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Does Translation Have a Future in the Post-Historical Society?

Researchers studying Flusser's work are faced with two apparently distinct periods: in the first period, while he lived in Brazil, Flusser developed his theory of language; in the second period, after his return to Europe, his theory of the media and post-historical society. Although Flusser didn't write much about the relationship between his ideas on translation and his media theory, there are clear connections between them. Flusser's theory of language and his communication studies are based on the same theory of the symbol. For Flusser, language is a system of symbols, and communication is also experienced as symbolization (*Sinngebung*). The progression of subjects happened naturally in Flusser, as he himself explained: "In a way, the question of the symbol has always occupied a central position in our thoughts. If our interest turned early to philosophy of language, it is because language was understood and experienced as a symbolic system, and if later our interest widened and now includes the field of communication, it was because the essence of communication, 'mediation,' is being understood and experienced as symbolization, that is, as '*Sinngebung* = give meaning.'" (Flusser 2007: 154-155, italics in the original).¹

In this paper, I intend to examine other confluences between those two periods of Flusser's thought, and point to some possible ways Flusser's view on language and translation can be applied to his conception of post-historical society.²

The Paradoxes of Post-Writing and Post-Translation

A key question that arises when discussing the role of translation in post-historical society is: will the predictions of the "end of writing" be fulfilled? Not that the end of writing implies necessarily the end of translation, if we understand the term "translation" in a very broad sense. Roman Jakobson, in his classic essay "On linguistic aspects of translation" (1964: 79-80), distinguishes three types of translation: intralingual translation or *rewording* (within the same language); interlingual translation or *translation proper* (between two different languages); and intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* (interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal signs). Still, there is no

¹ All quotations from Brazilian sources have been translated by me.

² This paper is abridged and translated from the fourth chapter of my Master's dissertation, *Vilém Flusser: a tradução na sociedade pós-histórica* [Vilém Flusser: Translation in the Post-Historical Society]. São Paulo: Humanitas, 2011. I would like to thank my sister Angela Tesheiner for editing my translation; my supervisor Lenita Esteves for her advice and useful suggestions; and CAPES and FAPESP for financial support.

doubt that an image-based translation – even if such images are based on a “text,” as indicated by Flusser – would be something totally different from what is understood nowadays as translation (or translation “proper”).

There is an implicit contradiction in the various written texts that affirm the end of writing, in the several books that herald the end of the book. Realizing this contradiction, David J. Gunkel (2003: 299) notes that “what a new technology is and what it will become is itself a product of the print media it is said to challenge and to be in the process of replacing.” A concept such as “cyberspace,” for example, is not something found empirically in the world, but something “[...] continually manufactured, mediated, and supported by a complex network of signifiers that includes science fiction novels, television programs, films, magazines, academic studies, technical papers, conferences, trade shows, comic books, websites, threaded discussions, blogs, and so on.” All we know about information technology is mediated by other forms of information technology. Thus, the object of investigation is already involved in the method of its investigation.

We have to recognize the paradox and pay attention to the circular movement that forms it. That’s what Flusser does when he discusses the future of writing. The book he devoted to this subject, *Does Writing Have a Future?* (2011: 3), begins with the strong statement that “Writing, in the sense of placing letters and other marks one after another, appears to have little or no future.” Flusser (2011: 4) acknowledges that such a topic could only be adequately covered by a “comprehensive book,” and jokes: “the crux of the matter is that such a book would be a book.”

In a letter written in 1990 to his friend Maria Lília Leão (2000: 18), Flusser states: “For a long time I’ve been thinking that the philosophical treatise (an alphanumeric text ‘on’ a particular topic) no longer fits our present culture. [...] But as I myself am a prisoner of the alphabet [...], I must content myself with writing texts that are pre-texts for images. The way to do it is to write fables, because fables are the boundaries of the imaginable.”

