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They are all Auschwitz: The Impact of the Brazilian Military Dictatorship on Flusser's Communication Theory

1. Introduction: Flusser Under a Dictatorship in Brazil

Understanding Vilém Flusser's trajectory in Brazil, between 1940 and 1972, is essential for grasping the development of his later European writings. With this purpose, Eva Batličková (2010) carried out meticulous research to compile Flusser's Brazilian works. In addition, scholars have explored the importance of his dialogues with Brazilian intellectuals (Hanke, 2004; Menezes, 2009; Menezes & Künsch, 2017; Batličková, 2018; Alonso, 2024), as well as his engagement with Brazilian literature and poetry (Salles, Lima & Alencar, 2020; Alonso, 2024; Castro & Bornhausen, 2024).

By the 1950s, Flusser had begun forming friendships with Brazilian intellectuals, including Milton Vargas (1914-2011), a professor at the Polytechnic School of the University of São Paulo (USP). His relationship with Vargas led to his initial entry into the country's intellectual scene, especially in the 1960s, through the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy (IBF), where he taught courses and published essays in the institute's journal. There, he strengthened ties with philosopher Vicente Ferreira da Silva (1916-1963), poet Dora Ferreira da Silva (1918-2006), jurist Miguel Reale (1910-2006), lawyer José Bueno, and other members of the group.

In her study, Batličková (2010: 18) notes how Flusser's promising career in Brazil was stifled by the intensification of the military regime, especially after Institutional Act No. 5 of 1968, which authorized the suspension of constitutional rights and guarantees. By the late 1960s, cultural and intellectual life in Brazil was subject to increasing censorship. Although Flusser was not directly targeted, the space for his work was drastically reduced. His situation was further complicated by his association with the IBF, which, from 1964 onward, became a vocal supporter of the regime and home to some of its main ideologues — a stance Flusser did not share. In 1972, he left the country, expressing his disillusionment in letters to close friends such as José Bueno and Miguel Reale (Cypriano & Russo, 2020; Alonso, 2024), in which he lamented that his engagement in favour of a "new culture" could no longer be justified within Brazil's "concretely painful" circumstances.

Despite the apparent impact the military regime had on Flusser's biography, his experience under the dictatorship in Brazil — and his positions in relation to it — remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this aspect of his time in the country is not merely a matter of filling a

biographical gap. On one hand, the lack of clarity leaves room for Flusser to be appropriated by Brazil's far right in current times (Mota e Silva, 2024), much as his work was once interpreted as supporting the 1964 coup — as we will see below. On the other hand, this article argues that such a gap undermines our understanding of the political dimension of Flusser's thought, without which some of his most well-known concepts — above all, that of the *apparatus* — lose interpretive power. What first emerged as research questions — how did Flusser actually experience the dictatorship, and how that experience shaped his work? — could gradually be explored as access to his correspondence with friends, lectures, and still-unpublished essays, most of them in Portuguese, became available to the Brazilian public. Open since 2016, the Vilém Flusser São Paulo Archive houses these materials. It is estimated that 80% of the archive's contents remain unpublished.

This article pursues two main objectives. The first is to contribute to the existing knowledge of Flusser's biography during the military regime, in order to avoid misplacing him within history. The second is to demonstrate how his experiences during this time were significant to the development of his later thought, by emphasizing the political dimension of his theoretical work. The article argues that a focused reading of this lesser-explored layer of Flusser's thought reveals him as a politically engaged thinker, attentive to the Brazilian historical context — even if he ultimately chose to leave the country.

2. Methodology: On the Correspondence

Flusser's correspondence helps to clarify the concerns discussed above as they appear throughout his thought. In these letters, the philosopher does engage with political topics more explicitly, something not common in his published work. This research first engaged with Flusser's correspondence in an exploratory way, finding with this the folder of letters exchanged between Flusser and José Bueno. What first stood out was the volume of the correspondence: four folders totalling around 300 pages, with documents dating from 1971 — just before Flusser's return to Europe — up to 1991, the year of his death. The sheer number of letters suggested a long and close friendship, which the reading confirmed. With Bueno, Flusser felt comfortable sharing personal anxieties, enthusiastically recounting his event schedule, revealing details about works in progress, and even exchanging barbs over political disagreements. The two exchanged reflections on major political and economic events of their time, particularly throughout the turbulent 1970s. The Brazilian military dictatorship was among their most frequent topics. This correspondence is particularly significant because it presents a more opinionated Flusser — something absent from his published books.

The research involved reading and categorizing the entire correspondence with Bueno into five groups:

1. Letters that describe Flusser's daily life and detail his years in Europe.
2. Those that reveal his newly found intellectual interests, such as futurology and ecology.
3. Those that mention other IBF figures, especially Dora Ferreira da Silva and Milton Vargas.
4. Those that discuss his writing process.
5. And finally, those in which Flusser and Bueno discuss politics, economics, and the military dictatorship.

In the following pages, selected letters are presented with the aim of exploring further how he experienced the dictatorship. As the reading progressed, it became necessary to consult other sources that could further support this article's objectives. This included unpublished essays by Flusser on topics raised in the letters, as well as his published work more broadly, some of which are mentioned below. Additionally, other correspondence was examined to contextualize his views — especially letters exchanged with Alfredo Augusto Becker, Luigi Bagolini, and Miguel Reale.

