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## **Postmodern Nomadism and the Beginnings of a Global Village**

### **Introduction**

The main aim of this paper is to comment on an essay by Vilém Flusser of 1990 dealing with new nomadism as an epochal change. As Flusser himself distinguishes between nomadism as a practice of archaic as well as of (post)-modern media-centered everyday life and as a way of academic thinking and writing, some initial considerations will be necessary concerning the aporia of nomadism and settledness in the academic field. Section 2 aims to prove that Flusser advances his radical thesis of a new nomadism in a quite traditional, i.e. *sedentary*, form: hypothesis – demonstration – conclusion, but he undermines the form from inside.

The remaining sections of this paper consist of some slightly critical remarks that I raise with regard to the central thesis of Flusser’s inspiring essay, and in each section I will agree to a lesser extent with his arguments: Is it really the Information Revolution and not the Industrial Revolution that leads to the end of the Neolithic Age (section 3)? Shouldn’t we consider the Information Revolution to constitute a new period of settledness rather than one of nomadism (section 4)? Is it only a virtual nomadism that came up about 1990 or does the epochal change concern also physical *nomadic* movement (section 5)? Is it true that the new nomadism leads to a catastrophic freedom (section 6)? And finally, if we have to attenuate to some degree the thesis of an epochal change, could it be that the *idiot* and not only the *nomad* is an appropriate allegory to be contrasted with the long-living national state based on settledness (section 7)? If this paper reads a little bit *idiotic*, i.e. slower in its argumentation, but not *sedentary*, in comparison with fashionable *nomadic* writing in Cultural Studies, this is by no means arbitrary.

### **Fashion and the sense of errant concepts**

Over the past several years, *nomadism* has become a popular term in the areas of speculative Cultural Studies and artistic performance.<sup>1</sup> While the majority of studies<sup>2</sup> that address *nomadism* still examine traditional tribal communities in Africa and Asia characterized by non-settledness

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in 2003, a conference in Berlin (<http://www.memenet.de/kongress.html>) brought about the foundation of an *Institute for Nomadism* <https://de.wiki.in-no.org>. In 2006, the artistic project *Nomads\_of\_Time* was put online at <http://nomadenderzeit.transmitter-x.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> The University of Freiburg’s library catalog, for example, contains 450 titles with the keyword “nomad\*”.

and cattle breeding, in theories in Cultural Studies and Literature the concept of *nomadism* appears together with other keywords such as hybridism, translation, transcription, migration, and space, among others.<sup>3</sup> These words represent concepts that are connected to each other: to a certain extent they form the *plateaus* of a rhizomatic discourse à la Deleuze and Guattari (1980 / 1987); but they also refer to another group of concepts such as identity, center, homogeneity, stability, and territory. The evocation of the former suggests that the latter denote entities which are precarious if not non-existent.

As Sokal / Bricmont (1998) showed in their provocative essay *Fashionable Nonsense*, postmodern Master Thinkers such as Lacan, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, and others often avoid giving definitions and instead employ chains of concepts that build upon each other: it is obvious that much of the actual work in Cultural Studies and Literature – for example the studies I cite in footnote 3 – is influenced by the academic style of the incriminated French thinkers. Even if one could attribute some sense to one or the other term in collocations such as nomadism, hybridism, translation, transcription, migration, space, and so on, one still gets the impression that some of the actual discourses in Cultural Studies get out of hand and turn into pure jargon or *name dropping* in which the individual keywords are chosen particularly for their catchiness. On the other hand, Jacques Derrida, especially in his early works,<sup>4</sup> showed that the *conceptual-chains-approach* can be quite innovative and fruitful as long as it consists of deconstruction and dynamic sampling of given conceptual oppositions in a post- or maybe better neo-structuralist vein.

But is the distinction between jargon and analytical discourse put forward by Sokal and Bricmont really legitimate? Can it be justified across different prominent philosophical traditions? Or does it solely depend, as Flusser remarked in 1990,<sup>5</sup> upon whether one should take the position of a *sedentary, honest* thinker, for whom *nomadic* thinking appears as “mystic babbling” (Flusser 1990: 29) or as “senseless gibberish” (Flusser 1990: 31)? However, as Flusser points out, if one chooses a *nomadic* point of view, then the *desire to possess* concepts, as is proper in analytical philosophical discourse, can only be considered a crazy endeavor.

The aporia that appears here is quite complex: Most of the scholars who attend conferences on nomadism, hybridism, translation, transcription, migration, space, and so on, are university professors who hold a chair in a more or less well-endowed department, sign their name to books and articles, and accept invitations to receive academic distinctions. Thus, if they voice

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<sup>3</sup> I just give some more or less arbitrary examples for a striking academic boom: Benítez-Rojo (1992), Buchholz (2000), Bujdei (2006), Maffesoli (2000), West (2002), Zaslove (2000).

<sup>4</sup> For example *La voix et le phénomène*, *De la grammatologie*, *Marges de la philosophie*. See the English translations of these works indicated in Reference Section.

