

Rainer Guldin

, (),

On Vilém Flusser's Idiosyncratic Use of Commas and Round Brackets

“[Le] style. C’est lui le grand révélateur: ce sont les tics de l’écriture [...] qui peuvent dévoiler un caractère [...]”

Bernard de Fallois on Marcel Proust’s *Contre Sainte-Beuve*

In this essay, I want to focus on an aspect of Vilém Flusser’s work that has received no attention so far: his frequent use of a combination of commas and round brackets. Flusser’s writing is the result of a tension between an exuberant overflowing associative creativity and an attempt to contain and control it. According to Flusser, one writes – in his case it is with the help of a mechanical typewriter – to guide the effervescence of one’s thoughts in the right direction, translating thought circles into linear lines. In the complex contradictory assemblage of ecstatic self-forgetfulness and conscious rational decisions that congregate in the writing process, there are also moments that tend to elude the attention of the writer, hybrid gestures that are an expression of his freedom of choice and a signal of an involuntary penchant of the mind. I want to argue here, that Flusser’s idiosyncratic use of certain punctuation marks reveals a highly ambivalent dimension of his thinking and writing that was probably also partially hidden also to himself.



Figure 1: One of Vilém Flusser's French typewriters

;

“Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you’ve been to college.”

Kurt Vonnegut, *Man Without a Country*¹

“When the stops and commas of the nation
call the semicolons ‘parasites’

Within the hour they form their troops,
an anti-semicolon group

The question marks avoid the scrape
(as always) and quietly escape

The semicolons’ mournful racket
is drowned out by surrounding brackets

And then the captured creature freezes
Imprisoned by parentheses.”

Christian Morgenstern, *In the Land of Punctuation*²

The Shape of Punctuation Marks

The poem *Im Reich der Interpunktion* (In the Land³ of Punctuation) by the German writer Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914)⁴ that was first published in 1905 mixes apparent playfulness with unmistakable political undertones. In the empire of punctuation, semicolons are chased down by full stops and commas, which call them drones, perhaps because semicolons are ambivalent punctuation marks, neither full stops nor commas, neither male nor female, but both at the same time. As hybrid punctuation marks, they seem to defy the grammatical order of language. Contrary to commas and colons, which graphically consist of two full stops, one on top of the other (because of this, in German they are called *Doppelpunkt*), semi-colons do not have a full existence of their own.

The English translation of Morgenstern’s poem uses the word ‘parasites’ for the more appropriate German word *Drohnen*. Drones are male bees that develop from unfertilized eggs. They do not sting, do not gather nectar or pollen and cannot feed without assistance from worker bees. Their only role is to mate with a maiden queen in nuptial flight. After this, they are stopped from

¹ I thank Nancy Roth for this quotation that in the end tells us more about Vonnegut himself than semicolons.

² “Die Semikolons werden Drohnen / genannt von Beistrich und von Punkt. // Es bildet sich zur selben Stund ein Antisemikolonbund. // Die einzigen, die stumm entweichen (wie immer), sind die Fragezeichen. // Die Semikolons, die sehr jammern, / umstellt man mit geschwungnen Klammern / / und setzt die so gefangnen Wesen / noch oben-drein in Parenthesen.”

³ In the current English translation, the word “Reich”, empire, has been substituted by the more general but misleading “land”.

re-entering the beehive and wither away. By using this specific word for semi-colons, Morgenstern equates the empire of punctuation with a beehive, a hierarchical entity that fits well into the historic context of the Wilhelmine period and the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, in which the poem was written.

Once the semi-colons have been tracked down, isolated and rounded up, they are imprisoned and double locked, first within “surrounding brackets” and then within “parentheses”. In the German original, Morgenstern uses the term *geschwungene Klammern*, also called *geschweifte Klammern*, these would have to be translated as braces, curly brackets or accolades: { }. The second set of brackets are parentheses or round brackets, in German *Parenthesen* or *runde Klammern*: (). These are added ‘on top’ (*obendrein*) of the first set of parentheses to increase the imprisoning effect.

Parentheses are intervals or interludes within the textual flow, islands in the language stream pressing on from right to left and from top to bottom. However, one can also use brackets inside parentheses to create a double enclosure. In Morgenstern’s poem, parentheses possess a ghetto-like character. They are tight prison cells, in which the semicolons are kept as *gefangene Wesen*, captured creatures. This is the very metaphor Adorno used in his description of round brackets in his seminal essay “Satzzeichen” (Punctuation Marks) on the use of punctuation in philosophy: *ins Gefängnis sperren*, to imprison (Adorno 1956: 574). I will come back to this point in the section on philosophical parentheses

({ ; ; ; ; })

Interestingly enough, Adorno, who was one of the few philosophers to deal with punctuation, interprets the ambivalence of the semicolon in a much more favourable manner. Semicolons⁵ are dying out. “There is no element in which language resembles music more than in the punctuation marks. The comma and the period correspond to the half-cadence and the authentic cadence (*Halb- und Ganzschluß*) [...], only a person who can perceive the different weights of strong and weak phrasings in musical form can really feel the distinction between the comma and the semicolon.” (ibid.: 569-570; 300-301) The semicolon “with its period and its hanging lower part (*mit Punkt und Unterlänge*) [...] keeps the voice suspended (*in der Schwebe*) by incorporating the comma (*indem es den Beistrich in sich aufnimmt*) – a truly dialectical image [...] finitude refracted through the infinite (*durchs Unendliche gebrochene Endlichkeit*).” (ibid.:570; 301)

Morgenstern’s semi-colons appear as foreign bodies within the text and language in general. In this sense, his prophetic poem about the constricting power of language and its deleterious

⁵ See also Forrer 2009.

effects is remindful of Adorno's well-known passage from *Minima Moralia* first published in 1951, where he describes foreign words as the Jews of language (*Fremdwörter sind die Juden der Sprache*) (Adorno 1951). Even nowadays, in multilingual texts, words from different languages are still in italics and sometimes in parentheses or both. However, if the word is not highlighted in any way it is already partially integrated into the body of the text, and as such not simply a foreign body (*Fremdkörper*) but both foreign and strangely familiar. The practice of highlighting words has been criticized widely because it tends to tame the destabilizing effect of the foreign word on the reader who by stumbling over it – often without understanding its meaning – is abstracted from the flow of reading. This will force him to slow down or stop and possibly even to look up its meaning. This process is bound to have an effect on the further reading, as the foreignness of the foreign word will become apparent only in a second moment. In the other case, the reader can make out the foreign element from afar, perceiving its foreignness before s/he even gets there.

