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Flusser on the Fly: Towards an English Translation of Flusser's Bochum Lectures

Introduction

Flusser drafted the undated typescript "Bochum" for *Symptome: Zeitschrift für epistemologische Baustellen* after his first, and only, lecture series in Germany at the Ruhr University Bochum in 1991 following an invitation by Friedrich Kittler. The article would be the first of numerous posthumous publications, published in December 1991 only weeks after his tragic car accident near Prague. In it he reflects on his experiences in Bochum and concludes that geographical thinking is *passé* and instead ought to be re-examined as topography – but he arrives at this conclusion in a typically idiosyncratic manner: "We are worms. The world flows in through our gullet and out through the anus" (Flusser 1991: 1, translation mine). Yet even if the poignant image of the worm wiggling linearly through soil becomes but an extended working metaphor for Flusser throughout the essay, he compares himself implicitly with the worm in dialogue with his own experiences in flux as *bodenlos* or groundless. But as multidimensional earthworms, whom Flusser demonstrably "nudges transcendentally with a walking cane," we neither know where we are going nor move linearly nor do we get much experiential use out of two-dimensional maps, or "tabletop surfaces" as he calls them here humorously, or geography (Flusser 1991: 1, translation mine). As Flusser meditates on the conceptual life map, he posits Bochum as one of many stations in his life that he could not find on his maps before lecturing there (Flusser 1991: 1, translation mine). But even attempting to calculate the distance between his hometown of Robion in Provence and Bochum, Flusser indicates that we have no experiential sense of three-dimensional measurements beyond the liter with which we grew comfortable "in school and in the supermarket" (Flusser 1991: 2, translation mine). Ultimately, to Flusser, there remains a futile disconnect between timeless value-free measurements and personal value-based measurements – a clash he sees in this case between calculating the distance between the two locales in cm³ directly or in calculating his honorarium in Deutsche Mark projected onto the journey, and then put in paired, spatial relation as DM and cm/sec (Flusser 1991: 2, translation mine). The futility of this computation goes even further for Flusser as he notes

that Marks would not suffice in measuring his other "inconvenient earnings" in Bochum such as "experiences, insights, and friendships" which he would neither know how to calculate, map, or bill (Flusser 1991: 2-3, translation mine). However, the loss of geographic objectivity becomes remedied through newly gained topographic connections.

Flusser continues the topographical sketch by describing life as living on the edge, as shaped by the powers of attraction and of continual falling over edges [*Kanten*], in a Heideggerian sense, gravitating toward various locales across a post-Euclidean "lunar landscape" of crater upon craters – no longer in alignment with the conception of either crawling along a "flat tabletop surface" in awe of heaven and hell with the edge always in sight, or along the "surface of a ball" fundamentally disoriented with no insight (Flusser 1991: 2, translation mine). For Flusser, the power of attraction of his speculative topography thus sublates the restraints of geography, a concept he associates with borders, war, and hatred: "If I say that Bochum is 1500 km from Robion, then I am in a militaristic mood" (Flusser 1991: 4, translation mine) he notes, whereas his post-historical topological sketch abolishes hate and foresees the world as "intertwined, intersubjective spheres" (Flusser 1991: 4, translation mine).

The Bochum sphere not only pulled Flusser closer, but its aftermath would also instigate a unique chain of events for Flusser scholarship, or dare we say a unique episode in media archeological reconstruction at large. Loudly Flusser posited his own appearance in the lecture hall as reminiscent of Hegel, Husserl, Bergson, and Bachelard – "without being presumptuous," (Editorial Preface)[1] he commented tongue-in-cheek – and his commentary was intended to follow in the steps of the famous published mid-century lectures of Adorno, Lacan, Foucault, and Deleuze that have continued to enjoy a certain popularity for the last fifty years. Of these thinkers, we might most easily compare Flusser's lectures with Adorno's humor-inflected jabbing asides, but Flusser's lecturing rhetoric easily surpasses his essayistic left-of-field playfulness – science critique goes hand-in-hand with Nazi jokes (Scientific Critical) and the Decalogue with noodle soup instructions (End of Politics I). Chuckles and laughter saturate the lecture recordings, much to Flusser's audible excitement.

