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Reading Flusser: An Abecedarium

Flusser's first significant effect on me was, I think, was to instil an understanding of myself as a reader, someone steeped, for better or worse, in historical consciousness. Over the years, the effects of his writing have broadened and deepened, expanded, changed colour, nearly dissolved at some points, and finally coalesced to this extent: as a historical figure he's become, for me, the writer on writing, the one who sought some perspective on the vast shape, size and impact of the technology, its slow rise and long dominance over other forms of communication, its competitors, its role in evolution, its effect on human consciousness, its present vulnerability to new, competing codes. I, presumably like all other readers, came to recognise many of my own basic assumptions about time and order and value in his descriptions of "historical consciousness," along with a complementary resistance, frustration and fear of a society changing into one coded in a completely unfamiliar way.

Here, I hope to share something of what seems most remarkable, important, promising about Flusser's work now, after roughly twenty years of contact. I did not find it easy. Thoughts that were already tangled seemed to become even more densely tangled as I watched, threatening to paralyse me. I sought help in a book of advice to writers beginning to work in the category of "creative non-fiction,"[1] The author, too, had once been overwhelmed by the complexity of a topic, further complicated by his own ongoing engagement with it. He had turned to an ancient poetic form that forcefully imposes order. The text of an *abecedarian* is organised around single words or phrases, each referring to some aspect of the overall topic. The words are then arranged alphabetically (the Roman abecedarian, 23 letters). It seemed like a suitable sharp tool for cutting through old cognitive bramble and bindweed, exposing what's still — to me — lively, relevant, current.

Art. A few years ago, I posted a very short argument -- a cry of frustration, really, called "Why art does not exist"... (https://nancyannroth.com/?p=2447). It's a list of available definitions that came to mind, most in current use, defended, operational. But for me -- and for many, I think -- useless, contradictory. I have a higher degree in art history, and fairly long experience teaching art students in art colleges, so I have long needed to attend to institutionalised definitions. But here's Flusser: "'Art' is any human activity that aims at producing improbable situations, and it is the more artful (artistic) the less probable the situation is that it produces." Or, from an earlier point in his career,

[1] Dinty W. Moore, *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction,* Penguin Random House, 2010, 84-5.

"When I look at a work of art, do I not interpret it as a frozen gesture that symbolically represents something other than reason?" Neither is a definition, in the sense of a statement that will withstand scrutiny over time and viewpoint. But both support and encourage a reader raising a serious question and, if she is open to answers well outside her expectations -- answers that raise more questions. In a very late essay, he wrote: "Art and human are synonymous, they both mean that we deny the fullness of the world (its being such). They both mean that we are not animals governed by habit, but human beings, meaning artists."[2]

At that time, I first encountered Flusser, about 20 years ago, I was teaching in an art college. No one would have said I was actually teaching art, however. The name for my area of responsibility shifted with the prevailing political winds, becoming "critical studies," or "history" or "theory" by turns. All the students were required to do some writing to earn a degree at university level. It was always something other than what the students had come to study, however. These were students of visual art, broadly speaking, understood as drawing, painting, photography, sculpture, performance etc. In the interests of naming what I was actually teaching in the college to align with other areas of study, I began to tell myself I was actually teaching "writing," and to map some of the most familiar art media in relation to it, not as a parade of possibilities through time, but in layers, overlapping, interpenetrating.

Black Box. At one level, it is literally a black box, namely a camera. More broadly, though, it's an awkward, unnaturally (read: technically) bounded space with an inside, an outside, and a function. Humans must remain outside, for if they try to break in and make changes, they'll instantly render the whole object dysfunctional. Flusser seems never at a loss for examples of black boxes any of us is likely to encounter on an average day: one particularly memorable one for me was his discussion of the post office as a black box: those of us on the outside interact with it at two points, input and output, and are otherwise entirely excluded.[3] But of course there are many less benign examples, notably other humans and groups of humans with technically synchronised functions -- bureaucracies, institutions -- that resist change.

