

**Débora Medeiros**

## **Vilém Flusser in Brazil: Media and the New Human**

### **Introduction**

Brazilian scholars are currently rediscovering Vilém Flusser's work, especially his writings on the Philosophy of Photography. However, Flusser's manuscript *Fenomenologia do brasileiro: em busca de um novo homem* remains the focus of much less research, despite the fact that it presents a lucid analysis of Brazilian society. The text is a result of Flusser's experience as a European immigrant in Brazil between 1941 and 1972. Flusser wrote some of his early works in the country, such as *A história do diabo* (1958) and *Língua e Realidade* (1963). *Fenomenologia do brasileiro: em busca de um novo homem* was written only one year before he left Brazil to return to Europe. The military dictatorship that ruled the country since 1964 had been making his work increasingly difficult. Flusser continued to lecture and write for the next decades in Europe and visited Brazil in 1976 and 1979.

This article seeks to contribute to research on Flusser's work, shedding light on one of its most neglected aspects, a phenomenological analysis of Brazil. It is structured in a way that not only provides a contextualized interpretation of his famous piece on Brazil, but also takes a look into some of the main concepts that permeate Flusser's work as a whole, connecting them to the concept of media literacy.

In the next section, "Flusser and Brazil", I will analyze some of the milestones of his work in the country, as well as showcase the way other authors have reflected on it. In the section "The new human", I will conduct a qualitative content analysis of his seminal manuscript on Brazil, describing how each chapter approaches the possibility of a new human being<sup>1</sup>. A more specific analysis of how Flusser saw the media in this process will be conducted in the section "Two kinds of literacy". Finally, I will connect the concept of media literacy to Flusser's work and elements typical of developing nations like Brazil: a synthesis of diverse influences to create original cultural manifestations and the predominance of broadcast media as constitutive of public discourse, due to the high level of illiteracy verified among the general population until recently.

---

<sup>1</sup> Having relied on sources in various languages, such as Portuguese, Spanish, English and German, I have quoted my own translations of the passages in Portuguese and Spanish, preserving the original passages in the endnotes. Book titles are written in their original languages.

The text analyzed in this paper was compiled during a visit to the Vilém Flusser Archiv, at the Universität der Künste Berlin. It is an unpublished draft in Portuguese of Flusser's *Fenomenologia do brasileiro: em busca de um novo homem*. Flusser's handwritten notes throughout the text allow a glimpse into his working process. The crossed out sentences and reformulations provide an almost dialogical nature to the analysis, revealing a writing process tied to the use of a typewriter instead of a computer, nearly extinct nowadays.

Flusser's perspective on the Brazilian society in 1971, the year when he wrote this text, will be contextualized through the country's socio-political reality back then, as well as with regards to his ideas about concepts such as technical images (*technische Bilder*) and literacy in developing nations. Thus, in the end, through this article, I seek to provide an analysis of some of Flusser's main concepts applied to the Brazilian case.

## Flusser and Brazil

Many scholars regard the decades Flusser spent in Brazil as decisive for his work. During this period, the Czech author studied his own identity as an immigrant, making a contribution to the field of migration studies, and perfected his own peculiar translation process, which still marvels and intrigues translation scholars. He also made acute observations of everyday life and socio-political reality in Brazil, including the way Brazilians interact with the media in their routines, which is among the main topics of my article.

Giannetti (2012) asserts that this period in Brazil influenced much of Flusser's later work, such as the essays *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt*, written between 1988 and 1989, and *Menschwerdung*, from 1990 and 1991. Both essays remained unfinished, but were published after Flusser's death. "In these two essays, Flusser resumes (without mentioning it) his phenomenological analysis of Brazil, in order to lead it back to a new post-modern anthropology, which promotes the possibility of the dissociation of the human being from his role as subject and his transformation into a 'project'" (Giannetti 2012: 10).<sup>1</sup> This was a result of the first time that Flusser, in his condition as a European immigrant in Latin America, was confronted with a non-historic perception of reality, in which everyday life was displaced in a potential world (Giannetti 2012).

According to Goodwin (2008), Flusser's perspective on immigration was quite unique. He presented immigration as the freedom to let go of the prejudices and habits acquired at one's homeland, without completely being assimilated into the new environment. Kathöfer (2008) elaborates on this freedom, describing it as the freedom to determine one's own emotional ties,

free of cultural preconditions. Here the immigrant has the chance to reinvent himself, away from those who have known him all his life. The immigrant should not be fully integrated, as he or she can bring a fresh perspective to the new home. As Goodwin summarizes, the “idea that immigrants have a responsibility to teach the settled people about the possibility of letting go of their habits and prejudices, and not vice versa as is usually thought, is an important part of Flusser’s positive valuation of immigration” (Goodwin 2008: 5).

Flusser is often compared with another famous immigrant that arrived in Brazil around the same time as he did: the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, who lived in the state of Rio de Janeiro between 1940 and 1942. According to Michael (2006), both authors saw a certain utopia in Brazil: Zweig regarded the country as an improvement on Europe, as he thought Brazil had overcome problems that were still a source of tension on the European continent, like racism; Flusser saw Brazil as something entirely new, impossible to fit into the traditional European categories.

Their experiences as European immigrants in Brazil are also compared in their respective outcomes: while Flusser thrived as a recognized scholar, Zweig and his wife could not find meaning in starting over after the horrors of Nazism – the couple committed suicide in 1942. "Flusser and Zweig looked for ways of synthesizing their experiences, and yet Zweig remained stuck in Europe while Flusser tried to include the new land. Ultimately, while Zweig saw that harmony was not possible given the situation, Flusser saw that a harmony was not only possible but he was able to investigate the creativity that is possible in immigration." (Goodwin 2008: 9)

One of the ways Flusser investigated this creative state as an immigrant was in his experiences with translation. Throughout the years, he developed a method of auto-translation that involved at least four of the languages he spoke – German, French, Portuguese and English – and consisted of creating a new text each time, containing the old versions in other idioms without translating them word by word. That, according to Guldin (2007), represented Flusser’s cross-cultural exchange with his surroundings and served as a metaphor of his multi-layered identity as an immigrant.