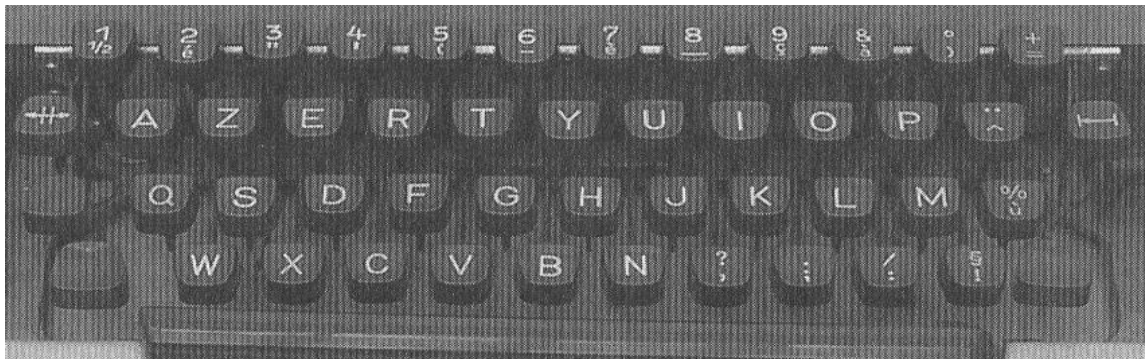


Figure 2: Keyboard of one Vilém Flusser's French typewriters

A gestural embodiment of a certain stylistic disposition

"There are some punctuations that are interesting and there are some punctuations that are not."

Gertrude Stein, *On Punctuation*

Punctuation marks can be seen as gestures, as embodiments of specific mental attitudes. As Adorno puts it, each of them possesses a specific physiognomic status of its own. The exclamation mark "looks like an index finger raised in warning; a question mark looks like [...] the blink of an eye." A colon "opens its mouth wide" and the semicolon is "like a drooping moustache." Question

marks “lick their lips.” (Adorno 1956: 596; 300). Round brackets are like a pair of cupped hands, holding and protecting something.

A further dimension is the shape of punctuation marks and their spatial relationship to the line of the text, which runs through the page from left to right and down the page like a river. In the semicolon, the comma seems to dangle from the period. It is suspended, with the upper part – the period – emerging slightly above the line of the text like a round stone in a riverbed. Through their verticality, round brackets are much more of an impediment to the flowing of the text than commas, which are just small bumps along the road, or the horizontal line of dashes which is parallel to the text line. Contrary to the round brackets, commas are only a short intermission and do not really stop the flow of words. Flusser’s persistent use of round brackets within commas points to a possible tension between interruption and temporary suspension. It is as if the commas partially annulled the interruption represented by the two brackets. I will come back to this point in the following sections.

Vilém Flusser wrote all his texts with a mechanical typewriter. This had typographical consequences. *Italics*, for instance was not available to him. On the keyboard (fig. 2) of one of his last mechanical typewriters, a French Dactymétal senior manufactured by AEG Olympia (fig. 1), the following punctuation marks can be made out: colons, semicolons, commas, full stops, round brackets (*runde Klammern*) – but not square brackets [*eckige Klammern*] –, apostrophes (which can also be used as single quotation marks), double quotations marks (*Anführungszeichen*), slashes, exclamation marks, questions marks, em dashes – (*Gedankenstriche*) and hyphens – (*Bindestriche*).⁶ Contrary to English where single nouns can be placed independently next to each other, in German they have to be grouped together in composite words (*Komposita*) or linked to each other by hyphens. Flusser does not use any ellipses (*Auslassungspunkte*). In his typescripts, Flusser uses above all commas, periods, double quotations marks and round brackets, but practically never colons, semicolons exclamation marks or question marks. Instead of dashes, he uses round brackets.

In Flusser’s typescripts, commas are generally used on their own, but round brackets rarely go without commas, creating a form of double enclosure: round brackets within commas. It is, thus, a double gesture remindful of Morgenstern’s poem only that in Flusser’s case it is not a form of imprisonment but an interruption and safeguarding through the creation of an exterritorial space within the text flow: an excursus, an aside, a tangential reference to another side of writing, which questions and transcends simple textual linearity.

As Gertrude Stein points out in *On Punctuation*, some punctuation marks are more interesting than others are. In Flusser’s case, the most salient combination of punctuation marks one can

⁶ Em dashes are longer and used between phrases or groups of words, hyphens, on the other hand, are shorter and used between prefixes and words.

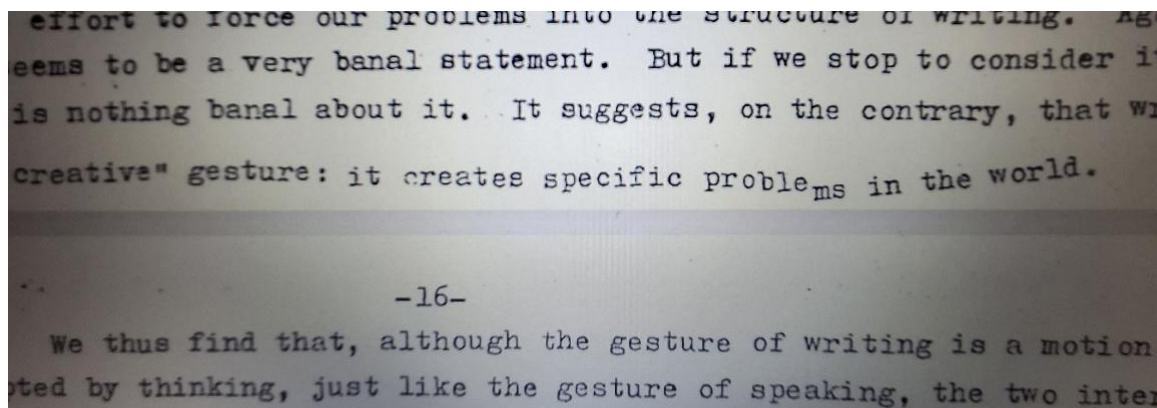


Figure 4: Vilém Flusser, *The Gesture of Writing* (detail)