Although he considered himself a “prisoner of the alphabet,” Flusser was a pioneer in trying to use the new digital media dialogically. The *Vampyrotheutis infernalis* fable is the result of Flusser’s partnership with the artist, biologist and “zoosystematician” Louis Bec, who created computer images for the book. More than mere illustrations for the text, these images, a mixture of artistic creation and zoological taxonomy, establish a dialogue with the hybridity of the text. In *Angenommen: eine Szenenfolge* [Supposed: A Succession of Scenes], a book published only in Germany, Flusser describes twenty futuristic scenarios, philosophical fictions conceived as video scripts, in an attempt to expand his work to the audiovisual domain. He launched a headhunting initiative, challenging his readers to recode/transcode³ the proposed scripts to video images and get in touch with his publisher, *Immatrix Publications*. The first edition in Germany of *Does Writing Have a*

³ Both terms appear in English translations of Flusser’s books.

Future?, titled *Die Schrift* and billed as the first “no longer book” (“Nicht mehr-Buch”), included a floppy disk, in an attempt to establish a dialogue with the reader, who was invited to comment on or rewrite the text, and send the results to the author.

In *Does Writing Have a Future?* Flusser performs a phenomenology and archaeology of writing, discussing what is specific in the act of writing and what is the role of this gesture in the formation of culture and historical consciousness. He resumes his analysis, developed in previous books, of writing as linearization of thought and explanation of images, but adds a dialogic element when he says that “lines of writing direct ideas toward a recipient.” (Flusser 2011: 6). The hidden intention of writing would be addressing the other.

There is a strong contrast between *Does Writing Have a Future?* and the first book published by Flusser, *Língua e realidade* [Language and Reality]. In *Língua e realidade*, Flusser examines the binding of thought to language; in *Does Writing Have a Future?*, Flusser indicates the need to abandon this model, because thought is detaching itself from language and approaching calculation and image. In his early texts, he was already critical of the linearization of thought resulting from the predominance of writing in “Western” culture. In *Does Writing Have a Future?* Flusser (2011: 31) suggests that “Perhaps binding thought to language inhibited our extraordinary capacity for abstraction so that this capacity could only develop in the areas of mathematics and symbolic logic. Perhaps the surpassing of the alphabet will offer these capacities new avenues for development such as that of synthetic images.”

On the other hand, Flusser’s enthusiasm for language is still evident – “Language is certainly a high intellectual achievement, and the languages available to us belong to our greatest treasures” (2011: 64) –, which explains his pessimism regarding the ongoing changes: “For if the future brings a new code that relies less and less on linguistic codes and more on codes of calculation and computation, if the swell of speech that will then flood over us turns out to be no more than background noise for the new mode of thought, then we may well fear the loss of language, the precious legacy we have abandoned.” (2011: 67).

The probable survival of spoken language does not mitigate this loss, because, after the surpassing of the alphabet by computer codes, without the support of writing, the tendency will be the impoverishment of spoken language, as “spoken language is doomed to enter the service of new codes and to become background noise” (2011: 69).

Thought is ceasing to be an ongoing discursive process; it is binding to image and “quantizing itself.” The quantum structure of the new codes simulates the structure of our nervous system – a mechanical and chemical turning on and off of streams of electrons between the nerve synapses (2011: 145).

One of the aspects of the end of the reign of writing is the crisis of science. When science is perceived as one among other fictions, there is no point in distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction, and we conclude that reality is what we believe it to be. This is a belief that cannot be criticized, for in order to criticize what is there, another belief must come into play. “All critical reading must start from a belief that is not open to criticism. Without it, nothing can be criticized, nothing is legible.” (2011: 84). Flusser (2011: 85) states ironically that “With this, all criticism has reached its original goal, the Enlightenment is everywhere victorious, and there is nothing more to criticize or illuminate. Everything has become clear, above all that all criteria, value, and measurements are ideological and that nothing stands behind these ways of reading (appearances).”

Since there is no more need to read and criticize, the “fully enlightened conscience” can concentrate on creation. This new consciousness is cybernetic and playful, and “confers meaning.”

