

Rainer Guldin

Vilém Flusser.

The Bald, Bearded and Bespectacled Pipe-Smoking Philosopher

“The pen and the pipe ... are me.”

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

“Roth: You had no beard.

Singer: No, no. Do I need everything? A bald head *and* a beard?”

Philip Roth in a conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer about the Polish writer Bruno Schulz

“It shouldn’t be underestimated that glasses are a cultural symbol loaded with meaning. Two pairs of glasses are even more so ... The glasses on the forehead certainly create the side effect of an attentively observing intellectual.”

Francesco Micieli, in an email to the author

Over the years, Vilém Flusser developed a specific style of self-presentation. The elements composing this specific look were a pipe, sometimes unlit, a full beard, possibly compensating for an early baldness, and one, occasionally, two pairs of glasses. Add to this the movements of the hands and the extended arms, sometimes symmetrical, sometimes stressing difference. Beard and baldness – the contrast of bareness and fullness – set the stage for the mobile components – the pipe, the glasses and the hands – that Flusser used skillfully, together or on their own, using one hand holding a pipe or both to attract attention to a specific point, to signal a pause or to emphasize a sudden change in argumentation. Flusser’s image of the 1980s and early 1990s – the time when he became famous as the philosopher of communicology, technical images and telematics – is that of a thinker restlessly talking and gesticulating while maneuvering his pipe from one hand to the other or his glasses from the nose to the forehead and back or that of the meditating philosopher slowly walking back and forth in front of his audience with his hands folded behind his back and a pair of glasses pushed up onto the forehead. These combined gestures are remindful of his writing style which moves constantly forward but is interspersed with pauses and surprising shifts in reasoning. As such they can be compared to the punctuation marks of a written text (Guldin 2025). As gestures, punctuation marks are embodiments of specific mental attitudes. Each of them possesses a specific physiognomic status of its own. The exclamation mark, for instance, looks like a raised index finger calling attention to a specific point. In Flusser’s case this can be either a raised hand

or a hand holding a pipe or a pair of glasses. The two parallel extended arms with the right and left hand executing a twisting motion could be compared to two parentheses.

Even if Flusser did not comment explicitly on his characteristic look he was definitely aware of it and used it repeatedly to structure his speeches and to enhance their effect. Flusser had a histrionic talent, he was a gifted entertainer, with a flair for performing and commanding attention through specific gestures and emotions. As Siegfried Zielinski put it, Flusser had the ability to captivate an audience. In restaurants, he quickly managed to become the center of attention.

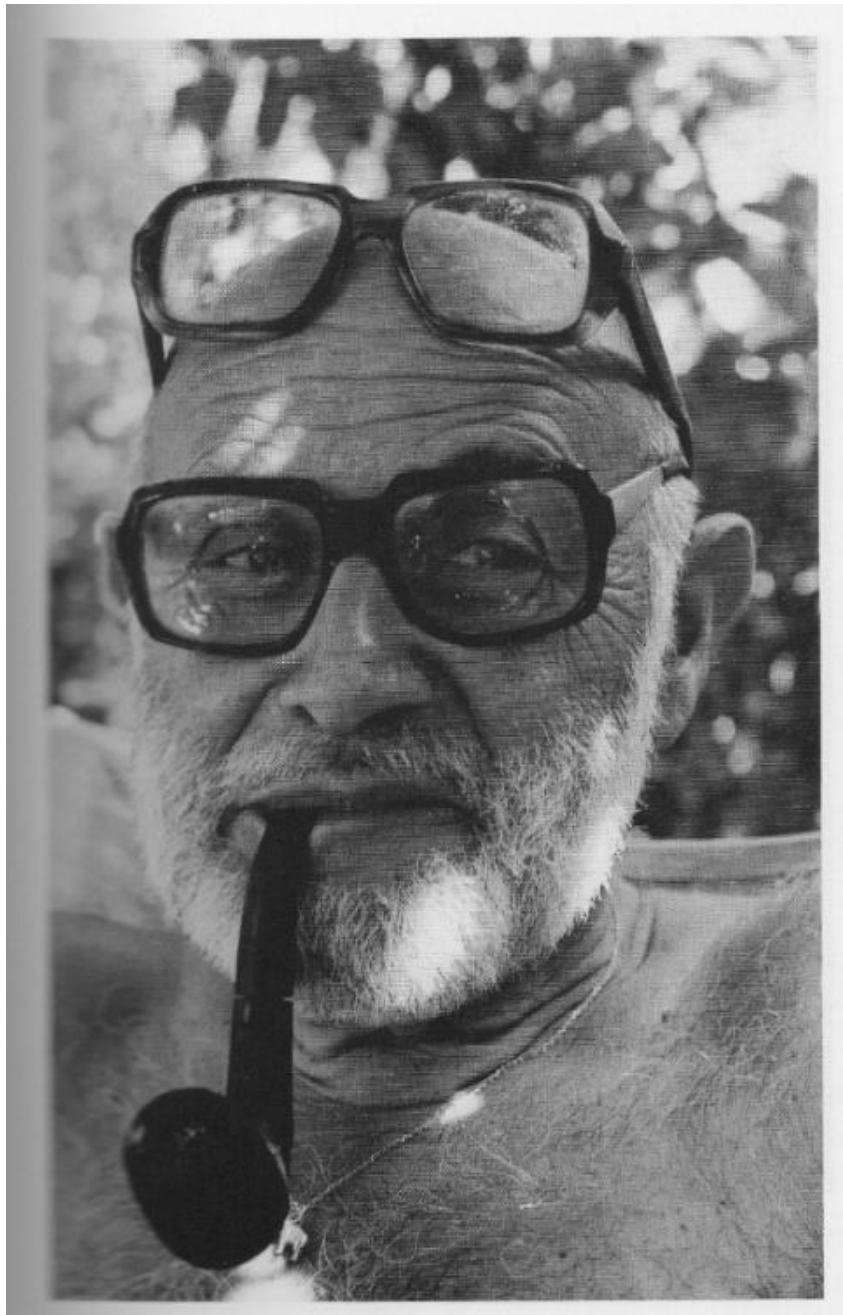


Figure 1: Vilém Flusser in Robion, 1980s (Flusser 1992)

In the previous picture that was most probably taken in the garden of the house in Robion in the mid- to late 1980s, Flusser presents himself in full array, bald, with a well-trimmed white beard encircling his face, smoking a pipe and wearing two sets of glasses. If the pipe stands for the mindful contemplative lifestyle of someone who has decided to step back from the conflicts of the world – *au-dessus de la mêlée* (above the battle), as Flusser himself put it in a letter to Alex Bloch written in Robion on May 1, 1983 (Flusser 2000: 179) – the two sets of horn-rimmed glasses suggest multiperspectivism, which is also one of the main tenets of Flusser’s philosophy. One could interpret the message Flusser is sending with this picture as an invitation to the spectator – or the reader for that matter – to approach his thinking and the world in general from different diverging points of view and with a certain contemplative reserve. Flusser enacts the spectacle of his thinking as a complex contradictory enterprise poised between phenomenological distancing and multilingual perspectivism, a warning to the listener and the reader not to trust naively what someone has to offer but to question all discourses, even his own. Flusser’s performance makes the very act of theoretical mediation visible. The picture could thus be interpreted as a *Vexierbild*, a picture puzzle, that the viewer and listener are called to interpret.

In the following four sections, I will try to deconstruct Flusser’s composite public image assembled over the years, breaking it down into its components and following their relationship over the years. Section one, “The Mood of Pipe Smoking”, discusses the gesture of pipe smoking as a specific individual style, in which the other gestures are immersed. Section two, “Momentous beards”, deals with Flusser’s beard and baldness and section three, “Impressive Glasses”, with his use of glasses. The use of two pairs of glasses, one of which was positioned on the top of his forehead, appeared during the 1970s and became Flusser’s trademark of a dialogic and digital philosopher in the 1980s and early 1990s. The sequence of the three sections thus follows the development and unfolding of Flusser’s public image. If the first three sections are mainly based on pictures, section four, “The Gestures of the Professor”, turns to videos which bring everything to life.

1. The Mood of Pipe Smoking

In an early picture (fig.2), Flusser is sitting at a desk in an office that he shares with three other people. On the wall to his right is a map of Brazil. He is bald and still beardless, and does not wear any glasses yet, but smokes a pipe. In the mid-1950s, Flusser founded the company IRB, which was later renamed as Stabivolt. From 1960 until December 5, 1964, he managed this small radio and transformer factory as *Director Commercial*, together with Juda Leib Datner as *Director Técnico*. At

the time, Flusser must have been between 35 and 44 years old. Most probably the picture was taken in that period.



Figure 2: Vilem Flusser (first from the right) (undated)

Smoking the pipe or smoking a cigarette are gestures that imply a different time-management and suggest two very different philosophical approaches. Smoking a cigarette is a nervous, tense gesture that does not require any special preparation. One smokes a cigarette in between activities, in the morning when having breakfast, after lunch or dinner, when having a coffee or a glass of wine and talking to others. No preparation is needed. Cigarettes are lit instantly, consumed swiftly, turn into ashes and the butts are quickly disposed of. As such they could represent the frantic and fragmented immediacy of everyday life. Pipe smoking, on the other hand, is generally a slow, deliberate and complex prolonged ritual that requires continuous maintenance. The pipe stands for contemplation, concentration and measured thought.

