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Devil may care: Flusser's journey into exile and beyond reason

“Disorder is intrinsic to life.”

Vilém Flusser, 1965: 35

A convincing case can be made that the legacy of the Enlightenment finally came to an inglorious end on 27 November 1991. On that fateful date, the philosopher Vilém Flusser was killed in a road accident near Prague, the city of his birth. He was, arguably, the last representative of the grand tradition of critical analysis that dominated European thinking – and, especially, the German-speaking portion of it – between the late eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Though some might deny him such pride of place (particularly those who have not read his works) and certain others would like to stake a claim of their own, Flusser's is the most recent name that can be appended, without obvious hilarity, to a list that might stretch from Kant to Adorno, with Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Heidegger as a few obligatory inclusions along the way. Readers with an in-depth knowledge of philosophy will balk at this odd grouping of diverse and even opposing schools of thought; and, of course, it cannot be construed as a simple linear progression or consensus of opinion. Rather, it is a tradition – replete with all the fantasies, falsehoods and contradictions inherent to that concept. The unifying feature that brings together the various strands of this imagined community is a belief in Reason as an instrument of investigation and evaluation: an implicit faith (yes, faith) that the quest for truth (not truth itself, necessarily) will set us free. Flusser's tragic demise put an end to all that, in more senses than one.

Between the devil and the deep blue sea

A bit of *Gründlichkeit* is in order, to get the ball rolling. As someone historically trained, the foundations of my case will be partly biographical and loosely sociological. Flusser's final visit to Prague was his first in over fifty years. In 1940, he escaped the advancing tide of unreason in Europe and sought refuge, escaping via London to Brazil. The route to Rio de Janeiro was a common one at that time for all manner of refugees fleeing the Nazis. Despite restrictions imposed on Jewish immigration by the Vargas regime, Brazil was perceived as a relatively safe

haven, even for Jews.¹ Flusser was following the same road traveled by more famous immigrants like the writers Georges Bernanos (arrived 1938, left 1945) and Stefan Zweig (arrived 1941, died in Brazil 1942), among many others.² He was to remain in the country for thirty-odd years, assimilating a substantial degree of Brazilian culture, taking active part in local affairs and publishing important works in the Portuguese language.

As an escape route from war-torn Europe, Brazil was often regarded as a merely satisfactory alternative for those who could not gain entry to the United States. However, it was much more than second-best in the minds of some European intellectuals, particularly those with an aversion to brash American-style capitalism. The iconic text is probably Stefan Zweig's *Brazil, Land of the Future*, published in Brazil in 1941 and swiftly finding its way into six languages (English, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish). At the time, Zweig was one of the world's best-selling authors; and the book came about as the result of his travels in Brazil, initially for a brief visit in 1936 and subsequently for a longer sojourn in 1940. It is essentially a compendium of the author's impressions of the country, composed in splendid narrative prose and combined with a substantial preliminary account of its history, economy and civilization [*sic*]. The book's central thesis is that Brazilian society's relative success in promoting the harmonious integration of different nationalities and ethnic groups should be viewed as a way forward for all humanity. Against a contemporary backdrop of nationalist propaganda, racial hatred and political persecution in Europe, the author depicts Brazil as an example of tolerance and humanitarian values. In castigating the decline of European ideals of civilization and culture, he concomitantly rejects the accumulation of wealth and comfort as a model of human progress. For Zweig, the USA was a society based on greed and ambition. Its love of competition and power would lead eventually to ethnic divisions no different from Europe, as well as a less than subtle tendency towards expansionism and war-mongering.³

Published soon after Flusser's arrival, *Land of the Future* was a very influential text, widely read and discussed in Brazil. Although Zweig's reputation was dented locally by the book's perceived value as propaganda for the dictatorial Vargas regime, its effect on national self-esteem, as well as international opinion, should not be underestimated. At the height of the Second World War – the military outcome of which was far from a foregone conclusion – the main argument was certainly cogent enough, particularly for foreign readers unaware of the book's inevitable flaws

¹ For more on the politics of immigration to Brazil at the time and, particularly, the plight of Jewish refugees, see Fábio Koifman, *Quixote nas trevas: O embaixador Souza Dantas e os refugiados do nazismo* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2002), pp. 103-168.

