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Was Flusser a feminist?

Flusser. Feminism. Two words that we do not spontaneously associate, neither from a biographical point of view, nor in terms of his philosophy.

Edith & Vilém

Perhaps, first, because the Flusser household seems to have been a very traditional couple (today, we would say 'patriarchal'). Edith Flusser lived in the shadows and in the service of her husband, by him and for him. She was an assistant, driver, librarian, cook, reader, and even a purveyor of typewriter ribbons (which became hard to find after 1985...). She fulfilled the typical role of the wife of the man of genius, so often found in literary, musical, and artistic history, with innumerable examples. One can say, as Flusser's biographers Gustavo Bernardo and Rainer Guldin wrote: "In many ways, Vilém Flusser's work is unthinkable without Edith Flusser¹." This is even more true when one considers the way in which she archived, translated, and disseminated her husband's work after 1991. As far as is known, she never complained about her subordinate role, and instead carried out these tasks by choice and with dedication. In her interview with Alena Wagnerowá in the early 1990s², Edith Flusser did not want to talk about herself. She defined herself as her husband's listener and student. She said that she followed the example of her mother, a very intelligent woman but without a profession. She added that she had never had a problem with being reduced to this role, because she and Vilém lived for each other, that her husband, unlike German men, had no presumption of superiority over women, that he respected her and respected all women, and that she never suffered from this situation. However, she added, Vilém reproached her for not being ambitious enough: ambition frightened her.

Edith Flusser seems to have accepted without questioning this very traditional unfeminist division of roles in the couple, she was happy to exert her influence in the shadows. She was the first to read her husband's writings and to comment on them, to the extent that, as she confided to the two biographers, she came to be afraid of expressing her opinion: "Everything I was saying, he considered it correct, [if I was criticizing] an article, he would immediately rewrite it. As a result,

¹ Gustavo Bernardo & Rainer Guldin, *O homem sem chão, São Paulo*, Annablume, 2017, p. 309, my translation.

² Quoted by Bernardo & Guldin, *op. cit.*, pp. 313-315, my translation.

I was afraid to interfere, to give my opinion.³” Their Brazilian friend José Bueno, seeing that Edith was taking care of everything, house, budget, children, friends, meetings, so that Vilém could think and write quietly, said that Edith “deliberately dimmed herself”, leaving all the light to her husband⁴. Indeed, she stayed in the dark.

Others were surprised. The Swiss writer and translator Felix Philipp Ingold (1942), who exchanged a lot with Flusser⁵, was one of those who saw this relationship as problematic⁶: "Vilém seems to have no qualms about demanding menial tasks from his wife. She takes care of everything so that he can devote himself to writing daily for many hours. She listens patiently to him when he reads his new texts to her, she organizes all his trips and all his lectures. For more than 20 years, she has been driving and taking him all over Europe, while taking care of relations with publishers, cooking for him and his guests, and solving all domestic problems. " Since both find it normal, Ingold added, "I can't criticize his machismo because he and she are complicit, without questioning and without frustration. It seems like she doesn't even hear his macho expressions." Ingold also said that Vilém treated women with disdain and belittled them, a fact that is contradicted by many other testimonies that emphasized his charm and seduction, and his intellectual relationship with a few other women such as Mira Schendel, Dora Ferreira da Silva and Elisabeth Rohmer-Moles. Ingold reported that Flusser once compared his writing work to a farmer ploughing his field, or to a man ploughing a woman during sex. The writer and philosopher Hervé Fischer, interviewed by Rainer Guldin, elaborated: "His wife Edith was very fragile by his side. She seemed to me to be his devoted servant. He was very macho himself, but he clearly adored Edith⁷."

Neither Ingold nor Fischer certainly ever told Flusser what they thought of his machismo. When the French artist and poetess Jeanne Gatard (1937) did so in a much less explicit way, it was one of the reasons for Flusser's falling out with her and her husband, the French artist and writer Alexandre Bonnier (1932-1992). The Gatard-Bonnier couple, who worked at the Institut de l'Environnement, an experimental school inspired by the Bauhaus, had met Flusser in 1972 in the context of the preparation of the São Paulo Biennial (in which Bonnier participated), and had invited him on several occasions to give lectures at the Institute⁸. Jeanne Gatard helped Flusser get published in the international journal *ArTitudes*, and Flusser wrote several texts for his friends⁹.