My father was a dedicated pipe smoker. One of his rituals, the only to which I was allowed to participate, included the mixing of two sorts of tobacco – Westminster and Batavia – that were sold in a blue and red package, respectively. The first sort had a delicate leathery, fig-like aroma, the second a slightly rustic herbaceous scent. In my twenties and thirties, I used to smoke cigarettes. At that time, I associated pipe smoking with old age, a certain sobriety and gravity, even solemnity. However, as Flusser shows in his essay “The Gesture of Smoking”, to which I will turn shortly,

this is only one way of looking at it. Ralph Hinterkeuser's picture of Vilém Flusser blatantly smoking a pipe during a conference in Bielefeld in 1984 in front of a blackboard, on which someone has written *Bitte nicht rauchen!* ('Please do not Smoke!') in capital letters (fig. 3) is an ironical comment on the conservative flavor that is often wrongly associated with pipe smoking. Here it is an anarchic gesture, an unashamed refusal to conform to social rules revealing the provocative side of Flusser's character and thinking.

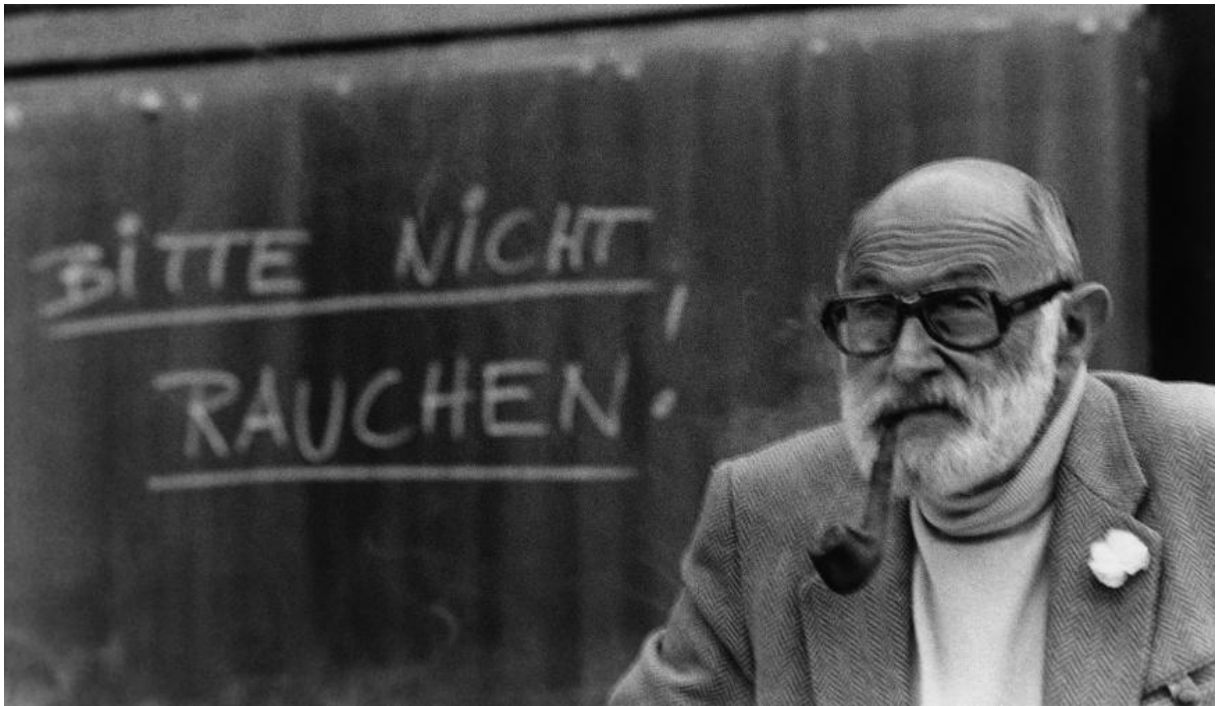


Figure 3: Vilém Flusser Smoking the Pipe, Bielefeld 1984 (Ralph Hinterkeuser ©)

A philosopher that played a central role in Flusser's thinking, especially in the early years, was the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre¹ whose *L'être et le néant* was listed in the bibliography of Flusser's first book *Das XX. Jahrhundert* (The 20th Century)² that he wrote in the mid-1950s. The most prominent accessory in Sartre's public image³ and daily life was the pipe, the true attribute of

¹Albert Camus who also inspired Flusser's work (Guldin 2024:) was inseparable from his cigarette. His iconic image, coat collar turned up and cigarette dangling from the corner of his lips, is an integral part of his literary myth:

² See *Flusser Studies* 25, May 2018.

³ "... Sartre may have been an instrumental element in the cultural impression of pipe smokers as intellectual professor types. Cigarettes were gaining enormous popularity in the 1920s and 1930s; they were easy and convenient, while pipes were bulky and old fashioned. But intellectuals such as Albert Einstein, Edwin Hubble, Bertrand Russell, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Jean-Paul Sartre all smoked pipes and were all college professors admired world-wide. This was the generation of thinkers who impressed the public with their intellectual accomplishments as well as their pipes, and it was perhaps inevitable that the two would overlap in the public consciousness." (Stanton 2020).

the committed 20th century intellectual, an accessory for reflection and writing that accompanied his long work sessions and philosophical debates. The pipe symbolized the posture of a writer immersed in meditation, punctuating the creative process. The image of the philosopher with furrowed brows and a pipe in his mouth was immortalized by numerous photographers (fig. 6). As with Flusser (fig. 8 and 10), pipe smoking became Sartre's true visual signature. He saw smoking not just as an addiction, but as a symbolic engagement with being. Contrary to Flusser, Sartre was also a compulsive cigarette smoker. He chain-smoked his favorite French brands while he was engaged in heated discussion in one of the Parisian cafés like the *Café de Flore* or the *Les Deux Magots*. Besides several pipefuls of tobacco he consumed roughly two packs of cigarettes per day (see Klein 1993). However, it is the image of the pipe smoker that prevailed in the public domain.

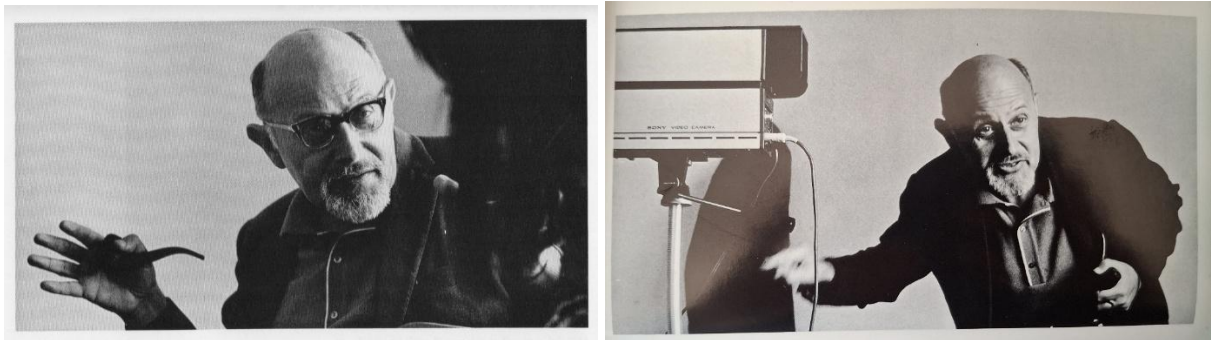


Figure 4 and 5: Vilém Flusser (undated) (Flusser 1992)

Besides Jean-Paul Sartre, another well-known philosopher who was a dedicated pipe smoker was Bertrand Russell. In his *Autobiography*, he links pipe smoking directly to philosophy. “I remember the precise moment, one day in 1894, as I was walking along Trinity Lane, when I saw in a flash (or thought I saw) that the Ontological Argument [for the existence of God] is valid. I had gone out to buy a tin of tobacco; on my way back, I suddenly threw it up in the air and exclaimed as I caught it, ‘Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound.’”⁴ His favorite pipe seems to have been a Straight French Billiard (fig. 9), but there are also pictures where he can be seen smoking a pipe with the classical shape of an English Bent Billiard.⁵ His favorite tobacco from the time he was 25 years old was the “Golden Mixture” by Fribourg & Treyer from a London tobacconist. Flusser also seems to have used both forms, but as in the case of Sartre, he used more often the straight

⁴ https://philosophynow.org/issues/152/The_Ontological_Argument_Revisited (accessed 05.19.2026).

⁵ The primary difference between a French straight Billiard pipe and an English Bent Billiard pipe is the shape and angle of the stem. Both use the exact same cylindrical bowl, but the French Billiard features a much shorter stem that terminates abruptly, whereas the Bent Billiard uses a curved stem.

Billiard. There is only one example of a Bent Billiard pipe in the pictures assembled in this essay (fig. 4). In some cases, it is difficult to determine which pipe he is actually using.

In “The Gesture of Smoking the Pipe” Flusser draws a portrait that provides the general mood in which his reflections take place. The essay tries to determine the essence of the gesture its specificity with regard to other comparable gestures of leisure like chewing gum. The motive “for smoking a pipe cannot be the actual smoking, that is, the breathing in of tobacco smoke alone, as may be the case with cigarette smoking ... One might even suppose” that this is “just an excuse for the complex gestures that precede and follow it” (Flusser 2014b: 119-120). Even if smoking a pipe can be considered a ritual gesture there is “no overall norm governing the behavior of pipe smokers” (ibid.: 120) Each pipe smoker has his own personal style and achieves his bliss in another way. The gesture of smoking is about subjectivity, it is “aesthetic rather than epistemological” (ibid.: 121).