All citations from letters, books and unpublished work have been freely translated by the author from Portuguese into English. This translation approach was chosen not in order to preserve Flusser's original literary style, but rather to render his correspondence accessible to an international audience. However, all letter excerpts follow the same translation protocols, which includes maintaining consistent terminology and tone, to facilitate comparison across texts. All letters are referenced and can be accessed via the website of the Vilém Flusser Archive in São Paulo, for readers interested in consulting the original texts in Portuguese.

3. Results

3.1 The IBF and the Military Dictatorship

The IBF was founded by jurist Miguel Reale (1910–2006), engineer Milton Vargas (1914–2011), and philosopher Vicente Ferreira da Silva (1916–1963), among others, in 1949. It became the central locus for the development and dissemination of conservative thought in Brazil during the second half of the twentieth century. According to the IBF's statutes (as cited in Gonçalves, 2016), its stated objectives included: 1) promoting the development of philosophical culture in the

country; 2) organizing congresses to discuss philosophical issues; 3) publishing a quarterly journal, the *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* (RBF) — in which Flusser himself published articles; and 4) collaborating with public authorities, universities, and associations in all matters related to the intellectual development of Brazil.

Strongly supported by São Paulo's oligarchy[1], the IBF — under Reale's leadership — assumed the role of intellectual mouthpiece for the military regime following the 1964 coup. This period was marked by the summary imprisonment of dissident intellectuals, including Astrojildo Pereira, Florestan Fernandes, and Nelson Werneck Sodré, as well as the arbitrary dismissal of others from public universities, such as Celso Furtado, Josué de Castro, and Darcy Ribeiro. But Reale emerged as a central figure within Brazil's intellectual far right. His writings helped justify the regime's early repressive actions as necessary safeguards against a communist threat[2], and the IBF became a key platform for disseminating this ideological defence[3].

Efforts to justify the necessity of the regime appeared in some of Flusser's letter exchanges with supporters of the coup, including Miguel Reale and José Bueno. At times, Flusser's own writings from the 1960s were swept up in this argumentative whirlwind, as seems to have been the case with *Language and Reality*, originally published in 1963. Flusser engaged in a brief exchange of letters with another prominent jurist affiliated with the IBF, Alfredo Augusto Becker. In a letter of September 22nd, 1965, Becker claimed that one of his "operating hypotheses" had been fully realized in Institutional Act No. 1 of April 1964, which, according to him, exemplified how a "victorious revolution" legitimates itself as a constituent power, issuing laws independently of any prior legal framework. For Becker, this act confirmed the normative authority of the

[1] The IBF was also made possible thanks to financial support from the state government of São Paulo, particularly through then-governor Lucas Nogueira Garcez (1913–1982), a prominent member of the São Paulo oligarchy and an executive at Banco Mercantil de São Paulo (Gonçalves, 2018, p. 6). This form of funding is one of the indicators of the close relationship the IBF developed with the Brazilian bourgeoisie and its aim to establish an intellectual foundation to uphold the hegemony of bourgeois autocracy in Brazil (Gonçalves, 2018, p. 7). This intention, and the institute's ties to economic power, are made explicit in an interview with Reale himself in which he justifies the founding of the institute as a place for collaboration between intellectuals and the industrial and financial private sectors (as cited in Gonçalves, 2016, p. 79).

[2] Recently declassified CIA documents revealed that, as early as 1963, the United States considered a military coup in Brazil a "preferable alternative" to President João Goulart remaining in power. This position reflected Cold War-era U.S. geopolitical interests, particularly concerns over Brazil's potential alignment with the socialist bloc. These revelations help contextualize the lead-up to the 1964 coup and the political atmosphere surrounding Vilém Flusser's years in the country. See: CNN Brasil. US saw military coup in Brazil as "preferable" option in 1963, says CIA. Published March 31, 2024. Available at: https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/eua-viam-golpe-militar-no-brasil-como-opcao-preferivel-em-1963-diz-cia/. Accessed April 8, 2025.

[3] Reale, in fact, authored the book *Os Imperativos da Revolução de Março* (Or *The Imperatives of the March Revolution*, in a free translation), published in 1965, as a legal and philosophical defense of the dictatorship. Key arguments of the book are: a) Reale's interpretation of the 1964 "revolution" as a legal reordering meant to prevent what he saw as the imminent threat of a proletarian revolution; b) his effort to expand the existing legal framework in order to legitimize and normalize the authoritarian situation.

"revolutionary" regime and illustrated the foundational logic of state formation — a process he had explored in his own legal theory[4] (Becker, 1965b: 45).

In a previous letter dated June 21, 1965, Becker informed Flusser that he had finished reading *Language and Reality* and found several convergences with his own legal theory. Flusser, in that book, argues that humans are *zoon politikon* because they exist in conversation with society — conversation being their very essence (Flusser, 2021:184). Becker relates this to his theory of state formation, which he describes as equally relational: both the individual and the state are forms of relation (Becker, 1998:35). In this view, the state is a dynamic social being that defends itself, even by adapting legal norms. In his exchange with Flusser, Becker uses this framework — along with quotes from Flusser — to legitimize the 1964 coup as a natural act of self-preservation by the state. This shows how Flusser's concept of conversation was co-opted to justify the regime. Flusser did not respond directly; in a letter from August 1965, he simply apologized for the delay in replying.

