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The Third Bank of Brazilian Thought

In Germersheim, a small town in the south of Germany, an international Symposium took place in October 2006 to discuss the Brazilian phase of Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991). This Symposium was part of a series of international meetings about his works that have been held around the world since his death in 1991. Both in Brazil and in Germany, Flusser's works have been published by a variety of presses. In Brazil, for instance, the editor of Annablume has recently republished his first books, *Língua e realidade* and *A história do diabo*, which were subject to intense debate in the aforementioned Symposium. Annablume Press is also publishing (for the first time in Portuguese) Flusser's philosophical autobiography entitled *Bodenlos*, a German word meaning "without-ground" or "without-foundations".

The Germersheim Symposium was held at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität and organized by Susanne Klengel and Holger Siever. It was called "*A terceira margem: Vilém Flusser und Brasilien*". The Portuguese expression "*a terceira margem*" ("the third bank"), as it appears in the name of the event in German, alludes to the well known short story by Brazil's renowned writer Guimarães Rosa, "*A terceira margem do rio*" ("The Third Bank of the River"), which Flusser explored with some enthusiasm. This expression very appropriately refers us both to the very meaning of the name "Flusser" itself, as "river" in German is "Fluss", and to all the connotations of "fluidity" therein.

The following scholars partook in the Symposium: from Brazil, Gustavo Bernardo, Izabela Kestler, Márcio Seligmann, Norval Baitello, Ricardo Mendes, Susana Kampff and Willi Bolle; from Germany, Dirk Hennrich, Holger Siever, Joachim Michael, Matthias Kroß, Michael Hanke, Siegfried Zielinski, Susanne Klengel and Rüdiger Zill; from Switzerland, Rainer Guldin; from the United States, Anke Finger.

Edith Flusser, Vilém Flusser's widow, was present at all lectures and generously talked with each presenter there whenever requested. Her presence at the Symposium was very important for two reasons: she has become the preferential reader of the philosopher and has helped enlighten us on the idiosyncratic subtleties of Flusser's personality. This is particularly relevant if one takes into account that the work of Vilém Flusser is strictly linked to his *persona* and to his performances. Siegfried Zielinski, for instance, has demonstrated this very accurately in his lecture: he presented his speech in front of the projection of a famous picture of Flusser wearing two pairs of glasses, one on his nose in front of his eyes and the other one over his forehead.

At the opening of the event, the organizers announced the impending publication of Norval Baitello's book titled *Flussers Voellerei* and the third issue of *Flusser Studies*. The Symposium quickly went

past the laudatory stage of the texts on Flusser in order to privilege what he himself would have liked to focus on: to discuss his works and the author in depth, to act on his provocations. Willi Bolle, for example, did this, when he criticized the Flusserian reading of Guimarães Rosa. Anatol Rosenfeld did the same, when he reviewed Flusser's first book from 1963: he would prefer Flusser to have examined his partial truths more thoroughly, but at the same time he had looked for books like that one: "splendid, although wrong," in his opinion. Often, there are more productive mistakes than many truths.

Dirk Hennrich and Izabela Kestler sought to place Flusser within the context of the sixties in São Paulo, before and after the military *coup d'état*. Complementing them, Susanne Klengel studied Flusser's essays on Brazil, showing us the multiple mediations promoted by the philosopher. Other presentations set up important connections, associating Flusser's thinking either with Wittgenstein's philosophy, as did Matthias Kroß, or to Vicente Ferreira da Silva's thinking and to Karel Capek's fiction, as I myself tried to do. Michael Hanke, in turn, commented on the Flusserian tension between *engagement* and *désengagement* derived from a mixture of astonishment and disappointment that Flusser had experienced in Brazil. This tension was well illustrated by Ricardo Mendes's presentation, when he talked about the philosopher's active participation in São Paulo's Biennial Arts Fair. In the same field, Joachim Michael (the only German who spoke in Portuguese) discerned that in his intriguing *Fenomenologia do brasileiro*, first published in Germany as *Brasilien oder die Suche nach dem neuen Menschen*, we can see the conceptual base of the Flusserian "communicology." Written after he had left Brazil and addressed to the European public, the book demonstrates his betting on the Brazilian man as the New Man of Western Civilization, though with some restrictions. Flusser bet on the Brazilians, but Brazilians are annoyed with a thinker who rejects the ideas of progress and motherland – so, some of them do not *bet* on Flusser.

As Márcio Seligmann summarized, Flusser converted his condition of victim (of Nazism and exile) into a condition of a model, introducing himself as the messenger of that new man: a nomadic human being who is always foreigner, therefore without motherland, but who is open to differences and acts as a constructor of bridges. Flusser tried to build multiple bridges, linking the various languages he grew up in or had acquired; between European culture and Brazilian culture; and between the metaphysics of doubt and his advanced theory of the new *media*. In the same field, Susana Kampff and Rainer Guldin related Flusser to Haroldo de Campos and his reflections about the baroque of Minas Gerais, an example of the Brazilian tendency to take as one's own the European culture but diverging from it, in a counter-conquest movement.

In Europe, the Flusserian *boom* was a result of his philosophy of photography as the paradigm of the technical image. This *boom* made him known in the old continent but, at the same time, moved him away from the Brazilian public, due to the German editions and also because it limited him to being perceived exclusively as a theorist of the new *media*. Anke Finger drew our attention to the following: we need to study Flusser's work as a very complex and very well articulated whole. Among his works,

the texts written in Brazil play a fundamental role. His philosophy of emigration is also a philosophy of translation, as pointed out by Holger Siever, and it is still a philosophy of strangeness and the amazement, as emphasized by Rüdiger Zill.

The Germersheim Symposium stressed the necessity to publish the complete works of Vilém Flusser both in German and in Portuguese, because just as Brazilians hardly know Flusser's German phase, most Germans are similarly unaware of his Brazilian phase – that is the bridge left to be built. We need to familiarize ourselves more with this thinking that seeks to build bridges via a concern with the strangeness of the human being. Such an academic pursuit is beyond doubt a worthwhile endeavour, and does justice to Flusser who wrote: *“The foreigner (and foreign) is the one who acknowledges his own being-in-the-world that surrounds him. Thus, he gives sense to the world, and in a certain way he dominates the world. But he dominates it tragically: he does not integrate into the world. The cedar tree is foreign in my park. I am foreign in France. Humankind is foreign in the world.”*