Another way of looking at pipe smoking is its relationship with other gestures. One can smoke a pipe and read a newspaper or watch TV at the same time, or in Flussers case, write a text and hold a conference. Pipe smoking creates a specific environment, a specific atmosphere. “Many people smoke pipes because they take pleasure in this particular gesture. It pleases them to interrupt other gestures, such as writing an essay or talking to a friend, to take their pipes apart, clear the bowl with old nail scissors, then run the stem through with a hairpin, put the two parts back together, pull the pipe pouch out of its pocket, crumble the tobacco between the fingers, push it carefully into the bowl, take the pipe between the teeth, get the tobacco to glow with a slow rotation of a specially constructed lighter, draw the tobacco smoke into the oral cavity and then resume the interrupted gesture of writing or conversation. It pleases them to share their attention between the gesture now resumed and that of pipe smoking, and it pleases them to have their attention to the gesture of writing or conversing immersed in the specific mood of pipe smoking. It pleases them that smoking a pipe, a gesture subordinate to the other one demands that they interrupt the writing and the conversing repeatedly” (ibid.: 126). In section four, I will come back to the structuring role of pipe smoking that surrounds the smoker in a cloud like atmosphere – like the tobacco vapors emanating from the pipe and the mouth of the smoker – and interrupts his other activities.

The pleasure that comes from pipe smoking comes from the gesture of ‘acting oneself out’, this is its very essence. This not only means to “expend superfluous life energy to no purpose”, but it also means to “project an essence that is one’s own, very particular and comparable to no one else’s. ... In acting out, the self is recognized as if from the outside and so asserts itself, for it is then performing a gesture specifically for itself. ... for in smoking a pipe a person moves as a function of specific ‘freely chosen’ objects ... in a manner that bears witness to his own existence” (ibid.: 127). To bear witness to oneself with no purpose and freely is “to recognize oneself by one’s

style, and then to immerse all other gestures (e.g. that of writing and that of conversing with a friend) in this style. ... pipe smoking is a gesture that permits us to act out, that is to find ourselves in the world through our own style” (ibid.: 128). However, in this gesture one does not give oneself up completely, as for instance in the gesture of writing. From this point of view, the aesthetic ritual of pipe smoking is an ideal precondition and accompaniment for any other creative act. The artist tries to express his own specific character in the framework that he has chosen, the context in which his individual style comes to expression, that is inside the gesture of smoking. Contrary to the gesture of writing, or the gesture of giving a lecture, which lead to an artwork and signal some information, however, the gesture of pipe smoking “has no intention outside itself” (ibid.: 131). The gesture of pipe smoking is profane and not magic “because it is too superficial to express being completely” (ibid.: 132).



Figures 6 and 7: Jean-Paul Sartre the pipe and the cigarette smoker



Figure 8: Fred Forest and Vilém Flusser (October 31, 1972)

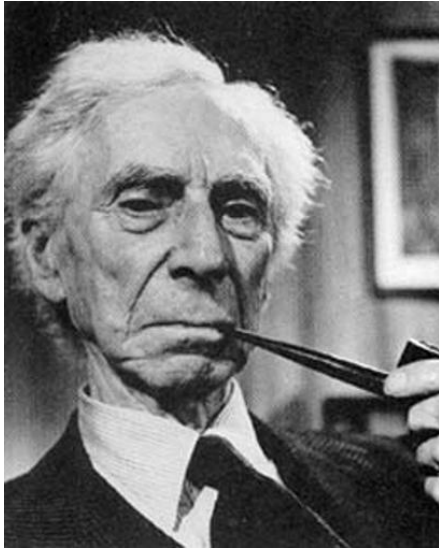


Figure 9: Bertrand Russell

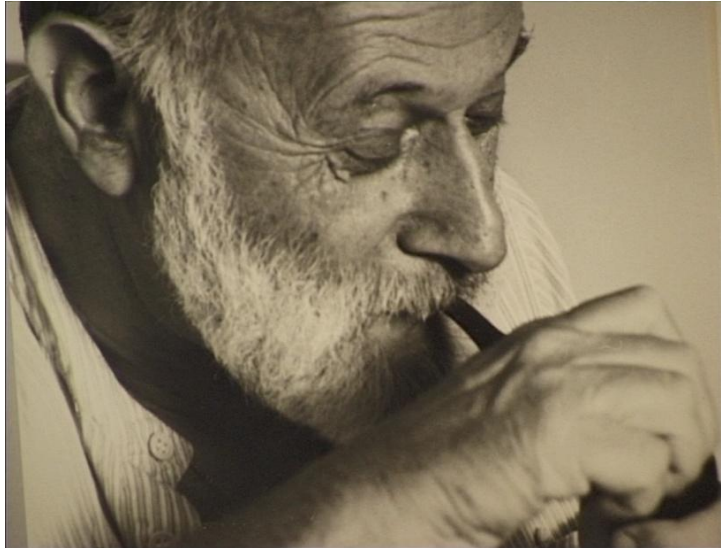


Figure 10: Vilém Flusser lightening a pipe (undated)

2. Momentous Beards

My experiences with barbers have been mostly disheartening. Usually, they just cut away at the hair until there was little left. That's what they were supposed to do, at least this was a widespread opinion in Switzerland in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As a child, I decidedly hated it when they dangerously snipped away in close proximity to the eyes. Perhaps as a reaction, when I was a student, I started growing a moustache and some scanty patchy facial hair that never managed to turn into a full beard. I kept my long curly hair in disarray, rarely cutting or even combing it. The way the hair of a hippie was supposed to be. After my university years, the beard was the first to go. The moustache followed some years later. My hair got shorter and shorter. I have never suffered from hair loss or a slowly expanding baldness. This is perhaps the reason I could well do without any beard or a moustache. My elder brother decided at a certain moment to go completely bald renouncing any other facial hair. Hair style is always relevant to the way we present ourselves to the world. Even if we do not follow any specific trend or are completely oblivious to the fashion industry, as was probably Flusser's case.

In *Bedeutende Bärte. Eine Philosophie der Gesichtsbehaarung* (Significant Beards. A Philosophy of Facial Hair), which is an unashamedly unapologetic plaidoyer for wearing a beard, Paul Stephan rightfully questions the notion that beards cannot become a subject of philosophy. Flusser who wrote a philosophical essay on shaving as we shall see, would have agreed with him. In the traditional western understanding, a beard had a clearly defined social significance, separating men from women, adult men from children, and at the same time creating a sense of community among the male segment of society. A beard was also always a statement about one's social status. An unkempt

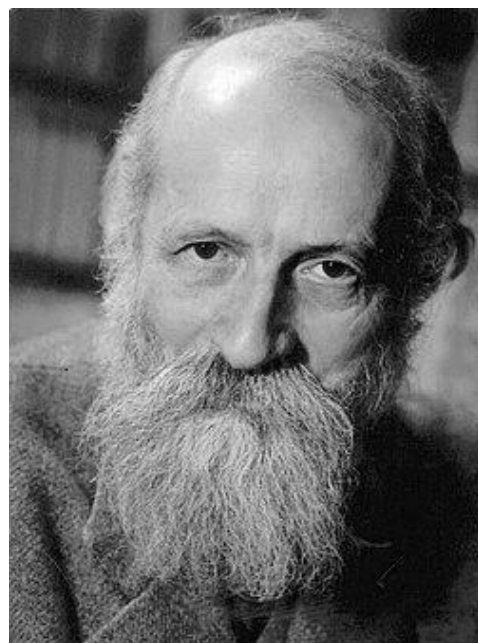
face was generally met with revulsion, as it reminded of the devil and the animal origin of the human species. In antiquity, long full beards were initially seen as a sign of masculinity, dignity and wisdom. But, as Stephan argues, starting with Alexander the Great, beardlessness became the general norm, a sign of culture and civilization still effective today. Wearing a full beard became a sign of barbarism. Only philosophers and prophets were still wearing a beard. Man is fundamentally a “*shaving animal*” (Stephan 2020:23). However, as Stephan points out, this is only one side of the story which knows both the clean shaven and the bearded face.

The opposition between complete beardlessness and a beard of some kind structures the discussion of the philosophical significance of beards in modernity. In German, a clean-shaven face is *ein glattrasiertes Gesicht*. The German word *glatt* means ‘smooth’, ‘plain’, ‘straight’, ‘sleek’ and ‘clean’. “Modernity is, first of all, the era of the ideal of smoothness (*Ideal des Glatten*) [but] at the same time the opposition against this ideal, expressed in a preference for the rough ... and the bearded.” Etymologically ‘beard’ (*Bart*) is related to ‘bristle’ (*Borste*). “It is the epitome of the stubborn (*des Widerborstigen*), the incommensurable” (ibid.:30). In this sense, beards have been repeatedly associated with communism and anarchism. Conversely being clean-shaven was a common practice in German Nazism. “The face of fascism and also of the New Right is smooth (*glatt*)” (ibid.:70), at most one can come across a discreet well-kept moustache – as with Martin Heidgger or Adolf Hitler – or other very accurate beard styles. In his essay on “The Gesture of Shaving” Flusser confirms this interpretation. “The gesture of shaving is the gesture of formalist rationalism, a classic, unromantic, and antirevolutionary gesture. Of course, one can’t claim that anyone who shaves is a fascist, but one could claim that a fascist couldn’t possibly wear a full beard” (Flusser 2014a:110). Mussolini despised beards but some prominent fascists like Count Giuseppe Volpi and General Emilio de Bono wore short well-kept beards as a sign of virility and power.