² See Izabela M. Furtado Kestler, *Exílio e literatura: Escritores de fala alemã durante a época do nazismo* (São Paulo: Edusp, 2003); and Izabela M. Furtado Kestler, *Die Exilliteratur und das Exil der deutschsprachigen Schriftsteller und Publizisten in Brasilien* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992).

³ Stefan Zweig, *Brasil, País do futuro* (Rio de Janeiro: Guanabara, 1941), pp. 15-21.

and shortcomings as a study of Brazilian society. Whether he read it or not, someone in Flusser's position must have been tempted by the idea of having exchanged a decaying civilization for the 'land of the future'. After all, refugees need hope as something to cling to, if nothing else.

The young Flusser's early years in Brazil were spent mainly in the requisite pursuit of subsistence. He worked at jobs quite detached from intellectual endeavour, gaining first-hand knowledge of commercial and manufacturing concerns. Only after 1960, at the age of 40, did he begin to approach the Brazilian academic community, via his collaboration with the *Instituto Brasileiro de Filosofia* (IBF), an institute for philosophical study and teaching founded and run by Miguel Reale, professor of law and philosophy with close ties to the political right. From 1962 onwards, Flusser became a full member of the IBF and a regular contributor to its journal, *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia*. Starting in 1961, he also began contributing to the literary supplement of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, the most staid daily newspaper in São Paulo. Meanwhile, he continued to pursue his own writings independently, developing the framework of thought that would soon find expression in his first books: *Língua e realidade* (1963) and *A história do diabo* (1965), both published originally in Portuguese.⁴

The period during which Flusser successfully made the transition into the Brazilian academic community was far from typical in the country's history. Between the mid-1950s and early 1960s, a series of upheavals and cultural changes altered Brazilian society permanently. In the aftermath of Getúlio Vargas's dramatic suicide in 1954, the political scenario finally began to move beyond a consensus that had remained stable since the so-called Revolution of 1930. Under the Juscelino Kubitschek government (1956-1961), the nation embarked upon a period of unbounded optimism and intense self-aggrandizement that culminated in the removal of its capital city from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília, officially inaugurated 1960. Charged up by the symbolism of Brazil's first World Cup victory in 1958, an unprecedented wave of national self-esteem ushered in the era of *Bossa Nova* in music and the *Cinema Novo* movement, with the new medium of television on hand to provide instant coverage of all things bold and wonderful. However, with Cold War tensions on the rise internationally, the unmistakable leftward swing of national politics after 1962 sparked a backlash against the buoyant mood of the preceding years. A military coup deposed the government of João Goulart in March 1964, with widespread and vocal support from a conservative middle class, concerned about the rise of communism and the decline of family values.

The publication of Flusser's early books in 1963 and 1965 posits a tempting symmetry around the political events of 1964. The implications of the military coup cannot have failed to

⁴ Ricardo Mendes, *Vilém Flusser: Uma história do diabo* (unpublished MA thesis, University of São Paulo, 2000), available at <<http://www.fotoplus.com/flusser/>>.

