

Introduction

Freedom and Reflection

With the terms *Freedom* and *Reflection*, we chose a topic for this edition of the *Flusser Studies* that, on the one hand, addresses one of our central concerns, one inscribed in the name of our circle – *International interdisciplinary work group for philosophic reflection (IiAphR)* – and, on the other, wishes to pose questions about the specific relationship of these two terms in the work of Vilém Flusser.

The *IiAphR*, now over 16 years old, is an open circle without a fixed location, a circle that moves between institutions and is devoted to self-organization, critical research, intergenerational dialogue, connections between the academic and the extra-academic, to young and integrated gender development, and philosophy and the humanities in Europe. The circle's welcoming environment, which makes possible *critical reflection* in the first place, helps realize the full potential of its philosophical work. *Free reflection* in this context often means interactions in restlessness; reflection treads a thin line between muse and irritation. Both together develop reflection's full potential. At such a line, Vilém Flusser and the circle also meet.

Thanks to *Flusser Studies* and the efforts of many researchers worldwide, Flusser's writings have been established as an independent field of study. Flusser is considered one of the fathers of media theory and the philosophy of media, and his work has provoked euphoria as well as harsh criticism. Amidst this dichotomy, Vilém Flusser stands out as a dazzling figure in the historic field of the humanities, a figure whose writing gains great significance in the face of the far-reaching meaning of media in contemporary life. Within philosophic academic discourse, however, at least in Germany, Flusser has yet to find a place. The reasons for this are numerous. They may rest partly on the history of education in Germany in the 20th century, and partly on Flusser's own style of thinking, often in terms of both the content and the method of communication of his thought. At the same time, questions about his relevance have become pressing – not least because of his emphatic engagement with technology,¹ which has very few critical components. This is an urgent question, as the first apotheoses in the Internet found complication and complexity (for example in the *Arab Spring*), while attracting problems, doubts, and criticisms concerning its actual capacity for democracy or its connection with capitalistic structures. Without, for instance, the technology to compute enormous

¹ Concerning Flusser's discussion of *Technology*, see the piece from Karen Koch and Johanna Lang in this edition.

amounts of data at hyper-speeds, the current financial crisis would not even be conceivable, the social effects of which have shocked the entire world. The pieces collected in this edition, each in its own way, concentrate on a number of Flusser's writings, in which the technological and medial developments are considered in conjunction with social realities.² In this perspective, the open-minded philosopher reveals himself to be a thinker of acute political applicability, as when he speaks of the *end of politics* in face of the relationship between technology and society.

If *freedom and reflection* are two themes with contemporary resonance, it is only because they also gesture back to a long philosophical tradition. Flusser always threw himself zealously into critically rethinking, reframing, and reevaluating the Western tradition. For that reason, he appears at first to have held no particular interest in a specific understanding of reflection, a term shaped by theories of consciousness in classic philosophy. And indeed, the phenomenon of *reflection* (from our point of view) is for Flusser, too, a primary and basic element – under the new stipulations, of course, that he discovered. Flusser's reference to the tradition and to the changes undertaken by him appears in a new and different light when one considers the critical revision of the tradition which begun by so many thinkers in the first half of the 20th century. This revision as a heightened awareness for the corporeal and bodily, the emotional, the inter-subjective and the interpersonal, the other, the stranger, and, not least, for the inter-subjective, social, and the, by now, global forms of communication – that is, technology.

A complex interconnectedness of these modern perspectives constitutes Flusser's thoughts on contemporary man, whose culture is influenced from the start by technologies. Via critical engagement, he links this to the philosophical tradition of reflection, which specifically, since Descartes and the dawn of the modern era, has signified the relation of the thinking subject to him- or herself. Flusser delivers sustained criticism of this reductionist thinking that is intrinsic to the theories of knowledge and aesthetic worldviews from Descartes to Kant to the positivism of the 19th century. This includes the centering on the individual subject instead of the emphasis on inter-subjectivity³, which could reveal paths from subject to project to virtuality. It includes as well the historical consciousness, which derives future possibilities from the past instead of abstracting from the future to understand the present. And it includes not least of all, the concrete and real component often missing from the conversation. Phenomenologically, Flusser understands *reflection* as a concrete situation that is mirrored back to the individual in which technology reveals itself as a

² Concerning the relation of the social and media reality, see the article of Steffen Koritsch in this edition.