In Judaism, the beard is a hairy matter, “eine haarige Angelegenheit” (ibid.: 76). The German *haarig* means both ‘a surface covered with hair’ and a ‘difficult matter’. In *Leviticus* (19.27) there is the injunction not to “round off the hair on [the] temples or mar the edges of [the] beard.” This interdiction, however, was never interpreted in a strict way in the European context most probably to avoid being identified immediately as Jew in a clean-shaven environment. In fact, in certain contexts Jews were actually forced by law to wear beards, so as to be recognized at once as such.

In a chapter on Jewish prophetic beards, Stephan (2020: 75-82) discusses the case of Martin Buber (1878-1965) that Flusser met as a young man in Prague. In 1937, he went with Edith Barth to listen to Buber’s speech “Vorurteil gegen Gott (Prejudice against God) (see Guldin 2017: 60-61). In an interview with Patrick Tschudin in Robion recorded on September 30, 1991, and broadcast on December 13, 1991, on Radio DRS-2, Switzerland, Flusser tells the story of this meeting which is also the story of one of Flusser’s main philosophical assumptions. “I was a boy of perhaps

seventeen, eighteen, when Buber visited Prague. He had a tremendous effect on me. His great black beard, his stature, and his gaze alone! it was the gaze of a visionary. And he didn't talk about the life of dialogue but about prejudice against God. He expressed it beautifully.” (Flusser 2003: 93-94). At the time, Buber was in his late fifties. In 1938, Buber was forced to leave Germany and settled in Jerusalem, where he became a professor at the Hebrew University lecturing in anthropology and sociology. Interestingly enough, Flusser remembers his long beard as being black. Contrary to Buber, Flusser's beard was always well trimmed, growing a little longer with age. It was never the beard of a prophet. In his early twenties, Buber still wore a short well-trimmed beard. It was only in his later years that he started wearing a longer, more unkempt kind of beard. Stephan calls him “ein unfreiwilliger Prophet” (Stephan 2020: 75), an ‘involuntary prophet’. With time Buber became unthinkable without his beard. “There is hardly a text about Buber in which his beard is not at least briefly mentioned” (Stephan 2020: 77). Describing Flusser at the *Bochumer Vorlesungen* in Summer 1991, Friedrich Kittler also zooms in on his ‘prophetic beard’ (Kittler 2009: 11).



Figures 11 and 12: Martin Buber (undated)

In a lecture that the German Philosopher Jürgen Habermas held in Jerusalem in 2012 he mused on his first and only meeting with Buber. “Over and over, we recalled, my wife and I, that unforgettable evening. ... We did not remember the actual content of the lecture, the impression was created by the very act of his appearance, when the tumult in the packed auditorium suddenly fell silent. The entire auditorium stood in respect as the president of the Federal Republic, Theodor Heuss, accompanied in silence the relatively small figure of a bearded, elderly, white-haired guest,

‘the wise man of Israel’. ... Seen through the lens of memory, the entire evening becomes focused on this single dignified moment.” (quoted in Stephan 2020: 77-78). It was the beard that bestowed on Buber the aura of an authentic Jewish thinker. This idea turns up again and again in the descriptions of the philosopher from the 1920s to his death. In a description by the German writer Arnold Zweig, Buber’s beard becomes a natural phenomenon: His profile glides like falling water into the beard that dissolves into spray and cloud. Buber’s late bushy beard was indeed like a cloud without any clearcut margins (fig. 11). His beard connects the ancient patriarch with a higher dimension of existence (ibid.: 78). In another account based on Buber’s visit to the University of Munich in the 1950s the mighty white beard is conjured up to frame the head of the biblical prophet.

One of Buber’s reasons for growing a beard was to hide a scar on the right side of his mouth that he had contracted at birth. Similarly, Flusser’s deliberately staged multi-eyedness in the garden of Robion (fig. 1) takes on a deeply self-ironic meaning when one considers that Flusser – as he pointed out in an interview in São Paulo in 1980 (Flusser 1996: 22) – was rejected by the Czech Brigade at the outbreak of World War II because he was blind in one eye. When Flusser died, on November 27, 1991, in a car accident near the German-Czech border he was on his way to an ophthalmologist who was to operate on his developing cataract.

In the beginning, Buber “kept his beard and did so for narcissistic reasons. ... As the beard gained in fullness, he bemusedly observed that people took him for a prophet, but as he ironically commented, ‘I could have shaved this wonderful beard off, but then I would have destroyed my image’” (ibid.: 80). An essential part of all this was his self-conscious photographic self-presentation. Buber knew that he was photogenic and was not shy about having the picture taken (ibid.:81).

Considering that Buber played a major role in Flusser’s dialogical philosophy one might ask oneself if he had a comparable influence as a style icon, when Flusser started to develop his own philosophical trademark in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, like the bespectacled pipe smoking Sartre, Buber set a precedent for a certain kind of self-presentation.

3. Impressive Glasses

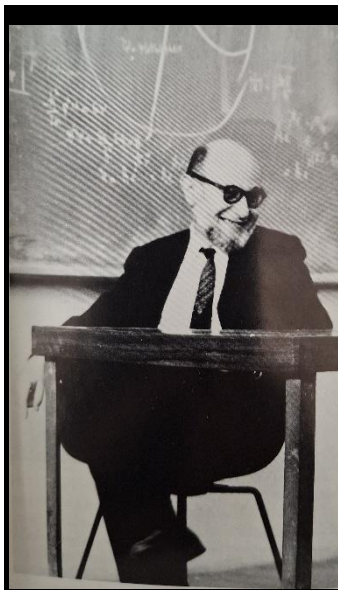
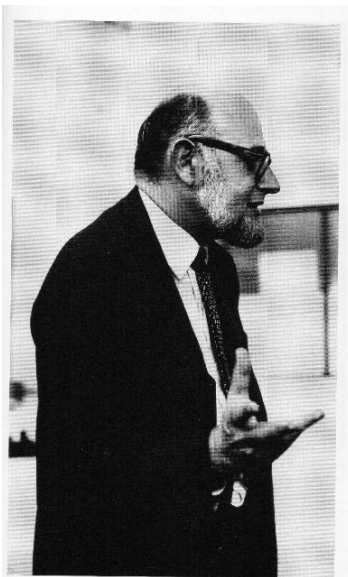
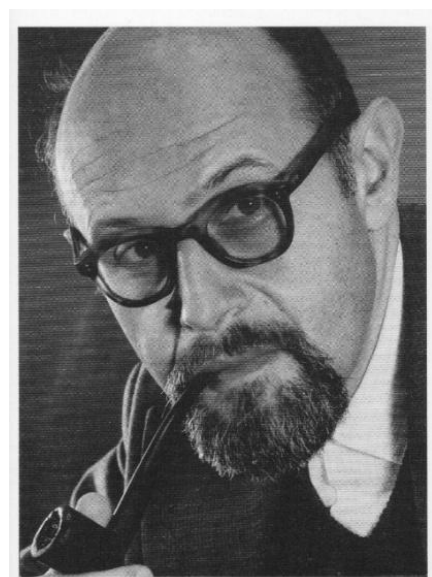
Pipe smoking is a slow meditative gesture, it stands for long term concentration and focus, the glasses, on the other hand, articulate restlessness, multiple perspectives and a constant shifting from one to the other. Pictures 4 and 5 show the variability of the connection of pipe and glasses. The pipe can be in the left or the right hand, leaving the other hand free to gesticulate. If the beard and the baldness represent the stage and the backdrop for Flusser’s self-presentation, then the glasses and the pipe are the mobile actors on the scene.



Figure 13: Vilém Flusser with friends in São Paulo (undated))



Figure 14: The Flussers at the airport of São Paulo (1960s)



Figures 15, 16 and 17: Professor Vilém Flusser (São Paulo (undated

In 1960, Flusser published his first essay with the Institute of Philosophy „Da Língua Portuguesa” (On the Portuguese Language). In that period, Flusser made friends with the philosopher Vicente Ferreira da Silva, the poet Dora Ferreira da Silva, Milton Vargas, and the legal philosopher and founder of the IBF (The Brazilian Institute of Philosophy), Miguel Reale. Vargas describes him in their first meeting as a “peculiar young man bald even back then, with a sharp nose and impressive glasses“ (Vargas 1990:15).

Picture 19 was taken around the same time in São Paulo, most probably in connection with the IBF. Flusser is still beardless and wears metal rimmed glasses. In the picture to the right (fig.

20) that was possibly taken later on Flusser has a scant beard and horn-rimmed glasses. The remaining pictures assembled here show a bald middle-aged man with a slowly greying, well-trimmed beard wearing a pair of horn-rimmed glasses smoking or holding a pipe. Picture 20 is the first to show Flusser wearing his glasses pushed up onto the top of his forehead, a gesture that became significant in the 1980s often in connection with a second pair of spectacles (fig. 24 to 27).