The observations Flusser made about Brazil from his point of view as an immigrant have been compared to those of other foreign scholars who wrote about the country, as well as to national intellectuals. The main basis of these comparisons is his manuscript *Fenomenologia do brasileiro: em busca de um novo homem*. Written by Flusser in 1971, it remained unpublished until 1994, when a German translation by Bollmann Verlag came out. Four years later, a Portuguese version, the original language of the text, was published in Brazil.

Despite its unique perspective, the book did not have much impact neither in Brazil nor abroad. Michael (2006) attributes this to the fact that the book was written during a time when Brazil was under military dictatorship, permeated with a discourse of development at all costs and

aggressive nationalism (one of the regime's most famous mottos was "Brazil, love it or leave it"). Flusser's criticism of progress for the sake of progress and the consequences it could have for the Brazilian spirit could not find an echo in that context. When the book did come out, three years after Flusser's death, the issue of development was no longer under the spotlight, despite the rise of globalization studies. This historical context will be explored further later in this article. Here it must be noted that Flusser's ideas are rather current with the Brazil of the 2010s, a country that is experiencing yet another development frenzy and has gained great visibility abroad.

For now, let us return to the many authors whose ideas scholars tend to compare with Flusser's. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is among the researchers whose theories present a parallel to Flusser's perspective of the new human as *homo ludens*, a being that transcends Arendt's (1958) *animal laborans*, through activities that at first sight can be taken as alienation but that actually lend meaning to Brazil's sometimes harsh reality. Guldin (2008) finds an interesting parallel between the *homo ludens* and Lévi-Strauss' (1968) *bricoleur*, as a way of highlighting the importance of synthesis in Flusser's ideas about Brazil.

Another inevitable comparison is with Canadian author Marshall McLuhan. Araujo (2008) speculates on the probability of Flusser having read McLuhan's classic book *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964), pointing out that it was translated to Portuguese by Décio Pignatari in 1969, an author who belonged to Flusser's group of friends in São Paulo. Speculations aside, Araujo (2008) also acknowledges the many differences between both authors' ideas: while McLuhan said we are returning to a tribal state, in which we can perceive reality through other senses, due to the new mass media, Flusser considered the changes made by the written word irreversible, thus making a return to the magical status of the picture – in other words, the tribal state – impossible.

Among all the associations, Ramos and Souza's (2010) analysis of a dialogue between Flusser and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, one of Brazil's most important historians, is quite interesting. Published in 1936, Buarque de Holanda's book *Raízes do Brasil* is considered one of the most important works in Brazilian Social Sciences, along with Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933) and Caio Prado Junior's *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo – Colônia* (1942). Ramos and Souza (2010) contend that Flusser's *Fenomenologia do brasileiro: em busca de um novo homem* should be added to this canon of essential books about the formation of Brazilian society.

Buarque de Holanda's most famous concept is that of the "cordial Brazilian" ("homem cordial"), an individual that typically relies on family or personal ties and informal strategies to reach his goals, which leads to a blurry line between private and public interests (something easy to observe in most corruption scandals in Brazil to this day). While Buarque de Holanda highlights the bad aspects of this form of sociality, arguing that the "cordial Brazilian" must become extinct,

eventually replaced by politeness and distance, Flusser sees its positive aspects. To Flusser, the end of the “cordial Brazilian” would lead to a society that objectifies the individual, and Brazil would lose the opportunity of creating a new form of mutual responsibility, based on relationships involving two subjects, rather than one subject (the person responsible) and one object (the person to be responsible for). “One might presume that, to him [Flusser], unlike Holanda, the answers to the national problems – and maybe to the world’s problems – do not lie solely in entering the modern order, but in reformulating the main practices it contains” (Ramos & Souza 2010: 14)<sup>ii</sup>.

What is the role of the media in this panorama? Guasque, Guadagnini and Fachinello (2007) describe how mass media, from radio to cinema, have become consumer goods in Brazil, highlighting the importance of digital inclusion in a rather unequal society. Their analysis reminds me of a question posed by Flusser in his book *Kommunikologie* (1996), when he described how, before World War II and the dissemination of the mass media, most developing nations were still in a phase he called Manuscript, which Europe experienced during the Middle Ages. This was due to the levels of illiteracy in these countries, very high until recently, at least in Brazil. As a result, many developing nations entered into the age of technical images directly, experiencing the effects of printed books only superficially. Flusser wonders how different these nations might have been had they fully enjoyed the consequences of printed books: “Was wäre geschehen, wenn allgemeine Schulpflicht, Tagespresse, politische Pamphlete usw. die Volksebene in Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika alphabetisiert hätten, bevor Transistorradios, Lautsprecher und Fernsehapparate die Alphabetisierung überhaupt in Frage stellten?” (Flusser 1996: 62)

Although this might-have-been question is impossible to answer, it sparked my curiosity about a specific aspect of the new human he envisioned in Brazilians. This takes us to my research question: According to Flusser, what is the role of the media in the creation of the new human being in Brazil? I will attempt to answer this in the analysis that follows.

## The new human

When Flusser arrived as a young European immigrant with his girlfriend’s family, in 1941, Brazil was under the authoritarian rule of Getúlio Vargas<sup>2</sup>. When he wrote the manuscript that will be

---

<sup>2</sup> Vargas was a populist leader who kept an ambiguous stance toward Adolf Hitler’s regime for as long as he could, caving in to regional and economic pressure from the US in 1940 and sending Brazilian troops to fight alongside the Allies in World War II. When the war was over, Vargas was forced to liberalize his regime and ultimately relinquish power, returning to politics a couple of years later, in 1951, when he was democratically elected president and remained in power until 1954, ultimately killing himself.

analyzed in this article 30 years later, Flusser was experiencing yet another authoritarian period in Brazilian history, initiated in 1964 with a coup d'état conducted by the Armed Forces, after a brief period of democracy following Vargas's rule. The military dictatorship only ended in 1985, long after Flusser had left the country.

