

Gustavo Bernardo

One of the most important Brazilian philosophers¹

“The foreigner (and foreign) is the one who affirms his own being-in-the-world that surrounds him. Thus, he gives sense to the world, and in a certain way he dominates the world. But he dominates it tragically: he does not integrate into the world. The cedar tree is foreign in my park. I am foreign in France. Humankind is foreign in the world.”

Vilém Flusser, *Natural:mente*

When Vilém Flusser wrote these words he was living in France after having lived in Brazil for thirty years. He had built his life and his work between two continents. He was born Jewish and Czech in 1920 in Prague. In 1939 he escaped from the Nazis and came to Brazil with his girlfriend, Edith Barth. His entire family was murdered in the Holocaust. He married Edith in Rio de Janeiro, and they lived in São Paulo until 1972 when they moved to Robion, France. In 1991, he returned to Prague to attend a conference, but he died in a traffic accident near the city of his birth. Better known as a *media* philosopher, Flusser philosophized in four languages, translating himself into and between those four languages. For Flusser, to translate was simultaneously a political and an existential gesture; to translate was to go through the experience of death. He wrote in his first book, *Língua e realidade*, that “language creates reality.” It means, when we switch languages, in a brief moment we die in “our” reality to live in another: we become another person who lives in another reality. Then, for Flusser, to translate was also to go through the experience of the Other. An Other himself, he always tried to maintain the point of view of the immigrant, that is, the point of view of the foreigner.

Flusser wrote many books, most of them published in German, but his importance to Brazilian readers is of great significance. His *Fenomenologia do brasileiro*, published first in German in 1994 and published in Portuguese in 1998, is a provocative and fascinating study of our character and culture. Abraham Moles, the French communication theorist and Flusser’s contemporary, recognized Vilém Flusser as “one of the most important Brazilian philosophers.” I agree with him, but probably many Brazilian academic philosophers would not. Firstly, because Flusser is not exactly an academic philosopher, and secondly because, in the sixties, he strongly criticized his Brazilian peers. Moles saw in Flusser’s thinking a bridge between the disparate systems of philosophical thinking and the

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fluency of essays, and he called it *Philosofiction*. To this Jewish-Czech-Brazilian philosopher, the fabled is the limit of the imaginable. His essays and fables, like *Vampyrotheutis infernalis*, are experiments in a strict sense: they do not give us any guarantees. Consequently, Flusser's philosophy became a thinking between academic philosophy and "street philosophy": his thinking is as rigorous as the best academic philosophy, but it is as poetical and clear as the best street philosophy, that is, the philosophy that lives outside of the academic ivory tower. Therefore, we can see Vilém Flusser as an outsider, and his importance to Brazilian philosophy derives strictly from this condition.

His philosophy dialogues powerfully with that of Vicente Ferreira da Silva, another forgotten giant who brought Heidegger's thinking to Brazil. It also synthesizes Husserl's phenomenology and Wittgenstein's logic. That mixture represents what I am calling Flusser's street philosophy, and it constitutes also the basis of his later and better-known theory of *media*. Based on this blend of philosophy, he always tried to surprise the phenomenon in the exact moment immediately before symbolization takes place, that is, in the exact moment immediately before the words freeze it. We know that words are not things, words only allude to things. But Flusser's phenomenological philosophy tries to catch the things themselves just in the moment before they change into words.

This attempt is, in fact, impossible. We can call it a kind of horizon of the thinking, or a Kantian regulatory idea. We also can call it a poetical thinking, in consonance with Moles' idea of *Philosofiction*: poetry does not say the truth, poetry alludes to the truth. But Flusser's attempt reminds us of Coleridge's conception of "the willing suspension of disbelief." According to this conception, we, as fiction readers, need to suspend our disbelief, in order to allow us to dive into the text we read – but this willing suspension of disbelief is, in fact, impossible, or possible just as a fiction. As theoreticians and teachers, however, we develop a type of "suspension of the suspension of disbelief" in order to understand the process that initiates and allows that "suspension of disbelief." What Vilém Flusser proposes in his philosophy is something similar, but he takes it a step further. Perhaps we can call it "suspension of belief" – suspension of the belief in *maps*, maps being all of theory, philosophy and science. If, as we said, words are not things, then scientific words like theorems, axioms and hypotheses are not the world that they try to describe. It means that scientific words are indispensable, of course, but they are no more than fictional approximations. We need to suspend our belief that the words are the things, therefore, that the scientific words are the world. This exercise of suspension of belief would be necessary in order to learn to choose and to decide. This exercise of suspension of belief could be attempted only by an outsider, by a philosopher who lives outside of the academic ivory tower: only from that position could he really see that ivory tower and, therefore, he could really criticize it, in our case, the Brazilian ivory tower. Flusser philosophized not exactly *in situ*, but always *ex situ*. Nevertheless, it is not a negative standpoint, but