distress the refugee philosopher. Although Flusser was by no means associated with the Brazilian political left at the time – his undisguised contempt for Marxism certainly precluded any such alignment – he was an enthusiast of the more general cause of cultural modernity. In his mid-forties, his tastes were highbrow contemporary, including an open admiration for João Guimarães Rosa, one of Brazil's leading writers, whose masterwork *Grande Sertão: Veredas* was first published in 1956. Flusser's preferences in art reflect an allegiance to the modernist agenda of progressive social advancement, especially his fervent espousal of Concrete Art, the main self-professed avant-garde of the time. Self-consciously constructivist in its origins and vaguely socialist in its politics, Concrete Art became a powerful intellectual vogue in Brazil, especially São Paulo, from the mid-1950s onwards.⁵ Swiss sculptor Max Bill's triumph at the first *Bienal de São Paulo*, in 1951, was followed by a visit to Brazil, two years later, generating unusual media attention and a fair amount of polemic on the subject of modern architecture. Devoid of a single geographical focus, the Concrete Art movement's international impact was felt mainly in Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, as well as South America. At the peak of the Cold War, this plurality heightened its appeal for many Brazilian artists and intellectuals, rendering *concretismo*, as it was better known locally, into a stance of calculated distance from the tiresome polarity of USA versus USSR. The movement provided something of an aesthetic equivalent to the political conceit of non-alignment, a term coined by Nehru in 1954 and brought to bear on international power relations during the Suez Crisis of 1956.

If Flusser could certainly not be classified as a 'leftist' by the ideological standards of 1964, neither would he have been perceived as necessarily 'reactionary'. Rather, his positions were baffling to most observers. In an interview given in 1999, one of the leading philosophy professors in Brazil, José Arthur Giannotti, recounted contemporary impressions in the 1960s, when both were part of the same academic milieu in São Paulo.⁶ According to Giannotti, prevailing opinion in the university setting viewed Flusser's works as archaic and overly literary, something of a throwback to an outdated philosophical tradition at a time when the main thrust of collective efforts was to place the study of philosophy on a proper scientific footing. Thirty years on, Giannotti came to recognize that Flusser's approach was postmodern *avant la lettre*; however, at the time, he was often simply discounted as old-fashioned and amateurish. Much to Flusser's frustration, considered opinion in 1960s Brazil took little notice of his writings at all. Whatever attention was directed at his work generally fell into the category of respectful puzzlement. In Giannotti's recollection, people were continually perplexed by Flusser's ability to

⁵ For a recent appraisal of the movement's impact on painting, poetry and design, see the exhibition catalogue: *Concreta '56: A raiz da forma* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 2006).

⁶ Gustavo Bernardo & Ricardo Mendes, eds., *Vilém Flusser no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1999), pp. 227-235.

come up with innovative patterns of thought and weave together disparate threads and then not impose any clear design on the material thus produced. The *zeitgeist* called for simple answers, and Flusser refused to provide them.

During the late 1960s, the *Instituto Brasileiro de Filosofia* came increasingly to be seen as a bastion of reactionary thinking and even support for the military regime. Its director, Miguel Reale, served as Rector of the University of São Paulo from 1969 to 1973, the darkest and most brutal years of the dictatorship. Consequently, Flusser's ties to that institution left him in an even more ambiguous position. At a time of stark and necessary separation between left and right, he was abandoned, like Heidegger, to the enemy camp. His third book, *Da religiosidade* – a collection of his newspaper essays – was published by the state of São Paulo's commission of culture in 1967. Between that year and 1971, he taught at the elite private college *Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado* and at the University of São Paulo's *Escola Politécnica*, working at both on short-term, temporary contracts, as opposed to any sort of secure position. He also lectured widely outside the university setting. Increasingly frustrated and dislocated, he began to seek avenues outside Brazil, traveling abroad frequently after 1966, initially with sponsorship from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1972, he returned to Europe definitively.

The refugee had come full circle. Exiled from Europe during the sombre period of 1939-1945, he had fled to the promising 'land of the future'. Thirty years later, the same shadow of totalitarian menace now drove him back to the land of his own past. Little wonder, in retrospect, that the refugee philosopher was among the first to hit upon the idea of a post-historical turn, in which the traditional diachronic progression of past, present, future could no longer be taken for granted. For Flusser, 'back to the future' was more than a clever paradox; it was old hat. Might 'forward to the past' be more apposite? Can his return to Europe be taken as a return to reason? To espouse such an argument would be to deny completely the relevance of his three decades in Brazil. Flusser could no more undo what had been done – could not, in an ironically trite phrase, turn back the hands of time – than anyone else bound up in the mortal scheme of things. The reason for non-return was simple. There was no longer any Reason left to go back to. Flusser's genius is to have been among the first to recognize this state of affairs. His early writings hold the key to understanding the new world beyond reason.

