Rainer Guldin, Cotton Wool

On Flusserian
Methodology and Terminology

→ **There is still a problematic unflusserian insistence on lasting ideas, fundamental contributions, permanence**

25 Years After: Vilém Flusser's Legacy

Networks / Utopia of a telematic society / digital anthropology: Vilém Flusser as "digital thinker"?

→ **A self-perpetuating misinterpretation**

→ Byung-Chul Han, *Im Schwarm* (2013)

→ Vilém Flusser, *Mutations in Human Relations* (1977-78)

→ Vilém Flusser, Interview with Patrik Tschudin (September 30 1991)

→ **I suggest a shift towards**

Thinking and writing strategies / terminology / methodology / styles / text types / genres

→ **Moving from text to text and from language to language**

speech → essay → book chapter / Germ. → Engl. → Port. → Fr.→→→

→ Performative aspect (How do Flusser's texts work?)

→ Reading Flusser as a "writer of (philosophical) **fiction**" → **Hans Vaihinger,** *Die Philosophie des Als ob*

→ **an unceasing rearrangement of ideas**

→ **The constant flow of ideas**

Byung-Chul Han, *Im Schwarm* (2013)

- „Flusser's digital messianism does not do justice to the actual topology of digital networks, which do not consist in selfless points (knots) or intersections but in narcissistic islands of isolated egos." (63) "digital communication is not about *Nächstenliebe* (Christian love) it accentuates the isolation of human beings." (65)

- "Flusser's liberating project has become a constraint, a form of bondage and servitude (*eine Zwangsfigur*)." (65)

- "present day society is based on performance isolating us from each other (*eine Leistungsgesellschaft*)." (66) [translation RG]

→ Flusser would have probably agreed …

Vilém Flusser, *Mutations in Human Relations* (1977-78)

A **network is ambivalent**: „it propagates information by constantly changing it […] Examples are rumours, mouth-to-ear communication small-talk […] being open to noise from all sides, it always **deforms the original information**. […] though contempt for network dialogue is not a good approach to it neither is adulation: the vox populi vox dei thing. The phenomenon of network dialogue must be approached for what it is: the ultimate reservoir of all information, the constant elaboration of information through vulgarisation […] the lowest common denominator […] and therefore itself somehow entropic […] amphitheatrical discourses (TV for instance) which tries to preserve information by stereotypical massification are synchronized at present in what tend to amount to total de-politisation (totalitarianism) through apparent total politisation (universal participation) […]"

Interview with Patrick Tschudin (1991)

→ **Flusser commenting upon the telematic utopia**

„Ich bin sehr begeistert. (*I am very enthusiastic.*) Ich glaube nicht an diese Utopie. (*I do not believe in this utopia*). Ich glaube sie wird nicht durchgeführt werden, aber das spielt keine so grosse Rolle. (I *do not think that it will be realised, but that is not so important*). Ich meine, **es wird nicht durchgeführt**, aber wir sind eine Generation, die die Utopie vor sich sieht. (*It will not be realised, but we are a generation that can envisage utopia.*)"

→ **The privilege of being there**

→ **In this sense, Flusser is not simply the „prophet of the internet and social media"**

On Methodology

"I do not position
phenomena below or
above each other […]. I do
not apprehend them at all,
they tend to become
blurred and they entangle
and devour themselves and
each other."

„Ich stelle tatsaechlich die Phaenomene nicht ueber- und
untereinander […]. Ich stelle sie naemlich überhaupt
nicht, sie verschwimmen mir und verschraenken sich und
verschlingen sich und einander."

Vilém Flusser

→ **Early methodological commitment**

„Ich **stelle** tatsaechlich die Phaenomene nicht ueber- und untereinander […]. Ich **stelle** sie naemlich überhaupt nicht, sie verschwimmen mir und verschraenken sich und **verschlingen sich und einander** wie die beruechtigte Laokoongruppe […]. Ein Phaenomen […] ist fuer mich nicht etwas, das steht, es fliesst und windet sich, mal ist es da, mal ist es dort […]. Ich [bin] voellig ausser Stande […], systematisch zu schreiben. Das Wort 'System', also auch 'Hierarchie', ist fuer mich gleichbedeutend mit Luege."

STELLEN → **to put / position / place / set / stand / plant / make up / <u>apprehend</u> / <u>impose</u>**

"I do not **position** phenomena below or above each other […]. I do not **apprehend** them at all, they tend to become indistinct (blurred) and they interlace (entangle) and **devour themselves and each other** as in the notorious statue of Laocoön and his sons […]. To me a phenomenon is not something that stands still, it flows and twists and turns, at times, it is here, and at times, it is there […]. I [am] utterly incapable […] of writing systematically. The word 'system', and because of this also the word 'hierarchy, are to me tantamount to lie.'"