When he wrote *Fenomenologia do brasileiro: em busca de um novo homem*, Flusser had already been granted Brazilian nationality. At the same time as he describes himself in various passages of the text as “a Brazilian intellectual who immigrated from Europe” (Flusser 1971: 3)<sup>iii</sup>, Flusser describes the country from the point of view of a European immigrant. Highlighting the dialogical and subjective nature of his manuscript, he writes that he intends to address both the Brazilian and the European reader. He acknowledges his text may be rejected by both readers – considered “too European” by Brazilians and “too Brazilian” by Europeans. However, if both groups agree to be Flusser's partners in this conversation, they may gain the opportunity of seeing themselves from an outside perspective. He believes he occupies a rare position, between History (his European origins) and non-History (his new home, Brazil), without desperately seeking either of these conditions and thus open to historical and non-historical influences while analyzing the Brazilian reality (Flusser 1971: 3-7).

What does Flusser mean by “historical” and “non-historical”? He explains that historical and non-historical societies can be geographically distinguished between the historical West, i.e. Europe and North America, and non-historical developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Flusser 1971: 3-5). However, what differentiates a historical from a non-historical society, even more than Geography, is the mentality that permeates it. Historical societies regard History as a succession of events that leads to constant evolution, progress, exhibiting the linear and unidimensional thinking that Flusser (1996) associates with widespread alphabetization and the dissemination of national languages, when printed books became a part of everyday life in Europe. Non-historical societies are not as permeated by linear thinking, due to factors like high levels of illiteracy or very recent literacy among the general population. As a result, they do not regard History as society's trajectory to ever-growing progress.

Even though Brazil belongs to the non-historical nations, both geographically and otherwise, Flusser points out that the ideology of progress is a part of the Brazilian mentality, but not the only element that constitutes it, as is the case with historical societies. Flusser attributes that to various factors, such as Christianity, which arrived in the country with the first Portuguese colonizers, who in turn made Catholicism the religion of the majority of the population; and the waves of immigration that started between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To make his point even clearer, Flusser compares Brazil to another non-historical nation, China: “The ideology of progress plays a different role in Brazil than it does in other non-

historical countries, such as China. It is not an imported ideology like in China, but rather a part of the very Brazilian mentality, brought by the first immigrants and constantly strengthened by the ones that came to the country later. In this sense, Brazil is effectively ‘Christian’. However, the ideology of progress is not the essence of all thinking, hoping, dreaming and acting as it is in Europe, but rather merely one of the elements of the Brazilian mentality, which determines a big part of the thinking, but not the rest. And, in this sense, Brazil is not ‘Christian’, after all.” (Flusser 1971: 106)<sup>iv</sup>

The ideology of progress has been reinforced throughout the decades by the Brazilian upper and middle classes, in a vain attempt to penetrate History and catch up with Western societies, which leads to a phenomenon Flusser describes in a chapter of his manuscript as displacement (“defasagem”).

Flusser explores his experience as an immigrant in the first chapter of the manuscript, which has the title “Immigration” (“*Imigração*”). He asserts that, in Brazil, it is more difficult for the immigrant to feel integrated than it is in the US. This happens because the Brazilian population presents itself to the immigrant as “a urban, heterogeneous and almost amorphous mass” (Flusser 1971: 8)<sup>v</sup>, where immigrants from various countries – as well as their children and grandchildren – descendants of African slaves, urban workers and migrants from rural areas let their peculiarities almost dissolve in the crowd. Flusser characterizes this phenomenon as a mixture that leads to practical “racial equality”, disregarding all theories and happening in real life<sup>3</sup>. That mixture, according to the author, has the potential to become a synthesis, not only combining all races and origins, but creating something new with the best aspects of each (Flusser 1971: 12-18).

In the United States, on the other hand, the origins of each member of the population are what define her. Each immigrant represents a piece of her country of origin in the US, establishing a kind of hierarchy that is clear to those arriving in the country. This way, the author establishes that, unlike Brazil, the US is not a “melting pot” and that is exactly what makes integration there easier.

Flusser sees immigration as a dialectical process between environment and individual. In the US, the environment and its hierarchy make the dialectical process on the part of the individual much easier: one knows where one fits in the hierarchy. In Brazil, the “amorphous mass” offers no hierarchy and the immigrant must find her place, based on her own efforts, in order to ultimately become Brazilian. “It is hard to become Brazilian, because the Brazilian structures are

---

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, I would say that racial equality may be part of the potential Flusser sees in Brazil, but does not yet belong to the country’s reality. According to a survey conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Brasil. IBGE 2008), the agency responsible for the country’s official statistical data, most Brazilians still perceive race or skin color as determining one’s professional opportunities and income, as well as the way one is treated in the Justice System and other public services, with white Brazilians, for example, seen as having the best chances.

hidden, and nobody is really Brazilian (...). Therefore, only those that give meaning to this term can become Brazilian. And, in order to give meaning, they need to discover reality first. And, in order to discover reality, they need to change the environment first. In other words: if living is to give meaning, discover reality and change the environment, then becoming Brazilian is a lifelong task.” (Flusser 1971: 15)<sup>vi</sup>

This dialectical effort, Flusser says, is part of everyday life in Brazil not only for immigrants. And, like most processes in this non-historical country, it takes place almost entirely subconsciously, since it is not perceived as part of history.

That fact creates the potential for a new human, in the sense that, just as with racial equality (according to Flusser), Brazilians have the potential to achieve a synthesis between History and non-History in real life, independent from theories. This process could be almost subconscious in the beginning, but then becomes conscious over time. “Therefore, this can be a concrete and lively way of being human and giving meaning to one’s own life outside the historical context, but nourished by it” (Flusser 1971: 20)<sup>vii</sup>. This synthesis between History and non-History, defended by Flusser as the core of the new human, is exemplified in different aspects of Brazilian everyday life throughout the piece.