Confessions. About a year ago I read Augustine's *Confessions*,[4] largely in the interests of testing my own response to what remains, after a millenium and a half, a widely admired, openly rhetorical memoir. It addresses a reader as a person who shares the writer's general situation, but will necessarily perceive it differently, simply by virtue of being a different person. The writer bears witness

[2] Vilém Flusser, "Habit: The True Aesthetic Criterion," *Writings*, Ed. Andreas Ströhl, translated Erik Eisel, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 56.
[3] V. Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* trans. Nancy Ann Roth, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 106.
[4] St Augustine. *Confessions of a Sinner,* trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, London, Penguin, 2004.

to his own thoughts and associations, his perception of conflict, error, doubt and resolution, effectively showing the reader the possibility of arriving at the same conclusion by way of his or her own perception, reasoning, values.

I find much, probably most of Flusser's writing to address the reader in this way. Whether it is rightly called teaching, or education,[5] it seems to involve a tacit understanding between writer and reader, teacher and student, that this is between two whole human beings who share at least some aspects of a situation, and who take responsibility for their own judgements, decisions, positions. The most famous of such teachers, perhaps Socrates — or Augustine — could teach by example, by demonstration, without the trappings of "professionalism," degrees in established disciplines, associations, certifications. They could ignore the "scholarly apparatus" of notes and bibliography, as Flusser did.

Discourse. In a discussion of the transition from oral to literate society, Flusser identifies alphabetic writing with the very possibility of thinking in a direction, raising questions, issuing orders, explaining things, in fact with the appearance of discourse itself. "The alphabet was invented to replace mythical speech with logical speech, and so to be able, literally for the first time, to 'think"'. The tension between oral (read: "mythical") language and written (read: "historical") language persists: "Writing literally has the tone of a quarrel between lovers, between the one who writes and the language…in this lovers' quarrel, we see what language is capable of doing: its capacities exceed all expectations."[6]

Approaching from nearly the opposite direction, the poet and classicist Anne Carson has reread and re-translated some of the earliest texts that exist anywhere in an effort to grasp the ancient Greek experience of eros. In the texts, many very short fragments, she exposes a wide spectrum of erotic tensions, painful and exciting at once, between parts, aspects of one personality experiencing writing for the first time, and presents convincing evidence that the archaic Greek poets, too, writing for the first time in history, felt an erotic, disruption tension between writer and language.[7]

Education. For quite a few years now, I've thought of Flusser's effect on me as an "aesthetic education". It's undoubtedly relates to my understanding of his writing as rhetorical and its effects appreciable in terms of impact on a reader. It also refers to Friedrich Schiller's ambitious, influential

[5] Jordan, Mark D. "Ancient Philosophic Protreptic and the Problem of Persuasive Genres." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1986, pp. 309–33. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.1986.4.4.309. Accessed 30 July 2025.
[6] Flusser, *Writing Future*, 32, 33.
[7] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay,* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1986.

and controversial book of 1794, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, something of a landmark in the history of aesthetics. In response to the terrifying violence of the French Revolution just a few years earlier, it addressed a fear that humanity had become ungovernable. Schiller famously introduced the idea of "drives" (later widely adopted in psychology, notably by Sigmund Freud), specifically the form drive [*Formtrieb*] and the sense drive [*Sachtrieb*] actively in opposition to one another. Let's call them "rational" and sensual" instincts for now. Schiller thought both essential to human beings' health and happiness, but prone to dangerous imbalances, an excess of one leading to a joyless, dull life, an excess of the other to a chaotic, destructive one.

As a means of achieving a balance between them, he proposed an aesthetic education. Drawing on the work of his near-contemporary, Immanuel Kant, Schiller treated aesthetics as the recognition and appreciation of beauty. Since an aesthetic decision is neither rational nor moral, a viewer who can make such a decision can learn to correct for whatever imbalances may exist in his personality, and so reach a wholesome, socially constructive balance. Among other things, it bears witness to a time before the age of complacency about considering aesthetics marginal or trivial. Further, the single most famous phrase from the *Letters*, about the humanity of play, reappears in Flusser's writing, very nearly word for word: "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays." [8]

Flusser's discussion the aesthetic is so radically different from Schiller's as to actually disorient a reader. What became of the appreciation of beauty? What do we value so highly now? Rather than any controversy, we seem to face an emptiness, an absence of any contemporary aesthetic at all. Schiller's text consists of letters — apparently personal correspondence — addressed to his wealthy and influential patron — with the explicit intention of providing logical and ethical grounds for clarifying, expanding, valuing the society's aesthetic capacities. The patron, presumably, was in a position to provide such an education "top-down," formally. Centuries later, Flusser addresses a unknowable, broad spectrum of potential readers, whoever and wherever they may be, and treats the capacity to read as itself as initiating an aesthetic orientation, shaping shared concepts of time and space, memory. By completely different means, his work seems to me to address that emptiness where the idea of the aesthetic once flourished, to suggest ways we might gain awareness of the enormous force, the impact of aesthetic experience on all of us.

