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Flusser Now: Social Media in Brazil, and Philosophy in Detective Mode

We are now celebrating the tenth anniversary of *Flusser Studies*, living in a liquid modernity without destination, as Zygmunt Bauman characterized our post-foundational condition.¹ While virtual-reality promises to be the next gold rush, with different brand headsets beginning to hit the international market, and high profile studios hurrying to create meaningful content for immersive environments, drones are commonly used for surveillance, killing, and soon, for home delivery of our day-to-day common purchases. Contradictions abound for net citizens in diverse combinations of entertainment, work, and surveillance. As the curators of the exhibition *Without Firm Ground: Vilém Flusser and the Arts* pointed out, Flusser’s hope for a global telematic community, based on dialogue, “has its back to the wall at the beginning of the twenty-first century”². This paper reflects upon some of these impasses with a few examples emerging from Brazil, which address issues of social segregation and the use of social media.³ It further reflects upon Flusser’s intimate experience with Brazilian culture, his methodological approach, as well as his hopes for a better future, arguing, for instance that, “synthetic images are an answer to Auschwitz”⁴.

Flusser’s multilinguism, his thinking without foundations, which “posits that existential ‘uprooting’ is a condition of freedom,”⁵ can also be understood as a method that decolonizes thinking. His ethical stance, however, is still rare, while the number of ‘we’ who are modern, continue to grow,

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, “Foreword to the 2012 edition: Liquid Modernity Revisited,” *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012) viii.

² The exhibition, *Bodenlos — Vilém Flusser und die Künste* [*Without Firm Ground — Vilém Flusser and the Arts*] was curated by Siegfried Zielinski and Baruch Gottlieb in cooperation with Peter Weibel, and showcased by two German venues: the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Aug. 14 and Oct. 18, 2015, and the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, Nov. 19, 2015 to Jan. 10, 2016.

³ Social media is the online communications channels and applications dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Examples include Wikis, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Academia.edu.

⁴ Quoted by the curators in the brochure of the exhibitions *Without Firm Ground — Vilém Flusser and the Arts*, ZKM, 2015. This sentence also opens the trilingual dictionary of Flusser’s terms (English/German/Portuguese) accompanying the exhibition: Siegfried Zielinski and Peter Weibel with Daniel Irrgang, Eds., *Flusseriana: An Intellectual Toolbox* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Univocal, 2015), 6.

⁵ Andreas Ströhl, “Introduction,” in *Vilém Flusser Writings*, Andreas Ströhl, Ed., and Erik Eisel, Trans. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xvi.

often without literacy or rights to cross borders. In the face of international terrorism and reactionary domestic immigration policies, we wonder if and how one can think critically and develop political agency through social media, or without traditional literacy. And yet, despite the cacophony of selfies and memes, social networks also offer the potential for resistance and organization, even when they are used by global surveillance agencies, banks, governments, and corporations everywhere, who know about our identity, consumer patterns, and preferences, as well as our financial status. A well-known example is the protests of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which began in the Fall of 2011, and inspired similar movements against social and economic inequality around the globe, despite the fact that it was unsuccessful.

Rolezinhos and “Technophagic Emergence” in Brazil

Flusser lived in Brazil for three decades and unlike other foreign writers and scholars who spent a few years of their lives in that country, such as the Austrian Stefan Zweig, the U.S. poet Elizabeth Bishop, or the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, he sought integration into Brazilian life as long as he believed a new type of civilization was possible from its complex mixture. Flusser explained: “For decades, I was involved in an experiment to synthesize Brazilian culture from a larger mix of Western European, Eastern European, African, East Asian, and Indian cultural phenomena.”⁶ In later essays, he reflected upon the Brazilian project, such as in “Mythical, Historical, and Posthistorical Existence.” In this 1981 essay, he begins by stating: “the Brazilian situation is extraordinarily instructive for Europeans.”⁷

In the second half of the 50s, Flusser lived through the optimism of the developmental era, when the effort to modernize the country can be summed up by the attempt to leap developmental stages in order to eventually catch up with the living standards of the first world. “Fifty years in five” was both the collective goal, and the government’s motto. Flusser observed that the different Western developmental epochs—pre-historic (mythic-magical); historical (equated with writing, linear time, and later with logical reason); and post-historical (equated with telematics and technical images)—are layers which in Europe tend to be stacked upon each other, while in Brazil coexisted side by side. At first, he considered this coexistence of difference to be part of Brazil’s open possibilities. But

⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁷ Ibid., 117.

after the military coup in 1964, and the first few years of a violent and repressive military dictatorship, he realized that the lack of communication among the different social classes and cultures was a problematic structure headed for disaster. When Flusser wrote the *Phenomenology of the Brazilian*, before establishing residency in Europe in 1972, he still had hopes that Brazilians could be the model *homo ludens* for the future civilizations.