<sup>5</sup> An excerpt of the essay “Nomanden” is published in an English version with the title “Nomads” in Flusser (2003a), but the passages cited here do not figure in the English text.

criticism toward academic *settledness* – related to concepts such as identity, center, homogeneity, stability, territory, and so on – it happens from an interior position, and the applause that they receive is somewhat paradoxical: either their discourse exceeds or falls short of the *sedentary* academic standards:<sup>6</sup> it runs the risk of becoming incomprehensible and of being only acceptable because it comes from a distinguished professor; or they meet the established academic standards and the discourse yielding a subversive *nomadic* content refers paradoxically to a traditional *sedentary* form.

This is not the place to judge all of the works cited in footnote 3 in this respect. They are, as I have pointed out there, just arbitrarily chosen examples of a general academic fashion. Without a more detailed look on their argumentation, I would not like to decide to which degree they meet standards of logic and clarity. And if they do not, it would be still an open question, if they exceed these standards in an innovative way or if they fall short of them.

I will only comment briefly on one of the cited works that in fact would be in my opinion a prime example of a discourse that falls short of academic standards: The book *Du nomadisme. Vagabondages initiatiques*, published in 2000 by the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli. Maffesoli forgoes a phenomenological study of the *nomad* and anecdotally evokes the compatibility of this figure with certain phenomena of life nowadays. According to Maffesoli, a nomad's lifestyle seems to be almost everything ranging from tourists on a packaged holiday to the promiscuous Don Juan jumping from one mistress to the other. Maffesoli himself seems to employ a *nomadic* style wandering from quote to quote without ever critically distancing himself from a famous author or comparing differing opinions.

Nonetheless, an interesting contribution put forth by Maffesoli is the oxymoron of *dynamic rootedness*, which he uses to try to explain the dialectics of settledness. He claims that it arises from nomadism and is then conquered anew by nomadism. Maffesoli also argues that settledness would not exist without nomadism and vice versa. The oxymoron *dynamic rootedness*, however, has the quasi-effect of fixing this dialectal movement instead of moving with it. Avoiding a deconstructionist argumentation that would have shown the *roots of nomadism* and the *dynamics of settledness*, Maffesoli seems to place himself in an imaginary exterior position and repeats the gestures of philosophical summarizing by using a totalizing term that he allegedly wants to overcome.

Maffesoli's academic style is exactly the contrary of Flusser's in his short article *Nomadische Überlegungen* from 1990 that has been published in an English version with the title *Thinking about*

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<sup>6</sup> These standards are of course not easy to determine. To nail things down we could refer to the standards of logic and conceptual clarity defended by Sokal and Bricmont.

*Nomadism* in 2003.<sup>7</sup> Flusser's article can be considered a prototype within an academic discourse that brings forward outrageous ideas in a conventional structure and style. He follows, as I would like to demonstrate in the following section, a traditional line of argumentation – hypothesis, demonstration, and conclusion – but leaves it suspended due to the discourse's specific content.

### Thinking nomadism in a sedentary form

Flusser begins with the hypothesis of an innovative periodization of human history divided into three epochs – the Paleolithic Age up to the invention of agriculture, the Neolithic Age up to 1990, and the near Future of New Nomadism, justified by the serious interest people take nowadays in thinking about nomads. He considers this justification a vicious circle:

„Um das Interesse am Nomadismus zu rechtfertigen, teilen wir die menschliche Zeitspanne neu ein, und um diese Neueinteilung zu rechtfertigen, rufen wir dieses Interesse zum Zeugen. Aus diesem Zirkel muß ausgebrochen werden. Dies kann gelingen, wenn man die beiden hier vorgeschlagenen Daseinsformen, also Nomadentum und Seßhaftigkeit, zuerst phänomenologisch miteinander vergleicht und sie sodann in die Neueinteilung einbaut“ (Flusser 1994: 58).

“To justify our interest in nomadism, we divide the span of human existence anew, and to justify this new classification, we call on our interest as evidence. We must break out of this circle. This can be done if the two forms of existence proposed here—nomadism and settledness—are first compared to each other phenomenologically and then integrated into the new classification” (Flusser 2003a: 41).

In the German text, he uses the verb *einbauen* [to assemble], an architectural metaphor that he repeats in the conclusion and that organizes the whole argumentation. Unfortunately, this metaphor is lost in the English translation. Its function is to signalize a thoroughly constructed building of ideas whose topping-out ceremony he can celebrate in the conclusion of his article (Flusser 1994: 64 / Flusser 2003a: 46). Nevertheless, in his conclusion he states that “we have begun to live nomadically” because of “a breaching catastrophe that will make the world uninhabitable, tear us from our homes, and expose us to danger” (Flusser 2003a: 46). I would like to draw the attention to the fact that the danger affects paradoxically the solid construction of the argumentation itself. As we will see in detail, it is the wind of nomadism tearing down the traditional academic building of an essay – hypothesis, demonstration, and conclusion – that

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<sup>7</sup> The original German text has been published three times: Flusser 1994: 55-64. Flusser 1997: 150-159, Flusser in Röller / Wagnermeier 2003b: 188-195. In the following, I am quoting from the first publication in 1994 and its English translation (Flusser 2003a) discussing, whenever useful, the problems that the translation brings about for the understanding of Flusser's approach. In the same year 1990, Flusser wrote a longer article entitled “Der Nomade” from which I have already quoted (Flusser 1990). I will abstain here from a more detailed reading of this article and concentrate on his essay *Nomadische Überlegungen* [*Thinking about Nomadism*].

