BETWEEN LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY:

Vilém Flusser's nomadic games[1]

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> For, to declare it once and for all,
> Man plays only when he is
> in the full sense of the word a man,
> and *he is only wholly Man*
> *when he is playing.*

Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*[2]

Flusser and his *homo ludens* – introductory remarks

A philosopher from Prague, a Brazilian intellectualist, a Jewish thinker – we can try to use such labels to describe the identities (cultural and "disciplinary")[3] of Vilém Flusser (1920-1991). We could also add further labels. Nevertheless, exhaustion of meanings and a complete description are out of the question. Flusser, as well as his philosophy – its methodology, form and content – fall outside simple categorizations, are nomadic and in a constant journey. Even such an ambiguous and wide-ranging label as a "postmodernist" does not solve the problem. Flusser's philosophy is a "spectacle", a performance, a game. Siegfried Zielinski, a German media theoretician and the former head of Vilém Flusser Archive (first in Cologne, then in Berlin), writes that the philosopher from Prague, similarly as Friedrich Nietzsche, claimed that philosophy should rather be danced than written.[4] Indeed, the conceptualization of Flusser's philosophy resembles attempts at catching a dancer during dance – certainly, this is possible, but the dancer stops dancing then. Flusser's thought is similar: it shows its entire beauty in movement, and any attempts at stopping it and capturing in a concept must seem artificial.

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[1] This article is based on certain fragments of my book devoted to Vilém Flusser's philosophy (especially the first chapter presenting his inspirations, methodology and forms of his philosophizing).

[2] Fridrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Mineola, Dover Publications, 2004, Letter XV.

[3] I focus here solely on the "disciplinary identity" motifs, that is Flusser's use of not only diverse scientific and philosophical traditions – sometimes apparently contradictory – which he combined with literary inspirations, but also his drawing on literature, its various forms and devices, as a manner of describing the surrounding reality. Thus, I do not include here biographical motifs in which Flusser's way of thinking is also rooted to some extent. More on these issues, see: Anke Finger, Rainer Guldin, Gustavo Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser. An Introduction*, Minneapolis–London, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, pp. 1-26 and Gustavo Bernardo, Rainer Guldin, *O homem sem chão. Biografia de Vilém Flusser*, Annablume, 2017.

[4] Siegfried Zielinski, *Thinking About Art After the Media: Research as Practised Culture of Experiment*, in: *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, ed. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, London-New York, Routlege, 2011, p. 297.

The reflections in this article result from the effort taken to cope with this situation. I attempt to show Flusser's thought just as it was: in constant motion, always in-between – in this particular case between literature and philosophy. Certainly, this juxtaposition is solely intuitive and in the case of Flusser's thought it can be distinguished only theoretically, because both these domains are the unity in his writings. Nevertheless, in my opinion it is possible to point out certain moments – this would be the aforementioned attempt at capturing a dancer, if only for a while – which make his entire theory unique, attractive and still relevant. I consider Flusser a philosopher, a theoretician of media and culture, and the moments I have mentioned refer exactly to the "literary quality" of his writings. First of all, I bear in mind the fictional character of his texts, both the entire works (such as *Vampyrotheutis infernalis* or *Bibliophagus convictus*) and certain motifs, mini-stories, which can be found in almost each essay (I will discuss it in part II). Secondly, I am interested in Flusser's literary inspirations. I am going to focus particularly on the figure of Robert Musil in the context of Flusser's inclination towards creation of utopias (these issues are presented in part III, the final one). Thirdly, I discuss an essay as a regular form of his philosophical expression (even though I mention this also at the beginning, in part I). This form holds together the issues I have mentioned: on the one hand, it enables Flusser to maintain a subjective, sometimes even personal, tone of expression, the coherence of which is ensured primarily by the logic of vivid, metaphorical associations of the author (as in the case of a literary story); on the other hand, an essay allows Flusser to "conceal" his inspirations (we will not find footnotes or bibliography in these texts), and to juxtapose what is seemingly incongruent.