The absence or lower frequency of certain punctuation signs in Flusser's typescripts is also due in part to the restrictions of the available typewriter keyboard. For years, Flusser used typewriters that did not have any umlaut. This forced him to write *ae*, *oe* and *ue* instead of *ä*, *ö* and *ü*. In the case of punctuation, however, besides the rules of grammatical correctness to be followed, there are more personal reasons to be considered. A specific use of punctuation marks is always an expression of the writer's individuality and the uniqueness of his/her style. Through the gestures of rhetorical punctuation, the author acquires a livelier character. "As a gesture of the virtual language body" punctuation can also shape the other means of written expression (Nebrig and Spoerhase 2012: 29). Furthermore, a specific use of punctuation by a writer does not necessarily always imply a conscious decision. Often it is more of an intuitive nature. This would explain its inconsistent and unsystematic nature in Flusser's typescripts. Through Flusser's idiosyncratic use of a combination of round brackets and commas, we gain access to a side of his writing that is both conscious and unconscious.

This essay is not a quantitative study. Such research would imply a systematic and thorough analysis of all the typescripts in the four different writing languages – including essays, books and letters – and this across the roughly forty years of Flusser's writing career, from the early 1950s to the early 1990s. Personally, I think that there is frequency enough for the phenomenon to deserve attention. A first tentative survey showed that this punctuation strategy does not appear in the very first texts like *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert* written in the fifties, in which Flusser still makes frequent use of word and sentences in other languages than German something that disappeared in the following decades. Flusser started using this punctuation cluster more frequently and systematically from the early 1970s on. Not all texts make use of it and the frequency within the single texts varies greatly. However, and this seems essential to me, it is a consistent writing strategy that can be found in all four writing languages and over a long period.

,

Philosophical Commas

“Texts must flow.”

Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*

Not much has been written about the role of punctuation in philosophy. It is thus no wonder, that Flusser’s idiosyncratic combination of commas and round brackets has not met with any scholarly research so far and that even Flusser himself has not written anything about his own use of punctuation marks.

With regard to this, Giorgio Agamben writes in his ground breaking essay “Absolute Immanence”: “Elements for a philosophy of punctuation are, with the exception of the brief indications in Adorno’s essay, almost entirely lacking [...] punctuation marks (for example, the hyphen in expressions such as Being-in-the-world) can take on a technical function (the hyphen is, in this sense, the most dialectical of punctuation marks, since it unites only to the degree that it distinguishes and distinguishes only to the degree that it unites).” (1999: 222).⁸ Each writer and each philosopher has a very personal and sometimes even unique way of using punctuation. In this sense, Agamben focuses on Gilles Deleuze’s use of colons and ellipsis starting out from the title of one of his books *L’immanence: Une vie ...* (Immanence: a life ...). In the title, “the use of the colon [...] as well as of the final ellipsis dots carries out a decisive intention.” (ibid.) The colon stands for “immanation” and the three dots of the ellipsis for “virtuality.” “Deleuze himself has suggested that punctuation has a strategic importance in his works” and that “it is too bad, for that matter, that many philosophers do away with punctuation [...]” (ibid.) Even if Flusser has never commented explicitly on his use of punctuation one can ask the question: What do commas and round brackets stand for in his writing and thinking and what intention the two punctuation marks do carry? Let us begin with the comma.

In “On Punctuation”, Getrude Stein discusses the use of commas and their relationship to periods. The following passage does not have any commas at all. “When I first began writing, I felt

⁸ However, there are several inspiring contributions in this domain. In “This Philosopher’s Use of the Em Dash Challenges Punctuation As We Know It”, Hannah Ackerman (2023) discusses Nietzsche’s frequent use of the em dash. Sheena Calvert’s (2019) “Punctuating Philosophy” provides a general overview of the field touching upon Nietzsche’s ellipsis, Jean-Luc Nancy’s hyphen and Deleuze’s colon and ellipsis. See also the essay collections by Abbt and Kamasch (2009a) and Schmidt, Lutz and Plat (2017).

that writing should go on, I still do feel that it should go on but when I first began writing I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and on and if writing should go on what had colons and commas to do with it, what had periods to do with it [...] Inevitably no matter how completely I had to have writing go on, physically one had to again and again stop sometime and if one had to again and again stop sometime and if one had to again and again stop some time then periods had to exist. Beside I had always liked the look of periods, and I liked what they did.” (Stein 1935: 2) Stein opposes periods to commas, colons and semicolons. “[...] periods had come to have for me completely a life of their own. They could begin to act as they thought best [...] They did not serve you in any servile way as commas [...] do. [...] Periods have a life of their own a necessity of their own a feeling of their own a time of their own.” (ibid.)

The main aspect of commas with respect to periods is thus their servile character. “There are two different ways of thinking about colons and semicolons you can think of them as commas and as such they are purely servile or you can think of them as periods and then using them can make you feel adventurous [...] commas are servile they have no life of their own they are dependent upon use and convenience and they are put there just for practical purposes. [...] A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it [...] a comma does nothing but make easy a thing [...] And so I almost never used a comma.” (ibid.: 4-5)

Two moments are of importance here with regard to Flusser’s use of commas in connection with round brackets. Firstly, as Stein points out, punctuation marks have to do with the impetus of writing, the constant advance of creative verve, the wish to go on and on and on writing without ever stopping. This is a feeling that has also animated Flusser sitting at his mechanical typewriter happily if not manically typing away, inebriated by the noise of the hammering typewriter-keys and the ping when one reaches the end of the line that invites one to push the carriage, which holds the paper back to the left. The computer has done away with all this, making it possible to write without any interruption, as there is no end of line or end of page that can ever be reached. With a computer, one also never runs out of writing paper, or has to change the typewriter ribbon.

Secondly, commas help you along and do not impede or stop the endless flow of writing. Commas are friendly, harmless, and ready to take on any function required of them. In this sense, one can also choose two commas – or two dashes, for that matter – to enclose round brackets in order to create a surmountable boundary that diminishes and alleviates the vertical caesura of the parentheses. I will come back to this moment in the next section.