In Flusser's mind, his Bochum Lectures were intended to lead to a comparable dialogic paradigm shift, in discourse and popularity, as the lectures of the aforementioned theorists. Yet despite his proclamation in front of the board of trustees that "one of [his] publishers will promptly put all this out in book form" (Before the Board of Trustees), Flusser's Bochum lectures would remain fundamentally fragmented, incomplete for years – scattered across fleeting notes, half-overwritten cassette

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[1] Unless specified otherwise, all undated references are based on the lecture fragments of the English translation based on *Kommunikologie weiter denken: Die Bochumer Vorlesungen*. (Flusser 2009).

recordings students had procured, and various transcripts. After all, in contrast to Flusser's numerous other speaking engagements, there was also no official transcript or guiding lecture notes – in typical Flusserian fashion there was no working bibliography either – as he spoke fully from memory; his hands were needed for the expressive gestures dear to him. What followed his passing, as highlighted by Siegfried Zielinski and Silvia Wagnermaier in their editorial introduction to the lectures, is a Herculean – or Sisyphean to be more in alignment with Flusser's existentialist vein – task of processing, compiling, and rendering of the Flusserian code for transmission. Over 50 hours of audio recordings and over 900 pages of transcripts had to be condensed, organized, annotated, and clarified before the first iteration, equally true to the Flusserian method of perpetual revisions and multi-versions, would be published in 2005 on the website of the Flusser Archiv as *Bochumer Vorlesungen 1991* to be read along the lecture recordings. In 2009 after additional edits and thematic re-compiling by Siegfried Zielinski and Sylvia Wagnermaier, the second and definitive version of the Bochum Lectures, *Kommunikologie Weiter Denken: Die Bochumer Vorlesungen* was published by Fischer Verlag, building on the eponymous success of *Kommunikologie* in 1998, also published by Fischer. Flusser's Bochum Lectures, his self-proclaimed magnum opus and lecturing career epitome – after only holding introductory, textbook-constricted classes "*Apostilas*" in Brazil (Motives) – were instrumental in raising the profile of Flusserian thought in the German context; however, they remain in desperate need of an English version. Working with Siegfried Zielinski, Sylvia Wagnermaier, Aaron Jaffe, Michael Miller, Andrew Battaglia, and others, I have been engaged in a team effort to this end. The challenge in translating Flusser's Bochum Lectures involves establishing an energetic idiom that adequately captures his playful and idiosyncratic moments, his autodidact erudition, his on-the-fly theoretical vernacular and jarring movements, in rhetoric *and* gesture, of expansion and compression. Furthermore, it is crucial to attend to the textual reality of a hybrid, synthetic assemblage that is synchronously steeped in an actual recorded voice and a posthumous, retroactive patchwork of audio files, notes, archival traces.

Flusser's lectures in Bochum were both intended as an introduction to his communicological oeuvre for the Bochum students and as theoretical fine-tuning – "for I have naturally thought things over and changed my opinions in the meantime," (Motives) Flusser says – which were to make the lectures equally interesting to the uninitiated and readers familiar with his musings. As stressed repeatedly throughout the lectures in Bochum, thus Flusser remained deeply committed to "record this general survey for future students" (Motives) yet to no avail until decades after his passing. Yet even if the lectures in Bochum were intended to be an accessible "Flusser Digest," as Kittler calls them (Kittler 2009) – a most fitting descriptor if we consider the chomping Flusserian worm – many of his famous

meditations on the importance of gestures (Flusser 2014), science fiction (Flusser 2011c), or the technical image (Flusser 2011b) would only be hinted at in passing. The late Flusserian thought as we find it in the Bochum Lectures is preoccupied with programming, computing, and algorithms – and he traced these three concepts throughout recorded, and speculative mytho-mystical, history and anthropology in their various alpha and beta states from which he extrapolated. Consequently, Flusser remained committed throughout the lecture series to be as "transdisciplinary" or pre-disciplinary – certainly another aspect that made him seem prophetic and unconventional – as he could. After all, the divided university seemed restlessly dated to him: "If there is currently a law faculty, and a biology faculty, and an arts faculty, they are just corpses; . . . numerous competencies have to come together" (Unemployment and Interface). Therefore, the human sciences are equated with the natural sciences, combined and blended where appropriate, into his communicology.

