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(A little less than) 20 years with Flusser

20 years ago, I did not even know Vilém Flusser's name and I was not the only one in France, far from it. Although he lived in France for seventeen years (1975-1991), wrote and taught in French, Flusser had remained unknown here until recently. The chauvinistic conservatism and arrogance of many French intellectuals, philosophers and historians of photography, had kept him in the dark¹.

20 years ago, I started my blog *Lunettes Rouges* that *Le Monde* published until 2024. After a very different professional career, I reinvented myself as a critic and art historian. I went back to university and started a master's degree in cultural studies. I didn't know then, that ten years earlier my master's supervisor had written that the book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (translated into French only in 1996, thirteen years after its original publication in German) was a "pretentious pamphlet written in gibberish" and a "sad farce erected as a metaphysical investigation under the guise of *Dasein*"...

A few years later, in my sixties, I started a doctoral thesis in art history, with another professor who encouraged me to try to identify and define what experimental photography could be. During the first year of this research, I identified dozens of photographers as possibly experimental, but without having any precise definition of what this expression could mean (unlike, for example, experimental cinema, which is well recognized and studied): this term did not appear in any history of photography, in any dictionary. I could only find one catalogue edited by the Italian critic Italo Zannier². Quite distraught, I was navigating from Gunther Anders to Jean-Louis Déotte, trying to cobble together my own definition.

And one day, after seeing an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (Lucian Freud, I think), I was passing by the Centre's bookshop, and, looking at the alignment of the spines of the books in the "theory of photography" section, I saw one with an attractive title "Pour une Philosophie de la Photographie", by an author I had never heard of before. Its cover was illustrated with a photograph by one of the artists I considered possibly experimental, Patrick Bailly-Maître-Grand, *Les*

¹ See, for example, Jean-Louis Poitevin, « Aveuglement théorique et insouciance éthique : sur quelques faiblesses congénitales chez les sectateurs français de l'image ... photographique en particulier » (Theoretical blindness and ethical insouciance: on some congenital weaknesses among the French cultists of the image ... photographic in particular), *Flusser Studies* n° 31, July 2021.

² Italo Zannier (ed.), *Sperimentalismo Fotografico in Italia 1970-2000*, cat.exp., Lestans (Italy, province of Pordenone), Centro di Ricerca e Archiviazione della Fotografia, 2001.

Gémelles (it was the 1996 edition of the French translation by Circé, subsequent editions had an unillustrated cover). It cost 14 euros, I bought it and went home to read it that evening.

What I liked first was the rhythm, the style: these short, punchy sentences, this zigzag or spiral reasoning ineluctably leading the disoriented reader to the desired conclusion. I quickly understood that this systematic play with words (and languages) was not an element external to the content, purely practical and ornamental, but that it was his means of articulating his philosophical position from within. I soon discovered that reading his text, unlike so many heavy (and sometimes pedantic) treatises, was a pleasure.

What surprised me from the outset was an approach to photography like no other. As a studious student, I had read a lot, obviously, I had immersed myself in all the theories about photography, but what I discovered then in Flusser was so different from what I had read in Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss or Philippe Dubois, these authors who had until then seemed to me to be the unshakeable pillars of photographic theory. It was not so much that these pillars were shaken, but rather that, for the first time (at least in my readings), an author took a step back, distanced himself from photography as representation and questioned the photographic system as such. I felt the same emotion as when, as a young man 40 years earlier, I had discovered Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*: a different vision, a thunderclap, a radical questioning, a thought "outside the box".

And then I came to the last page: "With one exception: so-called experimental photographers [...] They are conscious that *image, apparatus, program* and *information* are the basic problems that they have to come to terms with. They are in fact consciously attempting to create unpredictable information, i.e. to release themselves from the camera and to place within the image something that is not in its program. They know they are playing against the camera."

It was like an epiphany: my thesis was, if not done, at least doable, I finally had a tool, a thought to structure my research, an intellectual framework to study experimental practices. Eureka! It was past midnight, and I opened a bottle of champagne with my girlfriend.

I defended my thesis in 2016; among the members of the jury, only Michel Frizot had already an in-depth knowledge of Flusser, having included him in his teaching. Others noted that I talked a lot (too much) about Flusser in this thesis. At the time, no doctoral thesis in France had Flusser as its main subject; the first was that of Anderson Pedrosa four years later³.

³ Anderson Antonio Pedrosa, *Vilém Flusser. De la Philosophie de la Photographie à l'Univers des Images Techniques*, thesis to obtain the degree of doctor in art history from Sorbonne University, under the supervision of Mr. Arnauld Pierre, defended on September 18, 2020.