³ Bernardo & Guldin, *op.cit.*, p. 107, my translation.

⁴ Quoted by Bernardo & Guldin, *op. cit.*, p. 106-107, my translation.

⁵ See part of their correspondence, edited by Daniel Irrgang, in *Flusser Studies* n°20, December 2015, <https://www.flusserstudies.net/node/541>, and the files COR 96 & COR 97 in the Flusser Archive.

⁶ Quoted by Bernardo & Guldin, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-213, my translation.

⁷ In "Hervé Fischer – Rainer Guldin. A Conversation (2.2.2021)", *Flusser Studies*, n° 31, July 2021, p. 3. <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/fischer-une-conversation.pdf>, my translation.

⁸ See my presentation of *The Codified World*: <https://flusserfrance.eur-artec.com/1974-le-monde-codifie/>

⁹ See the details in my presentation of another essay by Flusser: <https://flusserfrance.eur-artec.com/1976-lappartenance-dalexandre-bonnier-traverses/>

Their correspondence occupies four files in the Flusser Archive¹⁰. The two households met many times. Jeanne Gatard was an intelligent and self-confident woman, and Flusser expressed his feelings towards her as follows: "As for 'tenderness', I do not find it childish or ridiculous, but I think it is an existential attitude that is not chosen, but spontaneous. You can't want to be tender, but I want to be tender to you. Maybe you're reading between the lines¹¹." This rare expression of sentimentality in Flusser's work thus remained veiled, even repressed. Perhaps it was in response to a letter from Alexandre Bonnier to Flusser a month earlier in which Jeanne Gatard's companion wrote¹²: "I love you very much and I even have affection for Madame Flusser (these things should not be told, too bad!)." On October 19, 1979¹³, Jeanne Gatard wrote a short letter of 15 lines to Flusser (typed, whereas her correspondence was usually handwritten) in which, on two occasions, she mentioned Edith: "Yes, I love you, but I like Edith better, your strong wife, this great lady of infinite patience" and "I embrace you very family-like and without any familiarity, and a little more Edith." In the same letter (to which she had attached a page from her text, *La Grande Sieste*, in which she "tried to express with a certain tenderness [her] struggle against fascism"), Gatard also spoke of Flusser's naivety and navel-gazing: Flusser's response was scathing.

On October 24, 1979, in a letter of two dense pages¹⁴, while begging her to excuse him if he was harsh, he described their exchange as a "dialogue of the deaf" and accused her of "taking sides against closed reason and in favor of what [she calls] tenderness". This "anti-rational tenderness" is a "'romantic' position, that is, aestheticizing and anti-humanist." He told her that "it is the silence of the rejection of reason that has settled itself in spite of you in your texts", a silence that he described as autism as opposed to the silence of wisdom. And finally, rather condescendingly: "But I'm probably wrong: you rationalize your feelings, you quantify them: you love Edith a little more than me. So: you doubt, you reason, and there is the hope that we will understand each other." For Flusser, reason had to discipline feeling. Jeanne Gatard, hurt by his tone and his criticisms, replied on November 15, 1979¹⁵: "We hurt ourselves. I am probably hurt even more than I can tell. [...] That's enough, let's not talk about it anymore. [...] You must let others live, even if you sometimes want to crush them. And then, of course, we're not the same age. [...] Convey my affection to Edith, and you take what you like." The relationship between them was never the same and withered over the years.

¹⁰ In COR 100, 101, 102 & 103.

¹¹ Letter from Flusser to Gatard, 21 November 1977, file COR 102, p. 83 (page numbers refer to the online archive https://www.arquivovilemflusser.com.br/vilemflusser/?page_id=672), my translation.

¹² Handwritten letter from Bonnier to Flusser, 16 October 1977, file COR 101, p. 51, my translation.

¹³ Letter from Gatard to Flusser, 19 October 1979, file COR 102, p. 86, my translation.

¹⁴ Letter from Flusser to Gatard, 24 October 1979, file COR 102, pp. 92 & 94, my translation.