Flusser tries to block up in a form that is in open contradiction with the content it conveys. However, it is a contradiction, to speak with Flusser, “with a method”:

„Alle Ziele sind Zwischenstationen, sie liegen neben dem Weg (griechisch *metodos*), und als Ganzes ist das Fahren eine ziellose Methode“ (Flusser 1994: 60).

“All goals are way stations; they are situated next to the pathway (Greek *metodos*), and the wandering, taken as a whole, may be seen as an aimless method” (Flusser 2003a: 43).

Again the English translation differs from the German text: “maybe seen as” introduces a stand-off, that the apodictic German “ist” (‘is’) do not contain. It looks like Flusser himself adopts this method and this is a quite unspectacular break with the traditional make up of his essay.

Greek μέθοδος means *to pursue, to pave the way*, from μετά *between, behind* and ὁδός *way*. Taking this etymology seriously, Flusser’s method does not turn into a totalizing, stagnant concept like Maffesoli’s “dynamic rootedness” whose inner tension remains suspended, but it also does not simply pursue the route that leads from nomadism to settledness and beyond. Flusser hints at his method in the middle of the essay instead of explaining it at the beginning, and this is by no means arbitrary, because a nomadic discourse does not progress straightforwardly. By choosing apparently a traditional academic, i.e. *sedentary*, form, he begins with a hypothesis (about the periods of human history) and proves it at the end. The new (methodical) nomadism, which the essay (from a sedentary academic perspective) appears to state, is only available in the middle of Flusser’s text. In this respect, he joins and separates the hypothesis and its proof in a veritably unsettling manner.

I would now like to come back to the beginning availing myself, too, of a fairly traditional academic approach and then retrace the argumentation of Flusser’s essay step by step. Flusser begins his argumentation by stating that there is an increasing interest in nomadism, and he interprets this trend as a sign of a turn of an era (Flusser 1994: 55; Flusser 2003a: 38). With the refreshing radicalism that characterizes his thinking, he subsequently examines the traditional periodization of human history and distinguishes three epochs: the Stone Age is followed by a long Neolithic Age characterized by settledness, which ranged from ca. 8000 B.C. until the year 1990, and is superceded by a post-historical period of nomadism (Flusser 1994: 56; Flusser 2003a: 40). To justify this radical thesis, he proceeds, as I have already cited above, with providing a phenomenological definition of sedentary people and nomads.

In this respect, Flusser’s phenomenology clearly differs from the indeterminacy of the fashionable jargon mentioned earlier. Of course, thinking operations that strive to define the boundaries of concepts may never stop. Their results remain provisional. One who abstains from the intellectual work of defining concepts from the outset, however, runs the risk of losing

himself in the gibberish. It is therefore not arbitrary, either, when speaking of *nomads* or *migrants*. 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 (1994: 35) 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.<sup>8</sup> This insight can be visualized in the following way:

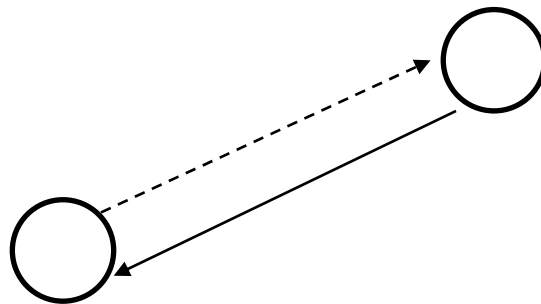


Fig. 1: Mapping of Migration

Migration turns out to be a transfer of sedentary cultural practice to a new living space by which it is redefined and modified, but not abandoned as such. It could be an aim of a philosophy of migration to broach the issue of oscillation between two domains of sedentary cultural practice. It could help to understand Maffesoli’s *dynamic rootedness* from the inside: not as a totalizing concept of human condition in general, but as a temporalized and spatialized paradox that characterizes the cultural practice of migrants as a special, but increasingly important part of our first world societies.

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:

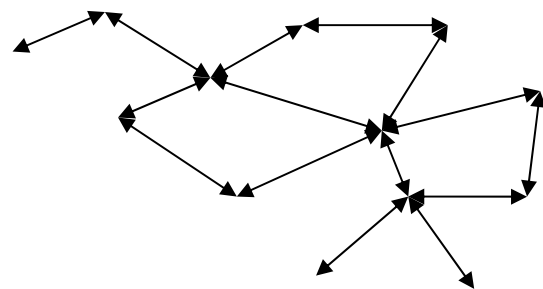


Fig. 2: Mapping of nomadism

<sup>8</sup> See Glick-Schiller et al. (1999).

As Flusser remarks in *Thinking about Nomadism*: „Nomaden sind Leute, die hinter etwas herfahren, etwas verfolgen. Etwa zu sammelnde Pilze oder zu tötende Tiere oder zu melkende Schafe. Gleichgültig, welches das verfolgte Ziel ist, das Fahren ist keineswegs beendet, wenn es erreicht wurde“ (Flusser 1994: 60).

“Nomads are people who pursue some goal, whether gathering mushrooms, killing animals, or milking sheep, and so on. Whatever their goal, their wanderings do not come to an end when the goal has been achieved” (Flusser 2003: 43).