A game or play – these words probably describe best Flusser's philosophizing gesture manifested in intertextual, open, "mysterious" essays, combining fiction and utopia with theoretical reflection. Flusser is a Rortyrian ironist,[5] aware that there is no such thing as the "final vocabulary",[6] but everyone of us deals with a multitude of languages/discourses/narratives, the universality of which is only ostensible. On the other hand, we cannot give up attempts at describing the world and organizing the reality which surrounds us, which is our home. In view of this situation – the postmodern condition[7] – the only thing we can do (as philosophers-postmodernists claim[8] and Flusser agrees) is to write ever newer stories and hope that they will enable us, at least for a while, to find rest, the mainland among rushing waters of "liquid modernity."[9] The philosopher from Prague follows this trail in his essays and creates ever newer languages and meanings. For instance, he frequently refers to etymology of specific terms and brings to light the most unexpected meanings, forgotten long time ago or pushed onto the sidelines of history.

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[5] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 73-95.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 73.

[7] See: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[8] We can mention Rorty and Lyotard, already cited here, but also e.g. Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist, philosopher-essayist and a theoretician of postmodernism.

[9] See: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006.

Sometimes he builds the argumentation of the whole essay around such an etymological intuition – inviting the reader to this game once again, provoking and alluring him with the "aesthetics" of thoughts. In his utopia of a telematic society,[10] a kind of a "supplement" to the historiosophy of the media, Flusser frequently refers to Johan Huizinga's concept of *homo ludens*,[11] claiming that man of the future – an artist-programmer – will be exactly such a ludic creature. This man, liberated from the necessity to work and replaced in this sphere by *apparatuses*, will be able to devote oneself to play of receiving, processing and transmitting technical images in a dialogic network of technological links which is supposed to cover the whole world (the prophetic character of this thought, originating from the mid-1980s, is hard to overlook).

The philosopher from Prague not only predicted the emergence of this kind of a cultural figure, but he also tried himself to fulfil the conditions set out for it. Flusser was a "bard" of the 20th century humanities, a wandering poet, who claimed that knowledge could emerge and be transferred in an interesting manner, that it could be play – as understood by Huizinga – because culture, and thus also philosophy, are essentially play. The aim of Flusser's stories – they are actually stories, philosophical fictions – is to make the reader think and become open to paradoxes and untypical intuitions, they invite us not only to read them but also to get involved in a dialogue, a game. Hence, let us have a closer look at the rules of this game.

I. *Scribere necesse est vivere non est* – poetics of an essay

Flusser adopted the essay-based form of expression already at the beginning of his philosophical career – first, as a columnist of a literary supplement ("Suplemento Literário") to a daily paper "O Estado de São Paulo", then as an author of books and articles published on several continents. This manner of thought expression repeatedly brought him "enemies", especially in the academic world. Flusser's correspondence abounds in frequently heated arguments with reviewers and editors of journals (this lack of formal "scientificity" often caused troubles to him in the world of science[12]). However, it demonstrates not only the author's tenacity, but in certain cases it can explain his understanding of an essay. This is a short response of Flusser to comments of "Leonardo" magazine reviewers concerning e.g. lack of footnotes and bibliography in his text:

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[10] Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Minneapolis–London, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, pp. 79-167.

[11] See: Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London-Boston-Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

[12] Flusser did not have formal higher education. The studies in philosophy, taken up in 1938 at the Charles University in Prague, were interrupted by the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. He was a self-taught person. However, this was not an obstacle to his academic career in Brazil. On the other hand, this was a problem e.g. for the American higher education system. Flusser's correspondence with a representative of the American Philosophical Association is quoted and commented by Anke Finger in her introduction to a book *The Freedom of the Migrant*. Anke Finger, *Introduction: Vilém Flusser as Philosopher, Author, and Migrant*, in: Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant. Objections to Nationalism*, Urbana-Chicago-Springfield, University of Illinois Press, s. XVII-XIX.

> The reviewer of my text wants me to quote from the large literature on photography, which is exactly what I wanted to avoid, since I believe that the current writing on this subject, (especially Roland Barthes and his followers), misses the point I am driving. Indeed, I want the reader to think that I reinvented the wheel, although in an ironical way. Indeed, I have done some reading, (as the reviewer so kindly says), but that fact should come out from the text, not from pseudo-academic foot-notes. If there is anything an essay should avoid, (in opposition to a scientific treatise), it is precisely this sort of preciosity[13].