Unlike Becker or Reale, José Bueno remained an anonymous figure in Brazilian public debate. However, it was to Bueno that Flusser spoke openly about his views on the military dictatorship during the 1970s. In the letters, at least, Bueno expressed admiration for the notion of progress embraced during the years of repression: the construction of hydroelectric dams, nuclear power plants, and the steady growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Bueno, 1975b:84; Bueno, 1976:102). He also described the 1964 military coup as a "revolution" against "the risk of disorder implicit in the previous regime" (Bueno, 1974:63). At the same time, a deep sense of spiritual loss — his anguish over the absence of religion in the growing urban scenario of São Paulo — made him something of a romantic when it came to behaviour and politics: he sought a simple, spiritualized form of human existence — a quintessential conservative, in this sense.

It was precisely because Flusser rejected both this notion of progress and this romanticism that he often confronted his friend, as in this passage from a letter dated October 25th, 1972: "[…] progress is annihilating, at least in the short term, all hope for a 'new man' — that is, for a life with meaning" (Flusser, 1972:4). Flusser urged Bueno to let go of his nostalgia and seek new meaning — an effort that would prove frustrating and unrewarding.

Flusser's concern with Brazil was not about the country's GDP, but rather about the possibility of the "new man." The idea of progress as promoted by the Brazilian military dictatorship, in his view, was precisely what prevented this new human from emerging, while simultaneously keeping the "old humans" — like Bueno — trapped in alienation, sustained by romanticism and nostalgia. Flusser, however, does not qualify this "new" as inherently positive or negative — at least not in this instance — and confines himself to describing it as follows: ""[...] a)

[4] Becker refers to his own work, *Teoria Geral do Direito Tributário* (or General Theory of Tax Law, in a free translation), originally published in 1963 and still considered one of the foundational texts in its field in Brazil.

the old men (technocrats, etc.) want to continue progressing in the Victorian way (dams, electric brooms, political grandeur, income). b) the more 'up to date' old men (Marxists, etc.) want to progress in an apparently new direction (cooperatives, wall newspapers, mass politicization, income distribution). c) the new men see that (a) and (b) are identical and want to stop progressing in order to enjoy life (make music and love in the streets, depoliticize the private, disregard the public, live at a low economic level)" (Flusser, 1975a:77).

Differences also surfaced in the correspondence between Flusser and Reale, who, in addition to being the founding president of the IBF, was one of the authors of Constitutional Amendment No. 1 of 1969, which legally consolidated the military dictatorship in Brazil. The debate began with a letter dated March 1st, 1974, in which Reale responded to a biographical profile Flusser had written about him and published in *Bodenlos*. In the text, Flusser acknowledges that Reale was right: there were no real conditions for a successful workers' movement in Brazil on the eve of 1964, and therefore socialism was not viable in the country. However, as Flusser (2007:181) writes, Reale fails to grasp "the terror of this fact" — that the proletariat could not emancipate itself in Brazil. According to Flusser, Reale's confidence in the Brazilian bourgeoisie led him to mistakenly choose what he saw as the lesser evil: the fascist-leaning technocracy represented by the military (Flusser, 2007:181). To these points, Reale responds: "The 1964 revolution was a violent fist slammed on the table — a call to the harsh reality of a people that must resolve, in terms of urgency and priority, its most basic problems, without venturing into lofty flights that interest only small groups who feed on slogans" (Reale, 1974:31).

Flusser, however, does not confront Reale's pro-dictatorship arguments directly. In his autobiography, Flusser himself (2007:178) admits to a certain distance or reserve between the two, which may explain why he limited himself to expressing concern regarding the regime's escalating repression. One such instance appears in an earlier letter, dated February 27th, 1970, in which Flusser (1970:11) asks: "In situations where philosophizing is discouraged, what are the commitments and responsibilities of the philosopher?" He then outlines four possible responses (apud Cypriano & Russo, 2020:115–116): a) to conform to the situation and abandon philosophy in its true sense; b) to engage in resistance, which also means abandoning philosophy; c) to isolate oneself and philosophize anyway, thus giving up both engagement and responsibility; d) to philosophize *quand-même*, which entails not only economic, social (and possibly physical) risks, but worse still, general misunderstanding and isolation; and 5) to flee the situation — an act he deems complacent, cowardly, and thus contemptible.

For Flusser, the most dignified option was the fourth, and it seems to have been the one he first embraced but then emigrated to Europe anyway. In the Brazilian context, this first choice led to the isolation he had anticipated, with the exception of physical repression. In letters to friends

— such as one dated October 1st, 1971, also addressed to Reale, and written just before his decision to return to Europe in 1972 — Flusser expressed his frustration with the difficulties he faced entering Brazil's intellectual and academic circles. His discontent is conveyed in a tone of farewell: "Brazilian society is currently in a historical phase in which my engagement may be more harmful than beneficial, since my contribution is to awaken doubt and analysis, not to inspire enthusiasm for getting to work" (Flusser, 1971:5).