We fast-forward fifty years, and in democratic Brazil, over the past decade, about eighteen million people rose out of poverty for the first time, in addition to another thirty-five million from the lower middle class, to whom the economic boom of the Lula government gave access to the market of commodities. Credit and mobile technologies were at the forefront of this transformation. And what is more, this new power which many acquired for the first time, was achieved by often skipping traditional literacy altogether.

While Brazilians continue to believe both in the possibility of becoming radically modern and in their failure to achieve that dream, the São Paulo media artist Giselle Beiguelman termed “technophagic emergence” the tendency of the digital culture in the country to devour and grind technology into new production models for collective use. Living in the poor outskirts and slums, many are using and combining technology with a DIY improvisational and creative attitude. This new lower middle class is also challenging the country’s class system, which relegated creativity, at least for the poor, to the realm of carnival and soccer.

The “technophagic emergence” is also largely based upon the use of social media, as the disquieting phenomenon of the *rolezinho*, a Brazilian slang for little strolls, illustrates.⁸ The *rolê* [stroll] was recently created by twenty-first century *flâneurs*, who began to organize, and in large numbers stroll through the luxurious shopping malls of São Paulo. These new *flâneurs* come from the poor neighborhoods in the periphery of Brazil’s large cities and slums. They are young, mostly black or mulatto, and organize their “flash mob” meetings through social media. They clearly contrast with the classic nineteenth-century Parisian literary type, usually the white men of leisure, made famous by Walter Benjamin’s study of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry. This young generation in Brazil, claimed access to public spaces to which historically they have been barred from, due to economic inequality and unspoken laws of “propriety.” By simply moving through public areas, traditionally “forbidden” to

⁸ Pedro Erber’s “The Politics of Strolling” (unpublished article in preparation for submission to the Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies), examines a number of newspaper articles, both from Brazil and the U.S. from 2013-14 about the phenomenon. In 2015, the Brazilian philosopher Marcia Tiburi, in the article “Filosofia do rolê: Ipanemismo, parque temático, e o que chamamos de cidade” [Philosophy of the *rolê*: Ipanemism, thematic park, and that which we call city], further examined the phenomenon by way of the relationship between walking and philosophizing: <<http://revistacult.uol.com.br/home/2015/09/filosofia-do-role-ipanemismo-parque-tematico-e-o-que-chamamos-de-cidade/>>

them, the *rolezinhos* challenged social and spatial hierarchies, while instilling class fears in shop owners and upper middle class shoppers alike.

Brazilian culture is certainly not alone in moving into the digital era with disregard for traditional literacy, as social and economic disparities increase globally. Flusser's productive realignment of first and third world experiences, the catastrophe of Europe and the dream of Brazil, is especially relevant in terms of his method. For instance, contrary to the popular Brazilian belief (and colonialist mindset) that one philosophizes better in German, French, or English, Flusser's multidimensional philosophy, based on the fluidity of thought among multiple languages, states just the opposite. Without privileging any language as foundational, he found Portuguese, the language of his involuntary exile, to be non-contaminated by traditional metaphysical terminology, and thus capable of becoming a true language for philosophy in the future. Flusser's process of thinking in translation and attentiveness to the materiality of language is part of his methodological and ethical legacy.

In *Flusser Studies* 18, Fiona Hanley called attention to Flusser's use of chiasmus as a method in an essay titled "X, The Gesture of Essaying." Hanley emphasizes Flusser's use of the figure of the chiasmus, and not just in the form of a literary figure that implies repetition and reversal of the order of a clause, but also in relation to the research method. For instance, when Flusser argues that science, as a form of fiction, can be seen as an art practice, and that art making, as a form of theorizing, can be seen as a kind of science.⁹ Flusser's apparent lack of methodology, is further explored in this issue of *Flusser Studies* by Camilla Mozzini's article "For a Flusserian Method," in which she observes that Flusser's way of thinking in the very act of writing, may well be an "anti-academic elixir," infiltrating in small homeopathic doses, formal academic rituals.