Fantasia essata. Something imagined exactly, with precision, *fantasia essata* is a phrase Flusser uses recurrently to express reservations about any crisp boundary between fiction and non-fiction, real and invented: what humans invent, then, is as astonishing, beautiful, frightening, and important, as

[8] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man In a series of Letters,* trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, 107.

what they discover.

Gesture. At first, I was grateful to have found a writer who confirmed my experience that medium matters: a given person's habitual, customary, or preferred form communication — as speaker, writer, painter, photographer, dancer or drummer — shapes that person's awareness, memory, sense of self, relationships, beliefs. The experience included many hours of encouraging art students to speak and write about their studio work, their own, unique engagement with a particular medium.

Gradually, with increasing surprise, I came to see the idea of gesture displacing the idea of a medium as a way of analysing, theorising the whole of human communication. Flusser defines gesture as a physical movement — perhaps associated with a tool or a material, but still a physical, unique, human movement. It seemed as if communication itself had been reimagined in bits, particles, turning the idea of medium upside down, or inside out. Let's say "medium" refers to a relatively fixed, presumably logical structure of materials, technologies and humans that functions independently of the specific humans involved. "Gesture" effectively dissolves the structures and resists the logic of that definition: it starts with a specific, physical, human …not even the entire human being either, but a movement that may be repeated or not, may constitute a very high or very low proportion of that person's communicative possibilities, and may vary enormously in its "legibility" to other humans.

Gestures have to be properly interpreted…If someone points to a book with his finger, we could know all the possible causes and still not understand the gesture. To understand it, one must know its "significance". That is exactly what we do continually, very quickly and effectively. We "read" gesture, from the slightest movement of facial muscles to the most powerful movements of masses of bodies called "revolutions". I don't know how we do it. I do know that we have no theory of the interpretation of gestures…We need a theory of the interpretation of gestures.[9]

"Habit: The True Aesthetic Criterion"[10] was among the first I read of Flusser's, and remains among those I continue to find difficult, or -- to try to use the terms he sets out it that very essay -- ugly. Ugly is one point in the loop of aesthetic responses he proposes that moves in a predictable way from a startled, negative response to something profoundly new through a series of steps to flat, empty, familiar, habitual, dull — habit. The essay suggests that aesthetic responses — he is discussing responses to art, but art defined broadly as "improbable" situations — could, ultimately be measurable, calculable. It seems to press toward making art predictable…exactly the opposite of the proposed definition.

[9] Flusser, *Gestures*, 2.
[10] V. Flusser, "Habit," 51-57 in *Writings*, 2002.

It puts people off, the word "aesthetic". Many, perhaps most readers will expect that whatever follows it is going to be absurdly complex or completely irrelevant. My own frustration reached a point some time ago where I wrote a snippet of verse:

Say the word "aesthetic" at your peril
Even if you know exactly what you mean
The chances that your listeners will is nil.

In the 20 years I've been reading and thinking about Flusser's writing, however, this concept has moved from the periphery to the core of the figure that has been forming for me. I've wondered whether there be a substitute for the word, something more familiar, perhaps less archaic. "Perceptual" come to mind, or "pertaining to perception". But aesthetics concerns *someone's* perception. It concerns perception that is unique to a human body, that has been shaped, ordered through repeated experience into person-defining patterns of seeing, hearing, tasting and touching associated, in turn, with values, delivering a speedy, clear awareness that I may love or hate or fear, adopt or reject what I have just perceived. For better or worse, there is no other word.

Among writers on communication, Flusser is, for me, the one who takes aesthetic matters seriously, for whom they always matter, simply because as he sees it, they figure in the very possibility of communication (even if I still find the idea of calculable aesthetic responses ugly).