Figure 18: Mira Schendel with Vilém Flusser on the terrace of his house in São Paulo (undated)

Having worn glasses since my early youth I am familiar with some of Flusser's gestures related to glasses. Taking off one's glasses momentarily and putting them on again can have different reasons. It can mark a pause or a change in occupation, it is also a way of signaling a more direct, unobstructed eye contact with the people around you. Or it can be simply due to tiredness. If the glasses end up in one of the hands, the right one in my case, it can be used to attract attention or to stress a point. Putting the temples of the glasses into one's mouth and sucking or chewing on them is a gesture that can express stress or thoughtfulness. Getting older short-sightedness is accompanied by growing reading difficulties. This is generally solved by the use of varifocal lenses. Short-sighted people can also take off their glasses to read a text passage and put them on again.



Figure 19: Vilém Flusser (São Paulo, undated)



Figure 20: Vilém and Edith Flusser in Campos do Jordão (1960s)

The example of the Swiss writer Francesco Micieli shows the subjectiveness and singularity of the gesture of wearing one's glasses pushed up onto the forehead. Micieli is not short-sighted and does not usually wear glasses. His reading glasses are positioned on the top of his forehead for practical reasons. This way, he does not have to go looking for them but can find them whenever he needs them. The cigarette smoke, the dark cavities of the eyes, and the bright reflection of the glasses, however, seem to contradict the simplicity of this explanation (see fig. 21).

My brother had to wear glasses when he was a child and was constantly teased for this. In southern Switzerland, where I grew up in the 1960s a person with glasses was described as a person with four eyes (*quattröcc*, from *quattro occhi*, 'four eyes'). In this context, having many eyes was seen as an aberration, a disadvantage, a plurality suggesting confusion. This is an aspect that Flusser could also have been playing with. Having two pairs of glasses could also act as a sort of decoy, a trick used to impress, confuse or distract the other. Commenting on the picture showing Flusser with two pairs of glasses (fig. 1), Micieli suggested the cyclopic dimension of wearing glasses on one's forehead. In this sense, Flusser might be described as a cyclops with five eyes, considering that he was blind on one eye.

The gesture of pushing one's glasses high onto the forehead or the top of the head has been used in the 20th century to articulate intense intellectual focus or transitions between different

perspectives and modes of thinking. As a cultural archetype it has been used by writers, academics and philosophers. The German media theorist Siegfried Zielinski is widely known for wearing his glasses pushed up high on his forehead, especially during public appearances, lectures and interviews. This signature look is a tribute to Vilém Flusser who was his friend and mentor. Another telling example is the Uruguayan architect Rafael Viñoly (1944-2023) who on certain occasions wore up to four pairs of black-rimmed spectacles stacked on top of his head (fig. 22). On some pictures one can see him wearing a pair of glasses on his nose along with three other pairs of glasses on his chest dangling from eyeglass leashes around his neck. Each pair of glasses was used for specific optical or architectural purposes. The presence of the different spectacles that allowed him to switch from one vision to another became at the same time a trademark of his work as an architect. Something similar can be said of Flusser, only that in his case the use of spectacles was complemented by other elements creating a complex shifting image that corresponds to his verve and versatility as a writer.

In June 2026, while working on this essay, I participated in a symposium on translation and philosophy at the University of Padua, a perfect environment for a close-range study of the use of glasses among scholars and researchers. It seems that fidgeting with one's glasses is more of a male than a female thing, a sort of display behavior, as it tends to make the wearer appear taller than he actually is. Glasses on top of one's forehead suggest a kind of visionary intellectual pre-eminence.



Figure 21: Francesco Miceli (detail)



Figure 22: Rafael Viñoly (2011-2012) (detail)

Generally short-sighted people wear their glasses on their noses and do not take them off during their speech or in discussions. However, people that are not short-sighted but need reading-glasses – and this confirms Miceli's case – frequently engage in the 'glasses on the forehead' routine. The

spectacles move from nose to forehead and down again, are taken off and put on again, mostly with the same hand. The speed and frequency of these movements often depend on a change of activity: listening to someone, leaning back, looking around, looking at the screen of a computer, consulting some documents, talking or answering a question. But they also seem to be an exteriorization of an inner mental process, or an expression of some kind of restlessness. One of the speakers was particularly active moving his glasses up and down throughout the presentation. I later found out that he had worked for several years in Germany with Siegfried Zielinski. In the introduction to the *Bochumer Vorlesungen*, Friedrich Kittler links the gesture of pushing up one's glasses to the flow of the speech. "As soon as Flusser had pushed his glasses up over his forehead he spoke freely. Words flashed from the prophet's beard like lightning, because they were always also judgments" (Kittler 2009: 10-11)⁶

Flusser's routine is a bit of an exception. He became most probably short-sighted in his later years and wore his glasses on his nose for several years before switching to a more elaborate gesture that moved from simply pushing the glasses onto his forehead to the simultaneous use of two sets of glasses. On the pictures assembled here, his glasses are either on his nose or pushed up onto his forehead. In some other rarer cases, they are in both positions. There are pictures where Flusser is wearing a pair of glasses on his nose, others where he is wearing them pushed up over his forehead, and still others where he is wearing two pairs of glasses. Add to this the way he uses his glasses in interviews and during his speeches: Glasses can be pushed up onto the forehead or the top of the head, taken off and put on again, but they can also migrate from the nose to one hand and then to the other and from there either back to the nose or to the forehead.

Apart from a few exceptions, Flusser generally wore dark horn-rimmed glasses. On the pictures on which he is wearing two sets of spectacles the two pairs have a slightly different form but are always in the same position. The spectacles at the top of his forehead have dark temples and the glasses Flusser is wearing on his nose light-colored ones. One might assume that Flusser had different sets of glasses the same way he had different typewriters and that his use of them was caught up in rituals of their own.

Flusser's use of glasses goes rarely without the presence of the pipe. The two objects seem to call out to each other. If we add the pipe to the spectacles a whole set of new possibilities arise. Flusser just smoking or lighting a pipe. Flusser wearing glasses on his nose, smoking a pipe or holding it in his right hand. Flusser wearing glasses on his forehead, smoking a pipe or holding it in his left hand. Flusser wearing two sets of glasses and smoking a pipe. Flusser holding a pipe in his left hand. Flusser without glasses holding a pipe in his left and a lighter in his right hand. Flusser

⁶ „Kaum, dass Flusser die Brille über die Stirn geschoben hatte, sprach er frei. Aus dem Bart des Propheten kamen Worte wie Blitze, weil sie immer auch Urteile waren.“

without glasses and pipe. There are endless combinations, however, as with other aspects of Flusser's thinking, there is no recognizable or intended systematicity. The pictures assembled in this essay show a broad variety of possibilities, highlighting Flusser's versatility and shifting style of thinking. They were chosen based on their availability and do not want to suggest any kind of exhaustiveness. Here, as with all other aspects of Flusser's work, the fragmentary open-ended character prevails. I will come back to Flusser's use of glasses and pipe, on their own or in combination, in section four.

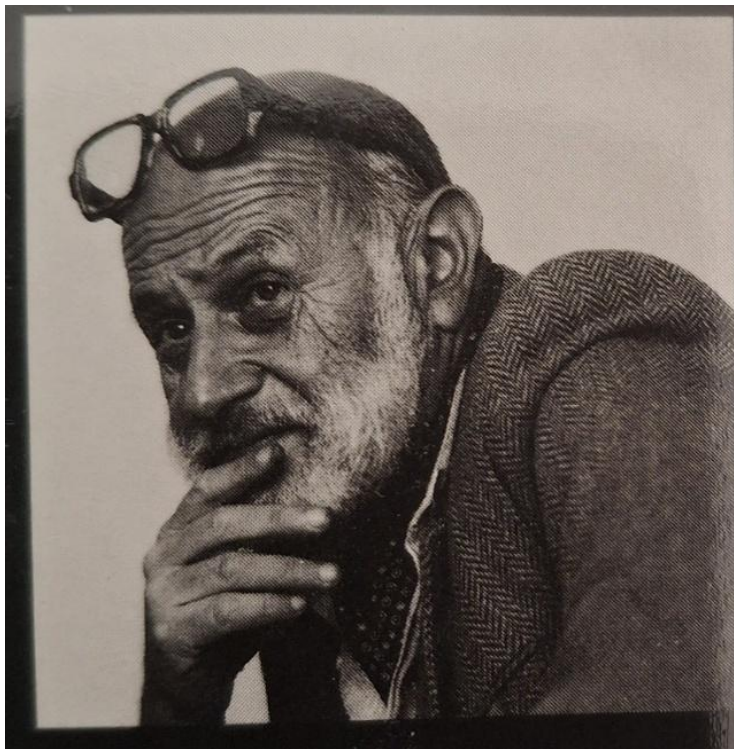


Figure 23: Vilém Flusser (undated) (Flusser 1992)

In the French essay “Les Lunettes”⁷, published in *La force du quotidien*, Flusser does not discuss any specific gestures associated with glasses. There are, however, a few passages worth commenting on in this context. He describes glasses as “an eminently Kantian object” (Flusser 1973: 64) referring to Kant’s metaphor in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* of the spectacles as a filtering device that influences our view of reality. For Flusser, glasses can be used to question the way we perceive the world. Contrary to the pipe, they possess an epistemological significance of their own. Basically, glasses are not to be looked at but looked through. In this sense, we cannot look at one’s glasses the same

⁷ This text was first written in Portuguese (“Oculos”) and then translated by Flusser into English as his French at this early stage was not good enough. The text was then translated by Jean Mesrie and Barbara Niceall into French.

way we look at our shoes or fingers. If we look at our glasses, we do not only question their status as we would with our shoes or fingers, but we question our view of the world. “To look at one’s glasses, is a rather curious decision, to say the least, because glasses are made to be looked through not to be looked at; if I do not see anything without glasses, I cannot look at them because to see them I have to look through some other glasses (of course I can look through ‘my glasses’, at someone else’s glasses, but that is different). ... If I must look at these glasses with the help of another pair of glasses, knowing that they will help me to see better I have to correct in my mind the deformation of my vision when I am not wearing glasses. Do I have to wear reading-glasses when I am looking at another pair of glasses, or rather spectacles that allow me to see further?” (ibid.: 64-65) Glasses are instruments of mediation. They are a complex metaphor for a plural view of reality and allow at the same time for self-reflexivity. Wearing two pairs of glasses at the same time, putting them on and taking them off again, or using them to gesture towards an idea is a metaphorical *mise en scène* of the epistemological complexity of perceiving that exteriorizes the internal elaboration of one’s thinking process.