Pop Philosophy: A Detective's Approach

In her new memoir *M Train*, Patti Smith, the American "punk poet laureate" calls attention to a current cultural shift by stating: "Yesterday's poets are today's detectives. They spend a life sniffing out

⁹ Vilém Flusser, "On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)", *Leonardo*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (1990): 399. The text in the original is: "If we abandon the idea of possessing some identifiable hard core, and if we assume we are imbedded within a relational network, then the classical distinction between 'objective knowledge' and 'subjective experience' will become meaningless. If intersubjectivity becomes the fundamental category of thinking and action, then science will be seen as a kind of art (as an intersubjective fiction), and art will be seen as a kind of science (as an intersubjective source of knowledge)."

the hundredth line, wrapping up a case, and limping exhausted into the sunset.”¹⁰ Smith gives as example the detectives on TV series who sustain her: Linden and Holder in *The Killing*; Goren and Eames in *Law & Order*; Horatio Caine in *CSI: Miami*. Her interest in their method of problem-solving is complemented by her meditation on time: “Real time, I reasoned, cannot be divided into sections like numbers on the face of a clock. If I write about the past as I simultaneously dwell in the present, am I still in real time? Perhaps there is no past or future, only the perpetual present that contains this trinity of memory.”¹¹

Flusser’s concept of post-history offers another perspective on time, while connecting three decades of his publications. This is the argument made by Rodrigo Duarte, who argued that Flusser’s concept of post-history is the hinge between the two major periods of his work, thus connecting early works from the 60s—his more metaphysical writings on language and history, such as the 1965 *History of the Devil*—and Flusser’s more famous 80s theory of media—beginning with *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 1983—his analysis of technical images, apparatus, and program.¹²

Flusser’s *Pós-História. Vinte instantâneos e um modo de usar* [Post-history. Twenty Instances and a User’s Guide], written in the 1970s and first published in Brazil in 1983, is a collection of short lectures he gave in Marseille, Jerusalem, and São Paulo.¹³ In chapter one, the user’s guide, he invites the reader to approach the essays in any sequence, as the following nineteen studies rethink history and geography as nodes of a larger network. On page 89, Flusser pointed out: “Migration shuffled history and geography.” Some essays deal with general considerations on methodology by examining, for instance, linearity including that of cause-and-effect, other essays take examples, as models, from the fields of theology, aesthetics, and communication. But even without an established sequence for the chapters, Flusser observed that this book begins in despair and unfolds towards a tenuous hope, from the concentration camps and the reification of people in Auschwitz, to cybernetics and inter-relational networks.

Flusser’s *Post-history*, gives one a bird’s eye view of concepts he develops in depth elsewhere. In *Phenomenology of the Brazilian*, for instance, Flusser stressed the juxtaposition of oral traditions and digital technologies. A contrast important to his theory of the *homo ludens* in terms of creative potential, which others also emphasized, such as the U.S. media scholar Gregory Ulmer, and the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, who both saw in the Brazilian samba, more than a literal dance form; and further ap-

¹⁰ Patti Smith, *M Train* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 32.

¹¹ Ibid. 83.

¹² Rodrigo Duarte, *Pós-História de Vilém Flusser: Gênese-Anatomia-Desdobramentos* [*Vilém Flusser’s Posthistory: Genesis-Anatomy-Consequences*], (São Paulo: AnnaBlume, 2013).

¹³ Vilém Flusser, *Pós-História. Vinte Instantâneos e um Modo de Usar* (São Paulo: AnnaBlume, 2011).

proached it as a figurative cultural style of turning information into knowledge.¹⁴ This cultural clash continues and will be addressed, in the next section, in the work of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiro de Castro.

Patti Smith's preference for a "clock with no hands," the metaphor she employed to reflect upon real time, contrasts, for instance, with the multiplication of clocks in Christian Marclay's film, *The Clock*, 2010, even though both Smith and Marclay emphasize paradoxes of time. Marclay is a media artist working with all sorts of mechanical, electronic, and digital technologies. His film meditates on time through reel footage. *The Clock* is a twenty-four hour film that functions as an actual clock. Besides showing the time, it is also a cinematic mise en abyme, created by thousands of film clips, in which clocks and watches are prominently displayed. Marclay ordered this material second by second, remixing scenes, genres, styles, and spoken languages from the archives of a century of film history. In real/reel time, audiences see actors aging, technology and material culture evolving. At this forever now, like Smith's "clock with no hands," we wonder, when does the present become the past?