As we can see, Flusser rejects the aforementioned comments as inapt, because they refer to a scientific treatise, as opposed to an essay which is an ironical form assuming active participation of the conscious reader who will recognize irony and will decide to take part in this game with the author (we could maliciously add that in this particular case irony consists also in the fact that the reviewer did not turn out to be "the conscious reader"). Another difference between an essay and a scientific treatise is something we can call, after Flusser, a difference in sincerity. As the philosopher writes, an essay is existentially authentic, that is spontaneous, and stems directly from the writer's existence, in contrast to the academic style of expression characterized by "existential insincerity." A thought expressed in an academic manner is not the first spontaneous thought, but the second. After all, no one thinks in an impersonal way, whereas the academic style demands such a form of expression. In this sense, it is a result of an effort, translation of the first thought ("I think") into the second, impersonal ("it is thought").[14] On another occasion – in an essay with a telling title: *Scribere necesse est vivere non est* ("To write is a necessity, to live is not") – Flusser presents his writing even more emphatically and in a manner we could call literary or even poetic:

> I write to produce a text on the sheet of paper which is a mirror of the concrete gesture of writing. Now this gesture is an articulation of my concrete being-in-the-world. It articulates the dialectics of such a being namely that it is totally determined by the world and at the same time totally free within it. (...) The writer does not become concrete unless he writes a text, and the text is not concrete unless it is written by a writer. Therefore the text, if written in this attitude of concreteness, must mirror my being-in-the-world, because it is a conscious articulation of it. (...) The text will have to mirror the fact that I cannot and must not distinguish between subject and object of thought, of language, and of writing. (...) My task in writing will be calligraphic in the Chinese sense of

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[13] Vilém Flusser's correspondence with Lisa Bornstein, 13.12.1985, typescript, Vilém Flusser Archive, Corresp.60_LEONARDO_1_OF_2, p. 10.
[14] Vilém Flusser, *Essays*, in: *idem*, *Writings*, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-193.

the term: *to write as beautifully as I can, and in the most beautiful language I am able of, the clearest thoughts I am capable of, to make shine my world through them.* (...) My purpose in this will be to produce a text in which the reader will recognize my being-in-the-world. And, since the reader is with me in the world, a text in which the reader will recognize an aspect of his own being-in-the-world. In such a text there will be no sense in wanting to distinguish between the realm of the private and the realm of the public. Nor will there be any sense to distinguish between "poetry" and "science". Because there will be no sense in distinguishing between subject and object. (...) But to try to fulfill this difficult task, to try to write honestly, is more necessary than living. Because I cannot live, without seeking immortality, and immortality is continue to be in the world by being in it together with the uninterrupted chain of my others. Concretely speaking, there is no other immortality for the writer. Scribere necesse est vivere non est[15].

We have here not only Flusser's interpretation of the idea of writing, but also a perfect example of its practical application.[16] We learn that a text is a result of an involved gesture, an artefact bearing the author's hallmark, and even more: that the reader can "read" the author from the text, his being-in-the-world which can be referred then to the reader's own situation. In other words, the reader can recognize him- or herself in a text. This is an ambitious task, but – in view of the final words of the cited fragment – not the most difficult one. At the end of the fragment we read that to write means, *de facto*, if not to gain than at least to seek immortality. Searching for immortality in another person – in his or her memory – is a Judaist motif which can also be found in representatives of the philosophy of dialogue – a very important inspiration to Flusser. Hence, writing is a matter of life and death. However, this loftiness is not just a pose of the writer. First of all, these claims are written from exactly such perspective, with such commitment and in such a language. As Nietzsche – this master of philosophical fiction and poetic philosophy – would say, they are written with blood.[17] Therefore, any disciplinary or field distinctions do not make sense here. The language flowing through the author[18] does not know the difference between poetry and science. Anyway – Flusser adds – the reader is not a less important element of the creative

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[15] *Idem, Scribere necesse est vivere non est*, typescript, Vilém Flusser Archive, ESSAYS_8_ENGLISH, pp. 3-4.

[16] Certainly, this text is not free from some linguistic mistakes. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that this is an unedited, pure typescript.

[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 27.

[18] Flusser uses this metaphor – language as a river flowing through writers – in yet another context, writing about literature or text as such. As Roland Barthes and others before him, he also claims that "the author is dead". It means that the figure of an author as a genius inspired with a divine spark, creating *ex nihilo*, does not exist. Language, text and literature are merely consecutive variations, stages of a dialogue between successive generations of authors. As Flusser says, nobody gets a "virgin" language at one's disposal, nobody creates all words and grammar from scratch. Vilém Flusser, *Taking Leave of Literature*, typescript, Vilém Flusser Archive, ESSAYS_8_ENGLISH, p. 3.

process: it is the reader who ultimately completes the sense of a given work, without the reader every text is just a meaningless sequence of signs. Texts merely written are incomplete, are searching for Another: "all texts are outstretched arms trying, whether optimistically or in despair, to be taken up by another."[19] An essay as a personal and open form of expression perfectly suits this viewpoint.