Flusser suggests another intricate arrangement combining eyes, glasses and windows, which are not only metaphors of vision but also metaphors of each other. We perceive a world in pink if we wear pink-toned glasses. “Our eyes stand between our glasses and our nervous system, and the window stands between our glasses and the road, in such a way that ‘we’ and the ‘world’ end up overlapping, becoming a single ... very complex system of glasses that interpenetrate each other ... In other words, we can look at ‘ourselves’ as if ‘we’ were a pair of glasses; ‘we’ stand in between a new ‘we’ and the world; and we can have a look at the ‘world’ as if it was a pair of glasses ...” (ibid.: 67) However, the danger of such a vision is the very transparency of glasses themselves, the possibility to look through them, something we cannot do with other objects. If we can look through an object it loses all mystery to us and if everything is turned into a pair of glasses and becomes transparent media lose their function. “Everything is turned into glasses, and we don’t have anything left that we can look at through them.” (ibid.: 68) This *reductio ad infinitum*, a universal “spectacularisation” as Flusser calls it, makes it possible to look at one philosophy through the glasses of another, for instance, at Marxism through Freud’s glasses. “Human freedom is reduced to an exchange of glasses” (ibid.: 69). In a world where everything is transparent, media cannot mediate anymore between ‘us’ and the ‘world’, a groundless world that leads to radical alienation. Despite this there is no real use in destroying our glasses. “In a sense, and despite everything we know about them, they are still useful for looking at the world, even if we have forgotten what the point of looking at the world is” (ibid.:70). The translators⁸, possibly alluding to a play of words in the

⁸ The English quotations in this essay are my translation from the French translation of the original English version.

original English version of the text, which has unfortunately been lost, point out in a footnote that the English word *spectacle* in the singular means *representation* and that the plural *spectacles* mean *glasses*.

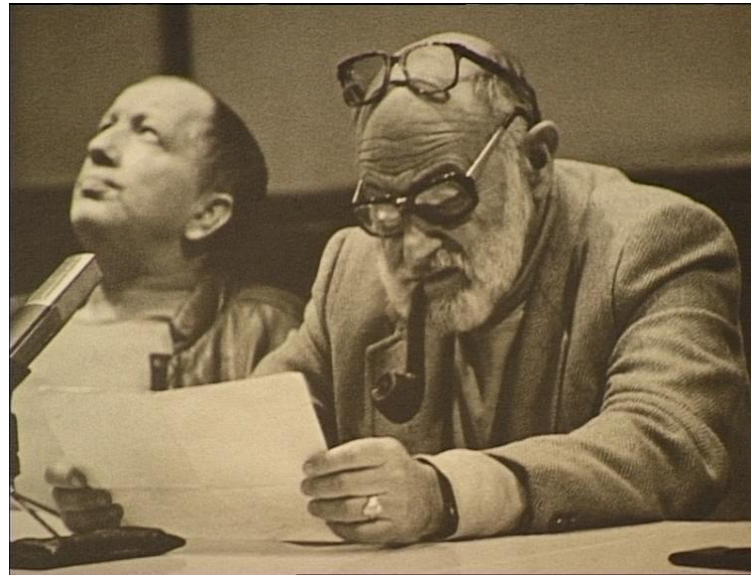


Figure 24 and 25: Vilém Flusser during a conference (undated pictures)

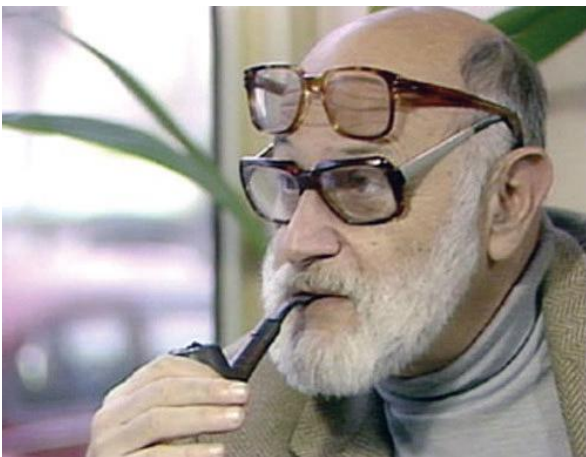


Figure 26 and 27: Vilém Flusser in a conversation with Harun Farocki (1986)

4. The Gestures of the Professor

The gestures of a person are not only expression of a series of converging aspects – social and cultural origin, character and context – they can also vary over time if s/he is exposed to other cultural contexts. In his seminal work *Gesture, Race and Culture*, first published in 1941 and reissued in 1972, David Efron studied the gestural behavior of Eastern European Jewish and Southern Italian immigrants in New York City. The book intended to debunk the myth that gestural style is biologically inherited by showing the impact of changing environmental conditions. Efron (1904-1981) was the son of Jewish immigrants from Belarus that arrived in Argentina in the late 19th

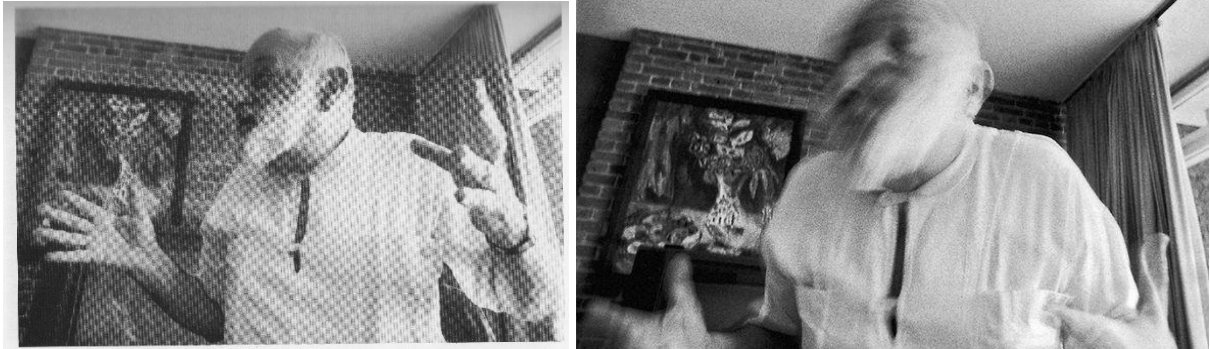
century. As Flusser, he was a polyglot speaking Spanish, English, French, German, Italian, Yiddish, Latin and ancient Greek. According to Efron the gestures of traditional Southern Italian immigrants were spatially expansive, often involving sweeping, whole-arm movements starting from the shoulder and extending outward into the lateral plane. The gestures of traditional Eastern European Jews, on the other hand, were restricted to the elbow and wrist, commonly employing vertical and frontal planes close to the torso. These gestures tended to change in the course of time differing “greatly from their respective traditional groups” and appearing “to resemble each other” (Efron 1972: 159).

In this context, Efron introduces the notion of ‘hybrid gesture’, which combines elements from the culture of origin and that of arrival. “The ‘hybrid’ gesture may be compared to a bilingual person in whose verbal behavior the accent, inflection, sentencer structure, and even some of the lexical elements of one tongue, make themselves present in the pronunciation or the vocabulary of the other” (ibid.: 154). Efron calls this phenomenon ‘gestural bilingualism’.

