

Introduction

Flusser et la France

Vilém Flusser a été basé en France les dix-sept dernières années de sa vie. Il a appris le français, il a écrit en français, et a donné des conférences et des cours en français, il a eu de proches amis français. Et il est resté méconnu en France de son vivant : trois livres sans grand succès (dont deux sont des retranscriptions de conférence), une douzaine de contributions à des livres collectifs, une trentaine d'articles, très peu d'interviews dans la presse francophone (4 en tout et pour tout), mais surtout une faible acceptation par l'intelligentsia française, une non-reconnaissance quasi-générale par l'Université. À partir de 1983, son succès éclatant en Allemagne (avec la publication de *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*) l'a amené à concentrer ses efforts sur ce pays et il s'est résigné au fait de n'être pas connu en France.

La situation n'a guère changé après sa mort : quelques livres traduits de l'allemand et, dans un cas, du portugais (7 au total entre 1996 et 2015), toujours peu de reconnaissance universitaire (un seul colloque en 2009, aucune thèse de doctorat avant 2020), une notoriété faible et, qui plus est, limitée au champ de la photographie et du design, sans tenir compte de la richesse multiforme de sa pensée. Pendant qu'en Allemagne, au Brésil, aux États-Unis et dans d'autres pays, les études flusseriennes prenaient leur essor, la France restait à la traîne (depuis la création de cette revue, seulement 5 auteurs francophones sur 250 contributeurs), et les textes de Flusser en français étaient difficiles d'accès.

Mais depuis quelques années, cette situation est en train de changer : trois nouveaux livres publiés en 2019-21, trois autres en projet, un intérêt croissant de la part de plusieurs universitaires, chercheurs et critiques, une première thèse de doctorat en septembre 2020, des articles de revue, et, en préparation, un site internet Flusser France reprenant ses textes en français et les écrits sur lui en français. On est encore loin de la richesse de l'édition et de la recherche en portugais, allemand et anglais, mais c'est une nette avancée.

C'est dans ce contexte que *Flusser Studies* a décidé de consacrer ce numéro spécial à Flusser et la France, qui a pour objectif d'une part d'approfondir les recherches historiques sur la vie de Flusser en France, et d'autre part apporter un éclairage sur l'articulation de sa pensée avec celle

d'autres intellectuels français ou francophones¹ et sur le regard actuel de chercheurs français sur sa pensée.

Ce numéro couvre donc un champ assez large, comme détaillé ci-dessous. Certains essais mettent l'accent sur les amitiés de Flusser avec des penseurs et artistes français, et, en premier lieu, Louis Bec, décédé il y a trois ans, à qui un hommage est rendu. D'autres essais explorent tel ou tel élément de la vie de Flusser en France, comme ses tentatives de publication ou de colloque ; on trouvera ici son premier discours en français, sa première interview et le premier article sur lui. Plusieurs textes de Flusser en français, soit inédits, soit épuisés, sont inclus ici (ainsi que quelques traductions pertinentes), certains faisant l'objet d'une présentation plus approfondie ; ses livres récemment publiés ou en cours de publication, sont également présentés.

Plusieurs chercheurs et écrivains apportent ici leur regard sur Flusser, sur sa pensée et sa réception critique, dynamisant dans divers champs la réflexion française sur son travail. De plus, huit photographes de la scène française ont été invités à exprimer, en mots et en images, l'influence que Flusser a eue sur eux. Pour beaucoup de ces contributeurs, ce numéro spécial a été l'occasion de réaffirmer l'importance de Flusser dans ce pays, et d'impulser de futurs projets, livres, articles, colloques ou site internet.

Flusser and France

Vilém Flusser was based in France for the last seventeen years of his life. He learned French, he wrote in French, and gave lectures and lessons in French, he had close French friends. And he remained unrecognized in France during his lifetime: three books without much success (two of which are conference transcriptions), a dozen contributions to collective books, some thirty articles, very few interviews in the French-speaking press (altogether only four), but above all a weak acceptance by the French intelligentsia, an almost general non-recognition by the Universities. From 1983, his resounding success in Germany (with the publication of *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*) led him to concentrate his efforts in this country and he resigned himself to the fact of not being known in France.