Let us focus now for a while on one specific element of Flusser's essay, namely the language. As we could see in the fragments cited above, the philosopher from Prague sometimes uses the language which is almost poetic,[20] full of metaphors and allegories. Such a type of writing is again prone to the accusation of the lack of scientificity, made from – let us call it like that – a positivist perspective. Undoubtedly, this style is far from the linguistically precise philosophical treatises, hence the accuracy of conclusions is decreased. On the other hand, this style is somewhat imposed by the object of research – at least in the majority of cases – and then it becomes an advantage. Heading towards new and undiscovered areas of reality, as Flusser does, which are in a constant movement (developing), often requires the researcher to restrict his or her inquisitiveness to asking a question that has not been asked before (which is supposed to provide the basis for further study), but frequently demands also a "flexible" language. A perfect example of such a "fluid" object is the media which, by definition, are always somewhere "in-between" and "hide" as soon as we look at them from the theoretical point of view. Writing about the media – especially when we understand them broadly, as all forms and kinds of symbolisation (e.g. a language, an image) – must involve a "soft", visual, metaphorical language, because the media themselves precede comprehension; without the media it is impossible to think about… thinking. This is also visible when we try, how Flusser does, to write down a scenario for development of technologies (communication or other). We are always late in comparison to them. Flusser was fully aware of this problem. In *Does Writing Have a Future*, where he describes our attitude to new communication (digital) codes, rooted in thinking with the alphabet, he notices:

> To want to describe it [what is coming] is to want to force it into the old thinking, to show how what is coming necessarily comes from the old, to explain it in terms of the old. What is new about the new is its very indescribability, and that means that what is new about the new consists exactly in the absurdity of wanting to explain it[21].

"Indescribability" should be understood here as inability of expression by means of the discursive, rational, logical mind. In view of such questions about the media we are helpless, because when we try to answer them we are forced either to use the language of the media themselves (for instance, when we

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[19] *Idem, Does Writing Have a Future*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 40.
[20] Gustavo Bernardo even calls Flusser a philosopher-poet. Gustavo Bernardo, *Science as Fiction: Vilém Flusser's Philosophy*, http://www.brasa.org/wordpress/Documents/BRASA_IX/Gustavo-Bernardo.pdf, p. 1 and 4.
[21] Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

write about language or writing), or to make use of an old medium while describing a new one (e.g. writing about technical images).

A way to escape this vicious circle is e.g. to use a more "universal" language which replaces accuracy of description with interpretative openness, and which grants a language user more "fluidity" and flexibility towards the object of research. The language of metaphor and allegory is characterized by this "universality." Flusser writes straightforwardly about it, e.g. in the context of the language development problem: "I am about to express myself with the help of allegories, and this is because I am about to describe a situation that extends beyond the intellect."[22] With such "definition" of the objects of analysis, not only a metaphor as a tool for philosophizing becomes understandable – after all, we know from e.g. Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson that metaphors are not just linguistic embellishments, but they also constitute a cognitive and communicative disposition of our mind[23] – but also the poetic character of the language used. According to Flusser, poetry is a kind of a source of language, while poetic intuition is responsible for creation of words (Greek *poiéō*, from which "poetry" originates, means also "to create").[24] Therefore, philosophy tinged with poetry seems to be a proper tool for analysis of the reality unnamed yet (or not completely named) – including media or technological reality. In an essay *On Doubt* Flusser writes:

> Poetry is the way in which the intellect plunges into unarticulated chaos and manages to break through the chaos in question. Poetry is thus the limit situation of language, which is attempting to overcome itself with poetry. In poetry, language attempts to articulate that which cannot be articulated, to make the unthinkable thinkable, to realize nothingness[25].

This attitude matches not only Flusser's idea of writing, but also his concept of blurring the lines, in this case between philosophy/science and art. Poetry, this "noblest of the arts," has its epistemological goals; what is more: they have the primal character. In order to name something which has not been named yet, to turn nothingness into reality – as Flusser writes – we need poetry. "Art makes the invisible visible"[26] and in this sense it is the pursuit of truth, that is, according to Heidegger, "taking something out of its hiddenness."[27]

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[22] *Idem, On Doubt*, "Flusser Studies", no. 16, trans. Valentine A. Pakis, http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/16/vilem-flusser-on-doubt.pdf, p. 10.