¹⁵ Handwritten letter from Gatard to Flusser, 15 November 1979, file COR 102, pp. 90 & 91, my translation.

L'amour, mine de rien

Flusser's relationship with Jeanne Gatard's partner, Alexandre Bonnier, also took a cold spell in 1979. Bonnier's artistic and literary work¹⁶ constantly evoked the two poles of ecstasy and death, with a transgressive fantasy dimension that may recall Georges Bataille: if death, Thanatos, corresponded to one of Flusser's subjects of interest, Eros, sexuality, ecstasy, on the other hand, were themes quite far removed from his own preoccupations¹⁷. Their mutual friend Hervé Fischer told Rainer Guldin about it: "And I know that Flusser didn't understand anything about Alexandre Bonnier's somewhat mannered art. In any case, Flusser was only really interested in the thread of his thoughts at the time. He was so focused on himself and the character he wanted to appear, that he was impervious to other people's ideas, unless he could make something of them in his own speech¹⁸." In 1978, Alexandre Bonnier and the ethnologist and poet Jean-Marie Gibbal (1938-1993) asked some thirty individuals or couples (including the poet Daniel Biga, the writer Charles Juliet, the curator Olivier Kaepelin, the curator and art critic Pierre Gaudibert, the novelist Gilbert Lascault, the Egyptian poet Joyce Mansour, and the Franco-Argentine philosopher Raphaël Pidal) as well as Vilém Flusser, to contribute to a collection of texts (letters, "love tracts", parables, poems, stories) under the title *L'amour, mine de rien*. In their call for papers¹⁹, Alexandre Bonnier said that he hated those "who have done nothing but talk about love without the indispensable excess," citing among them Lamartine, Aragon, and Alain-Fournier, and their opponents Madame de La Fayette, Stendhal, Jouhandeau, Balzac, Michaux, Breton, Bataille. Among his subjects of interest, he mentioned "Of course sexual freedom. And elsewhere pornography, the census of perversions and vices...", adding. "But it is as if this acquired freedom and avowed pornography make the 'feeling of love' romantic and old-fashioned. Old-fashioned or worse, that is to say, moralistic and ridiculous, when one confesses to loving passionately. »

For this book²⁰, Flusser wrote a letter to Alexandre Bonnier on 22 April 1979, in a tone very different from most of the other contributors (and it was the only one followed by a corrective addendum by Bonnier²¹). While almost all the other authors were poetic, romantic, or erotic, Flusser adopted a rather polemical tone, accusing Bonnier of having "spat this agonistic theme [love] in my face in a form which turned me into an antagonist, a part which I do not like to play

¹⁶ See Frédéric Valabrègue and Bernard Lattay, *Alexandre Bonnier, peintre et écrivain, 1932-1992*, Elne, Vox Éditions, 1994.

¹⁷ If I am not mistaken, Flusser's only text explicitly on sexuality concerns ... Vampyrotheutis infernalis and its three "copulatory organs".

¹⁸ "Hervé Fischer – Rainer Guldin. A Conversation (2.2.2021)", *op. cit.*, p. 4., my translation.

¹⁹ See COR 101, p. 68, my translation

²⁰ Alexandre Bonnier and Jean-Marie Gibbal (dirs.), *L'amour, mine de rien*, Paris, éditions Recherches, 1980, pp.149-153.

²¹ See my presentation and the text by Flusser: <https://flusserfrance.eur-artec.com/1980-lettre-a-mon-cher-ami-alexandre-bonnier-lamour-mine-de-rien/>. The typescript is found in file COR 101, pp. 75, 73 & 71.

in the tragedy of thought," which "continues to run through my throat." He then distinguished "four zones of love." The first, which he called "pornographic", included "phenomena such as 'pornography', 'guide to writing love letters', and 'love life advice in illustrated periodicals'." The second, which he called "psychosomatic," included "phenomena such as sex, loneliness, anxiety, friendship, trust, openness to others, in short, the dialectic between subjectivity and intersubjectivity." In the third, that of the "love experience", "things happened like my recognition of myself in the woman I loved, and my recognition of my beloved woman in myself." Finally, the fourth, the "philosophical zone" was the "zone of reflection on the experience of love", of which, "not being mystical", he would not speak. Once he had established this classification, Flusser considered that Bonnier's approach concerned only the first two zones, and that it confused "pornography with sex, that is to say, technique with the act", whereas he, Flusser, placed himself on the border between the last two zones.