Images. As mentioned earlier, I was teaching in an art college at the moment I really encountered Flusser, a setting in which a struggle between writing and images may be acted out on a small scale in the present. In retrospect, there seems to be something like a systematic denial about the relationship of image to writing: alphabetic text *does* dominate an art college -- in fact the pressure on an artist to write -- artists' statements, descriptions, proposals, explanations, "influences" -- is daunting. I commanded exceptional moments outside the studio, in a lecture room, perhaps, with or without an image projected, sometimes in an office -- or, at my request -- in the studio, usually to discuss the student's own text-in-progress. But by then I had already come to the conclusion that images don't have a history, and showing them in temporal order doesn't make up for it. Whether anyone wanted to acknowledge it or not, I was teaching writing. That involved reading, of course. With Flusser's help, I saw that I was in the unenviable position of cultivating an awareness of history in a somewhat resistant atmosphere: these were people aware of media, and most of them -- both students and staff -- had made a significant life decision about it. Drawing was widely understood to be absolutely fundamental -- the most immediate, the closest "translation" from thought. Painting was surprisingly polarised: some thought it was "over"; others thought it

was and would always be magic. Sculpture seemed -- to me, at least -- to have no conceptual boundaries -- although there were many financial and legal ones. Film and photography seemed to me to attract students who were relatively at ease with writing. But writing as such just wasn't on this particular map.

Kafka. The novelist Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is among the writers Flusser admired from earliest times, a fellow German-speaking native of Prague and a writer whose name alone stands for a calm, precise narrative of impossible, absurd, inhuman situations. In "The Gesture of Telephoning," it lifts the experience of a faulty telephone network into the realm of existential frustration. "The telephone has retained an archaic, paleotechnical character in comparison to the discursive mass media," Flusser writes, going on to suggest that freedom as such might be defined in terms of the possibility of dialogue, and the telephone as a facilitating technology of such dialogue. There is, in short, an emotional charge, an urgency about in a caller's effort to negotiate technical difficulties that may arise in making a connection. In pursuit of such real dialogue, however, "a human voice (usually female)..." breaks in through the noise of the network and speaks with the caller. This other conversation, "dialogue between the voice and the caller...has no parallels in human history or in the other media...The sole instance of such a dialogue outside the one on the telephone is the one between man and God in Kafka."[11]

Leroi-Gourhan. André Leroi-Gourhan was a man of many parts -- archaeologist, anthropologist, historian, philosopher and, almost incidentally, astute critic of art, music, food and more -- and he draws on all of these to deliver the account assembled in the book *Gesture and Speech*.[12] At the beginning he tracks a hominid evolutionary history up to the point when we began to walk upright. With this change, our hands were available for all kinds of highly informative interactions with the environment, and our crania were suspended on a vertebral column, making a very significant space available into which our brains could expand. Note that it is *not* the big brain that came first, driving the other developments; rather it was the feet that came first, making it possible for the organism to develop its control centre.

The next bit struck me as pure genius. Our brains developed in response to a need to co-ordinate our hands -- newly liberated from their drudgery in the service of locomotion, with the organs of the face -- above all eyes, ears. The key driver in our adaptation to this need to coordinate face and hands, both within ourselves and within a social group -- was language. With speech, we

[11] Flusser, *Gestures,* 138.
[12] André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger, intro Randall White, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993.

were completely human, as human as we are today. Rather than actually evolving special claws or beaks or exceptional strength or sight or hearing in order to survive, we designed and build technical solutions to address our needs, fears and desires. We adapted technologically to changing conditions, drawing on the rich neurological connections that had evolved linking brain, eyes, hands and organs for speech — lips, tongue, voice. In a chapter entitled "Functional Aesthetics," he proposes that the cognitive energy, the decision-making at least in early technological developments, was aesthetic. The human body remained largely as it was at the point we stood up, even as our immediate environment changed beyond recognition.

I don't know whether Flusser had access Leroi-Gourhan's work or not. If not, perhaps the striking parallel between them, which I take to be an understanding of what is fundamentally human as the capacity for aesthetic decisions, must be seen as an instance of convergent evolution.