The situation hardly changed after his death: a few books translated from German and, in one case, Portuguese (7 in total between 1996 and 2015), still little academic recognition (only one colloquium in 2009, no doctoral thesis before 2020), a low notoriety and, what is more, limited to the field of photography and design, without taking into account the multifaceted richness of his thought. While in Germany, Brazil, the United States and other countries, Flusser studies were

¹ Tout en reconnaissant et saluant l'apport de chercheurs suisses, belges et canadiens dans les études flusseriennes, nous nous permettons ici de faire un raccourci en disant « français ».

taking off, France was lagging behind (Of the 250 authors who have published in this journal since it was founded in 2005, only 5 have been French-speaking), and Flusser's texts in French were difficult to access.

However, in recent years, this situation has been changing: three new books published in 2019-21, three more in the pipeline, growing interest from several academics, researchers and critics, a first doctoral thesis in September 2020, journal articles, and, in preparation, a Flusser France website with his texts in French and writings about him in French. We are still a long way from the richness of editing and research in Portuguese, German and English, but it is a clear step forward.

In this context, *Flusser Studies* has decided to devote a special issue to Flusser and France which aims, on the one hand, to deepen historical research on Flusser's life in France, and on the other, to shed light on the relationship of his thought with that of other French or French-speaking intellectuals², as well as the current view of French researchers on his thought.

This issue, therefore, covers a wide field, as detailed below. Some essays emphasize Flusser's friendships with French thinkers and artists, first and foremost Louis Bec, who died three years ago, and to whom homage is paid. Other essays explore different aspects of Flusser's life in France, such as his attempts at publication or his participation in colloquia. In this issue, you will find his first speech in French as well as his first interview and the first article dedicated to his work. Several texts by Flusser in French, either unpublished or out of print, are also included in this issue (along with some relevant translations), some of which are the subject of a more in-depth presentation. His books recently published or in the process of being published, are also presented.

Different researchers, writers and artists contribute their own personal view on Flusser, his thought and his critical reception. For many contributors, this special issue was an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of Flusser in France, and to stimulate future projects, books, articles, conferences or websites.

Content of the issue

The present issue begins with a chronology of Flusser's French years – “Chronologie: Vilém Flusser et la France” – and a chronological list of all the texts Flusser published in French – “Bibliographie: Vilém Flusser en Français” that was elaborated by Marc Lenot.

² While recognizing and welcoming the contribution of Swiss, Belgian and Canadian researchers, we take the liberty here to make a short cut by saying French.

The first section, dedicated to the late Louis Bec, sets out with a tribute by Marc Lenot – “En hommage à Louis Bec (1936-2018)” – accompanied by twelve pictures, some of which will be new to many of our readers. Louis Bec, who died three years ago, was one of Flusser’s closest friends, one of the few with whom he never quarrelled, and the only one with whom he co-authored a book. Lenot’s essay briefly discusses Louis Bec’s life and work as a zoosystematician, the creation of the “Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste”, as well his theories about bio-art and artificial life. The essay also deals with the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, the central project of their collaboration. This introductory essay is followed by two texts that resulted from Flusser’s friendship with Louis Bec: “Bec’s Sulfanograde” and *Orthonature Paranature*,

In “Bec’s Sulfanograde”, which we publish in its original German and Portuguese versions and in a French translation, Flusser focuses on the relationship of science and art with regard to Bec’s simulated organic creatures, the sulfanogrades. The second text is introduced by Martha Schwendener and Marc Lenot (“Présentation de *Orthonature Paranature*” / “Presentation of *Orthonature Paranature*”). *Orthonature Paranature* is Flusser’s third book in French, after *La Force du Quotidien* (1973) and *Le Monde codifié* (1974), and the last published in France during his lifetime. It was published in February 1978 by the “Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste” and is connected to a lecture given by Flusser on October 9, 1976 on the occasion of Louis Bec’s exhibition “Les Sulfanogrades”.

The last contribution of this section is Élise Rigot’s French podcast about *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. The podcast is a creation based on reading the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* and research conducted at the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin under the supervision of Anita Jóri. “Bio Is the New Black” is a podcast that invites artists, designers, philosophers, scientists and engineers to explore the multiple ethical, critical and creative questions that arise with bio-manufacturing technologies.

The first contribution of section two – “D’autres amis français de Vilém Flusser” (Other French Friends of Vilém Flusser) – is a conversation between Hervé Fischer and Rainer Guldin. Fischer talks about his relationship to Edith and Vilém Flusser, their first meeting, multilingualism, writing in French, the Biennial of São Paulo, Flusser’s relationship to Alexandre Bonnier and Jeanne Gatard, *Art Sociologique* but also about the possible future of Flusser’s legacy. The interview is followed by the letters Fischer exchanged with Vilém Flusser between 1976 and 1982 as well as seven of his artworks.

