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# In the Shadow of Post-History – Introduction
# to the Philosophy of Vilém Flusser[1]

### (Summary)

The topic of the presented work is – as the title implies – the philosophy of Vilém Flusser (1920–1991), a culture theorist from Prague, who was famous mostly due to his acute and at times prophetic theses from the 80's of the previous century concerning technical images. His theories, however, reach far beyond reflexions on media studies or communicology. Although the starting point of Flusser's analyses are phenomena related to media and communication, they constitute merely a 'vantage point', from which he views broader social and political phenomena. Ultimately, he is interested in culture as such, and within it a human being, human existence and condition, which in his opinion change under the influence of transformations within the culture itself, and in technology, which constitutes its essential part. It is thus truly a humanist thought, philosophical in the full sense of the word, which takes into consideration categories such as freedom, good or beauty. In addition, in the case of Flusser we are dealing with not only an experienced reflexion – originating from life, from the author's personal, sometimes tragic experiences – but also with one referring to life – willing to influence life (it can thus be said – making a certain simplification – that it is a some version of the critical theory, even if distant from the "original"). Moreover, it is a project which is unfinished – firstly, because its author died suddenly and unexpectedly, and secondly, because it was originally intended as such. Flusser never wrote philosophical treatises or scientific articles, expressing his thoughts by means of an essay, always open to the multitude of interpretations by a critical and conscious reader. In relations to the reader, he did not want to be a guide pointing to the only right way, choosing rather to be a journey companion, a nomad who was himself searching for the ultimate goal.

The above sketch points to the intention, which was driving the author in the course of writing this work: it is making the reader familiar with the philosophy of Vilém Flusser by reconstructing his main theses on broadly understood culture. The aim also includes an attempt to construct a kind of coherent story, an interpretative pattern, which will allow for reading Flusser's dispersed body of works as a more or less unified theory. The theory, in turn, is meant to – at least in theory – serve as a contribution to criticism of contemporary times and thus be

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pragmatic, not only historical in its nature. The dissertation's main problem comes down to the question: what categories, devised by Flusser as a result of thought on communication and media, have the biggest influence on the concept of the new society emerging in front of our eyes, and the vision of culture it is shaping? How does Flusser make use of those categories in relation to criticism and analysis of contemporary cultural phenomena? The problem needed clarification, which I did, making use of four specific questions. First, I ask from which intellectual (especially philosophical) tradition Flusser's thought derives. What "methodological paradigms" and styles of philosophizing/theorizing related to it are the closest to him, how does he use them, and how do they leave a mark on the whole of his philosophy? Secondly, I wonder which concepts and categories created as a result of thought on communication (analyzed in historical and ontological terms) are the most applicable in Flusser's criticism of modernity, and which of them have special significance for his vision of the culture of the future, expressed in the utopia of telematic society. Thirdly, I ask in what way, according to Flusser, the media dominant in given periods of our culture's history influenced human beings as individuals and the society and culture they create.

What media, in his opinion, are dominant today, how they determine us, and how our attitude towards them will influence our future? Fourthly, I am interested in what Flusser's diagnosis of contemporary society and its culture looks like? What constitutes the utopia of telematic society? What symptoms of such society's emergence can already be observed today? In other words: it is also a question concerning the topicality of Flusser's thought.

The presented dissertation is divided into four chapters according to the problem tackled. I start my analyses with combining biographical elements with a methodological characteristics of Flusser's works – it is about identifying the styles of philosophizing – possibly: the research paradigms – which he was using. At the same time, I define the visible sources of influence and theoretical inspirations. I start by brief introduction of facts from Flusser's life, his wandering, which left a mark on his works, as it resulted in the philosopher's adoption of the nomad category, not only to describe his own existence, but also the manner of philosophizing. It was also here – in his rich biography – that, in my opinion, one should search for his tendency to express his thoughts in a non-standard forms, styles and "genres": in an essay written in a metaphoric, poetic language, which (the essay) frequently changed into a kind of philosophical fiction. Among Flusser's inspirations I find, first the philosophical traditions/schools such as philosophy of dialogue, phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, Marburg school's neo-Kantianism, and Marxism. However, in each case he chooses only the threads of his interest, modifying or rejecting others. Obviously, he adopts the category of dialogue and its significance