The English translation attenuates the central aspect of Flusser’s phenomenological view of nomadism: “to pursue some goal” has a purely physical reading. It means *hinter etwas herfahren* (‘to go after something’). Following Flusser, a nomad’s dynamism is not rooted at all and the nomad, then, is not a migrant because neither from her perspective nor from the perspective of the sedentary person does she aim towards immigrating anywhere. The nomad does not come with the precarious hope to stay: “the wandering of nomads is open-ended” (Flusser 2003a: 43).

Flusser’s *Thinking about Nomadism*, therefore, does not seem to fit well with his thoughts about a future philosophy of emigration. In this respect, the rash mixing of both concepts can be blamed on the editors of the 1994 volume *Von der Freiheit des Migranten: Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus*,<sup>9</sup> in which the essay appears first among different articles about migration.<sup>10</sup> In *Thinking about Nomadism*, Flusser does not allude to migrants once. Rather, he construes the concepts of *nomads* and *sedentary people* based on phenomenological views of nomadism and settledness, although he is aware of the difficulty of such a classification from the very beginning. In a simple, seemingly naïve manner that the English translation attenuates by using a more technical jargon – *localized* for *sitzen* (lit.: ‘sit’) and adding *condition* and the logical connection *because* – Flusser notes that:

“... zwar sitzen Seßhafte und fahren Nomaden, aber beides ist provisorisch, beide sind Menschen“ (Flusser 1994: 58).

“...although the settled are localized and nomads wander, both conditions are contingent, because both are human beings” (Flusser 2003a: 41).

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<sup>9</sup> As we have already seen, the editor of the English translation, Anke Finger, added another essay on nomadism not available in the original volume. Her idea was to provide Flusser’s essays that are disputing nationalism, which includes topics on migrants as well as nomads; of course, she didn’t want to obfuscate that there are important differences between the two concepts (Anke Finger, personal communication).

<sup>10</sup> In his interesting article “Nomadentum als konkrete Utopie – Unterwegs zu einer Philosophie der Migration” [“Nomadism as a concrete utopia – in route to a philosophy of migration”], Rüdiger Zill (forthcoming) unfortunately does not differentiate strongly between the two concepts either. In his article he traces, above all, the tradition of the concept of migration in the German-language philosophy of the interwar years. In the fourth paragraph of Zill’s article, he abruptly begins to speak about nomads, without contrasting this figure with that of migrants.

Indeed, “both are human beings”. The *human factor* acts as the smallest common denominator and eludes conceptual definition that for this reason always remains provisional. The *human factor* is the irreducible complex.

However, my goal here is to understand Flusser’s argumentation. This argumentation consists of *assembling* the phenomenological analysis of sedentary people who *sit* and *possess* [*sitzen* : *besitzen*] and nomads who *wander* and *find out* [*fabren* : *erfabren*]<sup>11</sup> in the tripartite periodization of human history:

„Diese beiden phänomenologischen Anschauungen von Seßhaftigkeit und Nomadentum, Sitzen und Fahren, Besitz und Erfahrung, Gewohnheit und Gefahr, sollen nun in die Dreiteilung der Menschheitsspanne in ältere Steinzeit, jüngere Steinzeit und unmittelbare Zukunft eingebaut werden“ (Flusser 1994: 62).

“Now we will try to integrate the two phenomenological perspectives of settledness and nomadism, sitting and wandering, possession and experience, habit and danger, into the Paleolithic Age, Neolithic Age, and the Immediate Future, the three-part division of the span of human existence” (Flusser 2003a: 44).

As I have mentioned at the beginning, Flusser refers another time to a metaphor from the field of architecture – *eingebaut* (*assembled*) translated with *integrate*. The construct of ideas, so it appears, can be established quickly: The Stone Age is assumed to be a time of nomadism. But the Neolithic Age turns out to be more complex and leaves the construction a wee bit skew-whiff. The Neolithic Age is not a simple period of settledness, but rather it is characterized by a constant struggle between *sedentary people* and *nomads*. Lasting evidence of this struggle is provided by the Limes Romanus or the Great Wall of China. The relentless dialectic of possession and experience now ends, according to Flusser’s thesis (Flusser 2003a: 46), with the actual triumph of nomadism. It is a meteorological victory tearing down our home-made refuge of academic assurance, because “it has become too windy to own anything at all” and “because we [therefore] have begun to live nomadically” (*ibid.*) Flusser concludes the presentation of his concepts at this point with these two apodictic sentences. A more detailed demonstration was already anticipated within the framework of the phenomenology of sedentary people and nomads. After having confronted *possession* and *experience*, Flusser goes into a lengthy discourse about the meaning of the media for the downfall of settledness, which I would like to discuss in more detail in the following section.

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<sup>11</sup> In the German text, Flusser plays with the opposition of *Besitz* (‘possession’) and *Erfahrung* (‘experience’) that could read literally as the location object of *sitzen* (‘to sit’) and the result object of *fabren* (‘to wander’).



## From Industrial to Information Revolution – toward the End of the Neolithic Age

At first glance, it seems to be surprising that Flusser does not comment on the changes that modern times brought about a traditional *neolithic* sedentary society: an acceleration of life processes due to the Enlightenment, Emancipation and Industrial Revolution that might be reshaped in terms of nomadization. The fact that modern times are a time of mobility is apparent at least in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, if not even earlier.