Objectivity, the rigor to approach one's "object" of study, is likewise, progressively questioned, and even suspended by philosophers such as Avital Ronell, who approximating Patti Smith's fondness for detective series, suggests we approach our "object" of inquiry, not as a police officer going after a suspect, but in detective mode, turning in our badge and assuming a different rapport with the truth. In our post-foundational era, according to Ronell, all transcendental navigation systems are down. "To the extent that one may no longer be simply guided—by Truth, by light or logos—decisions have to be made."¹⁵ One detective's approach is given by Bunk in the HBO series *The Wire*: "You know what you need at a crime scene? Soft eyes," Bunk points out. "If you have hard eyes, you're just staring at the tree and missing the forest."¹⁶

Increasingly of interest to different fields of research is the point of view of the object, which challenges both notions of objectivity and anthropocentrism, as Flusser did with his *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, originally published in German in 1987. On the back cover of the English translation, Flusser emphasizes intersubjective methods over 'pure' objectivity:

¹⁴ Gregory Ulmer, "The Miranda Warnings: An Experiment in Hyperrhetoric," in *Hyper/Text/Theory*, ed. George Landow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 367. Hélio Oiticica, *Aspiro ao Grande Labirinto* [I aspire to the great labyrinth] (Rio de Janeiro, Rocco, 1986).

¹⁵ "Confessions of an Anacoluthon: Avital Ronell on Writing, Technology, Pedagogy, Politics" with D. Diane Davis. *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*. 20.2 (2000): 243-281.

¹⁶ "Soft Eyes" is the title of the second episode of the fourth season of the HBO original series *The Wire*. Written by David Mills from a story by Ed Burns & David Mills.

Science is interesting precisely because it relates to me. It is a human function just as much as breathing is: it is an existential interest. And an entirely objective science would be uninteresting, inhuman. The search for scientific objectivity is revealing itself in its continual advancement not as a search for “purity”, but as pernicious madness. The present essay demands that we give up the ideal of objectivity in favour of other intersubjective scientific methods.¹⁷

Binary concepts, such as subject and object, nature and culture, us and them, are increasingly unproductive. In the visual arts, an example that questions these boundaries in art, in addition to Marclay’s, is the literal transhuman amalgamation created by Eduardo Kac and titled *Natural History of the Enigma*, 2003-08. This living petunia plant created in the science lab combines DNA from a plant and from a human animal. Working with telepresence and bio art for three decades, Kac was always interested in the point of view of the other, whether of a robot or a living being. In the 80s and 90s, he explored the point of view of telerobots and bats, for instance, and since 1999 with bio art, he became further interested in hybrid life forms. In his work, objects are never simply matter, passive, and brute. They echo concepts, such as Bruno Latour’s *Agent Network Theory*, or Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, both of whom propose an agency that emerges from ad hoc configurations of human and nonhuman forces.¹⁸

Decolonizing Thought: What do we owe the “object” of study?

The anthropocentric shift performed by Flusser’s *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, which reflects on human animals from the point of view of a deep-sea animal, in addition to Flusser’s suggestion that we abandon the idea of possessing some identifiable essence or hard core, is similar to Eduardo Viveiro de Castro’s critical contribution in the field of Anthropology. In his book-manifesto, *Metafísicas Canibais*, he questioned: “What does Anthropology owe, conceptually, to the cultures it studies? [...] Wouldn’t it be in this relationship, that the originality of Anthropology lies: in this alliance, always equivocal, but in close inspection, fecund, between the conceptions and practices originated in the worlds of the ‘subject’ and of the ‘object?’” And Viveiro de Castro continues, “Is Anthropology

¹⁷ Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, Rodrigo Novaes Trans. (New York: Atropos Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

ready to completely assume its real mission, to be the practical-theory of the permanent decolonization of thought?”¹⁹

In the introduction to the book *A Queda do Céu* [The Falling Sky], written by the Yanomami shaman and political activist David Kopenawa and the French anthropologist Bruce Albert,²⁰ Viveiro de Castro further stressed this methodological turn by emphasizing the ethnographic pact between Kopenawa and Albert. This large seven-hundred-page book, covers thirty years of dialogue between the authors (both with a unique life story), in which they examine the poetic-metaphysical bases of two different cultures. As Flusser did with *Vampyrotoenthis*, a *A Queda do Céu* makes us see through the eyes of the other, in this case, a millennial culture from an area deep in the Amazon region between Brazil and Venezuela. Here the traditional “object” of study from an oral culture representing itself through images and writing. Translation between voice and writing, between cultures, and among languages (Yanomami, Portuguese, and French) is also a key feature of this book, along with the analysis of our culture which has been destroying the Yanomami’s way of life, both with kindness (missionaries and on occasion government agencies) and violently (miners and corporations). Kopenawa questions our notion of progress and makes a bleak prognosis for the future of indigenous cultures. The same bleak future the shaman foresees for our own civilization, which he terms “the people of the commodity.”

