

Samuel Hurcom

Paths – Programmes – Permissiveness

In the last of four lectures delivered to the School of Communication and the Arts of the University of São Paulo in 1986, Flusser presented a ‘utopian vision’¹ of an immaterial, telematic culture, in which a highly informed Homo Ludens would realise the possibilities of its second-degree imagination through collaborative play with Artificial Intelligences (AIs). Flusser contended that this ideal telematic culture would not be governed by a ruling political class. Instead, power would be diluted and ultimately democratised as decision making would be made through the consensus of functionaries – human minds and AI systems alike – forming a well-structured ‘superbrain’.² Freedom would take on a ‘ludic’³ quality, and concrete reality would come to exist solely in the inter-subjective, electromagnetic cables (networks) through which information was transmitted and stored in perpetuity (thus negating entropy).

In 1986, Flusser was adamant that the technical pre-requisites to realise such a utopian society were already in existence.⁴ Yet he was equally adamant that such a telematic utopia would never come to fruition, owing to the inevitable but seemingly unpredictable accidents ‘that always intervene in the realisation of no matter what project.’⁵ At the close of his final lecture, he noted that such unpredictable accidents, and the very uncertainty of life itself, represent the essence of freedom. For Flusser, human freedom manifests as a critical capacity to make judgements of values in the face of unpredictable circumstances that condition humankind (where such conditioning circumstance may be natural or technological).⁶ Such judgements are made through inter-subjective dialogues within the ‘shelter’⁷ of human culture.

If contemporary readers of Flusser accept his contention that the utopian immaterial culture he envisaged is an impossibility, it is imperative that they consider what type of

¹ Vilém Flusser, ‘Immaterial Culture’ in *Into Immaterial Culture*, ed. by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Metaflux, 2015), pp.35-43 (p.35).

² *Ibid.*, p.38.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.42.

⁶ Vilém Flusser, ‘Rain’ in *Natural: Mind*, ed. by Siegfried Zielinski (Univocal Publishing, 2013), pp.29-34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.31.

telematic future humankind may inhabit, given that the technical pre-requisites for immaterial culture are rapidly being integrated into every facet of daily life. In particular, it is imperative that contemporary thinkers consider how to preserve the human capacity for critical evaluation (the capacity to articulate judgements of values through coded gestures such as writing) when language modelling AIs and other media generating apparatus are already beginning to dominate the cultural scene by way of highly accelerated information production and dissemination.