[23] George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

[24] More on Flusser's philosophy of language, see: Vilém Flusser, *Language and Reality*, Minnneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2018 and Vilém Flusser, *Philosophy of Language*, Minnneapolis, Univocal Publishing, 2016.

[25] *Idem, On Doubt, op. cit.*, p. 28.

[26] Flusser refers here to the words of Paul Klee, a Swiss-German painter. Vilém Flusser, *"Battlefields" by Antonio Amaral*, typescript, Vilém Flusser Archive, ESSAYS_2_ENGLISH, p. 2.

[27] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 56.

II. Philosophical fiction

Nevertheless, the issue of the metaphorical character or "vividness" of Flusser's philosophy reaches much further. It does not pertain solely to the language of particular fragments of a text, but also to the whole essays and their collections. In some of his works, Flusser developed a characteristic kind of philosophical writing, called philosophical fiction.[28] Generally speaking, it consists in placing philosophical reflection in the domain of fiction. However, this is not fiction permeated with philosophical motifs in Camus' or Sartre's style – Flusser did not write novels or stories – but rather a kind of confrontation between philosophy and fiction. Perhaps the most distinct example of such writing is a book *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis,*[29] the main protagonist of which is a vampire squid, a kind of a deep-sea cephalopod.[30] The title "creature from hell" (which, *nota bene*, was little known at the time Flusser wrote this text) is a figure (literary, philosophical, biological) whose life stands in total opposition to the human existence, as it may seem *prima facie*. Drawing on the category of "someone totally different", the author systematically familiarizes man with the vampire squid, ultimately bringing them closer together and showing the reader some relevant and possible analogies between them.

Certainly, this kind of philosophizing may be criticized by researchers who place fiction definitely in the world of fairy tales and legends, contrasting it with scientific facts. Without doubt, the epistemic value of fiction is not so obvious as in the case of strict methodological practices, but in my opinion such value cannot be completely denied.[31] I do not include here an argument for fiction as a "scientific method" put forward from the perspective of literary studies according to which literature has certain cognitive inclinations, especially of the philosophical nature. After all, as I have mentioned before, our focus is not on such fiction here. However, Flusser notices that "hard" science also uses a kind of fiction and mentions a research hypothesis and a simulation as examples. There is "no thinking without hypotheses, no experimental praxis without simulations" – the philosopher writes.[32] Commenting on this thought, Gustavo Bernardo writes in Flusser's style: "»fiction« is a word, of course, but we can say that all words

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[28] Gustavo Bernardo, *op cit.*, p. 1.

[29] Two English language editions of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* have been published so far: Vilém Flusser, *Vilém Flusser's Brazilian Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, ed. R. M. Novaes, New York–Dresden, Antropos Press, 2011 and Vilém Flusser, Louis Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste*, Minneapolis–London, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

[30] Another example of Flusser's philosophical fiction is a book entitled: *The History of the Devil*, in which the author explores the history of the development of human civilization from the perspective of seven deadly sins. Vilém Flusser, *The History of the Devil*, Minneapolis, Univocal Publishing, 2014. Flusser wrote also essays describing a mysterious insect, bibliophagus, which feeds on... text. *Idem, Bibliophagus*, typescript, Vilém Flusser Archive, ESSAYS_2_ENGLISH and *Idem, Bibliophagus convictus*, typescript, Vilém Flusser Archive, ESSAYS_2_ENGLISH.

[31] In the context of cognitive value of a narrative as a kind of literary fiction, see: Heyden White, *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*, "Critical Inquiry", vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, pp. 5-27.

[32] Vilém Flusser, *Science Fiction*, "Flusser Studies", no. 20, www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hanff–science–fiction–en.pdf, p. 1.

are a kind of fiction."[33] Each word, sentence or text, that is human communication as such is only – or as much as! – our interpretation of reality, an attempt at conveying our thoughts, feelings and points of view, confining them to a linguistic framework which is conventional by necessity. Thus, the paradox lies in the fact that language – just like any other medium – is supposed to use general forms in order to say something about the particular, the detailed, the accidental and the idiosyncratic. This is apparently an unfeasible task. On the other hand, some people, including Flusser, claim that art or artistic (including literary) tools can help us in this case.