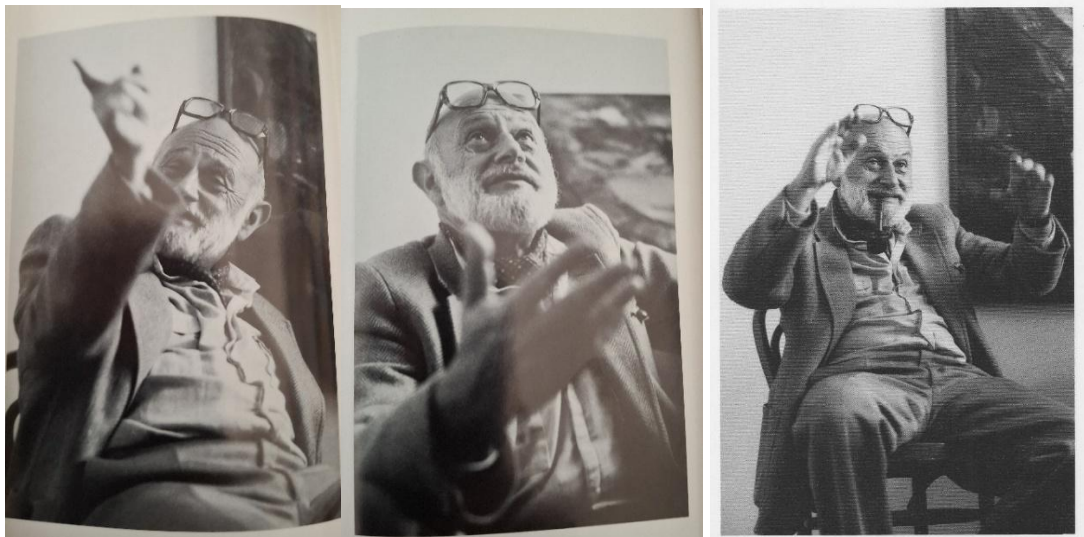
I was born in the German speaking part of Switzerland but spent most of my life in the Italian speaking South of the country. With time I realized that my gestural behavior tended to change when I moved from one cultural context to the other, and when I switched languages. Flusser was born into a Jewish environment in Prague where he spent his childhood and youth. In 1940, he reached Brazil where he spent the next thirty years and in 1972, he returned to Europe. In this sense, his hybrid gestural behavior must be considered within a mixed cultural context. Perhaps in his case one could even introduce the notion of ‘gestural multilingualism’.

In his study, Efron concentrated on the gestural behavior of Eastern European Jewish and Southern Italian immigrants in a dialogic everyday context. Most pictures and videos that have been preserved show Flusser in the situation of the professor, holding a speech or explaining something to a single person. In such a context, ritualized rhetorical criteria become important (see Hall 2004 and Ekman & Friesen 1972). Despite this, some of the criteria Efron defined in his book could be applied to describe Flusser’s own gestures: finger gestures, position and shape of hands, relationship of forearm to palm, unilaterality versus bilaterality of movement, fluid or abrupt change of gestural tempo, simultaneous gesturing, gestural manipulation of objects, and pictorial versus non-pictorial gestures. “... *Non-pictorial* gestures play a predominant role in almost any type of colloquial (non-ritualized) gesticulation” (ibid.: 95). Motions change when the expressed idea changes. Describing the abrupt diachronic transitions in the gestures of an unassimilated Eastern Jew Efron points to the parallelism between the mental process and the gestural accompaniment: “... Thumb and forefinger start the discourse, or simply the index finger describing the lacy convolution of thought, suddenly concluded with the palm turned up, and the other hand brought in for supplemental gesture” (ibid.: 82). Both unilateral and bilateral hand gestures play an important role in

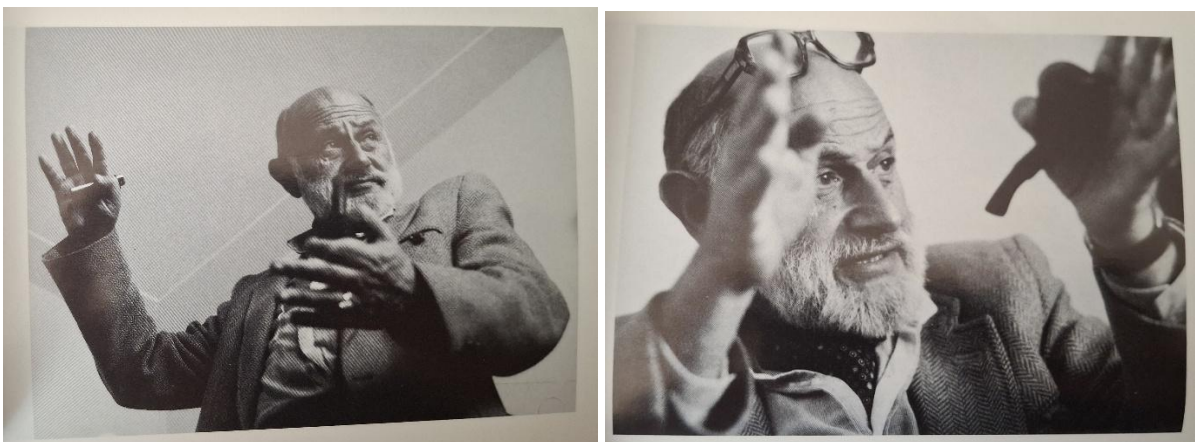
Flusser's gestural behavior. Single hand movement is more frequent when the other hand is holding an object. Flusser uses different objects in his speeches, from pipe and glasses to a lighter, both in the right and left hand.



Figures 28 and 29: Vilém Flusser (undated) (Flusser 1992)



Figures 30, 31 and 32: During a visit in São Paulo in the 1980s (Flusser 1992)



Figures 33 and 34: During a visit in São Paulo in the 1980s (Flusser 1992)

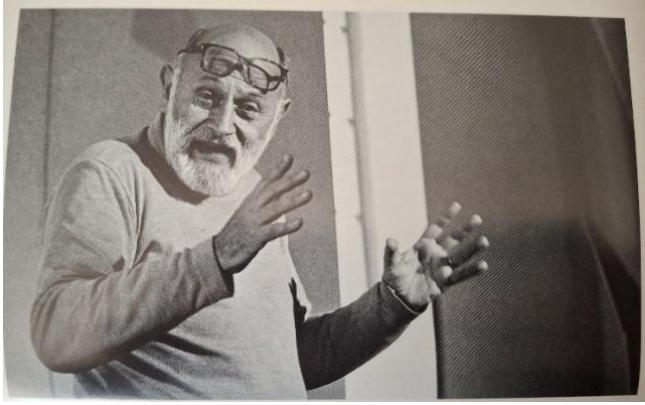


Figure 35: Vilém Flusser



Figure 36: Vilém Flusser

Picture 28 to 37 show that even when manipulating an object Flusser generally uses both hands simultaneously. The use of a single hand – mostly the right one – is more seldom. Often it is the raised hand or the extended index finger.



Figure 37: Vilém Flusser, (Budapest, April 1990)

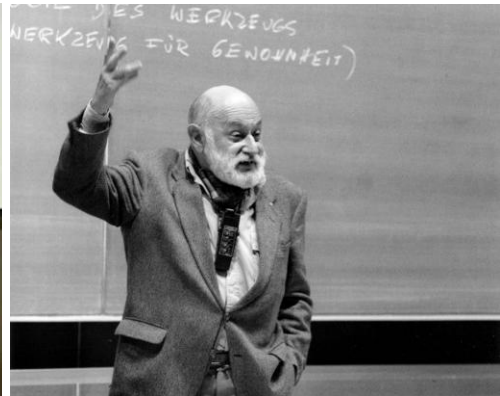


Figure 38: Vilém Flusser



Figure 39: Vilém Flusser in a conversation with Elfi Fröhlich (Leipzig, November 1984)

The predominance of the simultaneous use of both hands could be explained with Flusser's own interpretation of the dialectical significance of the two hands in his essay "The Gesture of Making". "We have two hands. We comprehend the world from two opposing sides, which is how the world can be taken in, grasped, intended, and manipulated. ... Because of the symmetry between our opposed hands, the world is 'dialectical' for us" (Flusser 2014:33).

In his reading of the essay, Christian Ciocan starts out from "the essential non-coincidence of the two hands", that is, from "their fundamental opposition" which defines their "originary movement" as the pursuit of "precisely this coincidence" (Ciocan 2024: 8). "We must constantly keep in mind that the notions Flusser uses to indicate various gestures fundamentally refer to the originary movements of the hands, which are considered constitutive elements of our being" (ibid. 16). An illustration of the reciprocal pursuit of the two hands for each other can be found in an early picture (fig. 19), in the gesture of the two raised hands in front of the body between chest and stomach with the fingertips gently touching. "Flusser does not refer to the usual and incessant movements of our hands, constantly restless and perpetually agitated, but to a more elementary mobility. This is a mobility that originates in the fact that, essentially, the hands seek to meet each other, in a perpetual attempt to overcome the insurmountable duality that characterizes them in their being. At stake, therefore, is a fundamental movement of the hands, one that we can call 'ontological,' situated deeper in the architectonic of the human being, more profound than all the common 'ontic' movements of the hand" (ibid.: 8). This tendency impinges directly on our thinking: "Various acts of our thought originate in the irrepressible tendency of the hands to meet each other, in their perpetual mutual search, in their tireless aspiration to overcome the constitutive duality that characterizes them" (ibid.: 9).



Figure 40: *Les gestes du professeur dans le jardin à Fontevrauld* (video stills, (Forest 1972))

Between 1972 and 1974, Fred Forest and Vilém Flusser collaborated on a video-project dedicated to gestures (see Arantes 2009 and Bureaud 2009: 3-5). At that time, Flusser had also started working on a series of phenomenological essays on gestures, a project that would keep him occupied for years to come. From April to October 1972, Edith and Vilém stayed in Fontevraud, a village on the Loire. In the summer of that year, Flusser and Forest produced the two videos "Les gestes du Professeur dans le jardin à Fontevrauld" (in English and French) and "Les gestes du Professeur

dans l'appartement à Fontevrault" (in French) (Forest 1972). In both cases, Flusser is shirtless, wearing shorts, has a pair of glasses frequently positioned above his forehead and a pipe in his left hand.

