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The Protreptic Writer

Flusser's writing has a style. That much I take to be uncontroversial. There may even be considerable agreement about many features of that style, such as a tendency toward a roughly circular compositional form, patterns of repetition, figuration, comparison and contrast. But what first drew me to this writing and continues to draw me back is its *effect*. I mean the experience of being persuaded, won over, not only to accept the surprising new answers Flusser sometimes gives to old questions, but also to absorb, even adopt the new position he sets out.

This paper takes Flusser's writing to be rhetorical in general — it almost always sets out to persuade its readers of something — but more specifically that it does this by engaging readers in an implicit dialogue concerning some aspect of their shared situation, feature especially noticeable in the short essays, such as *Gestures* or *The Shape of Things* (Flusser 2011; 1999). This writing is, in a word, “protreptic,” a form of persuasion arguably especially well-suited to phenomenology¹ (Wiesing 2014: 60-62). In Flusser's writing, there are many examples. “The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe” (Flusser 2011:118-134) is just one of them. But it is a particularly clear one and — more on the relevance of this below — it is my own current favourite. This paper tries to trace the way this text frames and persuades its reader. It goes on to show how the relationship between writer and reader develops, not only leading the reader toward the text's rhetorical goal, that is, toward a change of heart, but also identifying her as someone who has been perpetuating misunderstanding but who, with the tools and motivation provided in this essay, could change her ways. In looking for “the reader in the text”² (Suleimann 1980), an unfamiliar aspect of Flusser's orientation toward his audience comes to light, suggesting that further surprises would await further study of rhetorical structures in Flusser's writing.

Neither exactly a genre nor a style, “protreptic” refers to a text's “communicative purpose” (Kotzé 2004). First appearing in a competitive marketplace for intellectual skills

¹ I am grateful to Lambert Wiesing for having introduced me to the term.

² The main title of this book has become a kind of shorthand for the practice of identifying the positioning of writer and reader in a given text.

in ancient Greece, it names a kind of speech and writing that explicitly sets out to change the audience's mind, to persuade readers or listeners to adopt a particular position or practice. The dialogues of Plato are no doubt the most familiar example. Protreptic was further meant to exhibit the author's rhetorical skills, sometimes with the explicit goal of attracting students — something potentially relevant to a contemporary writer searching, as Flusser always was, for teaching work and publication opportunities. Protreptic writing is not restricted to a particular genre or topic, but it does always show an awareness of the audience. By acknowledging and addressing readers' probable convictions, hopes, fears and resistances, it steers them toward some changed understanding of a situation author and reader share, a method that has been advocated by at least one contemporary writer as an effective leadership tool, specifically in a business context (Kirby 2009).

As I begin to read “The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe” I am invited to join the author in observing a pipe-smoker, specifically to notice that this gesture requires an extraordinary number of pockets. And yet even before I reach the end of the first paragraph, I sense that he and I may not be in quite the same position. He states the goal of the essay as an answer to the question “Why would anyone want to smoke a pipe?” Only I immediately wonder why anyone would write an essay on this topic if he were not himself a pipe-smoker, and further, since I know from other sources that he is, I wonder why he is feigning not to be, pretending to be observing *with* me — two observers puzzled by the same phenomenon. I am being identified (“hailed,” to use the semiotic term) as someone who does not smoke a pipe herself, but who lives in a time and place where some people do. She finds the practice generally unappealing – the evidence being the sceptical tone of question tacitly ascribed to her, “Why would anyone...?” But it has never been important enough to her to think about seriously.

So far, he has it right, and I do not object, although I know that the question is a rhetorical move: I am being assigned a role, and the question is, in a sense, my first “speaking” line. In the time it takes me to reassure myself that he will get around to confessing his real identity as a smoker eventually and that something of interest is coming, he has greatly complicated the issue.

He “reads” his own initial description of a pipe-smoker's many pockets as evidence: many pockets are needed to store various tools and materials for a procedure that is complex, consisting of many separate actions. As an external observer, I could not have

known that. He has, then, quietly confessed to being a smoker. Without quite saying it, he has also told me not only that he knows far more about this than I do, but also that by admitting that I have never before known or cared, I've tacitly forfeited my right to quibble. Then—and none too soon—he begins to explain why I *should* care. He sets about convincing me, step by step, that pipe-smoking — to jump ahead to the conclusion — is a very small but absolutely genuine instance of an *aesthetic practice*, a category of human experience that has been very seriously, one might even say tragically misunderstood in Western thought for centuries.