He then addressed (for the first time, I think) the "problem of women's liberation." He did not limit himself to the "banal sense" of the term: liberation for sex (pill, abortion), for the economy (education), for society (MLF, i.e. the French Women's Liberation Movement), for politics (voting), everything that makes "woman both the first and the last proletariat." But above all, he emphasized the more significant meaning of this liberation: "Wanting to objectify a woman has become anachronistic: one can no longer possess a woman, fuck her, marry her, in short, love her, without being old-fashioned. That is to say: one can no longer love her, and be jealous of her, as before, without being aware that one is 'reactionary'." He continued: "If the historical situation (and not my existential decision) forces me to recognize woman as another (not only 'my' wife, but every woman), all my historical models of love are invalidated. And again: "I can no longer possess a woman: I must learn to let myself be possessed by love with her. I can't kiss/fuck²² her anymore: I need to learn that the kiss fucks us both. And I must learn from her, and that's as hard for her as it is for me." He concluded: "This is perhaps the first historical conjuncture that allows love between man and woman."

After this strange diatribe, in which Flusser attempted to explore a new form of feminist love, Bonnier rebuked him in an addendum to his letter: "I never 'spat in your face' the word pornography. I don't like pornography. I just told you it exists. [I don't like it] because I think it is a lack of imagination. Sade is not a pornographer, nor is Bataille, nor are many others. They are philosophers. Believe me, pornography is just a bourgeois notion. It can only exist with the forbidden and the desires of the forbidden." A year later (although I have not been able to determine the

²² Flusser used the word "baiser" which means "to kiss", but also, in vulgar speech, "to fuck", both literally and figuratively. It is difficult to believe that he was not aware of the double meaning of the word. Original text: "Je ne peux plus la baiser : il faut que j'apprenne que le baiser nous baise tous les deux. »

context of this letter, after a meeting in the German town of Rottweil, it seems) Bonnier wrote another letter to Flusser²³ on this subject: "Love is an orgasmic thing that has its roots in reality. [...] There is no God in my sex. It is only I who am stronger than a God in the moment of love. This is the whole story of original sin and the folly that flows from it. You know very well that religion, prohibitions, and eroticism (which is a consequence of morality) lead us there. I love because I am. I know, however, that every religion, and every political party, will try to take away my love. [...] And I'll die from it. But with the certainty that believers put their sex in their brains and that they confuse the sexes. I put things where they need to be." On June 27, 1980, Flusser replied rather bluntly²⁴: "I laughed a lot when I read you." He countered by contrasting Bonnier's conception of love ("love between two sexes") with his own ("total dedication to a person, an idea, or a cause"), and he added: "Your definition of love is not very interesting. [...] Frankly, Alexandre: I am less interested in your sex than in your experience, your sensitivity, and your intelligence."

These exchanges show the cultural and philosophical differences between the two men about love and sexuality, linked to their origin and to their age, with Flusser clearly appearing to be the more retrograde of the two. Their exchange was (as it was sometimes with Flusser) quite violent, and this aggressiveness damaged their friendship. But Flusser's ambiguous plea for women's liberation and his discourse on the importance of reinventing relations between men and women are particularly interesting, both as a stance taken by a man whose history, culture, age (and, as we have seen, his private life) would not seem to predispose him to this type of position, but also because he postulated that, with this liberation of women, traditional love was no longer possible and historical models were invalidated, such as Werther, Romeo, the troubadours, Don Juan (and also, he lamented without much explanation, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross).

Lizzie Calligas

Ten years later, Flusser returned to this theme in a short article about the Greek photographer Lizzie Calligas²⁵ (1943). He wrote this article in 1989, two years before he met the artist in September 1991 at the Ein Harod Biennial (a kibbutz built on the site of the Arab villages of Qumya and Tamra) in Israel, shortly before his death²⁶. In her series *Metamorphoses: My Body / Your Body* (between 1988 and 1991), the artist drew the body of her female nude model on a canvas, then photographed the model, projected the photograph onto the canvas by superimposing it on the

²³ Handwritten letter from Bonnier to Flusser, undated, file COR 101, p. 66, my translation.