In his essay, “Das Komma. Vom geheimen Ursprung der Philosophie“ (The Comma: On the Secret Origin of Philosophy), Peter Schnyder introduces a completely different point of view highlighting the fundamental the ambivalence of the comma, which as we have seen with Gertrud

Stein is generally considered to be only a secondary punctuation mark, but is in fact of central importance despite its modest appearance. In this sense, the German writer Friedrich Hebbel ironically described the comma as a character. He also points to a discrepancy between the more or less systematic use of punctuation and the agenda a philosopher is pursuing in his work. One would assume that the philosophers who pursue a systematic agenda based on a rational approach are also those who handle the punctuation of their texts with utter care. This is not the case, as the work of Kant and Schopenhauer goes to prove. Kant has written texts without any commas or periods, as if he did not want “to slow down the flow of writing through punctuation (*den Schreibfluss durch Interpunktion zu bremsen*).” (2009: 84) Schopenhauer, on the other hand, who criticised the stifling effect of unilateral rationality, was one of the most ardent supporters of a precise and differentiated use of punctuation. Flusser seems to contradict Schnyder’s interpretation. He repeatedly rejected any kind of systematicity, and this seems to have affected directly his erratic use of punctuation marks, especially if we consider the way he employs the combination of commas and round brackets. But then, perhaps what at first sight appears like an inconsistency is only a higher form of order.

In German, the comma is also called *Beistrich*, which is derived from the Middle High German *beistrich*, that is ‘added’ (*Bei*) ‘line or dash’ (*Strich*), a loan translation or calque of the Latin *comma*, which is in turn derived from the Greek *komma*, ‘a piece cut off’, ‘a short clause’, an ‘incision’, ‘section’ or ‘paragraph’. The word *komma* is derived from *kóptō*, ‘to cut’, ‘to cut off’. This seemingly irrelevant punctuation mark, thus, has more to it as one might think. Its etymology reveals a potential for violence. As Peter Schnyder points out, “in every comma there is something of a sword blow (*Säbelhieb*).” (Schnyder 2009: 85) Each comma is a “head-severing saber blow” (*ein Köpfe abschlagender Säbelhieb*) (Abbt and Kammasch 2009b: 11). This view openly contradicts Getrude Stein’s understanding of the comma as a mere servile helper and goes to prove that each punctuation mark deserves to be considered in its contradictory meaning. This is not only true for the comma or the semicolon but also for the parenthesis that I will discuss in the next section.

()

On Parentheses in Philosophy

In rhetoric, a parenthesis or parenthetical phrase (from *parenthesis*, ‘injection’, ‘insertion’, literally ‘(a) putting something in beside’, in Latin *interclusio* or *interpositio*) is an explanatory or qualifying

word, phrase, clause, or sentence inserted into a text passage. Parenthetical expressions are usually delimited by dashes, commas or round brackets, which are also called parentheses. If you leave a parenthesis out you do not alter the grammatical set up of the sentence, but you lose content that might be of importance in some way or other. Add to this that parentheses also have a framing function pointing to something outside the text. In this sense, they possess a meta-communicative and meta-textual dimension.

In “Satzzeichen”, Adorno also deals with the use of parentheses (*Klammern*) that he opposes to dashes (*Gedankenstriche*).⁹ The cautious writer will opt for dashes and not for round brackets because they “remove the parenthesis completely from the sentence, creating enclaves” (*die Klammer nimmt die Parenthese aus dem Satz ganz heraus, schafft gleichsam Enklaven*). Dashes, on the other hand, create small dams that lift the parenthesis out of the flowing river of the text without imprisoning them (*welche die Parenthese aus dem Fluss herausstauen, ohne sie ins Gefängnis zu sperren*). (Adorno 1956: 574) A parenthesis lifts a text passage completely out of the river (*ganz heraus*), the dash, on the other hand, acts like a low dam, that temporarily stops the flow (*stauen*) causing the emergence (*heraus*) of a specific content. In Adorno’s view, parentheses create prison-like enclaves, and seem, thus, to have no relationship to rest of the text whatsoever. By creating enclaves, they admit to the superfluousness of their contents. This is why stylebooks often frown upon them. By using parenthesis, one capitulates to pedantic philistinism. Contrary to this, dashes block off the parenthetical material articulating both connection and detachment, relationship and distance (*halten Beziehung und Distanz gleichermaßen fest*).

The spatial metaphors Adorno uses to describe em dashes and round brackets are telling. The flowing of the text is a river, and there are two ways of stopping it. Either by creating enclaves that imprison the sense and completely detach it from its environment, or by gently lifting a specific content out the flowing of the text, without completely detaching it from it. This interpretation is possibly also inspired by the outer appearance of the two punctuation signs. The horizontal mark of the dash is positioned slightly above the text line – the riverbed, in which the text flows – but parallel to it. Dashes do not oppose themselves to the flowing of the text, which passes over them like river water over flat stones. – They connect and do not interfere like parentheses. Brackets on the other hand are vertical impediments that extend below and above the letters of a text. (

However, the status of parentheses is more ambiguous than Adorno’s interpretation suggests. In fact, parentheses can both include and exclude. One can even put brackets within further brackets (*Klammern in Klammern setzen*) as in the title of Uwe Wirth’s essay on the significance of parentheses “(In Klammern)” (In Brackets). Wirth compares quotation marks with round and

⁹ For the use of dashes in philosophy, see also Kamasch (2009).

square brackets. “‘What happens’, asks Jacques Derrida in a conversation on parentheses [...] ‘if one puts something in quotation marks or in round brackets [...]? Could one call this a logical operation? Or is it a gesture of appropriation (*Besitzergreifung*) [...] or a gesture that adds something [...]?’ The fact that Derrida mentions quotation marks, round brackets, and square brackets in the same breath seems to imply that quotation marks also have a ‘bracketing function’.”

