realization of its program, in the aforementioned sense: “Auschwitz is not a violation of Western models of behavior, it is, on the contrary, the *result of application* of such models. Our culture allowed its mystifying mask to fall at Auschwitz and revealed its real face” (Flusser 2013: 7). Consequently, one of the practical results of this philosophical approach of Auschwitz is the problem of belonging to a culture whose grounds are so damaged as Western

⁴ Cf. Flusser (2002a): “We are in Brazil, in this sense, in a privileged situation. We are ‘under-developed.’ The progress, whose aspects pointing the apparatus and the functionary I tried to sketch, is here delayed. We are in a transcendent situation in virtue of the mere geographical position that we occupy” (89).

⁵ It would be a mistake to think that, for Flusser, the slavery of African populations after the occupation of the Americas has been a crime of minor gravity. Concerning this fact, in the aforementioned *O Último Juízo: Gerações I* (Flusser 2017a: 252ff), Flusser displayed a relentless critique of the European system of slavery of African people in the Americas, describing it as one of the unforgivable monstrosities of the Western world. It is also worth noting Flusser’s empathy toward Afro-Brazilians, who produced, according to him, the only “high-culture” genuinely Brazilian – a topic discussed in *Fenomenologia do Brasileiro* (1998), written in the beginning of the 1970s (cf. the German version: *Brasilien oder die Suche nach den neuen Menschen* [1994]).

civilization after the extermination camps. Flusser mentions even the limit-case of one's becoming crazy or committing suicide, if he/she rejects his/her culture *in toto*, although he concludes we must go on living and thinking anyway as a native of the contemporary world, even it is so chaotic as it really is. According to him, “there is no exit: we are condemned to use our models and to serve such models, even after they have been unmasked, if we wish to continue living. The only alternative would be to commit suicide. That is: we must continue our economic, political, scientific, artistic, philosophic activities despite Auschwitz. *We must continue progressing despite everything.*” (Flusser 2013: 7-8)

Like Adorno in his numerous passages about the need of remembering the Nazi genocides, Flusser thinks that this continuous “progressing despite everything” does not mean forgetting all the barbarism, thus taking the risk of repeating it over and over up to the most remote future. And the danger that it may happen is not negligible, since Flusser sees in events like Auschwitz the plain concretization of his notion of “apparatuses,” characterized by a non-conscious, automatized functioning, under whose auspices human beings lose progressively their human values to become “functionaries” in charge of operating mechanically the programs that make run the alienated and oppressive moves of the huge machine into which the world transforms itself: “Everywhere we can observe, as of now, the emergence of variations on the theme “Auschwitz.” Everywhere apparatus spring, just like mushrooms after a Nazi rain, from the ground that has become [*sic!*] rotten. Certainly: such new apparatus are not externally similar to the Nazi extermination camps. Their labels are different, as are the ideologies that pretend to inspire them. (...) But such labels and such 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.” (Flusser 2013: 8-9)⁶

The complexity of the present situation lies in the fact that the very objectification which allowed for the birth of modern science with all its achievements for humankind is the principle of functionality that ruled in Auschwitz and rules in its up to date, mitigated versions as apparatuses that reveal the perverse side of what Flusser calls “post-history.” But this term has also a positive connotation, taking into account his probabilistic approach, according to which a cybernetic system – just like apparatuses are – encloses many virtualities that in a long enough period of time realizes themselves one by one until all its possibilities be wholly exhausted. This admits also the possibility that some virtualities that honor the human being be discovered and developed and there lies the hope of better times: “What remains is for us to analyze the event “Auschwitz” in all its details in order to discover

⁶ The characterization of the apparatuses as “black boxes” relates to the topics of the famous philosophy of photography, whose Brazilian edition is *Philosophy of the Black Box* (Flusser 2002b). Elsewhere I pointed to the relationship between its central concept of “technical images” and several topics of Adorno’s critique of the culture industry.

the fundamental project that realized itself there for the first time, so that we may nurture the hope to project ourselves out of that project. Out of the history of the West. This is the “post-historical” climate in which we are condemned to live in from hereon.” (Flusser 2013: 10)

This hopeful aspect of Flusser’s conception of post-history coincides with the exceptionally optimistic central idea of the last aphorism of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, according to which the most important goal of a responsible philosophical reflection would be, in spite of the less favorable conditions, to focus on the possibility of human happiness: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique.” (Adorno 2005: pos. 4002). Also in these traces of hope in their generally more pessimistic thought, one can find an interesting confluence between Adorno and Flusser.

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