Mobility means first of all a physical phenomenon: burgeoning capitalism requires flexible workers who are not tied down to a particular location. The abolishment of serfdom allows a significant part of the working population to relocate from rural regions to urban regions proportionally, based on the demands of industrial production. Legal reforms accompany this process and facilitate labor mobility that leads to large waves of immigration in the young, emerging countries in North- and South America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, in its physical aspects mobility leads rather to internal and external migration processes and not to nomadism: two phenomena that should be kept apart and that may be a reason why Flusser does not take the increasing facilities of removal into account. In fact, it is “economics” (Flusser 2003a: 43) that has always led to a certain mobility in sedentary societies, but the reasons for the end of the Neolithic Age is due to the Information Revolution.

Above all, however, the developments in the areas of the new media seem to be a counterproductive factor as far as mobility is concerned. If, as Flusser himself points out, “Information is now distributed to private homes [...] It looks as if this rushing about is now purposeless and that it is now finally possible to remain seated” (Flusser 2003a: 42). We will see that Flusser claims that this is an “error”, but before discussing his arguments, let us develop the idea of a new settledness caused by the Information Revolution.

In fact, if Flusser states: “communication, not economics, now forms the substructure of the village (society)” (Flusser 2003a: 43), it looks like an implicit hint at the emblematic concept of the *global village*, coined by McLuhan in 1962. Taking *Global village* beyond McLuhan as a concept of space,<sup>12</sup> I would like to approach the following well-known phenomena as aspects of a new settledness.

In a postindustrial period mental work steadily becomes more important in comparison to physical work, and the new media allow this work to be done from home. Therefore, the Information Age appears to facilitate a new type of settledness. Already in McLuhan’s time,

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<sup>12</sup> McLuhan’s concept, however, coined first in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962, is to be understood more as a temporal concept of an era and appears to not be fully utilized with respect to his imagery of space (cf. McLuhan / Powers 1992). In this small essay, I will abstain from going into a more detailed exegesis.

newspapers, radio and television seemed sufficient for providing sedentary people with adequate information and, in this respect, satisfied their need for news, learning, and entertainment. With the new media, this is increasing exponentially. In the developed world, the various forms of practically simultaneous telecommunication allow the user to participate in a global exchange of information in real time. With this, not only the standard of knowledge but also the user participation possibilities are approaching a more equal level. The worldwide market presence of multinational companies likewise contributes to the fact that living conditions across national and cultural borders are beginning to increasingly resemble each other: you drink coke, you eat pizza, you buy your furniture at IKEA, etc. Above all, however, the urban-rural contrast appears to be disappearing as a contrast of accessibility to information. Relocating to an information-technical location is becoming increasingly obsolete since information is not restricted to a particular location anymore.

It is fascinating that even before the growing importance of the Internet, which McLuhan did not know about and Flusser could only imagine,<sup>13</sup> these processes were part of thought experiences: As early as the 1960s, the British architectural group Archigram developed a vision, using the slogan *Instant City*, of gradual equalization of information. Large Zeppelins and hot air balloons, according to the idea, should circulate in routine intervals through less urbanized areas and, similar to a wandering circus, should direct a nation-wide informational, educational, and entertainment program (cf. Cook 1972; Mazel-Roca 1994; Asendorf 2006):

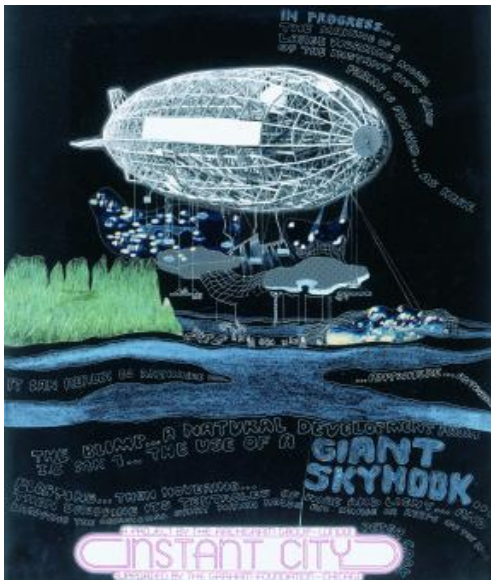


Fig.3: Peter Cook (Archigram) "Black Air Ship, a Project by the Archigram Group, London", 1970. Encre sur papier contrecollé sur carton, recouvert d'un film plastique protecteur, 41,5 × 29,5 cm. Coll. du FRAC Centre/Philippe Magnon

<sup>13</sup> In an interview broadcast by the German Television Company Sat1 in 1992 [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRjiODdrJIM>] Flusser refers to *Minitel*, a videotext online service launched in France in 1981 and considered one of the world's most successful pre-Internet online services.



Fig. 4: Peter Cook (Archigram) "Instant City in a Field Long Elevation 1/200°", 1969, 56,5 × 220 cm. Coll. du FRAC Centre/Philippe Magnon

Although from a modern point of view this vision seems grotesque and naïve in its materiality, with the implementation of Internet terminals in practically every household it appears, in fact, to be becoming a slightly modified reality. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Instant City can be considered as nothing more than a collective experience that takes place in a public space. As Flusser points out with respect to the French *Minitel* videotext online service,<sup>14</sup> it is precisely this public space that becomes lost through the wiring of households. The individual is isolated in front of his computer screen and appears to perceive the world from his private haven. Hence, there seem to be plenty of arguments to state that we are becoming more sedentary than ever before. It is precisely at this point that Flusser's critique applies.