Mind. *Absence of Mind* is the title of Marilynne Robinson's essay collection of 2010, in which she calls attention to something missing in the grand systems of Western thought — the structures of Darwin, Freud, Marx, among many others. She points out a quite systematic failure to acknowledge and value the insight and invention of a specific human mind. Robinson is far better-known as a novelist than she is as an essayist. She is known, too, for her commitment to Calvinism and for her Biblical scholarship. She uses the word "mind" for these essays rather than "soul," although her understanding of the two meanings -- and she shares this understanding in some detail -- are nearly identical: the unique, located, capacity of individual human beings to experience the world. At the point I read these essays, I had learned enough from Flusser to know that philosophers (including Robinson) recognised the category in question, the experience of individuals, as "aesthetic".

By contrast to Robinson, the literary critic Terry Eagleton is established as a Marxist thinker, far from any religious allegiances. And still, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*[13] -- not a history so much as an account of changing ways of reconciling aesthetic issues with logical or ethical principles — he acknowledges an absence, expressing some surprise not unlike Robinson's, perhaps, at Western thinkers' overall tendency to treat the entire category briefly, lightly, or not at all.

> Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body. In its original formulation [as a philosophical category]...the term refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek *aisthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought. The distinction is not one between 'art' and 'life', but between the material and the immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, that which is bound up with our creaturely life as opposed to that which conducts some shadowy existence in the recesses of

[13] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 13.

the mind...The aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of the human, which post-Cartesian philosophy, in some curious lapse of attention, has somehow managed to overlook. It is thus the first stirrings of a primitive materialism -- of the body's long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical.

I am not alone, in any case, in sensing a broad gap, an absence concerning the aesthetic in the most readily available and widely accepted accounts of contemporary thought. I may be unusual in reading Flusser's as a voice concerned with recovering, or reconstructing the category: among theorists, he seems to me exceptional in keeping a reader aware of and respectful of the perspectives, points of view, particular responses, voices anchored in individuals. A reader, as one who figures in the account, affects its direction and outcome, is asked to pay attention to his or her perception, to notice if it is different, and to value it, in fact to value it as specifically human. In an age of proliferating robots, he shows us how to turn aesthetic experience into resistance against becoming robotic ourselves.

Neswald. Neswald's book *Medien-Theologie (Media Theology)* came[14] as an upsetting surprise. It seemed like a critical response from a profoundly unsympathetic reader. To associate Flusser with theology seems to me to completely miss a central feature of the work, in fact exactly the one that aligns it with a the most potentially positive features of communications technology. Jaron Lanier, a well-known and exceptionally articulate computer scientist, had the best term I've heard for this feature. He called it "human specialness". Here is an excerpt from the closing of his book *Dawn of the New Everything:* We believe in ourselves and each other only on faith. It is a more pragmatic faith than the traditional belief in God. It leads to a fairer and more sustainable economy and better, more accountable technology design, for instance (Believing in people is compatible with any belief or lack of belief in God),[15]

Ouroborus. The image of the snake swallowing its own tail, Ouroborus, is usually understood to stand for something like infinity, a simultaneous consumption and regeneration, a continuity in change. Flusser uses in it in a discussion of reading, "Deciphering," in *Does Writing Have a Future?* He looks at himself writing at the end of writing, at a point when he knows the resulting text will be spoken away, passed over or discredited, very much as Lanier describes it very much later [See "You Are Not a Gadget," below]. "I wrote it nevertheless," he writes, "This "nevertheless" stands as an invisible title over all texts written today."[16]

[14] Elizabeth Neswald, *Medien-Theologie: Das Werk Vilém Flussers*, Köln-Weimar-Wien: Bölau, 1998.
[15] Jaron Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything,* London: Vintage, 2017.
[16] Flusser, *Writing Future*, 92, 93.

Perception. *The Me of Perception* is the title I wish Bloomsbury Academic had chosen for the English translation of Lambert Wiesing's fine study in contemporary philosophy, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung.*[17] I fear its official title, *The Philosophy of Perception: Phenomenology and Image Theory*[18] not only lacks catchiness, but more importantly, deflects readers from the simple but startling main idea: Wiesing starts from the assumption that there IS perception. No, it is NOT obvious. The "obvious" starting point is that there is a subject, and we want to understand how that subject perceives. Almost all studies of perception follow the general pattern. But because Wiesing starts from the (unprovable) assumption that perception exists, he is able to elegantly and persuasively explain how it — perception — demands a "me". If there is perception, there has to a perceiver.