There may be another reason behind Flusser's reluctance to speak out against the military dictatorship: his own fear of being arrested and tortured. The loss of his family members in Nazi concentration camps in Prague (Krause & Guldin, 2017:59) was a defining moment in Flusser's life that apparently made him deeply afraid of political repression in Brazil. This indicative comes from the testimony given by Professor Herbert Duschenes (1914–2003) — a filmmaker and art historian who attended Flusser's classes during his time at the University of São Paulo — during an interview with Ricardo Mendes on February 10th, 1999. Another Prague-born Jew, Duschenes recounted that he himself had lost thirteen family members to the concentration camps, similarly to what happened to Flusser, and for that reason, he found Flusser's fear of persecution entirely understandable. Duschenes explains: "He [Flusser] had a deep fear of being arrested by the dictatorship in Brazil at the time, of being thrown into a concentration camp, of being tortured. He said: I'm a physical coward, I can't endure any torture, I will give them whatever they want, I will say whatever they want, I can't stay at USP [University of São Paulo] because I don't have the strength to resist. [...] Flusser's fear was understandable. Perhaps he exaggerated (this wasn't Germany), but his story includes terror, physical fear" (Mendes, 2017).

In a series of letters that began on November 11th, 1974, Flusser made his opposition to the Brazilian dictatorship even more explicit to Bueno. The lawyer had shared with him details about the legislative elections that year. Bueno described how the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) had briefly attempted to mount resistance against the military but soon retreated[5]. Bueno (1974:63) described how, in his opinion, how the MDB quickly shifted its position after military party invoked the threat of political disorder — and he noted, with some perplexity, that even

[5] MDB is a brazilian political party founded in 1966 following the abolition of Brazil's multiparty system through Institutional Act No. 2, which established a two-party structure. The MDB thus became the only institutionalized opposition force to the military dictatorship, running in elections against ARENA, the pro-regime party. In 1974, the MDB contested legislative elections and also put forward Ulysses Guimarães as a presidential candidate against the military's nominee, General Ernesto Geisel. However, presidential elections at the time were indirect — decided by senators, federal deputies, and representatives of state legislative assemblies. As is well known, Geisel won the election in a mechanism designed by the regime to maintain the appearance of democratic process: the majority of voters were affiliated with ARENA, and all votes were open and nominal. In total, Geisel received 400 votes, while Guimarães obtained 76. Additionally, 21 blank votes were cast (all from MDB representatives in protest against the rules), and six electors were absent.

Brazilians with little to lose seemed deeply afraid of social unrest (Bueno, 1974: 63). Flusser then responded in a letter dated November 22, offering the following interpretation of the event:

(a) The opposition freely articulated some radical arguments against the regime, although it failed to articulate the foundational ones. (b) The opposition exercised this freedom of expression with great irresponsibility. The first conclusion implies that there is broad, though not unlimited, freedom of expression. The second suggests that such freedom is being abused, because those who possess it know they will not be held accountable for their convictions in the foreseeable future (Flusser, 1974:64).

Flusser criticized the fact that elections were being held despite having no real impact on the country's political direction. In his view, those elections were nothing more than a "[…] ritual intended to create the appearance of bourgeois democracy, both domestically and abroad. In fact, the very maintenance of the legislature fits within the explanation I have proposed." (Flusser, 1974, 64). For this reason, he criticized the MDB for being deluded — or rather, *in-lusio*, caught up in the game — with no real possibility of producing any transformation. Immediately afterward, he defines the Brazilian military dictatorship as an apparatus: "The material you sent me proves that the elections had a much more concrete function. They served as a safety valve for forces that accumulate during a process of administration without feedback. Such forces are potentially dangerous to the establishment. They are, in fact, responsible for the short lifespan of closed (strong) administrations in the 20th century. Through the safety valve, these forces dissipate and end up reinforcing the apparatus. The opposition thus functioned as an integral part of the apparatus — and probably more effectively than any instrument of repression aimed at those forces. [...] Those who engaged in opposition propaganda did so fully aware of the limitations imposed by the rules of the game. But I doubt they were also aware of their role within the apparatus. For to admit that would be to admit a kind of bad faith that seems quite unlikely. The existential situation of the opposition, in my view, was this: given the 'opening' granted by the apparatus, it was rational and ethically imperative to take advantage of the breach. They did not realize that the breach was a safety valve. They felt free within the opening, and within its limits, when in fact the reality was precisely the opposite: they would have been freer had they not acted within that breach. What they experienced as freedom was, in reality, a function imposed upon them by the apparatus. And this, to me, is the most fascinating aspect of the problem. The subjective sensation of freedom may conceal objective conditioning. This is not the Hegelian dialectic of freedom: I am subjectively absolutely free, and objectively absolutely determined. It is something else entirely: the apparatus grants me subjective freedom in order to better determine me. In effect: I am determined to the extent that I allow this subjective freedom to be granted to me. [...] In other words, the problem is this: there are existentially honest forms of engagement that

are objectively self-destructive, because they operate in service of that which the engagement subjectively seeks to resist. And the symptom of such engagement is irresponsibility, born from a confused awareness of this internal contradiction" (Flusser, 1974:64–65).