(Wirth 2017: 31) Besides having a comparable bracketing function the three punctuation marks also create a distinction of levels (*eine Ebenendifferenzierung*) and have because of this a graphically visible performative role. Brackets and quotation marks are a way for an author to comment his text on another level and within another textual frame. The similarity between brackets and quotation marks consists in this framing function (*Rahmungsfunktion*) which is also the bracketing function (*Klammerfunktion*). Brackets and quotation marks are like picture frames they belong to two different worlds, both to the inner textual universe and to something else, which is external to it. They enact a visible differentiation of levels within a specific text (*im Innern von Texten*). An intrusion from outside. An editor can interfere with a text by adding square brackets. This is also the case when a section of a quotation has been deleted [...] or when one wants to emphasize that a certain orthographical mistake is already part of the original text [**sic!**].¹⁰

Derrida intensively explored parenthesis in his philosophy, not only as a grammatical element but also as a metaphorical tool for deconstructing texts. He sees parentheses as a tool to recognize the limits of one’s own interpretation and to accept the complexity of language. A parenthesis is an insertion within a sentence. It refers to the main clause but is not fully integrated into it. In this sense, it illustrates the inherent instability of language and the impossibility of a clear, definitive interpretation. A parenthesis is a way to shift the boundaries of a text demonstrating that any attempt to fix a definitive meaning is doomed to fail. A parenthesis represents a kind of disturbance within the system, disrupting the supposed coherence and stability of the text. This is also the case with Flusser’s use of round brackets.

In her inspiring text “Die Parenthese und ihre Umklammerung” (The Parentheses and its Embrace), Renate Lachmann reflects on the complex philosophical implications arising from the use of a specific form of punctuation, in this case the use of parentheses and dashes. “It is important

¹⁰ In both cases, it is an intrusion from another author than the one who has written the text. In this connection, Wirth mentions E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler* in zufälligen Makulaturblättern that has been edited by a fictitious and unreliable editor who has not taken his role (editorial ‘Klammerfunktion’) seriously enough. The result is a jumbled-up book made of fragments. In his comments which are all in round brackets he desperately tries to bring some coherence and order into the text. “[...] the editor has failed to fulfill his editorial (parenthetical) function (seine editoriale (Klammer)-Funktion). In this respect, the parentheses become negative framing references – brackets with a de-parenthetical function (Klammern mit Entklammerungsfunktion). It is also noteworthy that the parenthetical remarks are consistently placed in round brackets (die Klammerbemerkungen durchgängig in runden Klammern stehen), thus claiming to be commentary, even though they simultaneously serve to mark the breaks as ‘monumental gaps’ – and, viewed in this light, should actually be placed in square brackets.” (ibid.:34)

to distinguish between round and square brackets, and to take their competition with dashes seriously (*die Konkurrenz mit den Gedankenstrichen ernst nehmen*). [Dashes] are generally more conformist than parentheses (*Klammern*) in that they confirm, reinforce, explain, and add something that would be annoying in the main clause (e.g., trivial explanations) – but they can also behave quite differently. Many things can be hidden in parentheses (*In Klammern kann sich manches verstecken*). What the matrix parent clause conceals ventures in the parentheses into the verbal light of day (*Was der Matrix-Muttersatz verschweigt, wagt sich in der Klammer ans verbale Tageslicht*), often abbreviated and compressed. Or to put it another way: what the sentence, aware of its content, is responsible for and reveals, can be undermined and overturned by a parenthesis. [...] But a parenthesis (*Klammersatz*) can also be cautious, whispering, sotto voce, suggesting something different, something unexpected, without insisting on it.” (Lachmann 2017: 36) The content of the text included within the parentheses has different functions: it can hide something, contradict the main clause or lead away from it; it can also reveal something that the main clause does not want to disclose. Lachmann uses the term *Matrix-Muttersatz*, matrix-mother sentence, for the main clause. The metaphor of the mother implies that parentheses can be considered as a sort of offspring generated by the main clause.

Besides the content of the parentheses, their position within the main clause has also to be considered. Lachmann distinguishes three types of parentheses: *mesothetic* (in the middle of the sentence), *opisthotetic* (at the end of the sentence) and *prostotetic* (before the beginning of the main clause). This third variant has the effect that everything that follows in the next sentence is just an appendix to the parenthesis, since everything has already been said. The relationship of mother sentence and parenthesis has to do with order and control, the tension between the straight line of the ongoing argumentation and the tendency of parentheses to digress, (to stray, run off the track, or go off at a tangent. As Lachmann puts it: “It is about protecting the matrix clause, the carrier clause that (happy to give birth) (*gebärfreudig*) carries itself to term (*sich selber austrägt*). Syntactical and semantic order must be established. Subordination is the restraining intervention that relegates parenthesis to its parentheses (*die Parenthese in ihre Klammer-Schranken verweist*). The German expression *in die Schranken verweisen*, to put somebody in their place, is here taken literally. The barriers, *die Schranken*, are in this case the parentheses themselves. Parentheses are generally in a subordinate position with regard to the main clause. Because of this, their function is close to that of relative clauses. In fact, Flusser often puts relative clauses within parentheses.

A parenthesis can also free itself from its constricting and enclosing function when it is accompanied by dashes that belittle (*verharmlosen*) its separating effect or by two commas that signal a lesser, surmountable boundary (*von Gedankenstrichen begleitet lässt oder zwei Kommata als überwindbare Grenzziehung*).” (ibid.) Parentheses accompanied by enclosing commas suggest boundaries that are

much easier to cross is, working against the separating effect of parentheses and reintegrating the enclave, as Adorno calls it, into the rest of the text. Dashes make the interruption of the parentheses look less noticeable and commas absorb its disrupting effect. In this way, the parenthesis has more freedom to express its content without incurring in accusations of disturbance. I will come back to this point, which is particularly relevant for Flusser's combined use of commas and parentheses, in the last section of this essay

(In Klammern setzen): Epoché and Sabbath

In Flusser's work, brackets are not just punctuation marks, they are a general metaphor for thinking and living. In German, brackets are called *Klammern*, from the verb *sich an etwas klammern*, to cling to something. Flusser generally uses this word in a double metaphorical sense, playing on the possibility of putting something within parentheses (*in Klammern setzen*), to set it apart or include it, or outside parentheses (*ausklammern*), to exclude it or leave it aside. Phenomena can be put in phenomenological parentheses (*in phänomenologische Klammern setzen*) to achieve a suspension of judgement so that one can look at them differently. The exile is also an exceptional situation that makes it possible to place everyday life in phenomenological brackets. Even translation can be considered a phenomenological strategy to distance oneself from death, an attempt to put (one's own) death in brackets. At the same time, it is possible to exclude (*ausklammern*) the noise and distractions of the outside world to achieve peace of mind. „One should not only leave the world outside intellectually, but also existentially (for example, to live in Robion (*Man soll nicht nur intellektuell, sondern auch existentiell ausklammern (zum Beispiel in Robion wohnen.)*))(Flusser 200: 203) In both senses, putting within parentheses (*Einklammern*) or outside them (*Ausklammern*) have to do with meditation and concentration.