The shifting perspectives of subject and object, along with issues of representation and voice, are also currently of interest in Brazilian cinema, as part of the country’s “technophagic emergence.” Fifty years after the beautiful and internationally awarded 1959 film *Black Orpheus*, made in Brazil by the French director Marcel Camus, it is from the poor and excluded periphery of large cities that visual narrative innovation comes from, at a time when Brazilian cultural institutions, from federal universities to public museums struggle to survive yet another economic crisis. The 2015 film, combining science fiction and documentary, by Adirley Queirós, titled *Branco Sai, Preto Fica* [Whites Leave, Blacks Stay] exposes the racism and violence, which until recently were “invisible” behind the myth of the Brazilian “racial democracy.” In the film, a researcher from the future interviews two men who were permanently disabled by police brutality back in 1986. *Branco Sai, Preto Fica* is a protest

¹⁹ Eduardo Viveiro de Castro, *Metafísicas Canibais: Elementos para uma antropologia pós-estrutural* (São Paulo: Cosacnaify, 2009), 20. English translation mine. The Portuguese original text reads: “O que deve conceitualmente a antropologia aos povos que estuda? [...] Não estaria aí a originalidade da antropologia: nessa aliança sempre equívoca, mas amiúde fecunda, entre as concepções e práticas provenientes dos mundos do ‘sujeito’ e do ‘objeto’? And he continues, “A antropologia está pronta para assumir integralmente sua verdadeira missão, a de ser a teoria-prática da descolonização permanente do pensamento?”

²⁰ David Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *A Queda do Céu: Palavras de um xamã yanomami*, Beatriz Perrone-Moisés, Trans. (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2010). The book was originally published in France in 2010 as *La Chute du Ciel: Paroles d’un chaman yanomami. The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* was published by Harvard University Press in 2013.

film made in Ceilândia, the city with the largest population in the periphery of Brasília. It is an innovative reenactment, years after the original violent event occurred, and with some of the original participants.

Another 2015 example, this one in the mainstream of Brazilian cinema, and currently circulating in international film festivals, is *A Que Horas Ela Volta?* [What time will she come back?]. A film by Anna Muylaert focusing on another “invisible” and much more subtle imbroglio of race, gender, and class that is part and parcel of the Brazilian middle class family structure: the institution of the live-in maids.

These examples at the intersection of culture, media, theory and history are urging methodological approaches from “pop philosophers,” often working in the mode of detectives. More and more, history and criticism are participants in complex relays, no longer subscribing to the separation between creative and critical practices, making and thinking, as the video collaborations between Vilém Flusser and Fred Forest in the 1970s already attested. In light of the contemporary engagement with generalized translation, reenactments, use of archives in remixes that combine fiction and non-fiction, human and non-human forms; the objective distance, which with rigor and certitude supposedly guaranteed truth, is being progressively distrusted.

When examining technical images and imagination, Flusser called for the development of a second-degree criticism, which was needed as a critique of traditional image criticism itself. “This new form of criticism implied a radically new form of imagination, diametrically opposed to the old one, and a new use of imagery, ensuing from a calculating, computational gesture.”²¹ For Flusser, the gesture of technical images, based upon the zero dimensionality of calculations and numerical operations, was concrete, recombinant, and generative. By arguing that, “synthetic images are an answer to Auschwitz,” he expected a different critical process to be able to confront the logical madness that produced the Holocaust. A critique of “pure” objectivity summed up his life’s work. But even when wireless networks and technical images are ever more participatory and dialogical, offering net citizens collective ways of processing information, we don’t seem to be creating a techno- imagination that is meaningful, or wisdom driven. As a researcher focusing on experimental art practices and decolonial histories, I experience the paradox more familiar to the artist and the poet: that of being simultaneously, inside and outside of the frame of the works one analyzes.

²¹ Vilém Flusser quoted by Rainer Guldin, “Iconoclasm and Beyond: Vilém Flusser Concept of Techno-Imagination,” p. 79.