At this point, it's clear that Flusser is a pipe-smoker and the reader is not. Still, neither of us seems to know why some people — he among them — smoke pipes. So part of the dialogue now seems to be internal to him. I am “listening,” learning, bearing witness. Given that my identity as a less than sympathetic observer is established by the second paragraph — not unkindly, but firmly — it's clear that the path ahead will not be altogether smooth. I will need to have each step of the argument spelled out in some detail. I will know nothing of phenomenology, nor will I entertain the slightest suspicion of any connection between it aesthetic experience. My role is to deliver “conventional wisdom” at key junctures, that is, to present common understandings of relationships, definitions of terms, and values, and to watch as their inadequacy is exposed.

At least it turns out he agrees with me that pipe-smoking *is* trivial. More exactly, he accepts that it will be trivial for me, a non-smoker; for him, it seems, it is trivial only inasmuch as he is able to see the issue from my point of view — but that only emerges later. In his first effort to answer the initial question, “Why do some people smoke pipes?” Flusser gives me credit for being willing to dismiss causal arguments, that is, for understanding that all historical, psychological, neurophysiological “reasons” for smoking miss the point. Here, Flusser uses the first person singular for the first time: “When I ask why I smoke a pipe, I am not talking about the things that condition me to smoke a pipe. I mean the motive for my smoking.” (Flusser: 2011:119) From this point “we” continue, or “one” continues to notice things that are relevant to a continuing dialogue between reader and writer, both positioned outside the practice itself. Only now I know that there is an “I” as well, a voice from the inside, wielding the authority of the author's personal smoking experience, to which I, a non-smoker, have no access.

“We” notice the regularity and repetition of a pipe-smoker’s movements, their resemblance to a ritual. “One” expects “ritual” to consist of rigidly fixed, stereotypical movements. “We,” see that each smoker smokes in his own way, producing a very diverse range of styles — however unlikely it seems that I would have noticed on my own. He anticipates that I will not be able to reconcile this new information with my conventional understanding of “stereotypical”. He acknowledges the logic in my thinking. Still, I’m wrong. I need a broader understanding of “stereotypical” behaviour: it actually does not mean “fixed” in the sense, say, that behavioural patterns among animals are fixed. It should, at least for present purposes, refer to behaviour that does not serve a purpose, is not meant to communicate anything to others, and — above all — is shaped and limited by an existing behavioural model. I also need to understand that when we are concerned with gestures of ritual, as opposed to those of work or communication, there is no conflict between theory and practice.

Here, I do begin to lose patience. A reader who can’t see why theory and practice have suddenly appeared here — and I suspect this would be the case for most readers — must await the explanation. It turns out to involve a clarification of “ritual” as movements that are both completely practical in the sense of having no theoretical basis, and completely theoretical in that they have no intention of achieving anything. Ritual is then seen as behaviour *rightly* called stereotypical — the contradiction has been resolved and a new definition of “ritual” achieved: we are concerned with behaviour that may vary a great deal as long as it stays within the boundaries of an established model. He goes on to give a memorable description of the discussions pipe smokers have, “in an atmosphere of smiling mutual tolerance” (Flusser 2011:121) about the “right” way to smoke a pipe. This is an instance of a theoretical discussion when nothing is at stake, and it is completely pointless: “Pipe-smoking’s complete impracticality appears in this contradiction as a struggle between opinions (*doxai*) regarding the best way to smoke a pipe, in which all the contestants realize that the issue is subjective, for when there is no intention of achieving anything, there can be no objective best method of smoking. And pipe smoking’s complete practicality appears in the contradiction as a variety of smoking styles, that is, as aesthetic rather than epistemological variations of the same theoretically incomprehensible activity — stereotypical, after all” (Flusser 2011: 121).

This is the essay's first mention of the term "aesthetic".

At this point a reader begins to get increasingly frequent reminders of the initial agreement she made with the author at the beginning of the essay, namely that pipe-smoking is not an important matter—hence the "smiling mutual tolerance" of theoretical debates among smokers. It is as if Flusser wants me to know that he knows that he may be losing me as he approaches the main point of the essay, its core, or perhaps better, its apogee. For the next move is an identification of ritual as an aesthetic phenomenon.