The interview with Fred Forest by Jean-Louis Poitevin and Martial Verdier deals with Fred Forest’s personal relationship to Vilém Flusser, their collaboration over the years, the influence

they had on each other's work and thinking, as well as the importance of the notion of gestures, the art of video and the role of the apparatus.

Anderson Pedroso's "Vilém Flusser and Abraham Moles" explores the central role that Abraham Moles played in Vilém Flusser's thought during the first years after his return to Europe in 1972, their theoretical affinities – their interest in cybernetics and its connection to the aesthetics of communication – and their paradoxical Jewishness.

The first part of the third section "Flusser en France" (Flusser in France) focuses on a series of texts and events related to Flusser's early years in France: his first speech in French to the AICA Congress in Paris on September 13, 1972, - the first mention of his name in an article in French, by Jeanine Warnod in "Le Figaro" on September 19, 1972 ("Thèmes révolutionnaires pour la Biennale de Sao-Paulo 1973" (Revolutionary themes for the São Paulo Biennale 1973) and an interview with Jacques D. Rouiller in "La Gazette de Lausanne" on January 6/7, 1973, his first published in French.

In "Les Rendez-vous manqués. Flusser, la France et la photographie" (Missed opportunities. Flusser, France and Photography) and "L'échec des Rencontres de Robion (1981/82): Un tournant pour Vilém Flusser?" (The Failure of the 1981/82 Robion Encounters: A Turning Point for Vilém Flusser?) Marc Lenot discusses Flusser's situation in France, where he lived the last seventeen years of his life. Although Flusser spoke reasonably good French, he published very little in France, gave only a few conferences and lectures, and never became part of French intellectual circles. After having definitely settled in Robion in 1981, Flusser attempted to organize a summer event as a sort of laboratory of ideas with regard to the São Paulo Biennial. However, there was only one session in August, on the subject of analogies of languages. This failure can be seen as a turning point for Flusser, as far as his relationship with France was concerned. After 1982, the centre of gravity of his intellectual and editorial life moved irrevocably to Germany.

The fourth section "Publier en France" (Publishing in France) opens up with another piece by Marc Lenot: "Flusser, *La Force du Quotidien*, Mame, 1973. Histoire d'une édition et d'une occasion manquée" (Flusser, *La Force du Quotidien*, Mame, 1973. History of an edition and a missed opportunity). As the title suggest, this is the story of yet another failure. However, the following three texts tell a more encouraging story. This essay is followed by an interview with Claude Lutz who is the founder and director of Éditions Circé, which in 1996 published a French translation of Vilém Flusser's *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*. Three more translations followed: *Petite philosophie du design* (2002), *Essais sur la nature et la culture* (2005) and *La Civilisation des médias* (2006).

In “Parution en français de *Mutations dans les Relations Humaines? De la Communicologie*” (French publication of *Mutations in Human Relations? Of Communicology*), which contains a short extract from the new French edition of Vilém Flusser’s book “Mutation of Human Relations?”, Marc Partouche describes his collaboration with Louis Bec and Vilém Flusser in the 1980s. After the publication of “Les Gestes” (*Gestures*) in 1999 (republished in 2014) and of “Post-Histoire” (*Post-History*) in 2019, Partouche has just published the French typescript (written in 1986) of a book, which, until now, was known only in its 1996 German version as *Kommunikologie. Umbruch der Menschlichen Beziehungen?* (the English typescript has not yet been published). This constitutes an important step in the program of French publications of Flusser’s works.

In “Le diable, l’absurde et la philosophie” (*The devil, the absurd and philosophy*), Philippe Thureau-Dangin provides a short introduction to the French translation of Vilém Flusser’s *The History of the Devil*. It discusses some of the main aspects of the book, including the notion of sin, the figure of the devil, but also the dangers of nationalism, Marxism, the theoretical shortcomings of existentialism and Flusser’s interest in Buddhism. The accompanying extract from *The History of the Devil*, paragraph 6.4. Conversation, which is the last part of chapter 6. Envy and Greed, focuses on the notion of conversation, which is central to Flusser’s thinking. It would later branch out into concepts of dialogue and go as far as the telematic society.