The devil, you say

The three volumes of Flusser's works published in Portuguese in the 1960s remain largely unknown and unread. Although they have sparked a recent revival of interest – all three have been re-published in Brazil over the last five years – they have yet to be translated into more

widely current languages. This fact severely limits the ability of most scholars to grasp the unity, boldness and breadth of Flusser's ideas. The first book, *Língua e realidade* (1963), posits the essential notion underlying his philosophy: simply put, that language is the only expression of reality (*i.e.*, mind). Given this first assumption, the rest of Flusser's substantial and eclectic oeuvre falls into place as demonstration and analysis of the codified structures underlying all aspects of human endeavour – from objects, images and media to thought itself. Following on closely in time from the first book, *A história do diabo* (1965) seeks to expand upon the original idea, elaborating upon the history and pre-history of the human drive to assert language and meaning. Flusser provocatively names this impetus: the devil.

Having established something of the historical backdrop against which Flusser was writing, I would like to devote the largest part of this essay to an exploration of the volume “History of the devil”, or simply HD, henceforth.⁷ The structure of the book is provocative and bold, almost dangerously so. True to his German heritage, the philosopher begins at the beginning. First things first – and language coming first in the Flusserian scheme of things – his starting point is etymology. The words “history” and “devil” are duly scrutinized and found to be two facets of the same aspect of the human condition: our submission to the temporal, our sense of existing within the flow of time. From time as the precondition of language, he moves on to the spatial relationships imposed by narrative. The chapter entitled “Infancy of the devil” considers the sentence to beat all openers: *in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*. Out of time and narrative, space and physical phenomena are born.

Flusser proceeds, with inescapable logic and consummate elegance, to pick apart the bases of physics (“The devil plays with tops”) and chemistry (“Playing with elements”), before arriving at the structural backbone of his own narrative: the seven deadly sins. The third chapter of the book is “Lust”, an account of biological evolution that builds up from the origin of life, through protoplasm, cell, tissue, organism, to humanity itself. Throughout, the devil is evoked as a metaphor for the inexplicable drive towards self-organization that the philosopher equates with the principle of will, in clear deference to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Sex, libido and love are next in sequence, with a neat discussion of inhibition as a necessary opposition to lust. Inhibition, “a scientifically cold and ethically neutral term” for God (Flusser 1965: 64), is the external focus against which the diabolical will-to-life directs its evolutionary drive.

Although dated in some respects, HD is extraordinarily forward-looking in others: its disregard for so-called scientific objectivity, for one. Slyly apologetic for the “pseudo-scientific air” (Flusser 1965: 64) of his argument thus far, Flusser openly equates scientific discourse with myth, examining the linguistic construction of various current mythologies (*i.e.*, physics,

⁷ Flusser, *op.cit.*. Further references to HD, in this section, will be parenthetical. All translations of excerpts are mine.

chemistry, biology) as keys to understanding their larger import. Finally, he arrives at the true object of his study – labeled “man”, perhaps uncomfortably for post-feminist sensibilities, though routine for 1965. Flusser has no doubt that “all life has only one purpose: to evolve in the direction of man” (Flusser 1965: 60). His proof is in the discourse. As a man, writing in human language, hoping to achieve communication, he must place all his perceptions and conclusions within the realm of human understanding. To step outside humanity and consider anything from the vantage point of a rock or a salamander is ontologically impossible. As unfashionable as this may seem for an environmentally challenged 21st century, the point is well taken. All discourse – scientific or other – has its origin in the discursive capacity of mind. (Those of a more social scientific bent might prefer the term ‘agency’.)