### **Gales of media blowing through the global village**

I would like to start this section with a more extensive citation of a passage to which I have already referred fragmentarily: „Leute, die Häuser bewohnen, ohne je durch die Tür zu gehen, waren bisher ‚Idioten‘ im ursprünglichen griechischen Sinne dieses Wortes: Privatleute, die von der Welt nichts wussten. Das hat sich dank der Informationsrevolution geändert: Informationen werden jetzt an Privathäuser verteilt, und gegenwärtig ist jener der Idiot, der durch die Tür ins Öffentliche schreitet. Es sieht so aus, als ob gegenwärtig das Pendeln zwecklos würde und als ob es jetzt tatsächlich möglich geworden wäre, sitzen zu bleiben. Das ist jedoch ein Irrtum“ (Flusser 1994: 59-60).

<sup>14</sup> His remarks can be heard, for example, in the aforementioned television interview.

“Until now those who never left their homes were seen as ‘idiots’ in the original Greek sense of the word, that is, private people who knew nothing of the world. That has changed as a result of the Information Revolution. Information is now distributed to private homes, and presently it is the person who leaves his home and goes out in public who is seen as the idiot. It looks as if this rushing about is now purposeless and that it is now finally possible to remain seated. But this would be an error...” (Flusser 2003a: 42)

Why should it be an error that the commuting (“Pendeln”) between the private and the public sphere has become purposeless? Why can we not simply sit in front of the television screen, catch up on the news and amuse ourselves, ordering a pizza and a coke online if necessary? Flusser answers this with an image: „Weil nämlich die Informationen, die ins Haus geliefert werden, durch materielle und/oder immaterielle Kanäle laufen, welche die Wände und Dächer durchlöchern. Es zieht im Haus von allen Seiten, die Orkane der Medien sausen hindurch, und es ist unbewohnbar geworden“ (Flusser 1994: 60).

“... because the information that is delivered into the home must be carried by material or nonmaterial channels, which puncture roofs and walls. The home has become drafty, as gales of media sweep through from all directions: it has become uninhabitable” (Flusser 2003a: 42) Flusser’s gales of media are not simply an external, quasi contingent phenomenon that penetrates into the peace of our homes, bothers us and drives us out of the house. The media storm, according to Flusser, is the same one that was known in the ancient world as *πνεύμα* or *spiritus* (Flusser 1994: 61; Flusser 2003a: 43-44)). It penetrates our interior:

„Früher galt es als bezeichnend für den Wind, dass er eine rufende Stimme sei, ein Beruf, eine Berufung, heute gehört zu seiner Charakterisierung, dass er den fassbaren, besitzbaren Grund in Körner zerreibt (kalkuliert), diese zerstreut (dispersiert), um sie dann zu Dünen zu häufen (zu komputieren). Der Wind, dieses gespenstige Unfassbare, der die Nomaden vorantreibt und dessen Ruf sie gehorchen, ist eine Erfahrung, die für uns als Kalkül und Komputation darstellbar wurde. Wir beginnen zu nomadisieren nicht nur, weil der Wind durch unsere durchlöcherten Häuser braust, sondern vor allem auch, weil er in uns hineinfährt“ (Flusser 1994: 61).

“In earlier times the wind was held to have a voice that called—a calling that beckoned. Today we deem as characteristic that the wind grinds the tangible, possessable ground into grains of sand (calculates), scatters them to the wind (disperses), and then piles them up in dunes (computes). The wind, this phantasmical intangibility that drives the nomad and whose call he obeys, is an experience that we describe in terms of calculus and computation. We are beginning to live the nomadic life not only because the wind blows through our punctured houses but in particular because it has entered into us” (Flusser 2003a: 44).

The windy vocation (“Berufung”), that inspired the nomad to follow his way, nowadays corresponds to telepresence: although we allegedly sit quietly in front of the computer, with respect to our words, our thoughts, and our image we are elsewhere. We are nomadic via chat and image telephony from one terminal to the next, regardless of where it may be located on the globe, and we have an impact in extremely different locations.

The question is, however, whether *new nomadism* should be solely understood in a metaphorical sense or, perhaps better, in a virtual sense. In the aforementioned television interview about French *Minitel*, Flusser focuses in effect on the phenomenon of telepresence. This *sitting nomadism* that separates the body from its media presence, however, appears to me to be only one aspect of new nomadism. Another unmistakable effect of (post)-modern life is the fact that our physical sphere of activities is also becoming increasingly broader and that we can move around within it at increasing speeds. This is how cheap airline fares have already revolutionized travel habits in Europe. We are increasingly taking off, often leaving just for a short time, to the most remote locations. But the trend towards change is also continuing in the economic and social realms, increasing exponentially in our liberal, postindustrial society. In specific areas of work, of course, and on particular levels of income, it is becoming more and more common to change companies, or even careers; similarly, a liberalization of public expressions of opinion regarding sexual morals eventually has led, probably more so in Europe than in the US, to flexibility in the area of partnership and family that continues to this day and is marked by terms such as *patchwork family* or *successive polygamy*. In all developed countries, a glance at the divorce rate statistics shows that it seems more and more common to change life partners. With Flusser one could argue that it is not an outside contingent mechanism at work here but, instead, a profound dislocation that our basic convictions are experiencing: “We are beginning to live the nomadic life not only because the wind blows through our punctured houses but in particular because it has entered into us” (Flusser 2003a: 44).