It is also through the eyes of an immigrant – or of a foreign tourist – that Flusser describes the Brazilian landscape in the chapter “Nature” (“*Natureza*”). Using adjectives such as “monotonous” and “boring”, he contradicts the widespread perception of Brazil’s nature as unique and exuberant. According to Flusser, the reason for this is that Brazilian nature only corresponds to these perceptions from an aesthetical point of view, which focuses on the peculiarities of the landscape but not on its vast and uniform totality. That is, to him, how most Brazilians regard the country’s nature, which makes nature incredibly deceptive. Flusser defines Brazilian nature not as a caring “mother” to the people, but as an evil “stepmother” who does not reveal herself as such (Flusser 1971: 28-31).

From an ontological point of view, Flusser gives many examples of how Brazilian nature only makes life for humans harder: the constant droughts in the Northeast; the Amazon jungle’s vastness that only serves its own ecosystem and makes agriculture in the area impossible; and the rivers in the South that run from the ocean towards the continent, making them inappropriate as transportation routes. He concludes: “To be able to cultivate the land, it is necessary to mobilize all efforts and use all kinds of tricks of an advanced technique” (Flusser 1971: 29)<sup>viii</sup>. It is this exhausting effort that makes Brazilians incapable of directing feelings of hate towards fellow humans. After all, everyone is an ally in this unconscious fight against nature and for “human dignity” (Flusser 1971). The same does not happen in Europe, where nature has been tamed and hatred can then be turned against other human beings. It is an interesting theory as to why there has



never been a civil war in Brazil, despite the heterogeneous character of its population. This fight against nature leads to a new kind of solidarity between Brazilians. Brazilians do not feel responsible for their fellow countrymen, because they do not see others as objects, but rather as subjects responsible for themselves. However, the fact that every Brazilian, no matter how different, is an ally against nature unites the society in a unique way. In many passages of his manuscript, Flusser hints that maybe this is a kind of love. Flusser argues that whatever this new form of sociality is called, it is only possible due to the peculiar relationship between humans and nature in Brazil. He stresses that it will only become reality, instead of a mere potential, when Brazilians abandon their aesthetical perception of nature and recognize it as the common enemy.

This chapter on the country's nature is quite ambivalent. Although Flusser warns against the consequences of unlimited progress in the West, his vision of Brazilian nature is rather utilitarian and only seems to take into account how it could serve humanity. This is also an aspect of the ideology of progress, as exemplified by the Promethean discourse (Murphy 2011), which sees nature as a never-ending source for human development. At the time Flusser wrote his piece, concepts like sustainability were not as widespread as nowadays, even though criticism towards the Promethean discourse became more frequent throughout the 1970s. Would he still have the same point of view, if he were writing in 2015?

The next chapter, "Displacement" ("*Defasagem*"), describes the unsuccessful attempts in Brazil, especially by the elite, to penetrate History, which only result in delayed and imprecise copies of historical periods that have already passed in the West. While historical societies turn to new methods to achieve non-historical thinking, such as existentialism, phenomenology and structuralism, non-historical societies ignore the crisis of historical thinking in the West and try to become a part of it. By doing this, they threaten the existential freedom Flusser sees in non-historical thinking, the freedom of transcending the surrounding environment and re-affirming the uniqueness of one's life, free from the burden of history and from the obligation of passing it to one's own progeny (Flusser 1971: 37-38).

Flusser does not contend, however, that Brazilian society should ignore History, but rather assimilate its influences without trying to copy it entirely. The author asserts that not even the dissemination of mass media can prevent displacement (Flusser 1971: 42-43). Not even world events that are now broadcast, tweeted and basically covered in real time are experienced simultaneously, since a message cannot transmit the direct experience (*Erlebnis*) of those who live the event to those who follow it through the media. Communication always takes place through symbols, thus always in theory, which cannot be concretely experienced. "Displacement is the attempt, condemned to failure, of living through messages, and the failure can't be avoided with the media's facility and reversibility. On the contrary, this easiness may in some cases even inten-

sify displacement” (Flusser 1971: 43)<sup>ix</sup>. This intensification of displacement may happen because of the illusion of simultaneity, of experiencing an event through its live coverage, when, in fact, the audience is only experiencing the message simultaneously, but not the event itself.

This is echoed in Flusser’s (1991) description, in the *Bochumer Vorlesungen*, of how the mass media are changing the way politics relates to the public sphere: with the broadcasting of political events, the movement between public and private spheres that was necessary to receive and then digest information before returning to the public sphere no longer takes place. Politics became exclusively private with the advent of the modern means of communication, since individuals no longer had to leave their homes and private spheres to feel they are experiencing political life. As in the case of displacement, this is an illusion, since the message of the political events taking place in the public sphere cannot be experienced (*erlebt*) in the private sphere.

According to Flusser, the only way to break free from displacement in Brazil is to accept the non-historical identity and practice it creatively in areas that enable great synthesis, like culture. This begins to answer our research question, but the next chapter, “Alienation” (“*Alienação*”), brings additional elements to this analysis of the relation between the media and the new human. What is commonly known as social alienation manifests itself differently in Brazil and plays an important role in the realization of the project that leads to the new human. While in the West alienation is a feeling of entrapment in History, a result of progress that transforms the individual into a piece of a bigger social machine, alienation in Brazil is a feeling of being stranded from History, of not belonging anywhere, a result of the non-historical character of society, which can be overcome when this characteristic is accepted (Flusser 1971: 48-50).

It is important to emphasize that, in his analysis, Flusser describes mainly the urban population of Brazil, as he sees the rural population as a closed society, with codes that are impenetrable to his foreign perspective. He focuses mainly in two social classes: the middle class and the working class.

The Brazilian working class is different from the American or European ones. While Western workers experience alienation for not knowing the entire production process of which they are a part of, in Brazil this alienation is a result of external capital’s influence over the production process, adding a further unknown layer to it. In addition, Brazilian workers do not usually relate to typical proletarian ideologies, like Marxism, since they were not originally disseminated by workers, but imposed top-down by a progressive elite in Brazil. Hence, Brazilian workers may not even see themselves as proletarians, due to artificial increases in income created by the gov-

ernment (raising the minimum wage, for example) which gives the impression that they are becoming members of the middle class<sup>4</sup>.