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser (2000: 11-12) emphasized the dialectical aspect of the struggle between image and text: “This raises the question of the relationship between texts and images – a crucial question for history. In the medieval period, there appears to have been a struggle on the part of Christianity, faithful to the text, against idolaters or pagans; in modern times, a struggle on the part of textual science against image-bound ideologies. The struggle is a dialectical one. To the extent that Christianity struggled against paganism, it absorbed images and itself became pagan; to the extent that science struggled against ideologies, it absorbed ideas and itself became ideological. [...] In the course of this dialectical process, conceptual and imaginative thought mutually reinforce one another. In other words, images become more and more conceptual, texts more and more imaginative. Nowadays, the greatest conceptual abstraction is to be found in conceptual images (in computer images, for example); the greatest imagination is to be found in scientific texts.”

However, in *Does Writing Have a Future?* Flusser (2011: 150) states that the change from alphabetic code to digital code cannot be understood through dialectics, but through Kuhn’s concept of “paradigm shift.” It is a sudden leap from one level to another, not a synthesis of opposites. If the changing of codes were dialectic, the preservation of writing would be possible, for in dialectics the earlier levels of consciousness can be absorbed, instead of simply ceasing to be. This is not the case: the new codes oppose the alphabet radically. This is the “formation of a new experience of space and time and of a new concept of space and time into which the old experience and concept cannot go.”

In spite of his pessimism about the future of writing, Flusser (2011: 154-155) speculated about the possibilities of recoding/transcoding or translating from the alphabetic to the digital world: “We probably will not be able to begin before we have developed a theory and philosophy of translation. We are very far from this. Still we can see recoding under way everywhere.” He

refers, for instance, to the recoding/transcoding of text into film, record, television program, and computer images, which allows scientific (logical and mathematical) text to become colorful and mobile images, in spite of the absence of an appropriate theory of translation. The development of a theory and a philosophy of translation would allow the transition from alphabetic to digital culture to become “a conscious step beyond current conditions of thought and life.” If that is not achieved, there is a strong risk of descent into “illiterate barbarism,” with the extinction of written language and consequent degradation of spoken language, which would be relegated to the role of mere servant of the new codes.

In the essay “Depois da escrita” [After Writing], written for a seminar held in Hessen, Falkenstein, in 1987, Flusser admitted that in *Does Writing Have a Future?* he tried to project a single current trend towards the foreseeable future: the change from linear to digital thinking. He is aware that he’s doing “caricatures,” exaggerating a single aspect and neglecting the others, but he does not see this as a disadvantage, since “caricatures allow you to see what characterizes the envisioned scene.” He adds that the “immaterial” consciousness emerging from this trend is not that new. It originated from research on calculus developed by Pascal, Newton and Leibniz, and reflected in various fields: Philosophy (Husserl), Psychology (Freud and Jung), Semantics (Saussure), Technology (Levi-Strauss) and Physics itself (Planck and Einstein). In this essay, Flusser says he does not believe that the new consciousness will annihilate the preceding one: “Digitization will not eliminate writing, as writing did not eliminate images and speech. The new consciousness will be, for a long time, a thin layer, poorly sustained, and settled on thick layers of historical, magical, mythical (and maybe even deeper) consciousness.” (Flusser 1987).

Thus, apparently, Flusser softened some of the statements he had made in *Does Writing Have a Future?* and re-introduced a kind of dialectics in the process of code change. He even quoted, in an abridged form, the passage from *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* that I have mentioned above, concerning the dialectics between text and image. The claim that the transition from alphabetic to digital code is a paradigm shift (and not a dialectic one) seems to contradict the admission of the possibility that the two kinds of code can coexist. Anyway, Flusser contradicts himself by admitting, in this seminar, the possibility of coexistence of the two codes, whereas in *Does Writing Have a Future?* he had declared that this would be “unthinkable” (Flusser 2011: 149).

Despite the tendency toward dominance of technical images, written texts will most likely survive, just as the mythical images continued to exist and to be worshiped by many during the period of textual dominance. In an essay about the end of the book, Gunkel (2003: 278) quotes Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*, in which Archdeacon Frollo, pointing from a printed book to the monumental cathedral of Paris, declares “Ceci tuera cell” (“This will destroy that”). In fact, the book did not destroy the Gothic cathedral; it merely displaced it as the principal mode of

human expression and the repository of memory. Similarly, the computer will not mean the complete end of writing, but the displacement of writing in its decisive role in the organization, presentation and storage of knowledge – a role that writing has occupied for more than five centuries.