After a forcefully angry detour through the love of country – “Nationalism is Western sex sublimated” (Flusser 1965: 82) – and a painfully bittersweet passage through the love of reading and writing – “Our minds are ripped in as many pieces as the authors who have possessed it” (Flusser 1965: 95) – Flusser arrives at the fourth chapter and second of his deadly sins. “Ire” is the term used to encompass the rebellion of the human mind against its realization of death and mortality. The discussion of will, not as a vague principle underlying existence, but as a conscious effort to resist the entropic dispersion of life and self, is broken down into the topics of freedom, law and chance. For Flusser, both lust and ire are life-affirming drives, experientially bound up in the sense that the world of phenomena is real and geared to the production and reproduction of the material conditions of existence. Ire is the basis of all the conquests of the human spirit in the historically brief interim of modernity, from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century, when the promise of progress seemed to placate and even dispel the fear of god. In a brilliant paragraph, too long to cite fully here, Flusser summarizes the rise of liberty and the decline of obscurantism through the domestication of the forces of nature by science. “Such a world was a beautiful dream,” he concludes, “but we have begun to awaken” (Flusser 1965: 117). In the subsequent stage, reality is no longer a convincing concept.

In situating the epistemological break with reality at precisely the historical moment of his writing, Flusser’s discourse betrays a bit of its own genesis. The late 1950s and early 1960s can be seen, in retrospect, as a moment of coming to terms with the tedium of modern society in its mature stage: nature dominated and science dominant over a century of technological progress, tyranny vanquished and liberty vindicated as a result of a recent and brutal war, religion on the wane and hedonism on the rise in the inescapable vision of a new culture of entertainment and spectacle, economic prosperity and material abundance as never before experienced in history. This is the age of technicolor musicals and hula hoops, of duo-tone cars with tailfins and early

rock 'n' roll. This is the golden age of America, and its impact on thinking Europeans is best summed up by the Sartreian term *nausée*, to which Flusser openly pays his respects.

Painfully awakened from the collective dream of reality, the new sense of unreality delivers us back into what Flusser calls “the hot stream of life” (Flusser 1965: 118). Detached by scientific ire from the preexisting lustful condition of being and having abandoned all its natural instincts, humanity is relegated to existence in “a realm of pure symbols”: “But “exist” is too positive a term to describe the situation in which we find ourselves. We have lost our sense of reality; we are alienated. As a measure of sanity, we are resolved, in our minds, to stage a return to the reality of life. However, for this reality to be captured, understood and experienced by us, minds that we are, it must be transformed into mental substance, it needs to be brought up to our level. Only thus will it be “real to us”, which is to say, only thus will the world of life be realized. [...] It is necessary to devour, swallow and digest life, for this mere virtuality of our minds to become reality.” (Flusser 1965: 118)

In this timely passage, Flusser speaks of the existential void of industrial society and identifies the dawning era of unbounded consumerism, material and symbolic. He christens this chapter, “Gluttony”. Contradicting the usual perception of this sin as a correlate of lust – bodily and primordial – he defines gluttony as a mental operation, consisting of two movements: hunger (knowledge) and digestion (technology). It is the incorporation into the self of that outside the self: “Gluttony is the pleasure of devouring, devouring for the sake of devouring, devouring as a means of creating reality” (Flusser 1965: 123). The counterpoint between virtuality and reality, in the passage cited above, is prescient. For Flusser, the programme of gluttony runs in three stages: “1) devour the world of the senses, 2) transform it into symbols, that is, into language, and 3) spew out machines and instruments” (Flusser 1965: 124). Enclosed within the wall of machines and instruments of its own making, the mind is sheltered from upsetting influences like want or chance and thus encounters a renewed sense of reality (completely fabricated, of course).