Bueno replied on January 3rd, 1975, stating that he disagreed with Flusser's concept of freedom: "The concept of freedom is mercurial, and for this reason it has been used by one side or the other according to convenience [...]" (Bueno, 1975a:68), thereby relativizing the repression that was taking place in Brazil during the darkest years of the dictatorship. In a letter dated January 21st, 1975, Flusser responded clearly and directly, positioning himself against the military regime: "Political freedom doesn't need all the elaborate reasoning and wisdom you're investing in it, nor does it need to be traced all the way back to Machiavelli. It's plain to see and undeniable. Those who surround it with so much saliva are the ones who know they're defending an indefensible position. Political freedom is a climate that one either breathes or does not breathe, and it leaves no room for doubt. It's the condition in which one says whatever one wants without fear, in which one does not fear uniforms, in which one does not 'respect' officials. In short: it is the condition in which we assume ourselves to be owners of public life, not recipients of the benefits that the public life generously bestows" (Flusser, 1975a:70).

In the exchange shown, Flusser defines the regime as an apparatus, using his most known concept to categorize the economic and bureaucratic mechanisms that gave the regime its appearance of normalcy, of functionality, and of necessity, despite the deep human reification[6] it produced. The regime's functionaries are the ones who keep the apparatus running. They do not question it ethically — that is, politically. It is a situation that forecloses the possibility of transformation.

3.2 On Marxism, and the "New Man"

This critique of the dictatorship as an apparatus was preceded by Flusser revisiting one of the foundational political frameworks of his generation: Marxism. In his letters to José Bueno, and later in unpublished essays, Flusser grapples with the historical socialist experiences of his time. Rather than fully discarding it, he returns to its utopian impulse — the hope for a new kind of human — as a horizon for political transformation.

[6] Reification (or objectification) is a term from German philosophical vocabulary, especially within the Marxist tradition. It refers to a form of alienation that involves the objectification (*Versachlichung*) of social relations and, ultimately, of the human being itself. Although the term appears in the works of Hegel and Feuerbach, it was further developed by György Lukács and Theodor Adorno — particularly in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* — to describe the dominance of technical rationality over subjectivity. Flusser similarly engages with the concept in Post-History, where he discusses Auschwitz as "the ultimate reification of people into formless objects, into ashes" (Flusser, 2011, p. 26). Reification, in this sense, is a key component of the concept of the apparatus developed in that work.

This reflection begins in his letters to Bueno, where Flusser addressed other contemporary issues, such as the 1973 oil crisis. In those exchanges, he refers to oil as part of a "cosmic project" (Flusser, 1974:41), and it is around this expression that he highlights the difference in perspectives between himself and his friend. In that context, by *project*[7], Flusser seemed to be referring to oil as an instrument within a model through which a certain image of the human[8] is shaped — that is, the human being understood through the lens of progress-driven intentionality and shaped by the instruments of this same progress. The actual aim of this project, he suggests, is not human fulfilment, but rather the fulfilment of oil and its automobiles: a complete process of reification. Because of this inhumanity, this project, in Flusser's view, should be abandoned — and this necessary abandonment represents the political turning point at the core of Flusser's engagement and concern. In a letter to Bueno dated January 21st, 1975, Flusser continues to develop this idea: "The fact is that oil is no longer considered a viable source of future energy. Not because of its price (which will fall again in the near future), but because it is an 'enemy of the environment' and because the automobile is an uneconomical and inhuman mode of transportation" (Flusser, 1975a:75).

In a letter to Bueno dated January 22, 1977, Flusser argues that socialism should have been responsible for providing an answer to the decline of the Western project, in a broader sense. However, as a variation of that very project, it proved incapable of doing so, in Flusser's point of view. In other words, socialism too would be a product of a particular image of the human shaped by progress: "To put it simply: the Western standard of living is unsustainable (given the disparity with the Third World) and needs to be reduced to approximately the Italian level. But only socialist governments are capable of doing this without constant strikes. [...] Certainly: a glance at the attached sheet makes it clear that the socialist experiment has not been a success (even though East Germany matches Italy), not only because it remains miserable (if we accept that misery = less than 3,000 per capita), but because it has not changed the human being" (Flusser, 1977:107).

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[7] The term *project* in Flusser's work refers to a broad conceptual framework through which he understands the Western mode of being-in-the-world. A project, for Flusser, is a structure of thought that allows for both diagnosing the present and imagining a transformed future. To grasp this notion in depth, one must draw from his later European writings, such as *Post-History*, while also revisiting earlier essays and letters from the 1970s, which reveal thematic continuities around this concept. In the opening chapter of *Post-History*, particularly in the essay *The Ground We Walk On*, Flusser develops the idea of the Western project through a reflection on Auschwitz. Drawing from his personal and historical experience as a Jewish survivor of Nazism, he argues that Auschwitz is not a deviation or aberration, but a realization of Western culture itself (Flusser, 2011, p. 21), arising from the very foundations of Western values and concepts. For Flusser, the true horror of Auschwitz is not simply the crime of mass murder, but the ultimate reification of human beings into formless matter—ashes—through apparatuses. This diagnosis, echoed also in his correspondence with José Bueno, particularly around the oil crisis.

[8] By image of the human, I am referring to the expression used by Flusser himself in *The Fenomenologia do Brasileiro* (*Phenomenology of the Brazilian,* in a free translation). The expression also appears in *Kommunikologie weiter denken* (*Comunicologia*: *Reflexões sobre o futuro*, in the Portuguese edition): "Since the collapse of humanism, and thus the collapse of the Enlightenment — briefly, since Auschwitz and Hiroshima—we no longer have an image of the human being" (Flusser, 2015, p. 32).