Vilém Flusser in a letter to Hellmut Wolff (June 26 1958)

→ **Two forms of devoration: self-devoration and feeding on each other**

→ Dialogue and thinking are an endless dispute

The metaphor of devoration and self-devoration is also inspired by the

→ *Manifesto Antropófago* by Oswald de Andrade (1928)

Two examples showing continuity of method:

→ Vilém Flusser, *Thought and Reflection* (from the 1960ies)

→ Vilém Flusser, *Pilpul* (published 1990)

→ Polemos pater panton

Vilém Flusser, *Thought and Reflection*

" […] thought envelops bodies, in order to understand them, and that it clings to them in order to modify them. Thought is, therefore, the process of grasping which expands into the world of bodies in order to devour them. The methods of this devouring process are **science and technology**. But there is another direction in which thought can move, namely the opposite direction. In this motion **thought turns against itself** in order to devour itself, i.e. to understand itself and modify itself. The term "**reflection**" shows where this kind of thought moves to, namely into the direction opposite to advancing thought. The German term "Nachdenken", (which means "to think behind or after") shows how this kind of thought works, namely as **a check on thinking**."

Vilém Flusser, *Thought and Reflection*

„Reflection is therefore the **inverse motion of thought**, wherein thought is being controlled and decomposed into its elements. The method of reflection, which is the devouring of thought by itself, is **philosophy**. Philosophy is therefore exactly the contrary of science and technology. I had in mind this opposition between philosophy on one side, and science and technology on the other, when I claimed that we should make use of reflection in order to avoid our plunge into the **abyss of tedium** and futility. It will not be through more science and more technology that we shall be able to escape the anguish of our situation, but **through more philosophy, if we do escape it**."

Vilém Flusser, *Pilpul* (in *Jude sein* 1995)

Pilpul is a „sophistic-playful method of studying the Talmud, developed in the 16th century." (139)

It embodies simultaneously the idea of an elusive core and multiperspectival, multilingual thought process repeatedly **ignited by contradiction**: "an **incomplete** and **never to be completed circling**." (149)

Jewish thought seeks to **identify contradictions**: "as unanswerable, as a sign of the limits of human thought. Jewish thought runs up against the borders of the thinkable, not in order to demolish them, but rather to ascertain them. I think that is Pilpul." (141)

Pilpul is "[…] a dance around a given object, it attacks the object **from different vantage points**, recedes in different directions only to approach it again and come upon other reflections. This **dynamic of reflection** […] figures concretely on the Talmud page: the object in the middle of the page, the reflections in **converging circles**." (141)

Vilém Flusser, *Pilpul* (in *Jude sein* 1995)

"There is a word or several words in the middle of the page and a few textual circles loop concentrically around this core. We immediately see that this core is to be pondered […] and the rotating circles contemplate the core (they are the 'commentary'). But this structure is far from easy: **the circles do not only comment on the core, but also on each other**." (144)

„Pilpul does not seek to affirm or negate the item to which we keep returning, but to approach it from as **many standpoints as possible** and to bring those **into conflict with each other**. It is as if Pilpul had switched over from a 'true-false' logic into a **multiply rooted logic.**" (149-150)

The Babylonic Talmud

"the circles do not only comment on the core, but also on each other"

"There is a word or several words in the middle of the page"