³ Concerning the relationship between intersubjectivity and foreignness in Flusser's work, see the essay from Frauke A. Kurbacher in this edition.

means of *reflection*, as a game between things and phenomena.

As a counter to a consciousness-centered concept of *reflection*, which, as a thought about thinking, constitutes a central act of individual self-consciousness and self-recognition, Flusser often seeks out in his stories and pictures of the history of media development the very processes in which the individual experiences him- or herself as integrated in the apparatus of the language and technology of culture.⁴ „*Ich kann mir nichts mehr vorstellen ohne Apparate; das ist die einzige Möglichkeit der Vernetzung*“⁵, he explains in the Bochumer Lectures from 1991 (KWD: 55).⁶ Flusser conceptualizes the relationship between the individual and the technical apparatus in historical as well as systematic methods under the premise of a perfect and indelible impression on the individual through technical media. On the one hand, this thought reflects the fact that we construct conditions with technology, to which we are subordinate. For this reason, Arendt defines technology as the *conditio humana*. On the other hand, this idea emphasizes that human existence itself necessarily manifests a medial (technical) character. The thesis that our relations to self, other and world – in short our *Haltungen*⁷ – can only be thought about under the condition that our essence is stamped by technology, constitutes one of the theoretically challenging inspirations of the communicologist, which affected the common Flusser-conversation and the pieces in this edition both in style and in critical method. The multidimensionality of flusserian technology refracts itself in its diversity within the essays here. The flusserian concept of *Technology* allows no simple definition, but rather interlaces itself with various thoughts, themes, and perspectives from Flusser’s work. In direct redress to Flusser’s optimism concerning the media and the developments of computer technology and cybernetics, we have continuously taken a critical distance from the flusserian claims throughout the course of our discussion. Nevertheless, Flusser’s worldview holds a hardly debatable power of suggestion in the face of the apparatus’s indispensability in contemporary life. The essays that grew from this challenging discussion also question the contour of *technical-medial reflection* – as well as its alleged implications of freedom – with respect to its various facets and contradictions, its potential as well as its limitations.

The *reflection on the apparatus* in the *Bochumer Lectures* constitutes the metaphor for the

⁴ Concerning writing as a medium, see the essay from Eduardo Guerreiro B. Losso in this edition.

⁵ “I cannot imagine myself without apparatuses; that is the only possibility for interconnectedness” translated by William Stewart and Karen Koch.

⁶ Concerning the subject of interconnectedness, see the article of Helga Pachnike and Barbara Eitel in this edition.

⁷ The German term *Haltung* isn’t easily translatable. There are various translations, which don’t express the term correctly, so we can only present a spectrum of what it includes: behavior, attitudes, dispositions, modes of thinking. See to this subject also the article from Frauke A. Kurbacher in this edition.

communicative ensemble of culture as a whole, in which acquired information is saved, processed, and disseminated, and further contains a special explosiveness in the present-day, as „*das außerordentlich schwierige Gleichgewicht zwischen Dialog und Diskurs ist gegenwärtig nur dank Apparaten zu leisten*”⁸ (Flusser 1991: 40). The production and dissemination of information, through the forms of dialogue and discourse, constitute the concepts, which according to Flusser also possess deeply ethical dimension. For the former means a symmetrical relationship of the transfer and reception of information between the dialogue partners, while the latter is defined as an asymmetrical and hierarchical distribution of information, but both are only separable in theory, as they play off of each other in myriad ways.⁹ Flussers criticism of power processes within communication begins with the technical as well as social apparatuses, which are capable of becoming media of freedom, but also just as easily media of bondage. Based on that, one of the general concerns of our essays has to do with the critical engagement of the ties between *freedom and reflection* in the design of the project with respect to its members, an issue important to Flusser as well.¹⁰ In his piece on the gesture of taking photos, Flusser places the photographer and the philosopher next to each other, as both select a picture of the world within a mirror of a real or metaphorical camera. This choice translates not merely to a picture of the world, but rather to a *projection into the future* of possible worlds. There it is assumed that *open reflection* will find a path, weaves together the spaces between individuals, and that both develop and are realized in, across, and, at times, against the limitations, which are the necessary bases that make possible free existence, as self and as one-among-others. Such conditions belong under no circumstances, however, to a *philosophie perennis*, nor are they simply desired. The choice of multiple possible images of the world is an example of the dynamic of freedom (Flusser 1997: 116). A reflection back onto the individual’s biased standpoint is always bound to the act of projecting, a reflection back onto the historic and political-cultural situation, to which the technical possibilities also belong. The critical consideration and analysis of our standpoints give us a feeling, an experience of ourselves in community, without appearing as independent thought or as one that is altogether historical, political or narrative, either. In other words: within projection, *freedom and reflection* detract from each other as acts of *lebensweltlich* (behavior-oriented) self-criticism.