It's a "daring assertion," he says in the very next sentence. He wants me to know that he knows he's leading me into territory I will find very unfamiliar. In fact he treats me as someone whose understanding of "aesthetic" is not firm enough to appreciate how daring the assertion really is. I'll need to be shown some of the implications before I'll understand. And he is absolutely right: if I agree that ritual is an aesthetic phenomenon, I will need not only to completely reconfigure my current understanding of art, but also to radically reorder, essentially reverse my current understandings the ways art is related to religion and to ritual. Both ritual and religion are to be aligned as possibilities within the broader category of art: "...there is an aesthetic form of being, the artistic life, and...this life expresses itself in various gestures, including ritual ones. It is not art that is a kind of rite but a rite that is an art form...This is not the usual claim that the artistic life is a life-form along with the political life, the scientific life, or the religious life, or even that the artistic life is aligned under the religious one (Kierkegaard). It is rather the unfamiliar claim that religious life, inasmuch as one understands it to be a ritual life, is one kind of artistic life form" (Flusser 2011: 125).

It is, in fact, a lot to ask of a reader. This is the reason for being repeatedly reminded beforehand of the initial agreement about the unimportance of pipe-smoking. Now she can see that its very triviality makes pipe-smoking a better example of a ritual behaviour than religious rites would be, even though almost anyone would associate ritual with religion before anything else. He assumes that I take religious rites very seriously, and hastens to confirm that he does as well. The core of the essay, in any case, involves a fundamental re-ordering of categories few of us consider very often, and probably not very systematically even then. I take myself to be a "good enough" reader – not ideal, perhaps, but curious and generally well-disposed, perhaps particularly toward this essay in light an educational background in art history and experience working as an art critic,

curator and teacher. I was unable to absorb the argument in detail, but found it very exciting in its general outline, an unexpected acknowledgement of a relationship between artistic and religious experience, along with a remarkable recognition of aesthetic experience as the overarching category.

The dramatic expansion of the essay's "field" — from pipe-smoking to aesthetic experience — appears almost exactly the middle of the text. After focussing quite closely on pipe-smoking in the first half, that is, readers are asked to "zoom out" and see pipe-smoking as one instance of aesthetic experience as a whole, a vast field embracing both art and religion. This structural shift, occurring as it does in the middle of the text, makes "The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe" recognizable as a circular composition, one of many examples in Flusser's writing. This in itself would not constitute further support for the claim that this text is protreptic, although some of the most celebrated ancient and medieval protreptic texts are circular. Homer's epics and specific books of the Bible, in particular, are very strict form of "ring" compositions³ (Douglas 2007). Still, the composition is one of the ways the text achieves its communicative purpose. Looser than a ring, the circular compositional structure of "The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe" establishes a number of steps or reference points on the way toward the central idea, then returns to them on the way back to the starting point, reinforcing, clarifying or repositioning them in light of the central idea, namely the identity of pipe-smoking as an *aesthetic* experience.

In the first part of the essay, for example, we encounter a conflict when pipe-smoking is identified as *stereotypical* behaviour. That is, the idea of rigidly-fixed, repeated behaviour is in conflict with the tremendously inventive diversity in the ways actual pipe-smokers actually smoke. This is resolved by broadening the definition of "stereotypical". On the far side of the essay, the issue reappears, carrying considerably more weight. "Stereotype" returns as "model," and positioned as one of the key features of an aesthetic gesture wherever it appears. In gestures of painting and dancing and piano-playing — as well as pipe-smoking — the structuring and limiting effect of a model can be observed, a point

³ Douglas maintains very strict criteria for the identification of a genuine ring composition, but she also recognizes more contemporary almost-rings, pointing out the difficulty modern readers sometime have in reading them: "In a ring composition the meaning is located in the middle. A reader who reads a ring as if it were a straight linear composition will miss the meaning."(x)

likely to surprise readers arriving with conventional Western understandings of “artforms,” who is, however, perfectly free to test the conclusion for herself.

Another example is the use of the first-person pronoun “I,” once in the first half and again in the second. Breaking the overall use of the inclusive pronouns “we” and “one” that position both writer and reader *outside* the gesture through most of the essay, “I” is a voice that speaks from *inside* the aesthetic gesture. We — he and his readers — may entertain ideas about what “causes” people to smoke — but “I” am not the object of such forces. “I” am a free agent whose behaviour is not “caused” by anything. I *act myself out* in this gesture. It is a voice that lies beyond “our” power to refute, and a key part of the essay’s protreptic effect is achieved by showing the reader his or her limitations. Here, even before it has been identified as aesthetic gesture, pipe-smoking is set apart from other gestures in terms of readers’ — non-smokers’ — access to it: later, after it has been identified as an aesthetic gesture, that is, as behaviour that affords an opportunity to act a self out, “I” reappears briefly as a voice from inside the aesthetic gesture of drumming (Flusser 2011:130). Again it is the voice of an authoritative insider, rejecting efforts to “explain” the gesture as, or at least primarily as, a means of accomplishing work or communication, insisting on its self-referential quality.