Perhaps surprisingly for a philosophy based on language, Flusser’s conception of gluttony encompasses the importance of material objects as the organizing principle upon which we base our impoverished notion of reality. The machines spewed out by our symbolic systems are routinely taken as proof, hard and incontrovertible, that things are as they must be, and not as we have made them. Applied physics is the arena within which the real gets translated into the palpable, giving rise to a slippage between inner truth and outer conditions of existence. Enclosed in a world in which technology has taken the place of nature to such an extent that “[t]he rhythm of machines is the rhythm of our lives” (Flusser 1965: 125), we are no longer able to see outside the walls of the artificial. The flow of time – the first product of language – is readily devoured and ultimately distorted. Machines render us capable of being in different places and doing

several things simultaneously, maximizing potential usage of time. The result of this multiplicity (multitasking and telepresence are recent terms, as yet unavailable when Flusser was writing) is “free time”, the tedium of which must be filled by consumption. “For this is the operating principle of gluttony: mouths opened to yawn are immediately stuffed with products” (Flusser 1965: 126).

Flusser predicts that the next stage of our fabrication of artificial reality would be a progression from applied physics to “applied biology” (biochemical modification of bodies and organisms) and “applied psychology” (biochemical modification of mood and behaviour). In our present era of ‘GMOs’ and ‘psy meds’, such predictions seem eerily prophetic. Of course, the scientific underpinnings of these developments were available to any keen observer in 1965. Much more disturbing is his espousal of the coming autonomy of technology from human control. “We will be devoured by our instruments,” (Flusser 1965: 129), he writes, foreseeing an ontological leap in which the instruments produced by thought and language will render humanity an accessory, if not entirely superfluous: “From the viewpoint of the pasture, the cow is an institution evolved out of the grass, the usefulness of which is to provide manure. A cruel destiny has made it so that the cow eats the grass that produced it. It is impossible to ask the grass to accept the viewpoint of the cow. An unbridgeable existential gap separates the two. The instruments of technology are the cows upon the pasture of the mind. But the mind possesses the ironic ability to transcend itself. It is able to do what the grass cannot: raise itself above the situation in which it exists. In this reflexive distance, we have an entirely new vision of the human situation. Man appears as the instrument of the instrument, just as the instrument appears as instrument of man.” (Flusser 1965: 132)

The symbiotic relationship between humanity and its instruments is actually part of a larger system, scarcely comprehensible from grass level. This “larger technology”, of which humanity is an instrument, Flusser identifies with the evolution of the concept of the devil – the self-organizing drive previously equated with time and language. In a sense removed from our common sense of the word, the devil is also technology.

The next two deadly sins – “Envy” and “Avarice” – are presented as twinned principles regulating the operation of human society. Envy is the evolutionary or reforming principle. Avarice is the principle of stability and preservation. The dialectical tension between them is the stuff of politics and history. This aspect of Flusser’s argument would have been perceived, in the context of 1960s Brazil, as the most pressing point to be addressed. The ideological composition of ‘society’ being the burning question at the time, any self-respecting philosopher would be expected to take a stand, for or against. Flusser does no such thing, making short shrift of society and history, as well as their classic apologists, Marxists and even Hegelians. In little over ten

pages, he rushes through ‘society’, ‘retribution’ and ‘justice’, saving room for a comparatively dense discussion of the more interesting topic of ‘conversation’. Here, the philosopher explores the applied dimension of his linguistic understanding of existence (“Each and every word is living witness to the entire history of thought.” Flusser 1965: 148), expounding a dialectical process of conversation as existential struggle between envy (words) and avarice (grammar).

What Flusser calls conversation is, these days, more usually labeled ‘discourse’; and he is coolly cavalier about dismissing “the scientific layer of conversation” as simply one more social construct, among many. Though “rigorously rational and consistent” in its methods, he argues, the aim of scientific discourse is just as “absurd” as any other form of conversation, the purpose of which is always to overcome death through knowledge (Flusser 1965: 152). All discourse, all language, is little more than the noise generated by the mind to fill the terrifying silence of nothingness. By creating a sense of community and society, discourse/conversation generates a false sense of eternity. In belonging to a ‘we’ – be it society or religion or ideology – larger than the mortal ‘I’, the individual gains admittance to something seemingly permanent. Of course, it is not.