A few years before the letter cited above, in his earlier message of August 6th, 1975, Flusser (1975d:89) had already explained to Bueno that the reversibility of the function between humans and their instruments — our capacity to regain control over them — would be the true Marxist revolution. In Flusser's analysis, a proletarian revolution aim would be to liberate the human to free the human from the objectifying gesture of progress while still preserving it as the subjective foundation for our image of the human. This emancipatory goal, according to Flusser, is not only necessary — it is also what leads him to conclude that "[...] we are all Marxists" (Flusser, 1975d:89).

More than a decade later, on November 9th, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell — an event that marked the beginning of the process leading to German reunification and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. That same year, Flusser wrote an unpublished essay titled *A Falência do Marxismo* (*The Decline of Marxism*, in a free translated), dated October 18th and dedicated to José Bueno. In the text, the philosopher revisits several themes from their correspondence and sets out to analyse whether Marxism was successful or not, and what its apparent defeat might signify. The essay is structured around three main arguments:

1) Marxism as anthropology: Flusser argues that all forms of humanism are grounded in a metaphysical anthropology — in other words, the idea that the human is "more than the nature that determines them (for example, 'spirit,' 'mind,' 'soul,' or even just 'identity')" (Flusser, 1989:12). Marxist humanism, however, differs in that it posits the human as *less* than nature, and that human dignity consists in the constant negation of that condition. "Marxism is 'revolutionary' above all because, for it, man is the one who denies his place. And it is this human dignity that is now failing" (Flusser, 1989:12). He continues: "The generation to which I belong has been nourished by this humanism. The decline of Marxism deprives us of sustenance" (ibid.).

2) Marxism as epistemology: Flusser writes: "[...] Marxism asserts that 'truth' is a horizon that can never be reached, though it can be infinitely approached" (Flusser, 1989:13). Its epistemology, then, is not a pursuit of truth per se, but an *engagement against falsehood (ideology)*. "The ideologies that materialize under 'false consciousness' (such as nation, state, religion) are to be combatted not so much to make room for 'true consciousness' (such as class consciousness), but above all because they are false" (Flusser, 1989:13). Without Marxism, Flusser claims, the distinction between truth and falsehood collapses, and "[…] the fervour of the struggle against lies evaporates. With the decline of Marxism, all engagement becomes ineffective" (ibid.).

3) Marxism as an ethical-aesthetic system: For Flusser, Marxism holds that only what is made by humans themselves can generate knowledge (both theory and *praxis*), and that art is the

foundation of values. The purpose of communism, then, would be to synchronize the division of labour in such a way that knowledge and values become accessible to all. This ethical-aesthetic system of synchronizing labour, knowledge, and art is the utopia — which, for Flusser, is what ultimately "makes us all Marxists." He continues: "It matters little that in the so-called 'socialist' countries such a society turned out to be the exact opposite of what was intended. What matters is that the very notion of creative synchronization has become inoperative due to computing, and that the Marxist utopia has proven to be a mistake. With the decline of Marxism, we are left only with negative utopias" (Flusser, 1989: 13).

In short, for Flusser, the apparent decline of Marxism, as signalled by the fall of the Berlin wall, also implicates on the loss of three fundamental elements for the West: the human dignity of resisting one's condition, the commitment to confronting falsehood, and the vision of a transformed future. On the fall of the wall, he continues: "The collapse of the Wall manifests itself superficially as a traditional political-economic phenomenon (and therefore of little interest) [...]. But beneath this deceptive surface, something else is unfolding: the rebirth of ideologies once thought dead by Marxism — Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turkism, Negritude, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Slavism. We are heading toward a post-Marxist Middle Ages. Fanaticism (of the right) is re-emerging. A new form of fascism is taking shape. This reveals the impact of the collapse of Marxism: what is collapsing is reason itself, in its desperate struggle against passion, and night is about to swallow the day" (Flusser, 1989:13).

Through these considerations on Marxism made by Flusser, we return to the central theme of Flusser and Bueno's correspondence: the possibility of a new human, which seems to be the core of Flusser's political engagement. In their exchanges, however, Flusser is not necessarily optimistic about the prospect of the "new man" as he saw in his moment. The reason lies in the surrounding context: the oil crisis or the military dictatorship in Brazil, and other topics they mention throughout their exchange. All the catastrophes marking the decline of the West seemed, in fact, to be producing not an engaged subject, but a disengaged one — at a time when radical engagement was most needed. The conditions of the era, in his view, were shaping a human being who was formalistic, rather than grounded in lived experience. In a letter dated January 24, 1975, addressed to Luigi Bagolini (1913–2005), an Italian jurist with ties to Miguel Reale and the IBF, Flusser describes this "new man", the real one emerging from such a context, in the following way: "My view of him [the new man] is pessimistic. That is: a view from the old man that I am. I see him, and I do not like him. He makes love, not war, but he does not know how to love and kills as much as the old man. [...] What 'wisdom' is to us, to him is 'pleasure', and what is 'politics' to us, to him is 'contact'. He does not engage in dialogue; he 'communicates immediately': he lives in crowds. For him, there is no longer a social circle (family, club, party, city), and thus no 'theatre',

where dialogue takes place. [...] They do not engage in dialogue: they make love or kill each other—immediate communication. [...] The new man is our son, and the problem is that of the *senex-puer*. But he already lives in fraternity, and we still live in freedom" (Flusser, 1975b:16).