²⁴ Letter from Flusser to Bonnier, 27 June 1980, file COR 101, p. 76, my translation.

²⁵ See her websites: <https://www.lizziecalligas.com/> & <https://lizziecalligas.blogspot.com/>

²⁶ Exchange of electronic correspondence between the author and Mrs. Elissavet Kalllīga (Lizzie Calligas) between December 14 and 17, 2023.

drawing, and photographed the resulting composite image. For Calligas, this complex layering of images was the mark of a feminist reappropriation of the classic nude freed from male voyeurism, quite in line with what John Berger had stated: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves other being looked at²⁷." In the text he wrote for the magazine *European Photography*²⁸ of his German publisher Andreas Müller-Pohle (who had introduced him to Calligas' work), Flusser explained one of the triptychs of this series as follows: "'My body' means 'the body I myself drew' and 'your body' means the model's body as it sets itself 'automatically' into the picture. Thanks to such a strategy, a synthetic body-image is to come about, wherein 'my body' and 'your body' overlap dialogically like two bodily intentions." After a short analysis of bodily expression and the dialogue between two minds, Flusser elaborated on his thoughts on feminism.

For him, by subjecting women's bodies to their own bodies, men have criminally repressed women and established a male monologue, preventing dialogue and making men and women strangers to each other, even though they love each other. He analyzed Calligas' work as follows: "The image does not tell us: 'look, this is how women see their bodies when there are no men about'. If it did so, it would merely be painful. But what the image is saying to us is: 'This is how you men must see us women, if you want to acknowledge us and be acknowledged by us'." And he went one step further by acknowledging: "that all the producers of images of beautiful women failed to recognize the otherness of the feminine spirit, that they have violated these women. That they have forced them to express themselves (and be expressed) through the male spirit." In one of the typescripts²⁹ for this article, Flusser wrote the following sentences which he then removed from the final text: "Thus those uncouth artists who have depicted beautiful female bodies in the past are *a priori* incapable of loving these women. Because they did not experience that shudder of strangeness which must precede love. They have violated the spirit which might have shown through these bodies, by forcing it to show itself as a male one."

He went on to say that, in front of this work, he understood that one must first reconsider love, reconsider what a man does when he loves a woman, and admit the otherness of the feminine spirit before one can hope to love a woman. And he added that 'otherness' means first and foremost 'alien', 'different' and 'ugly'. But it's the opposite of 'love', which, when you "fall" into it, "spontaneously transforms into beauty everything it touches." For Flusser, this triptych and the philosophy that inspires it are loveless. He stated the contradiction between feminism and love as follows: "If one begins to reconsider love (as the triptych means us to do), then love is done for. [...] Of course,

²⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 47.

²⁸ Vilém Flusser, "Lizzie Calligas: Bodies", *European Photography*, No. 40, October 1989, p. 70 (in German) & 71 (in English). Unless otherwise mentioned, all the following quotes are from this article.

²⁹ The three typescripts in English, not very different from the final text, are in the ESSAYS 5 ENGLISH file, pp. 76-82. The excerpt quoted here can be found on p. 82. The two typescripts in German do not include this passage (ESSAYS 12 GERMAN, pp. 79-82).

we must reconsider what we have done to women, and the women's liberation movement is fully justified. But precisely this is the paradox: it is because it is fully justified that it is unloving." And he concluded that reconsidering women risks destroying love and that justice and love cannot be reconciled.

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More elaborately than his letter to Alexandre Bonnier, this article, somewhat surprisingly, sets out Flusser's attitude towards feminism: the adoption of a feminist point of view, respectful of women, is an intellectual and moral necessity, but it goes against our literary and artistic traditions, and forces us to redefine the meaning of the word 'love' or even to abandon love in favor of justice. This paradoxical point of view, to which few feminist thinkers would adhere, was perhaps the easiest way for Flusser to reconcile this necessary intellectual and moral position with his own way of life, which was the antithesis of this feminist philosophy.