Yet another example is the repetition of the categorization: work, communication ritual. At the very beginning the question is stated as: “...if pipe-smoking (1) increases the smoker’s dependence on circumstances and in this sense reduces his freedom; (2) is a complex gesture that does not accomplish anything, as work would; and (3) does not “distinguish” the smoker...why do some people smoke pipes?” (118) The list appears again just after the pivotal assertion (the aesthetic identity of the gesture) in the middle of the text, and again at the end, repeated like a touchstone or anchor at challenging moments. When it reappears for the third time, we can identify it as belonging to a class of questions about gestures that do not achieve anything or share anything with others, but rather allow the gesturer to “act himself out,” to find himself. They are aesthetic gestures.

At the end, then, we return to the beginning. I am, or should be, convinced that pipe-smoking is an aesthetic phenomenon, which is to say a means for the gesturer to act out a self out and thereby to experience his or her own individuality. Along the way I’ve come to understand that pipe-smoking is so minor with respect to the main structures of the

smoker's life – work and communication — that it is available as a discussable example of an aesthetic gesture, in contrast to other, far more profound examples that would undoubtedly trigger fierce opposition. I accept the conclusion. But because the argument expanded to embrace the vast areas of art and religion, I sense that “we” — and Flusser remains “with” his readers on this point— are still left with enormous unresolved challenges. It will take a lot more work to reorient my thinking along the suggested lines. Despite my initial resistance, I have been convinced that a common, trivial gesture like smoking a pipe can be an authentic *aesthetic* gesture. That is a start. But it leaves the broader issues of art, aesthetics, ritual and religion open. It asks for an understanding of “aesthetic” subtle enough to recognize and value ordinary, modest practices – possibly even my own — and also to accept limitations with respect others’ “freely chosen behaviour ‘acting out’ a self within an existing model.”

In this essay the reader serves as a convenient representative of commonplace views, unexamined assumptions, a kind of foil for an exposition of some central difficulties in ordinary understandings of aesthetic experience. The text moves carefully, with repetitions. It feels like instruction. To this extent, it does not flatter. And yet it also frames its reader as someone of great potential, someone who can not only accept that such a minor behavioural pattern as smoking a pipe could have something in common with the creation of great art or religious insight, but who also could possibly apply the methods demonstrated in the essay. She might go on to identify aesthetic gestures in surprising places, including in her own life, or she might be able to sense the mismatches and contradictions in the pervasive understanding of art as consisting of “works”.

In his book *Exhortations to Philosophy: The Protreptics of Plato, Isocrates and Aristotle*, James Henderson Collins II list four essential features of protreptic texts: “(1) *Protreptic is dialogic*. While it may not take the shape of a formal dialogue, protreptic discourse is always a hybrid discourse which contains the voices of its competition. (2) *Protreptic is agonistic*. Protreptic is also in dialogue with other competing *protreptiko* and traditional discourse in the rhetorical situation of the marketplace of ideas. (3) *Protreptic is situational*. The shape and content of a protreptic discourse are determined, in large part, by the milieu of its competition and audience. A protreptic text certainly can be read in a different time and place and still produce an effect, but it is moveable because the scenario of potential conversion which it dramatized for the reader is contextually rich (4) *Protreptic is*

rhetorical...Whatever its theoretical considerations or demonstrative powers, protreptic discourse is ultimately pragmatic and deliberative, that is, concerned with adopting a future course of action” (Collins 2015:17-18).

Collins goes on to advance the book’s main argument, that protreptic was instrumental in the defining and legitimizing of philosophy itself.

Flusser’s writing seems to meet the first three criteria easily. It is not difficult to identify *agon* — contest or competition — in Flusser’s writing. The dialogic elements, too, appear plentiful. The situation is in fact broad, but can be defined as Western post-industrial culture at the end of the 20th century. This essay’s status as what Collins calls *rhetorical*, that is, its concern with a future course of action is perhaps not so explicit. But there is a sense of being “walked through” a phenomenological investigation, an invitation to philosophy after all.

Without direct reference to *epoché* or “bracketing out,” Flusser begins with a bit of advice about how to spot a pipe-smoker without making judgments or associations: look for the one with lots of pockets. It is followed by the quick, clean dismissal of causal explanations for smoking, again a stipulation of *epoché*, but again not stated as such. Flusser makes no appeal to external authority. Rather he makes the demand as the one who has had the aesthetic experience himself. He credits us with having noticed the deliberate, repetitive quality of our object of study — a quality visible to anyone, and with recognizing it as ritual. He provides the observations about the diversity of pipe-smoking styles, although we might have seen that for ourselves had we gone looking. The crucial issues are raised between writer and reader, between one who has had the aesthetic experience in question and the one who has not. Flusser has expressly chosen pipe-smoking so as to create this tension— it is not coincidental, but rather structurally essential that he identify the reader straightaway as someone who does *not* smoke a pipe.