This pessimistic view — shaped by Flusser's various disillusionments, including with communism and with Brazil, as he confides in a letter to Reale shortly before his death (Flusser, 1991:71) — stands in contrast to the more optimistic image of the "new man" he presents in *Fenomenologia do Brasileiro*, the last book he wrote while still living in Brazil (Batličková, 2010). In that work, Flusser offers praise of Brazilian playfulness and ludic spirit, and expresses hope for the country, even as he acknowledges many of the critical issues previously mentioned.

4. Discussion

4.1 On the Political Dimension of Flusser's work

The letters and other writings discussed above complement Eva Batličková's (2010) account of Vilém Flusser's Brazilian period by illuminating how he grew increasingly apprehensive of political repression in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This discussion gains significance only when it is integrated into a broader reading of Flusser's work — one that revisits his texts to generate fresh questions and research hypotheses for Brazilian Communication Theory, to which he made significant contributions. A renewed focus on politics emerges by juxtaposing his published essays with his private correspondence. Flusser is renowned for his essayistic exploration and his "exiled engagement" (Alonso, 2024:31), which leads him to consistently refrain from applying his ideas to specific political contexts, which leaves the political dimension of his work diffuse. This dispersion, we argue, reflects the repressive climate in Brazil.

The political dimension of Communication, through Flusser's private experience and work, is a call to politicize the very field of knowledge — challenging traditional methods of knowledge production by aligning them with the responsibility of shaping social formations and enabling society to represent its own needs. This becomes especially evident in his *Communicology* (2022), where, as Heilmair explains (2012:110), his pessimism gradually opens to ponder more creativity possibilities for the future. In Communication Theory, this effort is an invitation to view communicative environments as crucial spaces for political dialogue, where theorists continually renew these contexts in response to the need for political engagement. Borrowing Lucrécia Ferrara's words, the politicization of knowledge is "an imagination that transforms collective

interactions into ways of producing a communicative cognition, more imagined than defined" (Ferrara, 2018:107).

Studying the political dimension of his work means outlining a form of knowledge oriented toward transformation, not preservation — a perspective critical to understanding his Communication Theory and its focus on the conditions necessary for change. Moreover, re-examining his letters to Bueno and Reale reveals that Flusser engaged his correspondents in a deeper reflection on the signs of a catastrophic decline in politics as a closing of the possibility of transformation and on the concurrent resurgence of far-right ideologies, represented in Brazil by the military.

It also prompts a reassessment to be further explored on Flusser's views on Marxism, moving beyond the stereotypical image of the disillusioned communist that grew older and became a more conservative figure. His reflections on Marx not only deepen our understanding of his thought but also reveal how aspects of Marxist theory continue to resonate in his work. Additionally, Flusser's engagement with Ernst Bloch is also indicative of this: in *The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object* (1986), he cites Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* to argue that the ills of progress arise from the overwhelming success of the Western project rather than its failure. Bloch's concept of the *novum* — the possibility of the radically new that anchors the ontology of the not-yet, a utopian reality still to come (Bloch, 2005:109)— is in dialogue with Flusser's perspective.

This political dimension also permits to consider the profound tension in Flusser's body of work between optimism and pessimism, not hushing in defying his stance on many of his most researched themes but embracing this ambivalence that lies at the heart of his philosophical inquiry. On one hand, his reflections evoke a cautious hope in the possibility of transformation rooted in his critical understanding of existing structures (or the *apparatus*). On the other hand, this same understanding reveals an increasingly reified society through a teleology of progress driving the Western project to a point of collapse, precluding any substantive transformation.

In *Communicology* (2022), Flusser argues that a Theory of Communication is dedicated to rethinking the models of knowing, experiencing, and acting (Bornhausen, 2020). In doing so, it breaks with phenomena — be they social, political, economic, or otherwise — in order to reveal the hidden communicational connectors and the full fabric of attitudes that constitute them (Flusser, 2015:45). This critical responsibility is coupled with a clear task, as Flusser states: "to contribute to the mutations of human relationships" (Flusser, 2022:33).

Consequently, when he discusses politics, his perspective is inherently communicational: he examines the conditions under which a society is articulated and the plausible ways to alter them. The author positions communication — and the necessity to communicate in the face of death and degradation — as the foundation not only of social life but also of politics, conceived as one

form of social existence. As he puts it, "I assume the structure of communication as the infrastructure of culture and society" (Flusser, 2015:46).

These theoretical insights are echoed in Flusser's private correspondence. In his letters to José Bueno, as presented above, his apprehension about political repression is not expressed in abstract terms but through a concrete reflection on the disruption of communication itself and the impossibility of mutation of relationships. Flusser's characterization of communication as the infrastructure of culture becomes a living critique of the military regime, which sought to stifle the flow of information and reify social relations into rigid power structures, through persecution and death. In this way, his subtle yet pointed discussions with his friends reveal that resisting dictatorship — by maintaining a space for significant dialogue — is tantamount to safeguarding the very conditions necessary for transformation. Thus, the communicational lens that informs his theory is inseparable from his critical stance against repression.