Now, one might argue that there is likewise nothing *nomadic* about it if we question our *identity*, our *me*. Is it not true that the radical dislocation of the *self* is a consequence of the great findings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? A consequence of Darwin’s theory of evolution that tears man away from his god-given excellence and turns him into a reconstruction of the ape, of the teachings of Marx and Freud that abstract the will of our intuitive control and prove that it depends on class concerns or, respectively, on the unconscious? And, ultimately, of Saussure’s linguistics that revealed that even the meaning of speech is not primarily subject to our intention but rather to a differential game of signs in the system of language that is unclear to the individual? The lack of *living within oneself*, of an *inner settledness* that leads to a nomadism of thought, feelings, and

comprehension seems in this respect to be a phenomenon that by no means first begins to become virulent in 1990.

The point, however, in my opinion is the following: in the second era of modernity (after the first era during the Age of Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> and, especially, in the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) we have freed ourselves from a transcendental conviction that was retained during the first era and can be summarized in terms Kant's philosophy: the conviction of free will, with which it is possible to control the body through consciousness, the spirit through rationality and its language, and the soul through the adoption of a well-founded faith based on reason. In the second era of modernity, although the individual loses his trust in self-awareness as well as in self-control, one's *identity* remains externally controllable. Based on the ideals of the French Revolution, the individual attains his identity as a citizen. It is an identity that develops out of a social network, as it is created and maintained for him by both the civil nation-state, including its fascistic outgrowths, and socialism, with its respective administration and police instruments. Therefore, the gales of media that bring about new nomadism could help to *disperse* identity freeing people from the machinery of the state. I shall scrutinize this aspect in the next section.

### **Catastrophic Freedom as a Chance**

Flusser's *Thinking about Nomadism* concludes with a dialectic evaluation. The end of the Neolithic Age caused by the gales of media is similarly a catastrophe and an act of liberation. It is a catastrophe because it makes our homes unlivable, but, simultaneously, it is also could release us from the jail-like sedentary society (German *gesessen* the participle of *sitzen* ('to sit') is not exactly the same as *gesiedelt* ('settled'), but it also means 'been jailed'): „Wir haben zehntausend Jahre lang gesessen, vielleicht als Strafe für eine Sünde, die wir beim Übergang aus dem Paläolithikum ins Neolithikum begangen haben. Das Paläolithikum mit seinen unzähligen leicht erjagbaren Grasfressern und seinen üppigen Beeren und Pilzen war das Paradies und die Erbsünde bestand vielleicht darin, daß wir uns hingesezt haben. Aber jetzt haben wir die Strafe abgesehen und werden ins Freie entlassen. Das ist die Katastrophe: daß wir jetzt frei sein müssen. Und das ist auch die Erklärung für das aufkommende Interesse am Nomadentum“ (Flusser 1994: 64).

“We have been settled for 10,000 years, perhaps as punishment for a sin that we committed during the transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic. The Paleolithic, teeming with easily hunted herbivores and luxuriating in berries and mushrooms, was paradise, and perhaps our original sin consisted in our having settled down in it. But we have served our time and are being released. The catastrophe is that we are now forced to be free. And this explains our emerging interest in nomadism” (Flusser 2003a: 47).

To be more specific, the epochal change, “which is even more radical than the assumption of an impending posthistory” (Flusser 2003a: 41), seems to bring with it an increasing weakening of the prison-like state machinery whatever its ideological fundamentals are. The identity of the individual is increasingly becoming defined less by her passport, her residence registration or her criminal record: and even the national language acquired during childhood and the patriotic historical truths that are taught in school are becoming less important in a highly mobile, multicultural world. The claim to power of individual state figures is losing ground to political and economic globalization both symbolically and effectively. Multinational organizations and global players are increasingly providing the guidelines around which our daily lives are oriented. This also weakens the traditional national state at the symbolic level: the individual, at least in the *highly-developed* postindustrial societies, is no longer primarily defined as a citizen and subject whose identity is forced upon her by the country whose passport she possesses.

On the other hand, state machinery is long-living. It has been reorganized as, for example, in Russia after the breakdown of the Soviet-Union; it has proved to be able to deal with drastic economic and ideological change as in the case of China’s state-capitalism nowadays; and it has been reaffirmed as in the United States by a new wave of nationalism focusing on a new enemy after 9/11. And, of course, also the liberal European Community is a state machinery whose bureaucracy is a considerable constraint to media-inspired *nomadic* activities.

It is obvious that new media could contribute to a liberating loss of sedentary identity, at least when they are, in Flusser’s sense, openly structured media that permit a free selection and dialog. The Internet, whose triumph Flusser could only imagine, can be regarded as a prototype of such an open dialogical medium, but, as we have seen especially in the case of China, it can still be blocked and manipulated.