At one level the essay demonstrates how to gain access to someone else’s aesthetic gesture. It is possible if *and only if* he helps me, as he has here, by telling me. Only he can know that he finds this activity pleasurable, that he believes absolutely in having chosen it freely, and that it therefore is an aesthetic experience for him. If he doesn’t tell me, I can’t know – unless I myself freely choose to take up pipe-smoking and find it pleasurable. That is the nature of an aesthetic experience. The pipe-smoking example is a convenient way of cracking through my stubborn resistance to becoming aware of the way I — and

Flusser is surely addressing a common, rather than an exceptional reader — read, or often fail to read, gestures, a failure that ultimately obscures the aesthetic dimension of any communication. One senses an effort draw the reader toward phenomenology itself, through the *epoché*, through the concept of communication as gesture, to the remarkable human capacity to “read” (and to misread) the gestures of others, and the dangers of falling into bad habits, of accepting commonly held views at face value, and more.

If we agreed to retitile the essay “Exhortation to Phenomenology” we would perhaps call attention to the broader ambition that underpins it. But we would also undermine some of its most remarkable effects. For the focus on pipe-smoking sets up the *agon*, the conflict between pipe-smoking writer and non-pipe-smoking reader: these are the conditions for the exceptional exchange that follows between the inside and the outside of an aesthetic phenomenon. Because aesthetic experience is an experience of self, it is difficult — in important respects impossible — to share: In this essay, the reader becomes the object of the writer’s best efforts to share something about his experience, specifically his pleasure in smoking. The effort in itself is doomed to failure, but the point about aesthetic experience is made: an outsider can observe whatever effects the gesture may have in the world, can also receive an insider’s effort to communicate something about the experience, but cannot actually experience the pleasure.

Seasoned readers of Flusser’s writing generally do have favourite writings, usually among the essays. I am no exception. “Smoking a Pipe” heads my list at this point (they change, I’ve found) followed closely by “The Gesture of Photographing”. In asking myself “why these?” I began to think of reading Flusser as itself an aesthetic experience, at least to some extent, one that would afford particular pleasure to a reader who found something of herself in them, such as an insight into a persistently unsatisfied desire, an unanswered question, an unconfirmed suspicion. In this case the essay spoke to a very long, unresolved problem with the term “aesthetic,” which seemed to have two utterly irreconcilable meanings. Flusser did not “solve” the problem. He effectively redefined it, and in the process not only confirmed my own sense of its importance, but dramatically changed and expanded its scope. And he did it in an inventive way that drew attention to the writing itself, a matter of keen interest to someone who writes with effort rather than ease. It began to seem as though a given reader might be particularly drawn to a text that in some way features his or her own unresolved questions and doubts. Flusser constructs

his readers primarily to ask, wonder, and speculate. But on the whole he does not make assertions that definitely conclude the dialogue. Rather he gives the questioner the tools, materials, and “license” to go on asking. In the case of “The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe,” for example, he answers the opening question: some people smoke pipes because it gives them pleasure to “act themselves out” in a modest, unobtrusive ritual, affording the occasional taste of a ritual life without the tremendous demands of actually living one. It is an answer; it also leaves a trail of unresolved implications behind, which any particular reader may or may not pursue further.

The idea of a communicative purpose suggests a possible coherence in Flusser’s very diverse writing, a coherence that would reach across languages, across the boundaries of disciplinary fields such as philosophy, history or criticism, and between genres such as autobiography, fiction, or exposition. Such coherence would no doubt strengthen Flusser’s identity as a writer. It could also change the ways he is often aligned with other writers: his work as a whole might look less readily comparable to that of, say, McLuhan or Barthes or Kittler than to the oeuvres of such acknowledged writers of protreptic texts as Plato, Aristotle or Augustine. There are no complete or definitive answers here — I have access to only a fraction of Flusser’s writing in any case. The paper argues only for the value of taking his pattern of addressing readers seriously. It proposes, finally, that “to read him wisely is to read him widely,” as Albert C. Outler, one of Augustine’s translators, wrote in an introduction to the *Confessions* (Outler 2002:n.p.) Flusser’s work casts a wide net, with potential appeal to a very diverse readership, but seems to be most effective when it finds a “match,” a reader whose experiences, curiosities, frustrations or convictions about the world resonate – even if briefly or imperfectly — with those of Flusser’s projected reader.

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