Regarding this peculiar social group, Flusser uses two main examples – that may appear rather clichéd – to prove his point about the role of alienation: Carnival and soccer. In both examples, what can initially be seen as an escape from reality becomes reality itself. The clear rules of soccer and the emotional involvement it provokes transform it into a territory where real human connections are established. Likewise Carnival’s four days of anarchic fantasy give meaning to the entire year, thanks to the preparations for the parades, the sewing of costumes, the composition of new songs and the remembrance of last year’s Carnival. These examples show how the harsh reality is replaced with the reality of the game, through a “qualitative leap” to commitment to this other reality that is the genesis of the *homo ludens*; human beings that live in a cycle in which the game plays the central role, not work, distinguishing them from Arendt’s (1958) *animal laborans*, trapped in a cycle of work, consumption and waste. “That qualitative leap to commitment can always be pointed out, because the reality from which the Brazilian alienates himself is not ‘the reality’, but always a reality. The workers don’t live for their work and their economic, social and political situation, but fundamentally always for the game. If ‘happiness’ means a shelter from reality, then Brazilians seek it in another reality. Indeed, in Europe and in the United States a new consciousness is being formed that happiness is not necessarily connected to the historical process, and that progress doesn’t necessarily bring an increase in happiness.” (Flusser 1971: 56)<sup>x</sup>

However, as important as this other reality is in the life of Brazilians, it doesn’t last forever: soccer matches and Carnival do eventually come to an end, and Brazilians are again confronted with their harsh situation of misery and social inequality, something that characterizes the shock that comes after alienation. In order to become a full-time *homo ludens* and therefore get closer to becoming the new human, the basic needs – food, shelter, healthcare, education – that are currently not being addressed must be permanently satisfied. This is where progress plays an important role: according to Flusser, it must be a means to fulfill the basic needs of those that are currently living in misery, but not the goal, as it is in the West. If Brazil develops only to the point where these needs are fulfilled, then *homo ludens* can become a permanent reality – if, in contrast, progress grows to become a goal in itself, then Brazil becomes a historical society permeated by displacement.

The paradox between misery and progress is the theme of the chapter that follows, “Misery” (“*Miséria*”). Flusser believes that there are three ways of addressing misery: by accepting it and

---

<sup>4</sup> This point makes me wonder what Flusser would think of the new middle class in Brazil (known in Portuguese as Classe C), a group that has been officially recognized as part of the middle class after an increase in income through social programs during Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s presidency. They are currently regarded as the motor of Brazil’s internal economic growth.

adapting to the surrounding ecosystem, as primitive societies do; by using it as a propeller for more progress, like historical societies do, which ultimately leads to existential misery, the misery of excess; and by considering misery something subjective and, instead of attempting to satisfy the basic needs, trying to control them with discipline, as Eastern societies do. Flusser says, however, that no society uses one approach to misery exclusively: the most common approach is to combine all of them (Flusser 1971: 67-70).

In Brazil, Flusser perceives the possibility of a fourth way of dealing with misery. Leaning on existentialism, he sees the famous designation of Brazil as “the country of the future” under a new light. The historical and most common interpretation of this saying is that Brazil is bound to become a great superpower, which Flusser thinks is unrealistic. From an existential perspective, however, this describes a country that realizes its misery and gazes with concern towards the future, something that may lead to change.

Flusser then proceeds to describe the innumerable forms of misery that exist in Brazil. The comfortable assumption is that some of these types of misery are caused by no one and some are caused by everybody, therefore nobody feels individually responsible for the fates of the miserable. However, Flusser argues that misery can be reversed if the country’s efforts are focused on that. The responsibility lies on the shoulders of the few non-miserable Brazilians, but responsibility is not exactly the right term: “Since the Brazilian regards his neighbor as a subject, not an object, he sees his neighbor as responsible for his own existence, a responsibility that cannot be transferred to anyone else. As a result, the anguish and concern that takes hold of him when he realizes the misery his neighbor lives don’t originate from responsibility, but rather from a much deeper sentiment (‘love’, if you will). Therefore, as the Brazilian begins to worry about the misery of his neighbor because he ‘loves’ him in a concrete and non-romantic sense, in this sense Brazil is the country of the future.” (Flusser 1971: 72)<sup>xi</sup>

This kind of love, if articulated in concrete measures, may lead to the eradication of misery as the lack of basic conditions to lead a decent life. According to Flusser, there is a consensus in the country that progress through the manipulation of natural resources is a necessary factor to eradicate misery. However, while the ideology of progress is a part of the Brazilian mentality, it is not its only element and, although a part of the Brazilian elite advocates for unlimited progress, most regard this with quiet distrust, as they somehow know that progress alone could create new kinds of misery.

Thus, Flusser summarizes the fourth and new way of dealing with misery as another element that forms the new human: “the Brazilian doesn’t intend to progress indefinitely, ‘move forward in life’ or ‘make a career’, but rather, after achieving a necessary minimum (which is hard to define), abandon progress, the advances, the career and ‘enjoy life’” (Flusser 1971: 43)<sup>xii</sup>. That is also

what Flusser understands as the Brazilian project. In this context enjoying life means becoming a full-time *homo ludens* and living for the game or for other forms of alienation in Brazil, like religion or culture, the latter being a typical kind of alienation for the elite that also allows the qualitative leap to real commitment.