It is worth mentioning that science uses another specific kind of fiction apart from hypothesis and simulation – I mean a thought experiment on the basis of which it is probably the easiest to explain Flusser's philosophical fiction. Thought experiments (on the ground of science or philosophy) are conducted when for some reasons empirical verification is not possible at explanation of a given phenomenon. Generally speaking, in this case science needs fiction as a kind of "extension" of reality – fiction helps where reality does not reach. This issue looks similar in Flusser but, obviously, his thought experiments are carried out on a larger scale. For instance, in the above-mentioned *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* the author regards the life of the vampire squid (what is known about it and what Flusser imagines about it) as a kind of a model e.g. for the artistic activity of a human being and its future. This amazing book as a whole can be approached as a metaphorical clash between the human intentional world of culture and the deterministically conditioned world of nature. It is easy to guess that the conclusions drawn from this confrontation contradict the arguments for a definite opposition between the natural and cultural realities.

Thus, fictionalization of reasoning is supposed to help Flusser communicate something which is inexpressible in a "classical" discourse determined by exactness understood as logic and rationality. Hence, by referring to fiction, the philosopher tries to capture something truly intangible. If we return to the domain of Flusser's main interests (the contemporary culture and its media- and communication-related dimensions), it turns out that such steps are necessary. This is pointed out e.g. by Siegfried Zielinski in the context of media history writing:

> A history that entails envisioning, listening, and the art of combining by using technical devices, which privileges a sense of their multifarious possibilities over their realities in the form of products, cannot be written with avantgardist pretensions or with a mindset of leading the way. Such a history must reserve the option to gallop off at a tangent, to be wildly enthusiastic, and, at the same time, to criticize what needs to be criticized. This method describes a pattern of searching, and delights in any gifts of true surprises.[34]

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[33] Gustavo Bernardo, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
[34] Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, Cambridge-London, The MIT Press, 2006, p. 27.

The methodologically unconventional conduct of Flusser – manifested both in the content and in sometimes "fantastical" form – can be approached in exactly this manner: not only as pursuit of the goals previously set, but also as a journey during which these goals are defined. The philosopher–nomad travelling in this way is open to "true surprises" and treats them as "gratifications" and not as a reason to change his methodological approach.

III. Literary inspirations – Robert Musil and utopia

Flusser's thought was shaped not only by philosophers, but also by poets and prose writers. He read and admired or, as he said, found himself in the works of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke or James Joyce. He treated some literary works as "philosophical treatises" in accordance with the principle that ideas can be conveyed in various forms and that borders between particular branches of culture (e.g. art and science/philosophy) have only conventional character. For instance, he wrote about Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* that it was a supplement to Kafka's *The Trial*. In both cases we deal with a thesis that – using Kant's categories – pure reason is not in "contact" with practical reason. In Wittgenstein it is manifested by a claim that it is impossible to talk about anything which exceeds the world of facts confined within the framework of logical rules. In the case of Kafka this thesis takes on the form of a metaphor: man as a being condemned to absurdity of a situation to which there is no (rational) solution.[35] Similarly as Kafka's (Joseph) K., contemporary man has to struggle not so much with a specific problem which should be localized and overcome, but rather with the culture of "soft" objects (software) wandering feely among small (national) cultures, which renders delineation of borders (categorization) impossible. This is why, Flusser says, at criticism of culture we are no longer tilting at Cervantes' windmills, but we are rather besieging Kafka's castle.[36] We are standing in front of something we do not understand, what is mysterious to us, but at the same time all-encompassing – something which preoccupies us totally. Perhaps this is not a coincidence that Flusser refers to Kafka's *The Castle* in the context of apparatuses and the contemporary culture, and not to another, more acclaimed novel of the writer from Prague: *The Trial*. The fate of the protagonist of *The Castle* offers some hope (even if it is due only to the fact that the work was not finished). It is the hope that a clash with the mysterious and the unknown does not need to result in our (cultural) death.

