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Thinking with Flusser in my Gut

I remember well how I first encountered Vilém Flusser's thinking. It must have been around 2010, during one of my last semesters studying philosophy at Christian-Albrechts-Universität in Kiel. In an obscure anthology of various texts by postmodern media theorists, I found Flusser's phenomenological observation of the telephone.

My philosophical interest in design as a subject of research had already been sparked at that time. However, I had not yet found a philosopher who could offer me an approach to the topic. So, I tried my hand at writings on design theory, design history, and design sociology. But they never offered the philosophical yet political perspective I was hoping for. When I came across Flusser's fascinating observations on the telephone, I sensed that his work could offer the philosophical approach to design that I had been looking for. And sure enough, shortly afterwards I discovered that he had written a whole series of essays for the German design magazine *Design Report*. Encouraged by this discovery, I decided to write my master's thesis on Flusser's concept of design. And since I had read that many important texts by him had not yet been published and were stored in an archive at the University of the Arts in Berlin, I decided to spend three months in Berlin to do research in the Flusser Archive.

When I asked the Flusser Archive if I could have access to the archive as a guest researcher for a few months, they immediately agreed. From that moment on, my name was on a list of people who had access to the archive. However, the Flusser Archive was undergoing a personnel change at the time, which meant that there was no one who felt responsible for me or showed me around the archive. So I was on my own, which turned out to be a lucky thing. Whenever I wanted, I could simply go to the doorman and say that I'd like to visit the archive. Then I was given a key and could basically stay in the archive as long as I wanted.

I loved spending my evenings and weekends, when I was undisturbed, among the crammed shelves and numerous cardboard boxes. I rummaged through all the material I could get my hands on. At that time, nothing had been digitized yet; most of the archive material was simply registered with numbers.

I read—in retrospect, quite randomly — all the notes, scripts, diaries, and letters that fell into my hands. And I slowly began to understand how Flusser worked, how he made notes on his

typewriter and revised them by hand. How he used certain texts and text modules repeatedly, revising them and inserting them into new texts. I gained insights into his correspondence and his large network of friends and acquaintances. I was moved by the appreciation he received. But I was also shaken by the numerous rejections he had received when inquiring about publication opportunities. I got to know Flusser's special sense of humor, his stubbornness, and his unyielding optimism.

Over time, I became more and more familiar with his provocative thinking, his artificial methodology, and his writing style. Looking back, I think that it wasn't during my studies but during those months in the Flusser Archive that I learned how long you must read and learn before you can really grasp a way of thinking. That it takes careful contextualization, a great deal of intellectual empathy, and, in Flusser's case, even more humor to understand texts fully.

Flusser was also groundbreaking for my perspective on design. He was the first philosopher I read who dealt with design without referring to the major design schools, movements, or influential styles. He was not interested in functionalism, the Bauhaus, or the HfG Ulm, but rather in objects and power relations that are codified by modern material culture. He was not interested in design aesthetics, but rather viewed design from a political perspective. He was interested in the political implications of material culture. He was interested in the extent to which design is a tool for shaping people and society, and he was interested in the interests and purposes for which it has been instrumentalized.

Since graduating from university, I have held positions at academic institutions in design theory departments. My interest in design as a subject of research has remained to this day. The same goes for Flusser's influence. It is certainly thanks to my engagement with his thinking that I chose to do my doctorate on philosophical design critique. Flusser's design philosophy is a critical one – it was not a big step from critical design philosophy to philosophical design critique. And although I initially decided to focus my work on design critics other than Flusser, I eventually returned to him in my dissertation.

Many of the questions about design ethics that Flusser raised in his essays for *Design Report* still form the basis of my academic engagement with design. Flusser urged, like few other voices of his time, that we should reject normativity when looking at design. He was a Holocaust survivor, and Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration and extermination camp, appears repeatedly in his essays on design as a provocative example of “good design.” For this reason, Flusser exemplifies a situated perspective on design. Flusser's skepticism toward modern, professionalized design can therefore only be understood from a standpoint epistemological perspective. If we deny Flusser's texts this, he all too quickly appears as a radical pessimist or even a nihilist. Yet—at least in my conviction—the radical skepticism with whom Flusser analyzed design is an expression of unbridled optimism.

He was convinced that people can create a better world through the power of professional design practice. I continue to carry this conviction of Flusser's in my own thinking to this day.

However, Flusser's travail has not only helped me in my theoretical work. His ability to make a virtue out of necessity and not give up philosophy even under the most adverse circumstances remain an inspiration to me to this day. Academic careers are tough, and the professional existence of young academics is characterized by precariousness, temporary contracts, and uncertainty. The memory of Flusser's unyielding determination to be a philosopher and author, regardless of whether he received academic recognition or not, regardless of whether his writings were published or not, has helped me through many professional dry spell.

I doubt that I will continue to focus explicitly on Flusser over the next ten years. Just as I never saw any reason to visit the Flusser Archive again after my time as a visiting researcher, I may at some point no longer see any reason to make Flusser's work the subject of my work. But that would probably very much be in line with him. Because he was known for often refraining from explicitly referencing those who had influenced him. In an interview, he explained that this was because, after all, he was the person who had to take responsibility for what he said, not the person he was referring to. Furthermore, he believed that published ideas were common property. Everyone had the right to draw on them without being accountable to anyone. It should, after all, be obvious that he is not the sole source of all his knowledge, but he has internalized everything he has learned from others “in his gut” [“im Bauch”] (Flusser 1996: 92). I believe that since my time in the archives it has probably been the same for me. Whether I quote him, engage with him specifically, or not, I think with Flusser in my gut’ anyway.

References

Flusser, V. (1996). *Zwiesgespräche. Interviews 1967-1991*, ed. by Klaus Sander, European Photography, Göttingen.