from philosophers of dialogue – dialogue is the essence of politics, science, art; phenomenological description and lack of presuppositions are the core of his method, which should be supplemented with hermeneutic interpretation; he adopts certain problems from existentialists – for example freedom, sense or death; neo-Kantianism – above all as the philosophy of symbolic forms by Ernst Cassirer – constitutes a basis for Flusser's concept of culture as communication; Marxism, on the other hand, provided him – as he admitted himself – with an anthropological model, according to which a human beings are, to a certain extent, a product of their history and circumstances in which they find themselves. There are also other threads, for instance of religious nature – sometimes almost eschatological, which originate from Judaist tradition, as well as some motifs drawn from literature, for example prose by Franz Kafka or Robert Musil. I also try a more detailed approach to the methods used by Flusser – the above-mentioned phenomenology (hermeneutic) and linguistic analysis, which consists of etymology and translatology.

The second chapter is devoted to the presentation of Flusser's theses on communication, placing emphasis on those categories and concepts, which have the biggest significance in his philosophy of media, and at the same time, influence the shape of the whole theory of culture. I start by analyzing the concept of language as reality. Grasping this aspect of Flusser's philosophy of communication allows for understanding why, in his opinion, the dimension of communication in our reality is at the same time its cultural one. I also present here the essence of communication according to Flusser – its "natural" sources (human fear of loneliness) and transcendent goals (immortality), I describe the course of the communication process and introduce a number of terms important for it. First, the categories of dialogue and discourse as two forms of communication, which determine to a large extent how we can use different media and what kind of culture we can create thanks to them. The above reflexions are concluded with a reconstruction of Flusser's concept of culture as such, associated with communication, whose goal is to give our lives significance by breaking it from the nonsense of biological existence.

In the work's next part, I deal with Flusser's philosophy of media. It reveals, on the one hand, old categories and concepts adopted from thoughts on communication, but new ones also appear, being reflected in his diagnosis of modernity and the utopia of telematic society. Here, I take a closer look at Flusser's philosophy of media, which are subsequent stages of media development and accompanying cultural and existential changes of a human being. In respective paragraphs, I describe three main media (traditional images, writing, technical images) and the periods of domination of each of them. That part is preceded with attempts to reconstruct Flusser's definition of media and to provide explanations of the category of historiosophy, which

I have introduced. Next, I conduct a more in-depth and detailed analysis concerning the technical image, focusing on the term of apparatus and categories related to it (program, functionary).

The final, fourth, chapter is an attempt to reconstruct Flusser's diagnosis of the present, and the prediction concerning the future culture (both hidden in the shadow of the new epoch – post-history) from the perspectives of categories and concepts of philosophy of communication and the media presented in previous parts. His criticism of modernity is pessimist in its nature. The domination of one-directional (discursive) communication structures and putting our will at the disposal of apparatus – are, in simple terms, two most negative contemporary tendencies, which may lead to a tragedy similar to the one we experienced in years 1939–1945. Flusser, who lost his whole family in concentration camps, barely escaping with his life himself, warned us of the return of the Holocaust. He was trying to teach us that seemingly irrelevant details, various cultural practices, could have social and political significance. He was, obviously, aware that those dangerous contemporary tendencies do not necessarily have to fully materialize. A counter-balance for this unfavorable situation is the concept known as the utopia of telematic society. It is a vision of the first fully free and creative society, which in an appropriate (dialogical) manner makes use of tools (apparatuses) producing the most influential media of our time (technical images). The telematic society is, of course, only a potentiality, one of the possible ways, which we must ourselves decide to take. Finally, it turns out that Vilém Flusser's recipe is simple: our involvement in politics, science or art – which constitute culture as such – should take into account the essence of culture, its goal, which is – in fact – another human being.