In the Western World at least, in only a few years the Internet has revolutionized communication habits. It makes telepresence possible not only through chatting and image telephony, but it also exponentially increases the amount of information available to the individual in a form that until recently was unimaginable. It is not only a matter of such information that in the past was only accessible to the individual in a universal encyclopedia but also especially of the type of data (text, image, audio files) that one can create and communicate. This might be considered a self-controlled process of memory building, that frees the individual from being just part of an anonymous mass, but it also results in the virtualization of privacy: the ephemeral nature of speech in oral proximity, of movement, and of activity only to be seen by the eye of the present observer recedes behind the electronic recording that characterizes the act of telecommunication. Therefore, the chance that lies in the nomadic freedom of new media is also a burden. The gales of media do not only drive us out of our homes, our external sphere of

privacy, but also affects our internal privacy, externalizing, temporalizing, and fragmentizing the images we have of ourselves.

### **Nomadism of the Body – Nomadism of the Mind**

The uninhabitable effects created by the media channels running through perforated homes, however, raises further questions. Is it solely the telepresence, the continuously mediated *not-being-at-home*, that makes the home unlivable? Regardless of how disoriented and telepresent we may be, do we not remain at least physically comfortable by sitting on our sofa and casually typing on our laptops? Is Flusser's nomadism only a virtual one; a nomadism of the mind and not of the body?

Factually, as already suggested before, this is not the case: Without overextending themselves financially, more and more often middle class Europeans are taking a high-speed train or commercial jet and are physically moving themselves in a radius that far surpasses that of their parents or grandparents 25 or 50 years ago: going to Paris to see an opera, flying to London or New York for the weekend for a quick shopping spree, and, of course, going to the Mediterranean to take a swim. Three weeks of scuba diving in the Philippines or trekking in the Himalayas: something that these days a German high-school teacher's family can afford. Study abroad for several months with the European Socrates Program and, in addition, internships around the world become more and more common among university students, and, as you can read in German lifestyle magazines, several months of downtime, whether for continent-hopping around the world or a pilgrimage to Santiago, have clearly become a career-accompanying component of successful upper-middle-class biographies.

What drives people to live out both sides of telepresence? Is it not only to be somewhere else in the world in mediated spirit while sitting at home, but also the other way around, to leave the spirit at home and to move the body? Perhaps it is the desperate wish to reconstruct an experiential oneness, i.e., a reconciliation of both physical and mental experiences that through mediated spatialization of our existence literally slides further and further away. Perhaps, however, we are now on the brink of a simple revenge of our bodies from which our spirit is trying in vain to liberate itself in modern times. Instead of grounding our spirit in front of the computer during its virtual getaways, the body is now moving ahead of the spirit, moving increasingly faster and increasingly farther around the world, and is forcing the spirit to play the role of the rearguard. The divergence of spiritual and physical presence, however, seems to be the mainspring that does not allow the *post-modern nomads* to find peace and, differently than the discovery travelers of the modern times, does not lead them to a destination: instead, and against every belief in advancement in general, it forces them into an oscillating movement of cultural practices.



## Alternating the Nomad with the Idiot – an Outlook

Is the catastrophic freedom now really adequately named with the term *nomad*? Are traditional nomads now so *free* to be fruitful as an allegory? Isabel Toral-Niehoff (2002) answers in the negative in her meticulous analysis of traditional nomadic life, claiming that because of his strong social constraints, the nomad is not at all suitable for freedom fantasies. This objection should not be dismissed; however, nor does post-modern nomadic life take place in a social vacuum. The free choice of nomadism with respect to the social-economic or politically-compelled emigration is connected to social and economic constraints. The post-modern nomad comes from a social stratum that provides her with the financial means and necessary knowledge for her rambles. For this reason, post-modern nomads effectively form a transnational clan that causes tension for all of those who, for lack of resources, remain sedentary or for those who, out of completely different reasons than that of a media storm are forced into a migrant existence. Therefore, media based nomadism is only a part of life nowadays, and it seems to be still a little bit early to claim a radical epochal change as Flusser did in 1990.

Liberating nomadism surely has its appeal for all of those who can afford it. Yet constant telepresence in a divergence of body and spirit also harbors the danger of burnouts, of chronic exhaustion. It therefore seems more and more important to consider an alternative model, a compensatory concept for post-modern nomadism. Such a model could perhaps be concretized in the conceptual figure of the *idiot*.

In Flusser's *Thinking about Nomadism* we read that within a sedentary lifestyle, the apolitical existence of idiots is pitted against the civic fulfillment of duties: "Until now those who never left their homes were seen as 'idiots' in the original Greek sense of the word, that is, private people who knew nothing of the world" (Flusser 2003a: 43). The idiot who closes her ears in order to not hear the political message is, like the nomad, not a useful community member. While the nomad projects open antagonism to the sedentary person and flees only, to speak with Deleuze / Guattari, to build her war machinery in the seclusion of her deserts, the idiot steadily remains passive. The idiot obeys, but she does not fulfill her duties. Whereas the extroverted madmen are locked away and in extreme cases exterminated, the dim-witted idiots are ignored and scorned. Precisely here lies the wisdom of idiocy as a survival strategy. Stopping more often when others rush, marveling in the fascination of ephemerals, enjoying slowness and simply temporarily turning off the flow of information: these could be prescriptions for fleeing from nomadic stress as well as from sedentary imprisonment. And perhaps this is the method: to learn to alternate between being a nomad and an idiot, to sometimes act faster and sometimes slower than the totalizing train of long-living sedentary institutions, in order to elude them as much as possible.

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