In my opinion, however, when we talk about the literary inspirations which seem the most significant – at least in certain areas of Flusser's philosophy – we should mention primarily Robert Musil and his fundamental work *The Man Without Qualities*. I suppose that Flusser found Ulrich, the protagonist of this book, to be an ally in his essayist journeys. Or perhaps even more, because we can make a claim that

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[35] Vilém Flusser, *Groundless*, Metaflux Publishing, 2017, pp. 59-61.
[36] *Idem*, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

Ulrich was a kind of a role model for Flusser, a figure whose approach to life should be treated as an example to follow. In *The Man Without Qualities* we read about the main character:

> This urge to attack life and master it had always been clearly discernible in him, whether it had manifested itself as a rejection of the existing order or as various forms of striving for a new one, as logical or moral needs or even merely as an urge to keep the body in fighting trim. And everything that, as time went on, he had called essayism, the sense of possibility, and imaginative in contrast with pedantic precision; his suggestions that history was something one had to invent, that one should live the history of ideas instead of the history of the world, that one should get a grip on whatever cannot quite be realized in practice and should perhaps end up trying to live as if one were a character in a book, a figure with all the inessential elements left out, so that what was left would consolidate itself as some magical entity – all these different versions of his thinking, all in their extreme formulations against reality, had just one thing in common: an unmistakable, ruthless passion to influence reality[37].

Similarly, Flusser's "essayism" does not refer only to the reality itself, but also to the potentialities contained within it, which can be released sometimes only by relying on "a sense of possibility", by escaping into the world of fiction where "imaginative precision" reigns supreme. However, the ultimate goal of these efforts is to comprehend reality, to find one's place in it. Furthermore, in certain cases – as, for instance, in Flusser's utopian visions – the point is no longer the "reality of today" which is always "outdated reality", but the "reality of tomorrow." This is especially important if we consider the fact that the focus is here primarily on the contemporary media and technology which evolve much faster than the world of nature and constantly speed up.[38] It is clearly visible in the 21st century, at the time when what is a novelty today becomes a relic tomorrow, and when the opportunities offered by the reality exceed their comprehension by far.

From such a perspective, when Flusser created his media theory in the 1980s he did not content himself with criticism of the state of affairs at that time. In his book *Into the Universe of Technical Images*[39] (1985) he presented a specific concept of the future society and culture created by it, which he called the telematic society utopia. I will not reconstruct it here entirely, of course. I will just generally mention its three motifs which, taking into account the time when this concept was created, reveal certain prophetic qualities. The first motif refers to Flusser's vision of a technical image (all technologically produced visual representations – from the first photographs, through film and video, to computer-generated graphics

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[37] Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, vol. I, New York, Vintage Books, 1996, p. 646.
[38] Vilém Flusser, *The History of the Devil, op. cit.*, p. 124.
[39] *Idem, Into the Universe of Technical Images, op.cit.*

and visualisations) which, in his opinion, in the future shall replace writing as the basic medium of our culture in all areas. The point here is not only an image as the main tool of art, but also of technology, science and politics – "[t]hey will serve the game of visionary power."[40] Secondly, Flusser writes that future shall be dominated by the New Man. This will be *homo ludens*, that is an artist-programmer who will no longer be occupied with work understood classically (that is physical change in the tangible natural conditions), but with play, a game, a dialogic juxtaposition of symbols.[41] The combination of these two predictions results in the third one: the future structure of technologically developed states shall function on the basis of a network of relationships between individuals who will focus intentionally on production of information. Hence, this is a vision of an information society, a network society which appears as the "global brain controlled cybernetically through technical images."[42] I will not elaborate on these theses here, neither with respect to our cultural and technological reality, nor in connection with other similar – earlier or later – theories of other media and culture theoreticians. In my opinion, the insightfulness of this vision is obvious.

Certainly, Flusser's utopia should not be regarded as a prophecy. This is a certain thought experiment, exploration of possibilities. According to Flusser, realization of utopia depends both on external circumstances and on ourselves – the subjects of (post-)history.[43] We deal here with such thinking about utopia as can be encountered in Robert Musil's prose. In his *The Man Without Qualities* he writes:

> Utopias are much the same as possibilities, that a possibility is not a reality means nothing more than that the circumstances in which it is for the moment entangled prevent it from being realized – otherwise it would be only an impossibility. If this possibility is disentangled from its restraints and allowed to develop, a utopia arises. It is like what happens when a scientist observes the change of an element within a compound and draws his conclusions. Utopia is the experiment in which the possible change of an element may be observed, along with the effects of such a change on the compound phenomenon we call life.[44]

Obviously, such a perspective on utopia can be found not only in literature. Ernst Cassirer, a German Neo-Kantian philosopher, one of Flusser's masters – wrote years ago: "[t]he great mission of the Utopia is to make room for the possible as opposed to a passive acquiescence in the present actual state of