It is only logical, then, that the chapter that comes next in his manuscript is called “Culture” (“*Cultura*”). Flusser asserts the difficulty of assigning both time and space to culture. He distinguishes two types of culture: the historical (where hierarchies based on time make sense) and the non-historical (where space is the decisive factor). In the Brazilian context, he defends the importance of communication theory to understand much of what happens in the country, but says that its binary division between elite culture and mass culture is not enough to comprehend Brazilian culture as a whole. Instead, Flusser proposes three distinct categories or levels: a basic, non-historic level; an intermediary, pseudo-historical level (which includes communication theory’s elite and mass cultures alike); and a superior, non-historical level, the culture of the new human. At the basic level, Flusser sees a predominant influence of the African elements present in Brazilian society. This influence reveals itself not only in the more obvious, known cultural manifestations, such as samba, but more importantly in everyday life, in the rhythmic and musical nature of people’s routines (the way people walk and talk, a peculiar rhythm permeating everything). Religious syncretism is another very visible facet of this influence. Because of this aspect of anonymity and everyday life, it is useless to try to trace a chronology of the basic, non-historical level of Brazilian culture.

The intermediary level is admittedly Flusser’s “natural habitat”, as it is the natural habitat of basically every intellectual in Brazil. He confesses that this makes it harder for him to accurately describe this level. However, his assertion is that it is displaced (and for this reason only pseudo-historical), in the sense that it is constantly seeking to reproduce Western trends without ever catching up with them, trying to articulate a *zeitgeist* that does not correspond to the country’s own *zeitgeist*; at the same time, it is essential to achieve the next, superior level.

The superior, non-historical level is characterized by the successful commitment to genuine cultural manifestations in fields like poetry, music, visual arts and architecture. This commitment can only take place from the intermediary level, when the elite seeks alienation in it and makes the qualitative leap. In poetry, Modernism played a fundamental role, by embracing the various influences Brazilian Portuguese has experienced from its indigenous and African roots, as well as from the mother tongues of waves of immigrants, in an original synthesis.

This brings us to the last aspect analyzed by Flusser in his manuscript, the language, in the chapter “*Lingua*”. Flusser retraces the changes that happened in Brazilian Portuguese to the first waves of European immigrants, between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. Mostly composed of speakers of other Latin languages, like Italians or Spaniards, this first wave of immigrants did not feel the need to learn Portuguese immediately, getting by with a mixture of their mother tongues and some local vocabulary, something Flusser describes as a sort of “proletarian Esperanto”. However, their children were not satisfied with this mixture of languages and neither were the immigrants from other origins that began to arrive in the country, whose mother tongues, Japanese, Polish and Arabic for example, had no Latin root.

The elite picked up on the linguistic chaos and started molding the language, based on three variants: the slightly archaic Portuguese spoken in rural parts of the country, the “proletarian Esperanto” and the Portuguese spoken by the elite itself. They then gave back this new Portuguese to the workers, who not only embraced it, but also made new changes, in a continuous transformation that goes on to this day. In addition, the influence of non-linear languages such as Bantu and Tupi, with African and indigenous roots, respectively, were intuitively integrated into Brazilian Portuguese, mostly due to the routine aspect of the basic cultural level addressed earlier (Flusser 1971: 97-99).

These linguistic changes also imply, for Flusser, changes in mentality and in the way people experience the world around them. The new human, then, thinks not only in a linear way, but also with elements from languages that work with other kinds of logic (Bantu and Tupi, as well as many other African and indigenous languages dispersed throughout the country). He also synthesizes the elements of languages – and, therefore, mentalities – from various parts of the world, due to the input from immigrants and their mother tongues. Therefore, Flusser concludes: “(...) in Brazil, a process is taking place at various levels, which tends to transform an archaic and primitive substrate into a complex and sophisticated structure through the method of conscious elaboration and massive absorption of historical elements from the West. The process takes place more significantly on the linguistic level, which proves that it is authentic, as it’s mostly not deliberate. If and when the process reaches its goal, a new human without parallel will arise.” (Flusser 1971: 101)<sup>xiii</sup>

Despite his optimistic tone throughout this piece, Flusser makes it clear that Brazil and the new human are not the only hope for humanity in crisis, but one of the few. He adds that, for now, the new human is only a possibility. There is a long way before it becomes a reality. In the next section, I will analyze his perspective on the role of the media in this process.

## Two kinds of literacy

Throughout his manuscript, Flusser gives some clues as to what role the media plays in the creation of the new human. When he describes the qualitative leap Brazilians make from alienation to commitment, he mentions that the mass media are one of the spheres where this can happen, much like soccer and Carnival. However, he does not go into detail about this in his text. Nevertheless, the mass media, especially at the time Flusser wrote this piece, acted much like soccer: helping create human bonds, since everybody was watching, reading and listening to the same media. That was possible with the establishment of the network system for TV and for radio, in part. Through a web of affiliate channels spread all over the country, Brazilians tuned in to the same shows, generally produced in Rio de Janeiro, at the same time everyday. Part of the military's plan to forge national unity through a common national identity, the network system was extremely successful. In fact, it is successful to this day. One notices this easily by observing everyday life, where conversations usually revolve around the current soap opera, for example.

While the network system helped create a national culture, it also had downsides: the diverse regional cultures were weakened and much of the media consumed focused on Rio de Janeiro or other cities of the Brazilian Southeast, a reality that does not correspond to the country's reality in its entirety (Moreira & Rodrigues Helal 2009). This is maybe what Flusser meant, in the chapter "Misery", when he stated that an unlimited progress of the mass media is also harmful, like any unlimited kind of progress. He argues that, while the dissemination of the mass media, particularly of the press, helps fight a kind of basic misery, the misery brought by lack of information, too much media might provoke existential misery (Flusser 1971: 72-74). However, it is impossible to determine when progress becomes too much and even more impossible to stop this particular kind of progress without hurting the freedom of the press. In this aspect, a second kind of literacy is necessary. While nowadays most Brazilians are literate at least on a basic and functional level, media literacy presents itself as the logical step for a non-historical society like Brazil, which fast-forwarded through the consequences brought by printed books in Europe and ended up directly experiencing the results of technical images.