"a few textual circles loop concentrically around this core."
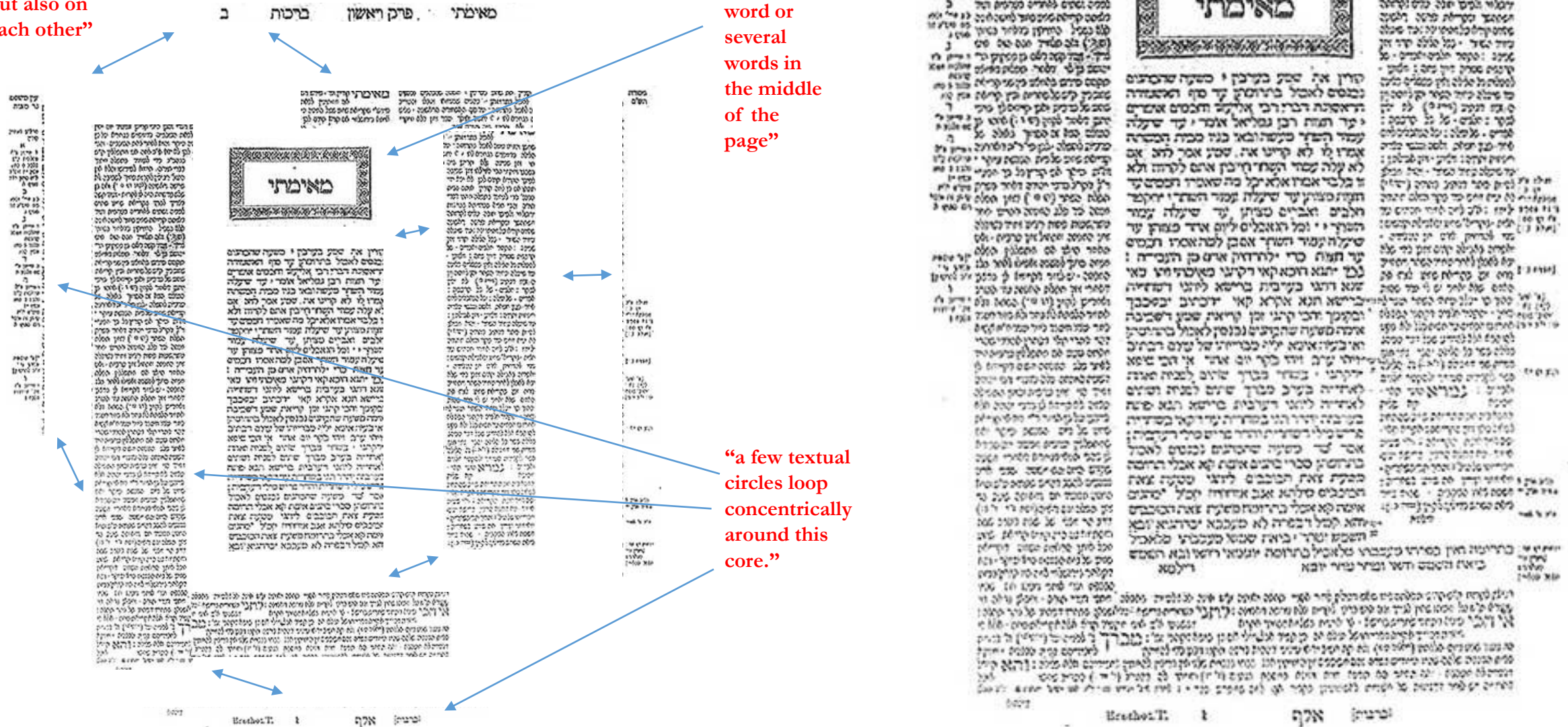
On Terminology

„Presse uns nicht
uns Wolken"

Hilde Domin

„Do not constrict us
us clouds"

"There are some **thoughts** which begin to take a very **nebulous shape** within me. [...] as to the nebulous shape of the thoughts, (which do not merit to be called 'thoughts' due to that **nebulosity**) I can say this: the shape is a **tendency** toward one of the languages at my disposal."