The two videos are self-referential as Flusser is talking about the use of gestures exemplifying this with the gesticulations of his hands. In the first video, Flusser is standing in the garden of a house next to a white wooden chair on the left and a window with closed wooden blinds on the right. He is wearing a pair of glasses and holding a lit pipe in his right hand. The first half of the presentation is in English. Possibly Flusser did not feel sure enough at this point with his knowledge of French. But in the second half he switches to French and the second video is completely in French. After a short introduction, during which he makes a simultaneous gesture with the two outstretched arms and hands – a screwing movement with the open hands parallel to each other – he sits down on the deck chair and crosses his legs. During the ensuing explanations, the pipe wanders to the left hand, while the right outstretched hand is re-enacting the content of the speech. The moving hand closely follows the rhythm of the speech, the pauses, and the shifts in the argumentation. Halfway during his speech, the glasses move from the nose to the top of the forehead and are at some later point pushed up even further to the top of his head. Flusser stands up and sits down several times. He discards his pipe and uses both hands in parallel, only to take up the pipe again, but this time with his right hand. From this moment on he switches from English to French. At the end, Flusser is again sitting in the chair, with the glasses back on his nose. He relights his pipe and starts smoking.

The second video is set inside the house in what looks like a living room. There is a lamp on the left illuminating the semi-darkness. Flusser is shirtless, handles a pipe which he lights with a match at the outset. He starts puffing away at the pipe, gently pressing the tobacco down with the matchbox. The first part of the speech is calm, there is little movement and it looks as if Flusser is reading from a text in front of him that is not visible to the spectator. He holds the pipe in his right hand and begins with some opening remarks on the first video and his collaboration with Fred Forest. His glasses are on the top of his head and stay there till the very end. After some time, he puts the pipe down, and the right hand becomes active. As in the first video, Flusser uses his cupped upraised or outstretched hand rotating it around rhythmically from right to left and back. At a certain point he stands up and begins pacing back and forth in the room using both hands to make his point. He leaves the text behind and starts speaking freely but comes back from time to time to look at his notes. The pipe reappears first in his left hand and then in his right one. If he was talking slowly and quietly in the beginning, he is now speaking loudly and seems utterly transported by his own thoughts. This video ends abruptly with Flusser standing up, the pipe in his right hand and the glasses still on the top of his head.

The two videos are in illustration of the two sides of pipe smoking discussed in the first section: enveloping the scene in a cloud of tranquillity and interrupting repeatedly the speaker. On the basis of these videos, one might also argue that Flusser's speeches do not only enact the duality of the left and the right hand looking for each other, but also the tension between the pipe – in the mouth, in the right and in the left hand – and the glasses – either on his nose or pushed up onto his forehead. In the first part of the first video, the pipe is in the left hand and the glasses on the nose, in the second part the pipe moves to the right hand, and the glasses are pushed up onto the forehead. In the second video there is no movement concerning the glasses, but the pipe wanders back and forth between left and right hand. In the first video, these movements are complemented by the use of two different languages and the alternance of standing up and sitting down. In the second video, Flusser is standing throughout but at a certain point he starts moving back and forth, before coming back to the original position at the end of the speech. Both videos have therefore a circular structure interspersed with a series of asides and digressions.



Figures 41 and 42: Vilém and Edith Flusser in the garden of their house in Robion (undated pictures)

5. Conclusion

The interpretation of Flusser's picture puzzle proposed at the beginning of this essay leads to the very heart of his philosophy. Flusser's nomadic way of thinking finds a visible enactment in his gestures and his parallel use of pipe and glasses which can be traced back to the fundamental dialectical opposition of the two hands, their "constitutive *symmetry*" (Ciocan 2024: 8). It is a peripatetic, non-linear form of argumentation, constantly moving back and forth, characterised by frequent cuts and shifts: standing up and sitting down, walking hither and thither, lighting the pipe, moving it from one hand to the other, putting it away and getting hold of it again, pushing the glasses onto the forehead or to the top of the head and sliding them down again. Flusser's

idiosyncratic use of two sets of glasses could also be interpreted as a comment on his use of the two gesturing hands. Similarly, the opposition between pipe and glasses – between a meditative and a multiperspectival approach – can be linked to the dialectical duality of left and right hand. “... The left hand focuses on ‘what the object is’ (the state of affairs), while the right hand focuses on ‘what the object must be ...’” (ibid.: 14). In this sense, the left hand (the pipe) is “anchored in praxis” and the right hand (the glasses) “anchored in theory” (ibid.).



Figure 43 and 44: Vilém Flusser 8 (with his dog Alma) in the garden of his house in Robion (Spring 1983)

The word ‘theory’ derives from the Ancient Greek *theōria*, ‘contemplating’, ‘looking’, ‘viewing’, ‘speculation’. ‘Spectacles’ and ‘speculation’ have the same Latin root in *specere*, ‘to look at’, ‘to observe’. The evolution of Flusser’s self-presentation in public and private settings follows that of his thinking and work, which are both characterized by complexity inner contradiction and a final attempt at synthesis foreshadowed in the pursuit of the two hands to meet each other. “The fundamental duality of the hands” and “their inherently oppositional nature” are “mirrored in their original symmetry and the imperative need to seek each other ...” (ibid.).

To conclude let me point to another side of Flusser’s self-enactment, a certain conceit and complacency, which has led some people to accuse him of arrogance. In the late 1990s, I met the German journalist and educator Hartmut von Hentig. He was truly surprised that I was enthusiastic about Vilém Flusser and his work. At that time, I knew Flusser mainly through his writing, which I found gracious, wonderfully light-footed and truly inspirational. Von Hentig had attended one of Flusser’s conferences and found his attitude standoffish, even off-putting. I never met Flusser face to face, but the videos I have seen do not simply confirm von Hentig’s harsh verdict. Flusser was surely not immune to the temptations of academic life with all its promises and deceptions. But

then, who is? For years he waited for a breakthrough, especially after his return to Europe in 1972. And then, suddenly, he was standing in the spotlight. This immodesty, as one might call it, surfaces for instance at the outset of the lectures he held in Bochum in the Summer of 1991, only a few months before his death in a car accident. “You are witnessing a philosophy *in fieri*. Without presuming anything (sic!), I believe it must have looked something like this when Hegel was called to Berlin, or when Husserl came to Göttingen, or ... the comparison is better: when Bergson came to the Academy, or when Bachelard lectured at the Sorbonne” (Flusser 2009: 14).⁹

With time Martin Buber grew skeptical about the use of a beard to create a sort of philosophical trademark. He started disliking this role and would have gladly done without it. If this was also the case with Vilém Flusser’s composite public image is anyone’s guess.

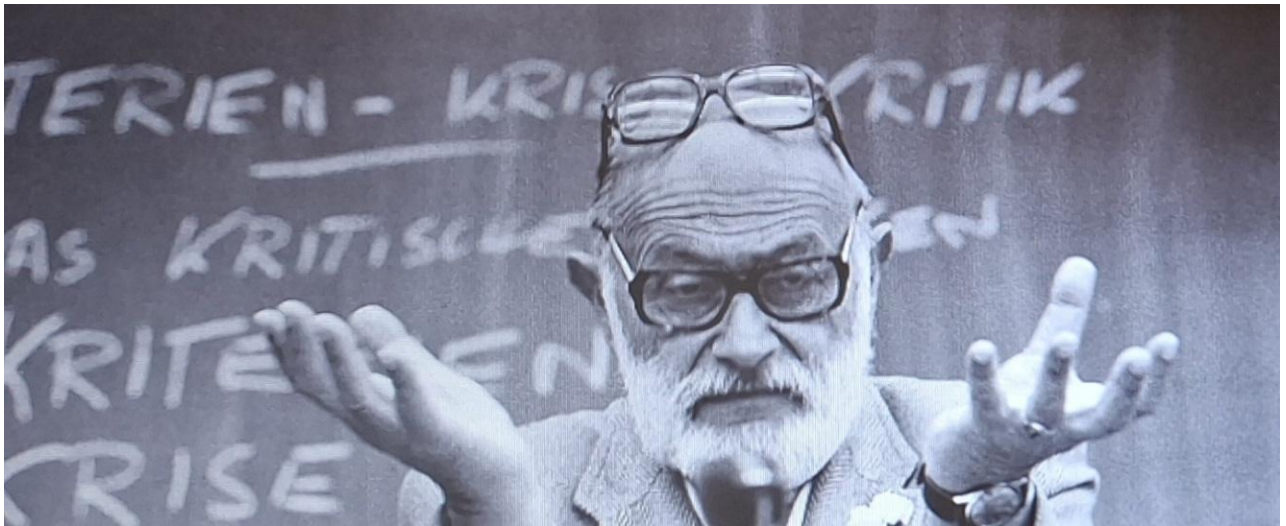


Figure 45: Vilém Flusser at the 5th Bielefeld Symposium on Photography and Media, November 1984 (Ralph Hinterkeuser ©)

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⁹ “Sie sind Zeugen einer Philosophie *in fieri*. Ohne mir etwas anzumaßen, ich glaube, so ungefähr muss es ausgeschaut haben, als Hegel nach Berlin berufen wurde oder als Husserl nach Göttingen kam oder ... der Vergleich ist besser: als Bergson an die Akademie kam, oder als Bachelard an der Sorbonne vorlas“ (Flusser 2009: 14).

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