There are a multitude of definitions of the concept of media literacy. Some place emphasis on skills acquired by individuals while others focus on knowledge and critical stances towards media content<sup>5</sup>. I will adopt Livingstone's (2003) broader definition, which takes both skills and knowledge into account: "(...) media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts" (Livingstone 2003: 1). Her approach is particularly inter-

---

<sup>5</sup> Van Dijk and Deursen (2010) offer a good summary of the main authors that work with each of these definitions.

esting because it elaborates on the various interacting factors at play in media literacy: access to technology (and how it continuously requires updates in the users' conditions of access as technology itself evolves, also bringing phenomena like the digital divide to the fore); analysis (the individual's cultural repertoire that enables her to understand media texts); evaluation (critical thinking, the capacity to question media texts, instead of accepting them as absolute representations of reality) and content production.

The critical use of mass media provided by media literacy is now necessary to avoid alienation in the traditional sense, without the qualitative leap to commitment. Otherwise, the media's messages will simply be accepted as reality, not as a mere representation that is impossible to experience first-hand. Both Lünenborg (2005) and Berning (2011) assert that media literacy on the part of the audience is essential for understanding media texts as a form of storytelling of the world, instead of the one and only possible representation of it. Media literacy would provide the tools necessary to understand under what circumstances these technical images are produced, raising awareness of the various problems that characterize the Brazilian media landscape, such as monopolies, illegal ownership, political clientelism, communication rights and journalistic routines in Brazilian newsrooms, issues that are already the object of various studies (Amaral & Guimarães 1994; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos 2002; Herscovitz 2004; Mastrini & Becerra 2007; Moreira & Rodrigues Helal 2009; Mattelart 2009). This would help fight the somehow deceiving assumption of technical images as reality itself.

As Internet access becomes more common in the country, the qualitative leap to commitment also takes place as new media practices arise. In an article on digital inclusion, the free culture movement and sociality in Brazil, Horst (2011) describes how real life sociality and networked sociality are intertwined in places like LAN houses, the Brazilian equivalent to Internet cafés, and how cross-cultural networks are established through social media. This leads us back to the research question posed earlier: According to Flusser, what is the role of the media in the creation of the new human being?

Based on the analysis of his essay and on a closer look at passages that refer to the media in Brazil, it is possible to say that Flusser attributes to the media the same capacity he does to phenomena like Carnival or soccer in Brazil: an outlet for the *homo ludens*, through which he can make the qualitative leap from alienation to commitment, namely by turning an escape from reality into a new reality, with meaningful human bonds and experiences. However, media literacy is necessary to avoid that an ever-increasing body of information and entertainment leads to the passive acceptance of technical images as reality.



## Discussion

Even though Flusser's perspectives sometimes show traces of his time, like the utilitarian views on nature, most of his observations still ring true over 40 years later. Basic misery is still part of the everyday lives of millions of Brazilians, something that makes progress remain necessary. However, the discourse that defends development at all costs, constant human rights violations and social inequality remind us of the threat of opting for unlimited progress, which would lead to the end of the possibility of the new human envisioned by Flusser.

While media play an essential role in enabling a qualitative leap from alienation to commitment, the Brazilian landscape is marked by concentration of ownership, conglomerates and political interests, making media literacy a necessity in a society that must learn to see through the technical images it grew accustomed to consuming even before it could familiarize itself with printed books and literacy in its traditional sense. The media are particularly important in a country as large and diverse as Brazil, making people aware of what is happening in different regions and connecting them through common offers. However, given all its problems, Brazilians must keep a critical perspective on what they consume, at the risk of losing the new human among a flood of information. With this analysis, I hope to contribute to studies of Flusser's writings during his period in Brazil, providing a contextualized interpretation of an essay that remains current and useful to reflect on the country's past, present and future.

## References

- Amaral, R. & Guimarães, C. (1994). Media monopoly in Brazil. *Journal of Communication*, 44(4), 26-38.
- Araujo, Y. R. G. (2008). The City as a Medium in McLuhan and Flusser. *Flusser Studies*, 6, 1-12.
- Arendt, H. (1958). *Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben*. München: Piper.
- Berning, N. (2011). Narrative Journalism in the Age of the Internet: New Ways to Create Authenticity in Online Literary Reportages. *extpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie*, 3(2), 1-15.
- Brasil. IBGE. (2008). Características Étnico-Raciais da População - um estudo das categorias de classificação de cor ou raça 2008 Retrieved 19 March 2013, from [http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/caracteristicas\\_raciais/default\\_raciais.shtm](http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/caracteristicas_raciais/default_raciais.shtm)
- Flusser, V. (1971). *Fenomenologia do brasileiro: em busca de um novo homem*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Flusser, V. (1996). Drei Charakteristische Situationen. *Kommunikologie* (pp. 51-63). Mannheim: Bollmann.

- Flusser, V. (1991). Vom Ende der Politik. In *Kommunikologie weiter denken. Die Bochumer Vorlesungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fisher Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Giannetti, C. (2012). Vilém Flusser: Brasil y la búsqueda del sujeto-proyecto. *Flusser Studies*, 13.
- Goodwin, M. D. (2008). The Brazilian Exile of Vilém Flusser and Stefan Zweig. *Flusser Studies*, 7.
- Guldin, R. (2007). Devorando o Outro: Canibalismo, Tradução e a Construção da Identidade Cultural. *Revista Ghrebh-*, 2(10), 29-50.
- Guldin, R. (2008). From Syncretism to Synthesis: Hubert Fichte's and Vilém Flusser's View of the Brazilian Cultural Endeavor. Paper presented at the BRASA IX, New Orleans (Tulane University).
- Hallin, D. C., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political clientelism and the media: southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. *Media Culture Society*, 24, 175-195.
- Herscovitz, H. G. (2004). Brazilian Journalists' Perceptions of Media Roles, Ethics and Foreign Influences on Brazilian Journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 5(1), 71-86.
- Horst, H. A. (2011). Free, Social, and Inclusive: Appropriation and Resistance of New Media Technologies in Brazil. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 437-462.
- Kathöfer, G. (2008). The Phantasm of the German Migrant or The Invention of Brazil. *Flusser Studies*, 7.
- Mastrini, G., & Becerra, M. (2007). Presente y tendencias de la concentracion de medios en America Latina. (Spanish). *Zer: Revista de Estudios de Comunicacion*, 12(22), 15-40.
- Mattelart, A. (2009). A construção social do direito à Comunicação como parte integrante dos direitos humanos. *Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação*, 32(1).
- Moreira, S. V., & Rodrigues Helal, C. L. (2009). Notes on media, journalism education and news organizations in Brazil. *Journalism*, 10(1), 91-107.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1968). *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Livingstone, S. (2003). The Changing Nature and Uses of Media Literacy. *MEDIA@LSE Electronic Working Papers*, 4, 1-31.
- Lünenborg, M. (2005). *Journalismus als kultureller Prozess. zur Bedeutung von Journalismus in der Mediengesellschaft. Ein Entwurf*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Michael, Joachim (2006). A perturbante estranheza do Novo: o Brasil de Vilém Flusser. *Flusser Studies*, 3.
- Murphy, P. D. (2011). Putting the Earth into Global Media Studies. *Communication Theory*, 21(3), 217-238.
- Ramos, A. P., & Souza, H. V. L. d. (2010). A natureza e o brasileiro: reflexões sobre Vilém Flusser e Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. *Intellèctus*, 10(1-2).