4.2 The apparatus as a political category

Although in *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (*Filosofia da Caixa Preta*, in Portuguese) Flusser employs the concept of apparatus to discuss photography and the photographic machine, this notion has been present in his work from the beginning. In *Da Religiosidade* (*On Religiosity*, in a free translation) (1967), for instance, the author considers the apparatus as indicative of a "loss of access to the transcendent" (2002:67) resulting from actions performed in obedience to a pre-established program — whether social, political, or economic. Even in his monograph, *Gerações* (*Generations*, in a free translation) — written in the 1960s, though without using the term apparatus — Flusser debates the potential for renewal amid what he calls the stagnation of the "sphere of the world" (2017:27). Later, in his work *Pós-História* (*Post-History,* in a free translation), originally published in 1983, the concept is developed more comprehensively, with a clearer political dimension that reiterates this theme of stagnation: "They are all, like Auschwitz, black boxes that function as complex gears executing a predetermined program. They operate according to the inertia inherent to them, and at a certain point, their functioning escapes the control of their original programmers. Ultimately, these apparatuses serve to annihilate their own operators, including the programmers, because they objectify and dehumanize man" (Flusser, 2011:22).

The reference to Auschwitz in the citation above compels us to recall Flusser's escape from Nazism in Europe and the loss of his relatives in concentration camps. When, in his letters, Flusser portrays the Brazilian military dictatorship as an apparatus — comparable to a Nazi concentration camp — it underscores the profound impact that his personal experience of repression in Brazil had on his thought.

According to Baitello Jr. (2021:52), the Flusserian apparatus consists of "[...] cultural objects of a specific type, as instruments (and not as consumer goods)" with "the intention of extracting objects from nature to bring them closer to man." More than a mere concept concerning the relationship between humans and technology — as the term is best known for— the apparatus, for Flusser, embodies a gesture of devouring and consequent dehumanization, associated with the idea of progress that he critiqued during the Brazilian military dictatorship. While the concept is familiar to Flusser's readers as a category for digital technologies, it must be revitalized and dynamically examined in its political dimension: as a category for the belligerence of the progress project and for the closure of communication-based engagement. Otherwise, there is a risk of mystifying it — treating it as something mysterious, incomprehensible, almost as if enveloping it with an element of religious poverty — and, consequently, formulating mistaken and depoliticized hypotheses regarding our contemporary highly technologized communicative environments. Whether considered through the lens of Auschwitz or the DOPS[9], the apparatus represents a mechanism by which society is stifled, grinding down people and impeding the emergence of the new, along with its attendant historical transformations.

6. Final Remarks: To think from Brazil

Flusser's experience during the Brazilian military dictatorship was characterized by a deep ambivalence that permeated both his personal life and his theoretical work. His private correspondence reveals a man who was affected by the repressive climate, exhibiting caution and even fear — elements that echo his reluctance to confront the Brazilian political realities in his published work. In his letters, Flusser expressed his disillusionments and oppositions within a society governed by a militaristic apparatus.

It is possible to affirm that this lived experience deeply impacted Flusser's theoretical production. Confronted with the stifling effects of political repression, he recast politics as an inherently communicational phenomenon — one that emphasizes the continuous rearticulation of social relationships and the necessity of a transformative dialogue.

Furthermore, labelling Flusser as an anti-Marxist or aligning him with far-right ideology, given his relations with the IBF, constitute a misreading of both his intellectual position and his historical context. As the material presented demonstrates, Flusser engaged Marxism in his time in

9 The Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) was a secret police agency of the Brazilian government, established in 1924. It was used to repress social and popular movements and served as a center for torture during both the *Estado Novo*, under the presidency of Getúlio Vargas, and the military dictatorship, until its conclusion in 1989.

a nuanced and critical way, acknowledging how his own work dialogues with this other perspective. One should not say that this makes Flusser, himself, a Marxist still. This does not imply that Flusser was, in any strict sense, a Marxist himself, as he did not engage in a materialistic analysis of his context. Yet, it is equally clear that he did not dismiss the framework entirely.

With some of these elements considered, we open the way for a re-politicized theory, one in which communication researchers assume a renewed responsibility: to enhance communicative environments, propose transformations, and subvert the apparatuses to which they are subjected.

As mentioned above, Flusser adopts a far more optimistic stance regarding Brazil in *The Phenomenology of the Brazilian* than what is evident in his private correspondence. In this alternative view, he argues that Brazil was undergoing a revolution in thought, enabled by its ahistorical condition — that is, its detachment from the Western project of progress. In many respects, particularly in the realms of culture and language, Flusser argues that Brazil breaks with the linearity of European thinking and gestures toward "a new way of human life—dignified, playful, and creative. The flavour of this new way of life permeates the situation, despite the prevailing misery, and makes existence in Brazil a meaningful endeavour" (Flusser, 1998:173). Consequently, Flusser envisions Brazil as offering alternatives to Western culture — a perspective that underpins his own political and intellectual engagement. Thus, rethinking from a Brazilian standpoint is not only a playful and creative exercise, but also a potent political task in a Global South context characterized by profound inequality and a weakened public sphere.

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