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[40] *Ibidem*, p. 135.
[41] *Ibidem*, pp. 85-86.
[42] *Ibidem*, p. 125.
[43] "Post-history" is one of the terms used by Flusser to describe the contemporary time. This term is connected primarily with technological change (the invention of photography and other apparatuses producing technical images) and parallel transformation of our cultural awareness (with respect to the political, artistic, scientific and other categories). See: Vilém Flusser, *Post-History*, Minneapolis, Univocal Publishing, 2013.
[44] Robert Musil, *op. cit.*, pp. 265-266.

affairs. It is a symbolic thought which overcomes the natural inertia of man and endows him with a new ability, the ability constantly to reshape his human universe."[45] Hence, utopias can be found not only in a literary fantasy form. Are the modern social contract theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Thomas Hobbes not such utopias, anyway? After all, these are certain attempts at a critical approach to the social reality. We deal here with normative claims as to how the political organization of the human society should look like, but they also provide a point of reference for researchers in social sciences (e.g. political science) or the humanities (e.g. philosophy).

As I have written before, Flusser predicts in his utopia that man of the future will be *homo ludens* – a conscious player. Formulating these claims, the philosopher from Prague tries to fulfil them at the same time. This is why he plays with theory, teases, trifles with and provokes the reader: "These utopian thoughts are themselves caught up in the delirium of play" – Flusser writes. "And so they hope to be received, changed, and sent on by the receiver in the same playful spirit."[46] At the end of his utopian vision, the author adds: prediction is impossible, because each prognosis obscures the future, covers it with residue of dubious speculations and excludes other possibilities. And the unpredictable cannot be predicted by definition.[47] Thus, Flusser – as Ludwig Wittgenstein almost a century before – orders us to abandon the ladder we have climbed thanks to him, and no longer prognosticate, but act.

The nomadic form – conclusions

Vilém Flusser's way of thinking is manifested in attempts – sometimes tentative, on other occasions spectacular – to implement the thesis he was strongly convinced of: art (including literature) and science/philosophy are two areas of culture that interpenetrate and complement each other. His theory of culture assumes not only that answers to questions posed by it can be found in cultural artefacts, but also that the search undertaken within its framework can and should by conducted together with and by means of these artefacts. We can make a claim that in this case Flusser's thought is a kind of a "reflection" of his life or perhaps an answer to it. After all, as an intellectualist, he himself had to struggle with the formal (institutional) framework of science which he did not fit in, ultimately choosing the nomadic "in-between" – namely between philosophy/science and art.

Flusser considered philosophizing to be a kind of a game, but at the same time this was the game "for everything" to him. In his autobiographical essay *In Search of Meaning* we can read the following:

> Language offers itself to me as a game, and I try to find its meaning. I did not
> find it, and I cannot even imagine or have a presentiment of finding it. It would
> be the end of the game. By the way, and this by accident, I produce. I publish,

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[45] Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Garden City, Doubleday Books, 1956, p. 86.
[46] Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, *op.cit.*, p. 104.
[47] *Ibidem*, pp. 159-161.

> that is, I try to change the world in which I find myself. I do it with many doubts and many reservations. At the same time, this publishing is my only justification to the others and to myself. And it is my only hope of not having lived in vain. Of having transmitted to others, as disoriented as myself, my search and the example of my failings. And, perhaps, some vague horizons as well. By this, I have perhaps contributed, though certainly in a problematic way, to my Brazilian surroundings. And who knows, this production of mine may paradoxically be a way to orient myself in others[48].

On the one hand, philosophy, work ("essayism"), language – all these are a game without an end and without a winner. It does not finish and it is impossible to indicate the victor in it, because there is not a criterion on the basis of which it could be ultimately adjudicated. All the criteria have fallen: God (Nietzsche), author (Barthes), grand narratives (Lyotard). Everything, each cultural involvement of ours, is nothing more than a "language game" (Wittgenstein). However, the other side of this story appears here, in which Flusser's optimism is detectable – these games can give us a sense of meaning. Not of their own accord, but because they are always directed at another human. As we remember: "all texts are outstretched arms trying (…) to be taken up by another." The nomadic form of Vilém Flusser's philosophy which takes liberally from the "non-philosophical" techniques is a reflection of the nomadic theoretical perspective in which the borders between particular culture areas have an arbitrary character. Nevertheless, this nomadism of style and thought is not concentrated on oneself, and in this sense it is not absolute. Its borders are delineated by another human who turns out to be the "ultimate" goal of the journey for the nomad from Prague.

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