## Original passages

- 
- <sup>i</sup> “En estos dos ensayos Flusser retoma (sin mencionarlo) su análisis fenomenológico de Brasil para reconducirlo a una nueva antropología posmoderna, que preconiza la posibilidad de desvinculación del ser humano de su rol de sujeto y su transformación en ‘proyecto’” (Giannetti 2012: 10).
- <sup>ii</sup> “Poder-se-ia conjecturar que, para ele, diferente de Holanda, a resposta para os problemas nacionais – e quiçá do mundo – não estaria somente no ingresso a uma ordem moderna, mas em uma reformulação das principais práticas aí encerradas” (Ramos & Souza 2010: 14).
- <sup>iii</sup> “um intelectual brasileiro imigrado da Europa” (Flusser 1971: 3).
- <sup>iv</sup> “A ideologia progressista tem papel diferente no Brasil que em outras terras não históricas, por exemplo a China. Não se trata de ideologia importada como na China, mas de parcela da própria mentalidade brasileira, trazida pelos primeiros imigrantes e constantemente reforçada por outros. Neste sentido o Brasil é efetivamente “cristão”. Mas a ideologia progressista não é substrato de todo pensar, esperar, sonhar e agir, como a Europa, mas não passa de um dos elementos da sua mentalidade, que determina grande parte do pensar, mas não o resto. E neste sentido o Brasil não é “cristão”, afinal de contas” (Flusser 1971: 106).
- <sup>v</sup> “uma massa urbana heterogênea e quase amorfa” (Flusser 1971: 8).
- <sup>vi</sup> “Tornar-se brasileiro é difícil, porque as estruturas brasileiras estão escondidas, e ninguém é brasileiro (...). Portanto, pode se tornar brasileiro apenas quem primeiro dá sentido a este termo. E para poder das esse sentido, precisa primeiro descobrir a realidade. E para poder descobrir a realidade, precisa primeiro alterar o ambiente. Em outros termos: se dar sentido, descobrir realidade e modificar ambiente é viver, então tornar-se brasileiro é tarefa para uma vida” (Flusser 1971: 15).
- <sup>vii</sup> “Portanto, pode significar uma maneira concreta e viva de ser homem e dar sentido a sua vida for a do contexto histórico, mas nutrido por este” (Flusser 1971: 20).
- <sup>viii</sup> “Para trabalhar a terra, é preciso trabalhá-la com mobilização de todos esforços e utilizando todos os truques de uma técnica avançada” (Flusser 1971: 29).
- <sup>ix</sup> “A defasagem é a tentativa, condenada ao fracasso, de vivenciar mensagens, e o fracasso não pode ser evitado com facilidade e reversibilidade dos meios de comunicação. Pelo contrário tal facilidade pode em certos casos até intensificar a defasagem” (Flusser 1971: 43).
- <sup>x</sup> “Sempre poderia ser apontado o salto qualitativo para engajamento, porque sempre a realidade da qual o brasileiro se aliena não é ‘a realidade’, mas uma realidade. O proletariado nunca vive para o seu trabalho e sua situação econômica, social e política, mas fundamentalmente sempre vive para o jogo. Se ‘felicidade’ significa abrigo na realidade, então o brasileiro a busca em outra realidade. Aliás, também na Europa e nos Estados Unidos começa a despertar a consciência, que a felicidade não está necessariamente ligada ao processo histórico, e que o progresso não traz necessariamente aumento de felicidade” (Flusser 1971: 56).
- <sup>xi</sup> “Já que o brasileiro toma o seu próximo por sujeito, não por objeto, toma-o como existência responsável por si, responsabilidade essa intransferível. De modo que a angústia e a preocupação que tomam posse dele ao dar-se conta da miséria do próximo não brotam de responsabilidade, mas de um sentimento bem mais profundo (‘amor’ se quiserem). Na medida portanto na qual o brasileiro começa a angustiar-se e preocupar-se com a miséria do outro, porque o ‘ama’ em sentido concreto e não romântico, nessa medida o Brasil é o país do futuro” (Flusser 1971: 72).
- <sup>xii</sup> “O brasileiro não pretende progredir infinitamente, ‘avançar na vida’ ou ‘fazer carreira’, mas pretende, alcançado um mínimo necessário (de difícil definição), abandonar o progresso, o avanço, a carreira e ‘gozar a vida’” (Flusser 1971: 43).
- <sup>xiii</sup> “(...) no Brasil, está ocorrendo um processo em muitos níveis que tende transformar um substrato arcaico e primitivo em estrutura complexa e sofisticada pelo método de elaboração consciente e absorção maciça de elementos históricos do Ocidente. O processo se dá mais significativamente no nível linguístico, prova que se trata de processo autêntico, porque grandemente não deliberado. Se e quando o processo alcançar sua meta, terá surgido um novo homem sem igual no resto do mundo” (Flusser 1971: 101).