Eschewing collective solutions of any kind and despairing of all possibility of individual transcendence, Flusser comes to the highest of his deadly sins: “Pride”. This is the point of arrival in humanity’s long battle – alongside the devil, ally of our own making – against the opposing forces of non-time, non-space, non-organization, non-evolution. Pride is the place in which the philosopher situates his own position: “The climate is icy; and were it not for the quiet whisper of death’s cold wind, the silence would be absolute” (Flusser 1965: 157). This is the point of critical reflection on the senselessness of all that humanity has so devilishly attempted to achieve through the pursuit of the other deadly sins scrutinized so far. And yet, in this place of despair, the mind uncovers the true object of its adoration. “The present chapter,” he writes, “will be a song, a hymn in praise of human will” (Flusser 1965: 157).

At this stage, Flusser’s argument takes a decidedly unorthodox turn. As if the elaborate allegory of the devil and deadly sins literarily fleshed out over 150 pages were not enough to put off the vast majority of readers in the mid 1960s, our exile thinker raises the stakes even higher. Enter poetry, music and painting as the three languages through which the Will manifests its drive to impose sense and structure as things concrete.⁸ Flusser examines developments, then recent, in all three arts, positing a general tendency towards abstraction of representational form and an emphasis on constructive elements (*i.e.*, words, notes, colours) as the preferred object of creative attention. In this new ‘concrete’ era, the constituent aspects of each language come to the

⁸ This drive might more neatly be summed up as a ‘will-to-form’, to borrow a term from translations of Alois Riegl’s concept of *Kunstwollen*.

fore as the true focus of artistic expression. He draws a parallel to “modern physics”, the structures of which “have moved away from the representational and figurative” (Flusser 1965: 169). Surprisingly up to date in his understanding of contemporary developments in particle physics, Flusser suggests that matter itself is little more than an “aesthetic” perception of consistency – system rather than substance.

The stage is set for Flusser’s great intellectual leap beyond Reason, into the void of the unknown. Once the world of phenomena is broken down into its component particles, the shabbiness of any traditional conception of reality is revealed. The only reality is Will, the surface of which is manifested as the dual apparitions of mind and nature: “ Seen from its surface, the phenomenal world appears to consist of phenomena linked together in two ways: either by chains of cause and effect, or jumbled together by chance. We know this is no more than illusion, because all phenomena are linked to each other and to our will by chains established by the latter. To accept the causal chains as independent of our will, and to seek to break down the casual jumbles and causal chains (as the antiquated sciences are prone to do), is proof of the power of illusion over our reflective minds. So long as science foments this illusion, so long as it accepts the causal links as ‘given’, it will remain unable to break through to will. Science is not yet conscious of the fact that it is we who are the authors of the laws of nature; it still lacks this level of self-recognition.” (Flusser 1965: 170-171).

Assuming that the exploration of mind and nature requires differing approaches, Flusser proceeds to a discussion of “science as yoga” and “yoga as science”. At this point, the skeptical reader might lose patience once and for all, were it not for the fact the argument is constructed with such keen acuity. The occurrence of chance in nature – particularly, the uncertain behaviour of subatomic particles – is ground enough for dismissing the materialist conception of science then still current. Taking a solid black table as example, Flusser posits: “With its instruments – that is, something that can be lived as experience – science proves that the table is neither hard, nor black, nor anything else, because it is not a thing. Neither is it a copy of some Platonic original, or of any other kind of mental phenomenon: it simply does not exist. What does exist is an electromagnetic field, plus a gravitational one; therefore, structures of virtuality exist. A field is an imaginary structure in which something may occur. And a field is the substance of the phenomenal world, of the table, for example. We should, therefore, speak of the world of appearances as potential, and not as real, as we are used to do.” (Flusser 1965: 175)

Thus, Flusser comes to the crux of his argument: the idea of material appearances as “structures of virtuality”, elaborated through language and underpinned by will. This is, perhaps, one of the earliest and most concise formulations of the Flusserian conception of codified

structures and their expression as form or materiality. It contains, in a nutshell, the blueprint of much of his future writings.