For me, the longer reverberations of this tidy reversal concerned the experience of "me" as an aesthetic, perhaps *the* aesthetic experience. You can't make logical or ethical arguments about your own perception: It just IS — physical, unique. Maybe it defines "aesthetic". The book read to me as a daunting example of what it takes to *really* insist on the aesthetic identity of a given concept: long, deep familiarity with a particular philosophical discipline, focus, energy, a talent for writing, a sense of humour and sheer stamina. It made me wonder whether there are other concepts, eternally contested in logical or ethical argument, unresolvable *because* they rely on aesthetic perception. The concept of gender came to mind. With no existing framework in which a statement such as "gender is an aesthetic category," has meaning, the effort to explain becomes overwhelming.

Wiesing is a philosopher specialising in aesthetics, a phenomenologist, a long-term admirer of Vilém Flusser's work (contributor to this journal), and a man of great patience and sympathy with translators.

Quanta. Flusser's reader will absorb his pattern of rethinking large entities, whether thoughts or judgements, furniture or mountains, in terms of tiny, discreet particles, quanta. In a discussion of photographing, for example, he refers to a principle from quantum physics, that an observer of an object inevitably affects that object, however strange it may seem. Flusser uses the principle almost in passing, gently confirming a contention that photographing counts as a form of measurement, and that even a landscape photographer changes and is changed by the landscape in question.[19] Another particularly memorable example of Flusser's quantising thought for me was his lack in interest in the transition from film-based to digital photographic images — gradual, but usually dated to the 1990s. Much was made of it in photography's educational and publishing circles, but Flusser had always thought of photographs in terms of "whirling particles".

[17] Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung: Eine Autopsie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009.
[18] Lambert Wiesing, *The Philosophy of Perception: Phenomenology and Image Theory,* London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
[19] Flusser, *Gestures*, 82-83.

Reading. Recent research on reading broadly supports Flusser in his contention that "spoken language seems to rush toward writing almost on its own, to become a written language and so to achieve its full maturity."[20]

Stanislaus Dehaene specialises in the cognitive neuroscience of language and number processing in the human brain. In *Reading in the Brain*, he explains in some detail, from the results of many brain scans, how writing, quite independently of any particular language or writing system, always respects the requirements of one particular part of the brain, located in the visual cortex. He calls it the letterbox. Writing systems — and his research has included studies of cuneiform and hieroglyphs as well as alphabetic languages — have conformed to the brain, that is, and not the other way around.[21]

Dehaene, like others investigating the joys and obstacles of reading now, understands reading as an evolutionary step, an adaptation to certain very specific conditions. Although some of our near-relatives of other species can also learn to read marks, we are the only ones who move from sound to surface and back again. We have always had what it takes, the kind of visual perception, connections to speech and memory that underpin the phenomenon of reading. But it must still be learned, and the effort required to do this varies widely, depending on both the language in question and the writing system, not to mention the student's gifts and motivation.

Dehaene differs from some other contemporary researchers in his broad view of evolution. He can, in particular, acknowledge potential losses as well as gains in learning to read; he speculates about the possibility that humans might discover other perceptual and cognitive possibilities suited to evolutionary development, ways to "evolve" further, in ways we have not yet identified.

Smoking. "The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe"[22] opens by pointing out to readers how complicated the ritual of smoking tends to be (as can be seen from the number of pockets needed to accommodate the various objects required). It moves from the identification of ritual into the positioning of ritual as a category of aesthetic expression. From there, it moves quietly into what has been, for me one of the most startling, provocative claims of all, namely that religious experience is a form of aesthetic experience.

Smoking a pipe was surely very carefully chosen as an example of a ritual. It is resolutely secular and almost universally considered trivial. That means that a group of pipe smokers — each of whom is absolutely certain that he smokes in the *right* way, can exhibit "smiling tolerance" toward one another; when the stakes are higher and convictions are stronger, conflict can be fierce and

[20] V. Flusser, *Writing Future*, 32.
[21] Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read,* Penguin, 2009.
[22] Flusser, "The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe," 118-134 in *Gestures.*

durable.

Trump, Donald. He does not read, apparently cannot read. To the extent I have undergone an "aesthetic education" with Flusser, I know myself to be a reader whose perception of the world and system of values shares much with other readers. Trump's behaviour "reads," to me and I'm confident to other readers -- as news of the ongoing conflict Flusser outlined between historical consciousness, such as my own, and a new kind of consciousness -- visual, calculating -- that apparently prevails, at least for now, in the universe of technical images. It terrifies me.