The phenomenological principle of *epoché* negates continuity and cumulative linearity; it stands for a liberating interruption, a sudden suspension of thought, a pause. Flusser compares it to the Jewish Sabbath, another moment of standstill. In a letter to Alex Bloch dated March 9, 1985, he writes that one must first get out of oneself in order to get back to the world of phenomena. “This method of emerging from oneself (*Heraustauschen*) and emerging into (*Emportauchens*) what was, is, and will be (abbreviated to YHVVH) is called ‘Sabbath’ in Judaism (a word that has to do with ‘sitting’ or ‘resting’ and is related to the Greek ‘scholé’ = leisure). (*Diese Methode des aus sich Heraustauschens und Emportauchens in das, was war, ist und sein wird (verkürzt JHVH) nennt man im Judentum ‚Sabbat‘ (ein Wort, das mit ‚Sitzen‘ oder ‚Ruhens‘ zu tun hat und mit der griechischen ‚scholé‘=Muße verwandt ist).*“ (Flusser 2000: 200) Flusser uses here a metaphor that recalls Adorno's description of the

parenthesis and the dash. Life, like the flowing of the text, is a river from which one, something, a thought, can temporarily emerge. Adorno's description of the dash as a temporary stop corresponds thus in part to Flusser's use of parentheses.

Perhaps Flusser added commas before and after round brackets, to open up the enclave, the prison cell, as Adorno calls it, in order for the previous text to penetrate it and for its content to flow into the subsequent text. In the course of the subsequent self-translation processes the content of parenthesis fused with the rest of the text or simply evaporated. In any case, one of its main functions was to conserve a thought association, to freeze a fleeting association, so that it could be used in one of the following versions. An easily recognizable aside in the homogeneous flow of the text – a sort of *pro memoria* –, clearly standing out from the page for later perusal, especially if one considers the possibility that Flusser used his previous texts in his self-translation practice.

In the next section, I will focus on a central aspect of Flusser's writing practice, torn between uninterrupted linear progression and the sudden emergence of an association, a sudden ramification of the textual tree, as Flusser described it himself in his essay "The Gesture of Writing".

Continuity and Discontinuity in Writing.

"There are two sorts of [...] rhythms. In the first, one wave of discourse follows another. In the second, they crash, foaming, into each other. The second sort of rhythm could be called 'syncopation'."

Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*

The combination of brackets and commas could be described as the very embodiment of Flusser's double take on writing caught between the smooth flow of the lines and syncopation, that is, the interruption of the regular flow of rhythm. Commas are comparable to buoys placed along the flow, bobbing up and down, when one wave follows another. Brackets, on the other hand, signal what Flusser calls syncopation, a disturbance and a moment of respite from the linear continuous linear flow. Furthermore, as Uwe Wirth points out, brackets move the text onto a meta-communicative level. They are, in a certain sense, an intrusion of the writer.

Flusser's frequent use of the combination of parentheses and commas allows digression while at the same time curbing and reducing the associative intrusions. These parentheses enclosed

within commas can be described as the very scene where the two contrary tendencies of his thinking collide: the constant creative push forward and the continuous flow of the ongoing reflection, on the one hand, and on the other the constant urge to stray off the main path through frequent associative eruptions.

The separation introduced by the bracket is more substantial than that of a simple comma. Even visually, a comma is only a partial interruption. Its verticality only plays out beneath the text line. The flow of words moves over it as if it were a rounded stone barely emerging from the text line. A bracket, on the other hand, is like a small curved vertical dam against the flow of words. Its verticality embraces all the height of the letters, reaching below and above them. Together with the second bracket, it looks like a small island, a sandbank, around or over which the words flow. As an enclosure, the two brackets act as a container. They create a dry spot for preservation emerging from the flowing of the text. Adding a second comma after the two round brackets implies a partial negation of their existence, returning the text to the level it was occupying before, the linear horizontal flow of the textual lines. A contradictory gesture. A pause and a negation of the pause. As Renate Lachmann put it, the two commas cut the intrusion off from the main text allowing at the same time a certain amount of independence of the information contained in the parentheses. The two commas separate the content of the parentheses from the rest of the text in a way two full stops would not. Of the three forms of parentheses Lachmann writes about in her essay Flusser uses above all mesothetic parentheses – in the middle of a sentence – and sometimes opisthotetic parentheses – at the end of a sentence. However, he does not generally use any prosthetic parentheses – at the beginning of a sentence. This suggests that parentheses are used only when the textual flow is already in full swing.

Flusser never commented on his use of punctuation. We may assume that this writing habit was probably an intuitive choice rather than a specific strategy. This assumption is confirmed by the fact that the single enclosed parentheses can appear anywhere in the text and with changing frequency. The term idiosyncrasy comes from the Greek *idiosynkراسία*, a peculiar temperament or habit of body, from *idios*, one's own, *syn*, with and *krasis*, temperament, or the blend of the four body fluids, literally a particular mingling. In Flusser's case, the idiosyncratic use of a combination of commas and parentheses in his writing is an expression of a fundamental thinking habit. A mixture of control and freedom.

I would now like to focus on a specific case in order to reach a first tentative conclusion with regard to Flusser's uses of double enclosures. To do this I have opted for a series of texts, in which Flusser discusses explicitly the multilingual self-translational writing process that was the very basis for his creativity.

A Case Study: “The Gesture of Writing”

There are altogether eight versions of “The Gesture of Writing”, four published ones – two in French, one in German and one in Portuguese¹¹ – and four typescripts: an English version of 18 pages, a French version of 15 pages (“Le geste d’écrire”), a Portuguese version of 7 pages (“O gesto de escrever”) and a German version of 5 pages (“Die Geste des Schreibens”). The first three texts were most probably written in the mid-1970s and “Die Geste des Schreibens” for a conference at the Hochschule of Sankt Gallen to be held on January 12, 1981. This last text, however, despite the title, has a different content, and is, thus, strictly speaking, not an organic part of the other three versions. Therefore, we are left with a small corpus of altogether three texts.

