

Rainer Guldin

The Mirror Labyrinth

“[...] who lives in unapproachable light,
whom no one can see [...]”

1 Timothy, 6.16

My relationship with Vilém Flusser’s work dates back 33 years and clearly precedes the founding of *Flusser Studies* that I initiated in the summer of 2005 after a discussion with Edith Flusser in December 2004 in a diner in Philadelphia during an MLA convention. I got to know Vilém Flusser in the early fall of 1992¹ and used his theory of photography to interpret the collaboration between the photographer Leonore Mau and the writer Hubert Fichte in my speech “Das Double der Schrift. Photographie und Schreibprozeß” that I held on October 5, 1993 at the second international symposium on the work of Hubert Fichte *Mehrfachbelichtung. Fotografie und Schreibprozeß* held at the Hubert-Fichte-Arbeitsstelle in the University of Hamburg.² However, even if my first theoretical perspective on Flusser’s work was connected to his theory of photography, one of my main interest was and still is his significance as a multilingual writer and self-translating philosopher.

I started out with translation and multilingualism and then moved on to some of his main notions and theoretical interests: the Baroque, technical images, iconoclasm, the apparatus, border, language, nomadism, anthropophagy, game theory, kitsch and colour theory, nihilism, the diabolical and the satirical. I also wrote about some philosophers and writers that were important for his work: Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, Haroldo de Campos and Anatol Rapoport. In my contribution to this twentieth anniversary issue “, () , On Vilém Flusser’s Idiosyncratic Use of Commas and Round Brackets”, I focus on another fascinating aspect of his writing practice.

Vilém Flusser’s writing practice based on constantly shifting perspectives is comparable to the numerous processes of self-translation that have generated his work over the years. As the multilingual Jewish practice of *pilpul*, a method of studying the *Talmud* Flusser wrote about at the very end of his life³, his oeuvre grows in slowly expanding spirals around a central core,

¹ See Rainer Guldin (2015), *Le style c’est l’homme même. Für ein fluides grenzüberschreitendes Denken*, in *Flusser Studies* 20 (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/guldin-le-style-est-homme-meme.pdf>).

² See Rainer Guldin (1995) *Das Double der Schrift. Photographie und Schreibprozeß*, in: *Medium und Maske. Die Literatur Hubert Fichtes zwischen den Kulturen*, ed. by H. Böhme and N. Tiling, M&P, Stuttgart: 87-103.

³ See Vilém Flusser (1995) *Jude sein. Essays, Briefe, Fiktionen*. Mannheim: Bollmann.

continuously adding new topics and new often contrasting points of view, combining continuity with renewal and variation with inner consistency. Similarly, writing about Vilém Flusser is a journey through an endlessly varying and constantly expanding kaleidoscopic landscape full of surprises.

In the practice of *pilpul*, one keeps running up against a central concept, the name of God, for instance, in an attempt to pierce the impenetrable veil that surrounds it, and fails every time. However, it is this very failure that calls for another attempt and another and still another, that is, for a continuous creative effort. In the fight against one's personal death and the ultimate all-encompassing entropic death of the universe, human culture is like a small negentropic epicycle trying to create meaning in a sea of absurdity sitting on a bigger entropic cycle, which carries everything inexorably into total oblivion. Creativity and writing are, thus, always connected to absurdity and failure.

This leads me to a significant twist in my interest in Vilém Flusser's work. In the last two years, I have been working on a book dedicated to the relationship of faith and philosophy in the work of Marshal McLuhan, Jacque Ellul, Vilém Flusser and Michel Serres: *Philosophy and Faith. McLuhan, Ellul, Flusser and Serres on Theology and Technology*.

In 1998, seven years after Flusser's sudden death in a car accident at the Czech-German border and at the very height of his success in Germany as a digital thinker and communicologist, Elizabeth Neswald published the provocative book *Medien-Theologie. Das Werk Vilém Flussers* (Media-Tehology. Vilém Flusser's Oeuvre) In connection with the internet, which in the course of the 1990s, became more and more pervasive, and the optimism kicked off by the Fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, Flusser was generally seen as a prophet of a better telematic future, in which worldwide free communication would take sway. Neswald's book introduced a strident provocative note by focusing on the religious and above all the apocalyptic dimension of Flusser's thinking. The very first text I published on Vilém Flusser was a review⁴ of Neswald's book. At that time, I did not fully understand the relevance of her approach. In a way, Neswald hit upon a central aspect of Flusser's thinking which was not taken into consideration within the context of the late 1990s but needs reconsideration and further inquiry now that the early enthusiasm of the internet with its endless promises has come under closer critical scrutiny.

One can find numerous traces of Flusser's lifelong engagement with religion. The already mentioned Jewish practice of *pilpul* is only one example. More can be found in *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert* (The Twentieth Century), *The History of the Devil*, *On Religiosidade* and *On Doubt*. In *Até a terceira e a quarta geração* (Unto the Third and Fourth Generation) Flusser presents a reading of

⁴ See Rainer Guldin (1999) Flusser nella valigia, Cenobio, April-June: 167-172 (with Francesca Rigotti).

Western history in terms of the abandonment of transcendence and the gradual development of a policed society organized according to scientific rules, a mega-apparatus, a grey global society peopled by soulless anonymous functionaries. Interestingly enough, Neswald did not know this early text, as she focussed only on Flusser's German oeuvre published in the 1970s and 1980s.

In a letter to his friend Alex Bloch, dated October 26, 1979, Flusser described the process of writing in the following terms: "Writing is like a mirror labyrinth that you build while losing yourself in it."⁵ In this view, the writer constructs a mirror labyrinth, in which the single mirrors mirror each other in a dazzling show of endlessly repeated images. Writing is not a representational art. It does not describe 'reality' and is not primarily engaged in revealing 'objective truth'. Writing is the construction of a fictional narrative, of a series of mirrors that reflect the internal 'truth' of the constantly growing and expanding oeuvre of the writer. The reader that enters this labyrinth tries to reconstruct it as faithfully as possible in a series of successive attempts. However, in the process he is lured away by its multiple shifting meanings and inner reflections, by its numerous paradoxes and contradictions and sometimes also by the writer's own artifices and tricks. Writer and reader connect in these parallel labyrinths where they both lose themselves and by losing themselves meet each other. They do not meet each other in the fullness of understanding but in a comparable experience of powerlessness, futility and absurdity, which in Flusser's view is the only true attitude towards life in general. In this sense, the reader becomes the writer's accomplice in a shared feeling of *quand même*.

⁵ Vilém Flusser(2000) Briefe an Alex Bloch. Göttingen: European Photography: 130.