Finally, the allegory of the deadly sins comes to a nostalgic close with “Sloth”, or sadness of the heart, as Flusser chooses to interpret that concept. The end result of the great self-organizing drive to imbue structure and order into existence is the realization of the ultimate pointlessness of such a quest. “The devil was created to create the world; and, now that the world has been dissolved, both the devil and his creator are dissolved as well. Or, to formulate the process of evolution in a tautological manner, the only adequate formulation: from nothing came nothing and was annihilated. Nor should we have expected any other result. The devil is a negative principle.” (Flusser 1965: 188)

The concept of the devil – successively defined in the book as time, technology and, finally, the discursive structure of language – is dissolved by the diabolical nature of its own quest for structure and meaning. “Language is, resorting to a happy image of Wittgenstein’s, a ladder to reach the goal of silence, and this ladder must be toppled once the goal is reached. But this is not all. Having toppled the ladder of language, thought has annihilated itself. It has reduced itself, as last proper noun (personal pronoun in the first person), to zero. Total silence ensues. Nirvana ensues.” (Flusser 1965: 196)

The remaining pages of HD, less than thirty, wind down into a critical examination of the book’s own position within the web of language it seeks to weave and unweave. Amidst considerations on mathematics and logic, Buddhism and death, Flusser draws to a melancholy close: “At the start of this book, we had the courage to define the devil. At the close of this book, all such courage has evaporated. At the start of this book, we had the poorly disguised intention of annihilating the devil. At the close of this book, we have managed almost (but only almost) to annihilate ourselves. [...] But we should not altogether disparage this result. It is the result, perhaps, of our destiny. [...] After so many triumphs of the mind, after so many discoveries and inventions, after so many conquests and glories, is it not perhaps time for some defeat?” (Flusser 1965: 215) A melancholy close, indeed, tacked on as “9.000 Post Scriptum” to the weird numerical structure of this strangely unclassifiable book.

Sympathy for the devil

Any habitual reader of Flusser who has stayed with this essay to the present point is probably aching to read HD – if nothing else, to gauge the accuracy of the insufficient summary presented here. The book is truly essential for understanding Flusser’s thought, especially the underlying unity of his multifaceted incursions into subjects as apparently disparate as photography and

design, religion and linguistics. It is also essential reading for understanding Flusser as historical agent and his role in the development of something we take for granted today: the conception of postmodernity as fragmentation of the logical certainties of science and reason.

To conclude this essay, I would like to resume the contention that Flusser's intellectual journey beyond reason is an outcome of his personal history of exile. It was in Brazil, amidst the resurgence of the brutal spectre of totalitarianism in the mid to late 1960s, that he was able to articulate a grim vision of language as "ivory tower" (Flusser 1965: 201), within which the mind resists the inevitable outcome of its own annihilation. All construction is deconstruction, necessarily; and all that remains is to philosophize the ruin of our own folly. Flusser's return to Europe, bearing the message of a new order – based on the recombinant codes of virtuality and not on sequences of cause and effect, such as classical physics or the old history – marks the closing of a circle and the end of an era. His dual flight from unreason is symbolic of 20th-century humanity's encounter with its own inability to forge the Enlightenment dream of a better world.

Such an approximation of personal exile and post-historical conscience may seem overly simplistic to some. Not to Flusser. The author of *HD* inscribed his situation into the book in the following terms, worth citing in conclusion: "The present book is being written in Brazil, a peripheral territory of the West. The rebellion against the inexorability of the end that approaches in the form of a Western Buddhism is, perhaps, a product of this marginal situation of Brazilian society. We, in Brazil, feel with greater clarity, perhaps, the impending catastrophe of Nirvana. [...] We, in Brazil, are still 'underdeveloped'. We still think and live a little. May God have mercy on our souls." (Flusser 1965: 201)

When the last refuge of the devilish drive to achieve meaning caved under its own weight, the philosopher had no other choice than to flee the ivory tower and run resolute into the arms of annihilation. The devil, it turned out, would be sorely missed.

Bibliography

Vilém Flusser (1965). *A história do diabo*. São Paulo: Martins.