a provocative standpoint. Flusser considered Brazilian philosophy to be “shy,” restricted by ritual gestures around the three orthodoxies: Thomism, Marxism and positivism. Through his peculiar and aggressive way, he tried to “shake” it and to provoke Brazilian philosophers.

In philosophical jargon suspension of belief is better known as the Greek term *epoché*. For the Greeks it was a state of mental rest from which we neither assert nor deny. This state often leads us to stillness and it leaves us receptive to all the perspectives. Husserl revived the concept, turning it into the axis of his phenomenological reduction. Epoché, then, corresponds to the momentary suspension of judgment, so that one can try to see the phenomenon from a new perspective. In absolute terms, it is a trick of thought. Thought has no condition of suspending itself. As a consequence, thought needs “to be deceived” to open a new access to another truth. Thought needs to suspend itself or to try to suspend itself, although the task seems impossible. In Brazil, it sounded a little abstract and potentially confusing. We do not have a metaphysical tradition, but in fact a struggle between positivist and Marxist traditions. The work of Flusser had put those traditions under suspicion.

Suspension of belief, the Flusserian epoché, is another kind of knowledge, because it preserves the enigma as enigma and mystery. To learn we cannot undo the enigma, because to undo the enigma is a sin. To search for the truth, to make it a tool, is a sin. Flusser said it in his last book, *Gesten*. Sometimes he blended, like in this passage, the Marxist category of alienation with the religious idea of sin. So, his discourse had become richer but, at the same time, its reception had become much more difficult. The last chapter of *Gesten* addresses the gesture of searching, of research. It maintains that our present crisis is a crisis of science: a crisis of our gesture of searching. The gesture of searching or researching would be the paradigm of all our present gestures. However, Flusser contends that the gesture of searching *should not* be a model for other gestures because it does not search for anything that has been lost. It searches with indifference; does not set goals, does not ascribe values. The place taken by scientific investigation in our society would be, consequently, in contradiction with the investigation proper. The scientific investigation escapes from the problems that interest humankind and it is devoted to unimportant objects. Because those objects stay at a distance, they are “simply” objects, and humankind can become their subject, can get to know them in an “objective” way.

Why is this of interest in the context of Flusser as a Brazilian philosopher? Because, when he criticized the gesture of searching, he did it also in the Brazilian context. Brazilian philosophers, imprisoned in those three orthodoxies, had persisted to search “ahead,” had persisted in their compromise with the Western idea of progress, without seeing what was really important for Flusser: the whole life as an enigma. Flusser tried his best to force the emergence of new

perspectives. For him, Brazilian philosophers needed to search with desire and suffering, that is, with values, positive or negative ones. “Value” is, of course, a very loaded and, at the same time, vague concept, but Flusser did not unravel this vagueness. For him, knowledge is, among other things, passion, and passion is in its turn a type of knowledge. What is vaguer than passion? In consequence, what is vaguer than our knowledge? All this happens in the fullness of the human life, in its “being-in-the-world.” The gesture of a “pure” attitude, ethically neutral, is a concealed gesture. It is an inhuman gesture, it is alienation and madness. When it comes to know inanimate objects, this alienation is exclusively epistemological, and in this case it is simply a mistake. But when other things come into play, such as illnesses, wars and injustices, alienation turns into a criminal gesture. The investigator who approaches society as if it were an anthill, and the technocrat, who manipulates the economy as if it were a chess game, these two characters are criminals. Flusser said it in his second book, *A História do Diabo*, and in his last book, the one which was published when he was still alive, *Gesten*. He implicitly criticized all philosophers, Brazilian ones particularly, to be criminals, to be accomplices to Western thinking, the same thinking that brought us to Auschwitz and Hiroshima – in Brazil, to urban and northeastern misery. Vilém Flusser formulates a proposal to confront the apparatus, to confront technicism and to confront Brazilian “developmentism.” His proposal consists of attributing values, but via a philosophy *ex situ*, a philosophy written by an eternal and foreign foreigner.

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