The mirror of reflection allows us to see not only the world, but ourselves as well. It reveals us to be

⁸ “the extraordinarily difficult balance between dialogue and discourse is presently only able to be carried out thanks to apparatuses” translated by William Steward and Karen Koch.

⁹ In this respect, the themes of this volume are linked with the general subject of the current research interests of the *LiAphR: Experiences of the Asymmetrical. Orientation within Criticism*. Concerning the concept of canals, see the essay by Martin Schmidt in this edition.

¹⁰ Concerning the concept of projection, see the article of Guido Bröckling in this edition.

not singular, continuously reflecting subjects, but rather projections of a future, that is both freely chosen and determined by circumstance. The classic concept of the subject and the problems of autonomous thought attached to it are offset via this change of setting in the context of a radical inter-subjectivity. This is clearly a form of considering *responsive freedom* in the sense of Flusser, but also in the sense of many contemporary philosophical trends.¹¹ Such a philosophy of answering as one of, in essence, being-adjusted-to-another is laid out by the thinker of the medial, but not carried out.¹² Different than the *responsivity* accentuated by a philosopher like Bernhard Waldenfels, Flusser focuses more strongly on the *between* separating subjects, on the constantly changing forms of the putting-oneself-in-relation. In the act of reflecting within the understanding of an *inter-subjective projecting* described, the individual can remain neither theoretically nor practically in mere self-reflection. Even more so, individuals become a part of the projected movement across themselves and onto the other or others.

Reflection as questioning, searching movement describes freedom as open space that is thought of less as empty and preexisting but rather as always beginning to form. In this *space of betweens*, movements become possible and at the same time generate this space. Such a space of betweens, even in its form as a reciprocal and conditional relation of freedom and movement, constitutes the engagement by *LiAphR* with Flusser's work as well. The movements in a space of betweens created by *reflection* are not limited to the cognitive alone; rather encompass all senses and abilities. They are themselves a piece of greater realization of lived and living, of personal as well as *collective freedom*. Through this reflective method, criticism as well as a freedom realizes itself in Flussers work. Our circle, in the sense of our own self-understanding, feels indebted to this approach.

Particularly in times of increased instrumentalization, special attention must be paid to the fields of philosophy, the humanities, and the arts, which combine in their effects criticism, potential for social change, and self-discovery in the sense of a search for that, *which we are*. The kantian and enlightenment purpose of an emancipatory *freedom from* and a constructive-productive *freedom to* seems not only permanently topical, but even specifically called for in the face of preexisting social and global circumstances. And indeed the claim of the Enlightenment calls for the extension to those very self-critical thought structures of the *between*, which turn the medial, technical, and inter-subjective conditions of human existence into the necessary size of critical discourse. Flusser offers here fresh approaches to tie both together. Beneath the compulsions of increased efficiency,

¹¹ Susann Köppl considers such questions concerning *freedom* in her essay in this edition.

¹² In addition, see the article by Sebastian Schulze in this edition.

continued profit, and marginalization of the landscape, of culture, and education, the so-called *ivory tower* of *mere theory* increasingly emerges as a space deserving preservation and a good worth protecting. Otherwise, only in the arts, the theoretical understands this good in a challenging and creative way to be un-usable, i.e. not of any material value. Nevertheless it still has – to borrow Flusser’s words – a *function* in a positive sense. The gentle maintenance or regeneration of these open spaces, which the humanities is capable of constituting for the individual as well as for the collective, signals in this context an ongoing dialogue as well, a *symphilosophizing* – in this (here following) case through and with Flusser.

Flusser, Vilém(1991). Die Bochumer Vorlesungen. In: Wagnermaier, S.; Zielinski, S. (ed.): Kommunikologie weiter denken. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2009, S. 23 – 264.

Flusser, Vilém (1997). Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie. Frankfurt/M: Fischer.