In his short comment on the forthcoming French translation of *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (“Édition française de *Dans l’Univers des Images Techniques*”), Emmanuel Alloa points out that the text is both a foreshadowing of the development of digitization processes to come and a harkening back to the earliest moments of civilizational techniques. The full potential of Flusser’s thought-provoking ideas arguably could not be understood at the time of their publication. This French translation by Pierre Rusch will allow for a new understanding of this crucial phase in Flusser’s oeuvre.

Section five “Au sujet de Flusser” (*About Flusser*) begins with Pierre-Damien Huyghe’s “Appareil et caméras chez Vilém Flusser, objections et critique” (*Apparatus and cameras for Vilém Flusser, objections and criticism*). This essay deals with the notion of apparatus, which together with the concept of program are the two salient characteristics of post-history. The paper also explores the notion of the “photographable” (*photographiable*) in its relationship to the possibilities defined by the camera.

Yves Citton’s “Vilém Flusser et la recherche-crédation” (*Vilém Flusser and research-creation*) deals with the Flusserian notion of research-creativity. The author re-examines Flusser’s work looking for theoretical connections and hidden connections between the time the texts were

written and the present. Flusser's vision is linked to the artistic scene in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, but also to his experiences in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the following contribution, Martha Schwendener's "Flusser and French Theory" explores the impact and reception of Flusser's work, which both in Germany and the US relied largely on the avenues opened up by French theory. Flusser was first celebrated in Germany, where Friedrich Kittler, the most prominent media theorist of his era, embraced his technical image writings. Kittler himself was informed by recent French theory: Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. In the U.S., Flusser's reception was through two avenues, both heavily influenced by French theory: photography theory within art history, and the U.S. art world. The paper traces some of these connections, comparing Flusser to Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Paul Virilio, Guy Debord, and François Laruelle.

In "Aveuglement théorique et insouciance éthique. Sur quelques faiblesses congénitales chez les sectateurs français de l'image... photographique en particulier" (Theoretical blindness and ethical recklessness. On some congenital weaknesses among French cultists of the image ... photographic in particular), Jean-Louis Poitevin points out the indifference of the great majority of French theoreticians, historians and critics of photography and images toward Flusser's thinking. For him, the essentialist approach of most French theoreticians of the image is centred on the index, on the real, on the absence/presence concept. Flusser's concepts go against the grain of the dominant French thinking on images and photography, undermining traditional French beliefs in this domain.

In "Pour un design radicalement circulaire. À propos des « Considérations écologiques » de Vilém Flusser" (For a radically circular form of design. About Vilém Flusser's "Ecological Considerations"), Victor Petit and Anthony Masure discuss an essay in which Flusser shows the limits of a clear opposition between nature and culture and supports the provocative hypothesis of a naturalization of the technique taking the form of circularity. Rereading this text after all these years allows us to take a step back on recent debates in the field of design research in France, concerning the concepts of ecology, the Anthropocene and collective responsibility.

Section six "Des Photographes" (On Photographers) is dedicated to French photographers that had contact with Flusser or were inspired by his work.

Vilém Flusser published a short German and English text on the work of Bernard Plossu "Die Wissenschaft des Ungenauen"/"The Science of the Imprecise" that we republish here along with a new French translation "La science de l'imprécis" and the four pictures by Plossu that figure in the text. Flusser never met Plossu personally but had a copy of the catalogue of Plossu's exhibition *Intermediate Landscapes* at the Center Pompidou in 1988. The essay focuses on sharpness

and blur, proximity and distance, and uses photographs by Bernard Plossu to explore Abraham Moles' theories of the imprecise.

The last part of the issue reunites the work of eight French photographers who were influenced by Vilém Flusser's thinking and writing. Juliana Borinski was especially sensitive to her position as a cosmopolitan migrant. Driss Aroussi, Isabelle Le Minh and Lionel Bayol-Thémines have been reading and reflecting on Flusser's work for a long time, and have often been inspired by it. Mustapha Azeroual and Laure Tiberghien discovered an echo of their work in his writings. Jean-Baptiste Perrot recounts the revelation he experienced on discovering Flusser's thoughts. Denis Bernard, starting out from a picture of Flusser himself, focuses on the gesture of the photographer and questions the epistemological status of the image. Each of the eight written statements is accompanied by an image.

Marc Lenot (Lisbon-Paris) and Rainer Guldin (Vienna-Lugano)