The following year I published a book based on my thesis⁴, presented it at the Rencontres d'Arles, gave a few lectures, wrote various essays on Flusser and photography⁵. My interest in Flusser was still essentially limited to the field of photography and technical images. Thus, in November 2020, I published in *Flusser Studies* n° 30 a textual analysis of the three original versions (German, English and Portuguese) of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: an approach as close as possible to the text, relatively rare in Flusserian studies.

My interest in Flusser broadened when, in April 2020, Rainer Guldin asked me to co-edit with Anthony Masure the special issue of *Flusser Studies* on Flusser and France (issue n° 31 published in July 2021). It was for me a fundamental experience as an author and editor. First of all, it allowed me to extend my vision of Flusser, to explore other areas of his thought. Then, it was an opportunity to do a real historian's work by establishing a detailed chronology and a complete bibliography of his writings in French and by writing several articles on various events of his life in France (including a tribute to his friend Louis Bec, who had died three years earlier). Finally, it was an opportunity to get to know many French-speaking Flusserians, including those who contributed to this issue. In addition, to broaden the scope and in line with my specific interests, I invited several artists to express in images and words what they owed to Flusser. This special issue of *Flusser Studies* can be seen in retrospect as the starting point for the renaissance of Flusser studies in France.

In 2019, in his essay « Vivre dans les Programmes⁶ », Anthony Masure had noted that the two hundred entries in the critical glossary *Flusseriana. An Intellectual Toolbox*⁷, were presented in three columns, in English, German, and Portuguese; in the book's layout, a fourth column, left blank, involuntarily reflected the absence of Flusser's fourth language, French. Similarly, the now-defunct *Flusser Brasil* site had four columns titled essays in English, German, Portuguese, and French, but this last column was entirely empty.

The observation of this absence and the interest aroused by the special issue on Flusser and France led me to consider the creation of a site to fill this gap and provide researchers with all the texts of Flusser in French, originals and translations, published and unpublished, as well as the texts on Flusser in French (respecting the copyrights of course). This proposal was favorably received by Yves Citton and its development (by Damien Capitan) was financed by the ArTec program linked to the University of Paris 8. Before his new responsibilities limited his availability, Anderson Pedroso contributed with me to the creation of this site.

⁴ *Jouer contre les Appareils. De la Photographie Expérimentale*, Arles, Editions Photosynthèses, 2017.

⁵ Including, in *Flusser Studies* n° 24, December 2017, a trilingual essay "Flusser and the photographers, the photographers and Flusser"

⁶ *Multitudes*, n° 74, spring 2019, p. 176-181.

⁷ Siegfried Zielinski, Peter Weibel, Daniel Irrgang (eds.), *Flusseriana. An Intellectual Toolbox*, University of Minnesota Press, Univocal, 2015.

The *Flusser France* website now includes more than two hundred entries; all of Flusser's texts in French are available, either online or referenced. The big work that remains to be done is the editing and putting online of his correspondence, in particular the one with Abraham Moles, with Jeanne Gatard and Alexandre Bonnier, and the one (once we have his agreement) with Fred Forest. In the meantime, most of the new entries today are for books or essays on Flusser; we also announce events related to Flusser, a bit like a *bulletin board*.

The *Flusser France* website is therefore a kind of secretariat for the French-speaking Flusser community, a point of reference and a tool for the circulation of information. Given my age, the question of its continuation will one day arise.

Always fascinated by his style and way of thinking, I also contributed to the edition of his original unpublished French version of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*⁸, with Élise Rigot and Florent Barrère, and to the publication of fourteen essays written in French by Flusser on the theme of research-creation, *Arts, Sciences, Technologies. Défis à la Recherche-Création*⁹, with Yves Citton and Élise Rigot. I have also published in *Flusser Studies* a few essays outside the field of image and photography (on Palestine, feminism, Hercule Florence), and I am considering a French edition of his book *Freedom of the Migrant*, which I consider extremely relevant in the troubled and repressive world in which we live.

Unlike the majority of Flusserians, I am not a philosopher, but an art historian, and the essence of my work therefore revolves around photography, images, communicology. The recent call for papers for the next issue of *Flusser Studies* on Flusser and Artificial Intelligence, which Baruch Gottlieb and I will co-edit, is a natural extension of this work. Although he died in 1991, Flusser showed a form of prescience about digital photography and its dissemination: how can his thinking enrich our critical understanding of AI?

⁸ Les presses du réel, 2024.

⁹ Les presses du réel – ArTec, 2025.