Flusser soberly proclaimed that the *deus ex machina* was dead and that the war-mongering programming functionaries had killed it (Standpoints, Phenomenological); for this reason, he urged the students to become programmers themselves to counteract media spectacle, specifically in direct responses to the highly mediated Gulf War that had ended only weeks before. Baudrillard scandalously proclaimed that "The gulf war did not take place" (Baudrillard 1995) in March 1991, Flusser, equally cynical in June 1991, stated that "even going there [the Persian Gulf] would be useless. . . . Human decisions have either already vaporized from the horizon, or they happen as a function of the transmitter" (Standpoints, Phenomenological). Both thinkers struggled with the future of representation and critiqued the translation of happenings and events onto our screens. However, there remained a clear difference between them: Baudrillard would maintain a pessimistic outlook whereas Flusser would always return toward hopes for a better future. When Flusser thus proclaimed that everyone ought to learn how to code, he meant it less so in the sense of the neoliberal big-tech investor or media influencer – whom the ever-prophetic Flusser called "*homines ludentes*," the algorithmic elite and the "puppet masters" gaming the system for their pleasure (Programming) – and more so as a call to self-determination against algorithmic, programmed automatization. Flusser saw the future of humanity in continual playful re-programming instead of re-volutionizing ruptures and pronounced the decline of the Protestant work ethic – to him the unemployed were the underappreciated post-work avant-garde because machines were already doing all the work and paid all the taxes (The Unemployed as Avant-Garde). He gestured toward the unavoidable progression from *homo sapiens*, to *homo faber*, to *homo ludens* because he observed that humans would not get any wiser. Without intending to regurgitate – to return briefly to the digestive movements of Flusser's transcendental worm – many of the excellent points

highlighted in existent meditations on translations in Flusser publications, the rest of this paper will focus specifically on thematic issues that were particularly pertinent to the Bochum Lectures corpus and their translation.

Translating Flusser, Flusser the Translator

Translations themselves remained essential to Flusser's thought processes, workflow, and oeuvre. In short, to translate Flusser is to engage with a thinker who is seriously preoccupied with the process of translation itself. As Flusser already mused in a theoretical sketch on translations in the mid-1960s, "Alphabets translate the meaning of spoken language, but not all of it" (Flusser 2006: 2); here we can see that even then in its kernel, decades before the publication of *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft* in 1987, that Flusser had been associating translation, as remediation and between languages, with a meditation on the potential loss of meaning – and equally as an interface providing insights into the liminalities of meaning that emerge in translation and rewriting processes (Guldin 2013). But he seemed confident that translations are more easily possible between prose of two languages, or what he calls "horizontal translations," than verse to prose translations, or "vertical translations" (Flusser 2006: 5). For instance, Flusser imagines in jest that Li Bo would have had fits of laughter if presented with Pound's translations of his poetry (Flusser 2006: 6).[2] Flusser sees the process of translation as essential to communication – verse to prose translations as fostering discourse, and prose to verse translations as philosophy (Flusser 2006: 8). Translatability, and thinking-as-translation, remained pertinent in Flusser's thoughts in Bochum and he frequently employed etymological wordplays throughout his lectures in an attempt to make students aware of the obscured meanings of their conversant languages by oscillating between literalized and lateralized thought processes. As he described his unique writing and translation process in one of the lectures, "I'll tell you about my workshop so you know what I'm talking about when I talk about art. I translated from German into English, from iambs into hexameters, so that the information I want to work out could gain a new facet. Because if I want to publish it [his writing] in Germany, I have to translate it back into German. If I want to publish it in America, I'll leave it in English, but I will probably squeeze in French and Portuguese so English can earn a real

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[2] I would prefer not to imagine Flusser having this reaction to our horizontal translation of his lectures, and rather hope that he would find new insights in the liminality between German and English of our lectures as he did in his own translations and rewritings.

profit" (The Practice of Writing). Flusser thus echoed Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator" who notes that "what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux – until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning" (Benjamin 2002: 257).

In Bochum, too, meaning emerged effectively from sampling of the languages Flusser wrote primarily in German, Portuguese, English, and French but he also explained, true to the philosophical and German philological tradition, concepts through the lens of Old Greek and Latin. In "Publicizing I," he reflects on the difference between sacred and public spaces, and he uses the Greek: If I choose wisdom, σοφία (*sophia*), then I have to be theoretical. If I work, then I only come to opinions, δόγμα (*dogma*). In "Culture/Critique" he notes: "Even the ancient Greeks and the ancient Jews were convinced that the purpose of life on Earth is to prepare for another life. Ease [Muße] in Latin is *otium*. The opposite, loss of ease, is called *negotium*." For Flusser, Old Greek and Latin served as vehicle to draw on etymological traces and give close attention to linguistic construction itself.