Virtual reality. The date of Flusser's death, in November 1991, coincides closely with the first appearance and rapid spread of the phrase "virtual reality," widely attributed to Jaron Lanier and a company called Virtual Programming Research (VPR). Lanier's background had been in the development of video games. In his autobiographical book *Dawn of the New Everything*,[23] he speaks about the technical challenges of projecting images and sound well enough to make a virtual situation credible to human vision and hearing. He seems to almost enter in to the discussion Flusser initiated in one of his last essays, called "Digitaler Schein." There,[24] he defends the positive possibilities of "alternative worlds," — probably just months before the term "virtual reality" would have been readily available.

Lanier included over fifty positive definitions of virtual reality in *Dawn of the New Everything*, including "A way to try out proposed changes to the real world before you commit," (217) or "A new art form that must escape the clutches of gaming, cinema, traditional software, New Economy power structures, and maybe even the ideas of its pioneers," (237) or "the medium that can put you in someone else's shoes; hopefully a path to increased empathy". (299)[25]

X (formerly Twitter). Social media platforms compete with one another for attention, positive or negative, whether through size or speed or permissible actions. Some argue that X (formerly Twitter) is especially fast and effective in fragmenting and misconstruing the meanings of posts, and accordingly, promoting antagonism among users (see *You are Not a Gadget* below).

You are not a Gadget is the title of one of Jaron Lanier's books, the one that begins: "It's early in the twenty-first century, and that means that these words will mostly be read by nonpersons —

[23] Jaron Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything: A Journey through Virtual Reality,* London: Vintage, 2017.
[24] Vilém Flusser, "Digitaler Schein," 202-215 in *Medienkultur,* Frankfurt: Fischer, 2002.
[25] Lanier is currently "scientist at large" at Microsoft. His official title, however, is Office of the Chief Technology Officer, Prime Unifying Scientist. It spells out "Octopus". He is, as Flusser was, fascinated with cephalopod neurology, and is said to be working on a virtual reality encounter between a human and a squid.

automatons or numb mobs composed of people who are no longer acting as individuals. The words will be minced into atomised search-engine keywords within industrial cloud computing facilities located in remote secret locations around the world. They will be copied millions of times by algorithms designed to send an advertisement to some person somewhere who happens to resonate with some fragment of what I say… Reactions will repeatedly degenerate into mindless chains of anonymous insults and inarticulate controversies…Real human eyes will read these words in only a tiny minority of the cases. And yet it is you, the person, the rarity among my readers, I hope to reach."[26]

I think of Lanier as the person Flusser imagined, but despaired of ever finding, the person capable of translating a book -- written in linear, alphabetic code -- into an numerical, algorithmic code: "those whose mathematical competence is sufficient don't try to break out of writing," he wrote, "for they have already set it aside in contempt."[27] But Lanier actually embodies a completely different relationship between linear and algorithmic code. Not only does he himself write books, by choice, specifically to reach readers with whom he clearly shares aesthetic values; he also is a musician with an avocation that quite particularly shuns digital transmission: he collects old and unusual musical instruments and learns to play them. It requires direct, immediate physical contact with the instrument.[28]

Zero. In the course of writing this essay, I've increasingly sensed an ironic undertow in Flusser's drive to measure, quantify, things that most of us would consider unquantifiable. In a discussion of reading, for example, he argues that reading is a critical activity, and compares a reader to a hen pecking at kernels of corn, selecting "good" or "large" kernels from the rest. In search of the kind of clarity and precision admired in the "hard" sciences, he goes on to suggest a means of measuring how good the text is. This requires setting a standard, a criterion from which to He calls the standard "zero". "Let us call it something positive to get to the bottom of all this measuring," he writes, "Let us call this zero 'truth' It is a zero point because it means an extreme position unattainable and therefore empty."[29]

[26] Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto,* Penguin, 2011.
[27] Flusser, *Writing Future*, 164.
[28] Jaron Lanier, "What My Musical Instruments Have Taught Me," *The New Yorker*, 22 July 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-weekend-essay/what-my-musical-instruments-have-taught-me, accessed 31 July 2025.
[29] Flusser, *Writing Future*, 82.

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