Since in Flusser’s case the process of self-translation generally produces shorter and shorter texts, one may assume that the English version was written first and the Portuguese last. The English version is also the one with the greatest amount of commas and round brackets combinations:

, (), 61 times / , (). 8 times / (). 4 times / (.) 7 times (altogether 80).

There are other variants that appear only once in the text and testify to the rapidity and the lack of systematicity with which Flusser makes use of round brackets, commas and periods:

- *to form a new structure (“con-struction”).* / No comma before the bracket.
- *(This is why I believe that the only “true” translation is the one attempted by the author of the text to be translated.* / No closing bracket.
- *by its present form, (pencil writing of typewriting) “Essentially everything I write* / No period after the second bracket.
- *And to give specific (namely literate) thought into material form* / Brackets without commas or periods

The following three versions are not only shorter but have also a significantly smaller number of groupings. , (), is the most frequent combination in all three versions:

“Le geste d’écrire”: , (), 38 times / , (). 13 times / (.) 8 times (altogether 59)

¹¹ The German version that was published is a translation from the French by Wilhelm Miklenitsch (Flusser 1991), the French (Flusser 1999) and Portuguese versions (Flusser 2014) are based on the original typescripts.

“O gesto de escrever”: , (), 14 times / , (). 2 times / 1 time (). (altogether 17).

Besides the general reduction of frequency, one can also detect that the two texts like the first one contain more mesothetic than opisthethetic parentheses and that the ratio between these two changes in favour of the parentheses at the end of the sentence in the course of the process of self-translation. So, one might argue that a double process of reduction and curtailing takes place: The overall frequency of double parentheses is drastically reduced and in particular those that appear within sentences, that is, those combinations that carry the load of the associative tangential tendency that animates Flusser's writing, all the ideas that keep intruding in the writing process, the choir of all the different voices that clamour to be heard. Naturally, the reduction is in part also due to the fact that the texts get shorter. But this does not fully explain the changes occurring during the writing of the different linguistic versions.

As far as the content of the single brackets are concerned one can distinguish between examples – which appear in groups at certain points of the text –, short explanations, relative clauses – in the English version there are nine of them , (which seems to be totally alien to writing), – and longer sentences – in some cases two or three lines in length. Flusser frequently uses the plural “we” –, (had we not its praxis) –, and at some point, the author speaks directly to the reader – (or, if you prefer) , / , (which is, if you consider it, a dubious statement). In the French version, some of the examples have been put together in one single parenthesis, most of the longer sentences and relative clauses have disappeared, but the new sentences have taken their place. Brackets within commas have been substituted by brackets ending in a period, (which can be inside the bracket or outside it at the very end of the sentence.). In the Portuguese version, besides the examples, only one longer sentence has remained, which was specifically added for a Brazilian readership. As Flusser is not a systematic thinker, (or writer for that matter), it is difficult to bring any kind of consistent order into his constant adding and cutting, that is repeated in each new version and every time in a different way.

In the first essay of the series, Flusser provides a possible interpretation for his idiosyncratic use of punctuation¹², which is constantly caught in between freewheeling association and a conscious desire to control. To describe this, Flusser uses the metaphor of a tree constantly branching out which can be kept under control only by systematic and continuous pruning and chopping away of the excrescences. “For a start I accept the tendency of the thought which *presses* toward its specific language to be articulated. I formulate it silently in that language. It then provokes a whole chain of thoughts, as is characteristic of linear thinking. The chain is *somewhat* under

¹² For a more detailed analysis of this text series see Guldin 2005: 288-292.

my control, because it must obey the rules of the grammar of its language. [...] The process of silent formulation is so quick that it seems that the various *branches of the thought tree grow simultaneously within me and within the language*. (I can no longer distinguish well between myself and the language at this point). [...] An *unchecked growth* of thought, (the Joycian [!] ‘river’), would defeat my purpose, which is to give form to what is *pressing within* me toward articulation. Although I know very well the *seduction and beauty of letting myself float within the river of language*, I have to resist such a temptation. (Which is the reason why I admire, but also distrust what is called ‘automatic writing’). I know that the *branching out of the thought* is due more to word association than to thought association, although one certainly implies the other. [...] To stop the *tendency toward a tree*, I must take a typewriter, which does not permit tree structures, (whatever Joyce and his followers might say). [...] As I type the sequence of thoughts in the language which is ‘appropriate’ to them, I make a series of negative choices. I *eliminate* word and thought associations as they press against my surface. Which shows again that writing is more akin to sculpture than drawing. It consists of *constant chopping*.” [emphasis mine RG] (ibid.:10-11)

When the first text is translated into another language a whole new swarm of associations, branching out in new directions intrudes in the writing process. “As I begin to type my Portuguese text, in order to *chop away the new associations which assault me* [...]. The original thought not only assumes a different shape, but may also take a different direction, because the *associations chopped away during the first writing* may now be taken up again in a different context.” [emphasis mine RG] (ibid.:10-11) The organic tree branching out in many directions is tamed by the linearizing action of the typewriter. At the end of the essay Flusser points to other aspects which he has not dealt with. “I have concentrated my attention to very few aspects that extremely complex gesture [of writing]. In fact, I have considered practically only two aspects: the articulation of thought in language, and the articulation of language in letters. Thus I have left out all esthetic [!] aspects, (on the level of sound, of rhythm, of visible form), all ‘orthographical aspects’, (on the level of choice of letters, of *punctuation*, paragraphing etc.), all ‘rhetorical’ aspects, (on the level of choice of a style, of metaphors, of explicit and implicit connotations etc.), and so forth.” [emphasis mine RG] (ibid.:18)

As the example of the multilingual series of texts discussed in this essay shows there also occurs a shift from a more open ended and provisional form of the comma and round bracket combination in the middle of the sentence those placed at the end of a sentence. This could be explained with the fact that brackets used with periods (inside or outside the brackets) represent full sentences which have a firmer stand within the textual flow than words or strings of words inserted between commas and brackets. These have a much more fleeting presence and can therefore be removed more easily.