Similar to Heidegger, who to Flusser is "not a good philosopher but he is an important one" (Calculable Freedom), more so "saucy" than the "upstanding" Husserl, Flusser actively played with the deconstruction of words. He even dedicated two full sections on the affix "tele-" and the suffix "-matic" in his final lecture. "Speculating is mirroring" [*Spekulieren ist spiegeln*], Flusser notes in "Mirrors: Reflection and Speculation," and conversantly he employed numerous well-known Heidegger-isms, including *Dasein*, *Gestell*, *Nachdenken*, and *Sorge* in particular to reflect on, and dispute, Heiddeggerian thought. These terms have been notoriously difficult to translate, bent into prosthetic hyphenated compounds in English, from the German. In these cases, the definitive Sambaugh, and Macquarrie & Robinson translations of *Being and Time*, familiar to Heidegger readers, are helpful resources.

Perhaps the most complex aspect of this translation process was Flusser's approach to lecturing. Flusser remained uncouth and variational throughout the lectures and certainly did not mince his words; he was more so conversationalist rather than lecturer and his sentences remained short as if he were pronouncing eternal truths, thoroughly speculative, and full of what Kittler called "terrible simplifications that once gave professors and lecturers a hard time" (Kittler 2009). Thus, Flusser was more so reminiscent of ancient Greek philosophers rather than of the modern professional university professoriate. As Flusser was speaking without script, performing "a philosophy *in fieri"* he called it (Before the Board of Trustees), the lecture corpus was also scattered with skewed syntax, mixed metaphors, and slips of memory in slightly misremembered quotations. For example, Flusser was of the cynical opinion in "The Prefix Tele-" lecture that Blaise Pascal noted that "*Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison*

ignore" [The heart has its reasons, which reason *ignores*] which suggests agency, whereas the original line from Pascal's *Pensées* actually states "que la raison *ne connaît pas*" [which reason *does not know*] (Pascal 1958: 78, emphases mine).

We can assume that these errors were largely rooted in Flusser's fluid multilingual repertoire, and most of them had already been adjusted in the edits of the German edition. However, some of these convoluted syntactic constructions were intentional; as he admitted in his lecture on "The Practice of Writing," Flusser perceived his own writing in a dialectic he once compared to a "lover's quarrel" between writer and language (Flusser 2011a: 33): "It comes down to a struggle between me and the German language, whereby I force the German language to do something it actually doesn't want to do. When I write in German, I write everything in iambics – I hope my readers will never figure it out. The iambus is a rhythm that contradicts the German language" (The Practice of Writing). To honor these intentions sometimes means mimicking Germanic syntactic formations, abiding the Flusserian parataxis in turn imitated from Wittgenstein. Stylistically, it is necessary to adhere to Flusser's straightforward use of transitions, pronouns, and the subjective and collective ambiguities of colloquial spoken German. For example, there is [*es gibt*], something [*etwas*], one [*man*] indicate syntactic vagueness that would only be obviated as part of the transcription process that would not have stood out to listeners as a skewed in Flusser's transmissions of spoken German. After all, as Kittler once put it, "Only sound recorders can register spoken typographic errors" (Kittler 1990: 284). But retaining the dialogic modus operandi in writing, for instance, captures the personalized address of Flusser speaking directly to his audience as a "we," and a "you," in translation of the collective honorific *Sie* commonly used in lecture address, to amplify the personalization and urgency of his messages in English.