Vilém Flusser, *The Gesture of Writing*
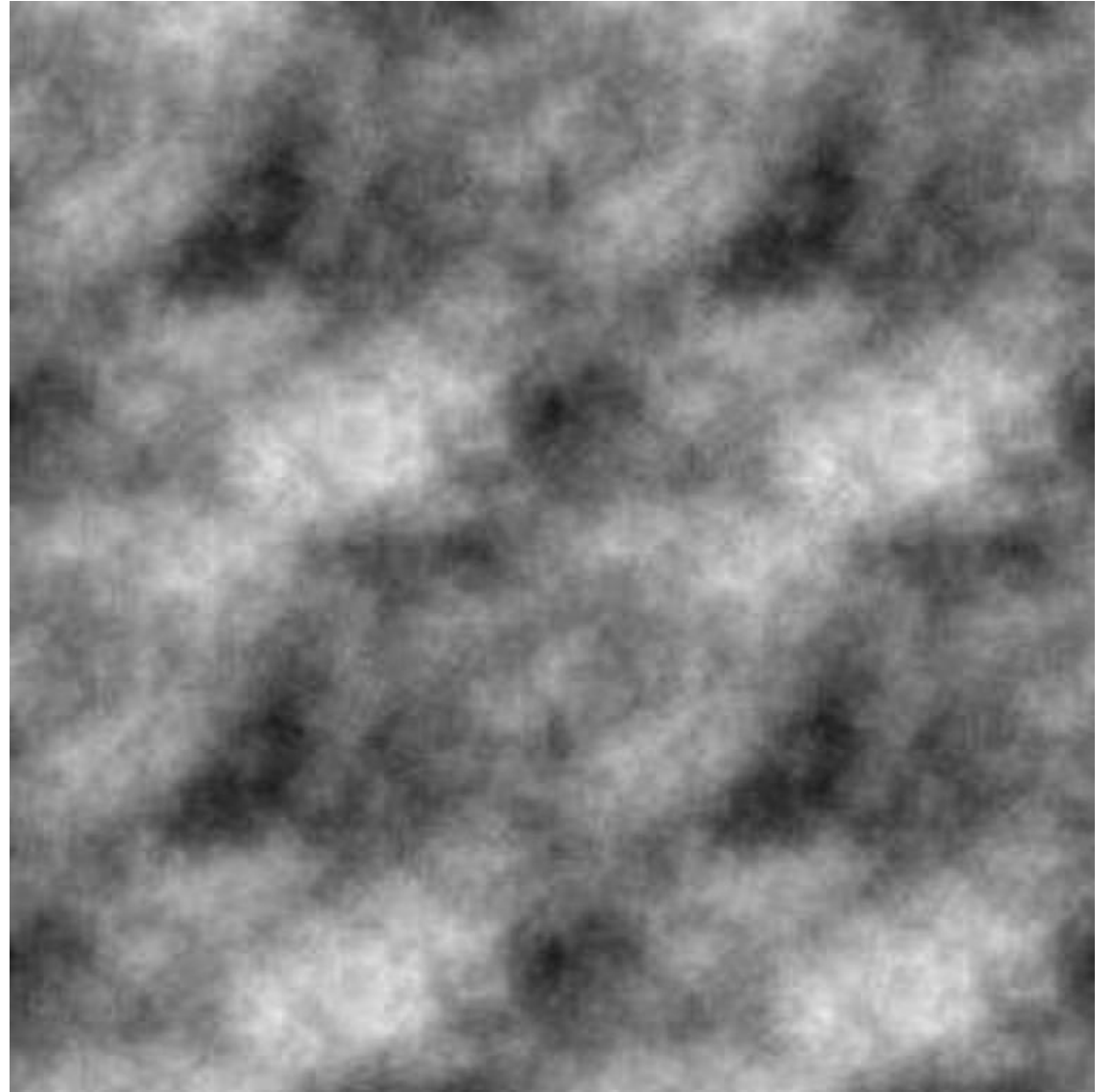
„In the course of the modern era numerical thinking has penetrated more and more deeply into things but instead of reaching the ground it has **dissolved things into wafts of mist that float in nothingness**. But this is not the essential moment yet. While bending over things it has dissolved itself into wafts of **mist floating** in nothingness. This uncanny process is generally termed euphemistically 'Enlightenment' confusing fog with clarity."

Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt*

Diller & Scofidio, *Blur Building*

"**Models are cotton balls** that are extracted from nothingness. The **cotton-like, cloudy**, ungraspable and at the same time incomprehensible, but also easily **malleable and mutable** nature of our models explains the existential climate in which we live. We walk in **patches of fog**."

Vilém Flusser, *Lob der Oberflächlichkeit*

Fluffy cotton wool balls

„Für Vilém Flusser sind all seine Äußerungen eher der Versuch, etwas, was gleichsam **in der Luft liegt**, mit allen verfügbaren Kräften zu **ballen** und einen **Wattebausch** daraus zu machen. All seine Begriffe sind explizit **wattig**. Das kann durchaus als Argument gegen ihn ins Feld geführt werden, seine Begriffe aber **wollen wattig sein**. […]. **Seine Welt ist wattig**, ein klarer und deutlicher Begriff für ihn ipso facto falsch.“

Volker Rapsch, *Vilém Flusser (1920-1991). Sechs Erinnerungsskizzen*

"To Vilém Flusser all statements are an attempt to **agglomerate** to best of his abilities something that is, so to speak, **in the air,** and to fashion a **cotton wool ball** out of it. All his concepts are explicitly **fluffy**. This can definitely be used as an argument against his way of thinking, but his concepts **want to be fluffy**. […]. **His world is fluffy**; to him, a clear-cut unambiguous concept is ipso facto wrong.“

→ **Remember the verb „stellen" from his early letter to Wolff**

To conclude …

- **Inter:** interdisciplinarity / moving from language to language / mixing and merging of styles and subject matter / ambiguous concepts / fuzzy logic / grey zones

- **Multiplicity:** points of view / models / disciplines as languages / multiple continuous open-ended self-translation / writing and rewriting

- **Metaphorical phantasy:** etymology / wordplay / paronomasia / calling attention to style / to the artificiality of texts / to the constructedness of points of view

- **Work in progress:** endless reworking, recombining of previous subject matter / a series of reinterpretations / unwinding / **spiralling out** / no final position to be attained / no ultimate truth to be reached

→ All of Flusser's texts should be read as if they were **philosophical fictions** (not only the texts that are explicitly so because of their content, for instance *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*).

and …

"Immer mit einem ironischen Unterton."

"Always with an ironic undertone."

Vilém Flusser in an interview with Christian

M. Doermer (Robion, September 29 1990)