Finally, another important aspect to be considered is the relationship between the typescripts and the printed versions, in which Flusser's odd combination of commas and parentheses was systematically curtailed, generally by removing the commas that were thought to be in the wrong place from a syntactical point of view.¹³ However, by privileging abstract order, grammatical and syntactical correctness (which is subject to continuous historical change) over personal creativity one eliminates an important aspect of a writer's thinking. In all the four published versions only a few of the original combinations remain. Add to this that all the commas before the round brackets were systematically deleted, which is a common practice with Flusser's published texts. In fact, in all four of Flusser's writing languages the use of two commas to enclose two round brackets is a deviation from the rules, an excess. This editorial practice was probably based on the tacit assumption that Flusser could not possibly have meant to use two commas to enclose two round brackets.

Generally, punctuation marks indicate how a written text should be read and, consequently, understood. They operate on the level of syntax. But the two commas enclosing two round brackets do not have any clearly recognizable syntactical function, they are like a pause within a pause. This is true especially for the first of the two commas. By deleting the first of the two commas syntactical correctness is reestablished but unfortunately the stylistic idiosyncrasy is lost. This systematic and consistent publication policy could also mean that Flusser did not really care about this detail, publication being his first aim. However, this does not make his idiosyncratic use of commas and round brackets insignificant but points to a hidden, (and half-conscious), dimension in the writing process, (and is thus all the more telling).

References

- Abbt, Christine and Kammasch, Tim (ed.) (2009a) *Punkt, Punkt, Komma, Strich? Geste, Gestalt und Bedeutung philosophischer Zeichensetzung*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Abbt, Christine and Kammasch, Tim (ed.) (2009b) *Philosophische Zeichensetzung. Eine Einleitung*, in *Punkt, Punkt, Komma, Strich? Geste, Gestalt und Bedeutung philosophischer Zeichensetzung*, ed. by Ch. Abbt and T. Kammasch. Bielefeld: Transcript: 10-16.
- Ackerman, Hannah (2023) This Philosopher's Use of the Em Dash Challenges Punctuation As We Know It, in *Editing Research* <https://editingresearch.byu.edu/2023/06/20/philosopher-challenges-em-dash-usage/>
- Adorno, Theodor, W. (1956), *Satzzeichen*, in *Akzente. Zeitschrift für Dichtung*, 3: 569-575 (translated into English by S. W. Nicholson, in *The Antioch Review*, Summer 1990, 48/3, *Poetry Today*: 300-305).
- Adorno, Theodor, W. (1951) *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* file:///C:/Users/41792/OneDrive/Desktop/minima_moral.pdf
- Agamben, Giorgio (1999), *Absolute Immanence*, in *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford California: Stanford University Press: 220-239.
- Calvert, Sheena (2019) *Punctuating Philosophy*

¹³ This is something that also happened with Franz Kafka's texts (Nebrig and Spoerhase 2012: 19-20).

- <https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/14167/1/Final%20Draft%20Punctuating%20Philosophy%20.pdf>: 1-21.
- Derrida Jacques (1998), In Klammern I, in *Auslassungspunkte*. Wien: Passagen: 17-39.
- Flusser, Vilém, *O gesto de escrever* (typescript)
- Flusser, Vilém, *Die Geste des Schreibens* (typescript)
- Flusser, Vilém (1991) *Die Geste des Schreibens*, in *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*. Düsseldorf and Bensheim: Bollmann: 39-49.
- Flusser, Vilém (1999) *Le geste d'écrire* in *Les gestes*, Paris; Cergy: HC – D'Arts: 17-26
- Flusser, Vilém (2009), *The Gesture of Writing*, in *Flusser Studies* 08,
<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/the-gesture-of-writing.pdf>: 1-18.
- Flusser, Vilém (2011) *Does Writing Have a Future?* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Flusser, Vilém (2014) *O gesto de escrever*, in *Gestos*, São Paulo: Annablume: 99-109.
- Forrer, Thomas (2009) *Das Semikolon. Geistreiche Zutat*, in *Punkt, Punkt, Komma, Strich? Geste, Gestalt und Bedeutung philosophischer Zeichensetzung*, ed. by Ch. Abbt and T. Kamasch, Bielefeld: Transcript: 87-99.
- Guldin, Rainer (2005) *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen. Vilém Flussers Werk*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag: München.
- Kamasch, Tim (2009), *Der Gedankenstrich. 'stille Ekstase'*, in *Punkt, Punkt, Komma, Strich? Geste, Gestalt und Bedeutung philosophischer Zeichensetzung*, ed. by Ch. Abbt and T. Kamasch, Bielefeld: Transcript: 119-138.
- Lachmann, Renate (2017), *Die Parenthese und ihre Umklammerung*, in *Satzzeichen. Szenen der Schrift*, ed. by Dietmar Schmidt, Helga Lutz and Nils Plat. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos: 36-39.
- Mathews, Jack (1997), *The Philosophy of the Comma: A Brevitarian Reflection*, in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 80, 2/3: 427-438.
- Nebbrig, Alexander and Spoerhase Carlos (2012), *Für eine Stilistik der Interpunktion. Studien zur Stilistik der Interpunktion*, in *Die Poesie der Zeichensetzung: Studien zur Stilistik der Interpunktion*, ed. by A. Nebbrig and C. Spoerhase. Lausanne: Peter Lang: 11-31.
https://www.projekte.hu-berlin.de/de/zfgerm/1999-2024-publikationen/bd25_vorwort1.pdf
- Schmidt, Dietmar, Lutz, Helga and Plat Nils (ed.) (2017) *Satzzeichen. Szenen der Schrift*. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos.
- Schnyder, Peter (2009), *Das Komma. Vom geheimen Ursprung der Philosophie*, in *Punkt, Punkt, Komma, Strich? Geste, Gestalt und Bedeutung philosophischer Zeichensetzung*, ed. by Ch. Abbt and T. Kamasch, Bielefeld: Transcript: 73-86.
- Stein, Gertrude (1935) *On Punctuation*
<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/works/stein.pdf>: 1-5.
- Wirth, Uwe (2017), *(In Klammern)*, in *Satzzeichen. Szenen der Schrift*, ed. by Dietmar Schmidt, Helga Lutz and Nils Plat. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos: 31-35.