Flusser's lectures were highly figurative and sprinkled with reflections on the multiple languages he pulled from. His diction was largely shaped by his somewhat vintage, expatriate Prague German reminiscent of Kafka, but his word *choices* seemed deliberate. To retain the sense of unconventionality in writing, it thus seemed a given to select words that would bridge the German and English by staying close to Flusser's original phrasings despite their pragmatic flaws. His numerous colloquial references to "idiocy," to him partially synonymous with "unwise," his Nazi jokes, his references to "sub-human" functionaries, or his reflections on the failures of communication by comparing Czech

with Swahili[3] certainly emphasized that Flusser was born in 1920 and employed a German uncoupled from its national development. Even if Kittler teased that Flusser's pragmatisms of "hand and language" also contributed to his "numerous philosophical slip ups" (Kittler 2009), mostly related to Flusser's para-academic study of ancient Greece, his deliberate etymological reflections and comparisons were intentionally provocative. Indeed, Flusser remedied the lack in formality with polyglottal nuance and creativity in which Duden Dictionary conventions and grammatical rules were secondary to language as a tool for thought; he did not care whether the *-heit* [-ness/-th/-ty] suffix could only be used to nominalize and abstract adjectives if it made for a compelling pun – to Flusser, the shoe ideal would always be measured by its *Schuhheit* [shoe-ty], not by its *Schönheit* [beau-ty] (Publicizing I).

When discussing the technicalities of television and the role of it as apparatus, Flusser used the word "television," instead of the conventional *Fernseher* [literally "far-seer"] to emphasize the Greek etymology not visible in the German and to alienate his listeners, in the Brechtian sense of alienation [*Verfremdung*], so that they pay close attention to his layering of meanings. In contrast, he used the more conventional *Fernseher* whenever he discussed the broadcasting institutions, programs, or the image. In this way, he quite literally disentangled, expanded, and overcame the discourse intersecting technical and social apparatuses we find explicitly in Kittler's writings, and in Flusser's own writings on the telematic society and the technical image: "I can imagine nothing anymore without apparatuses," he even noted in one of the lectures (After the Communication Revolution). However, while Flusser's oration was "pragmatic" and misaligned with the conventions of the German lecture hall, his most important points were made with the utmost care and with the most vivid examples.

Conclusion

Playing off his chief interest in picture-making and images, Flusser's Bochum lectures are a prime example of Flusser the anecdotal storyteller. Through his iconic rhetoric, he was giving his lectures both a personal touch and a sense of theatricality, and via his expressive gestures he theorized as essential to affect production (Flusser 2014), he projected primal scenes to the lecture hall – sans the need for the most widely used technical apparatus of the German academy, the overhead projector:

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[3] "Speaking Swahili" is the archaic equivalent of the more commonly used, albeit not less politically incorrect, colloquial German reprimand "Am I speaking Chinese?" [*Spreche ich Chinesisch?*] to express communicological frustration.

He invited his audience to his house in the Provence, "riddled with visible and invisible cables like Swiss cheese" through which former French president Mitterrand arrived in his kitchen *without* invitation (Publicizing III), summarized conversations with his friend Luis Bec on football/soccer, a game he did not care for (Spiele, Jogos, Games), voiced his dismissal of the formulaic and opinion-directed Brazilian telenovelas (Bundling vs. Networking), and meditated on the experiences of the "pseudo-human" clerk processing his passport (On the Suffix -Matic). In the same vein, the history of science, theology, and his speculative anthropology are equated and presented as if Flusser had been their direct observer: Adam and Eve (Concerning Lost Freedom), Abraham and Isaac (Responsibility), Zarathustra on the mountain (Homo Universalis to Team Work), the first counting, flea-picking apes (From Culling to Counting), or Da Vinci and Galilei – whom Flusser endearingly referred to by their first names – were all actors in his tele-theatrical performance. "He treated the disciplines like a big quarry screening two million years of our species in the time-lapse of a summer semester," Kittler (2009) would summarize the lectures in retrospection.

Even if Flusser struggled to calculate the bills for said summer semester in Bochum, the "inconvenient earnings" from the lectures continue to pay dividends. Flusser concludes his essay on Bochum by noting, "When I say that Bochum has grown close to me and is now closer to me than my neighboring village, I am in a post-historical, relational, intersubjective mood" (Flusser 1991: 4, translation mine). Indeed, it remained Flusser's intention to connect all curious minds to his relational intersubjective network by communicating and sharing his knowledge with the world. Both technical apparatuses and the lecture hall audience failed him. But the "inconvenient" connections he made on his life's journey continue to (re-)write his legacy. In his later years, Flusser became fundamentally oriented toward posterity and imagined a record of his own impact in the life of others. Perhaps it would not be too farfetched to consider Flusser's thoughts this transcendentally nudging walking cane, with its ripple effect continuing to bring multitudes of trans-disciplinary thinkers and artists together decades after his passing.

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