In either case – whether digital thinking “erases” alphabetic thinking or whether we may witness the coexistence of both kinds of thinking – Flusser’s alert about the urgency of the development of a theory and a philosophy of translation from alphabetic into digital thinking is quite relevant.

Furthermore, we have to be very careful not to fall into the illusion fostered by some theorists, such as McLuhan, that computer codes exist independently of language. This concept is based on an essentialist vision of language, which was deconstructed by Derrida and Flusser himself, among other thinkers. Reflecting on this question, Gunkel (1999: 62-64) traces the genesis of the computer to a tradition of search for a universal understanding. The computer is indeed a language machine, whose fundamental power resides in the ability to manipulate linguistic tokens. The real beginning of computers goes back to the rationalist philosophers of the seventeenth century (Cave Beck, Athanasius Kircher, Francis Lodwick, Comenius, George Dalgarno, John Wilkins and, most important of all, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz) and their efforts to create a universal language – so aptly described by Umberto Eco in his book *The Search for the Perfect Language* (1995). The philosophy of Leibniz centered on two concepts which he saw as interrelated: the universal symbolism and the calculus of reasoning. He aimed to create an artificial, philosophical language, which would provide a rational protocol whereby all debate and controversy would be resolved through calculation, and to establish a universal writing that would be acceptable to all nations and cultures. Leibniz’s rational calculus would restore the linguistic unity that was lost with the fall of the tower of Babel. For Gunkel, the universal language constitutes the very genetic structure and fundamental program of cybernetic technology. It is only natural, then, that projects of a universal language should make use of computers. Among the projects informed by this linguistic perspective are the *machine translation* (MT), at least in its early stages, and other more recent projects of “post-linguistic communication” or even “post-symbolic communication.” According to McLuhan (1964: 80), “Today computers hold out the promises of a means of instant translation of any code of language into any other code of language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt by Bergson.”

An example of the so-called “post-linguistic communication” would be computer-mediated mind-to-mind connection or direct neurological interaction, facilitated by Brain-Computer Inter-

face (BCI) technologies, such as electroencephalogram (EEG) monitoring and implanted electrodes. However, the experiences with this kind of technology have revealed that it is extremely difficult to *interpret* the brain waves and discern what a person is thinking or even what her/his intentions are. In the end, these technologies cannot circumvent the problem of language, interpretation or translation; they merely relocate it from speech to brain waves. (Gunkel 1999: 77-79).

Among the experiences of “post-symbolic communication” is Jaron Lanier’s Virtual Reality. The central hypothesis behind this project is that, with Virtual Reality, translation would no longer be necessary, because it would be possible to create and display models of objects or even actions. Virtual reality would lead to a kind of interpersonal communication that would be facilitated not by the manipulation of symbols that refer to things, but by direct and immediate manipulation of the things themselves. (Gunkel 1999: 80-83). However, once again we are facing a Platonic-Aristotelian conception of language, according to which words are arbitrary signs that refer to things – an assumption that has been criticized by several thinkers, including Flusser, for whom translation is not based on the existence of a “thing in itself.” Moreover, even if we could accept this essentialist conception of language, the possibility of a “post-symbolic communication” would still remain doubtful. As Gunkel (1999: 83) suggested, quoting an essay by Simon Penny, “Virtual Reality as the Completion of the Enlightenment Project,” Virtual Reality cannot escape symbolic description, for the virtually simulated object is not identical to the object itself. The virtual cup is not a “real” cup. You cannot drink tea from a virtual cup. The cup is a representation, a stereographic image produced by a computer fed with *descriptions*. And these descriptions are themselves designed and programmed through the manipulation of symbols. Therefore, Virtual Reality is very far from escaping the limitations of symbolic description; it is produced by the manipulation of descriptive signs.

All of these projects deal with the diversity of languages as a problem to be overcome. Flusser’s writing technique, which makes use of self-translation and retranslation (Guldin 2001), is based on an opposite view, resorting to diversity as a creation tool. In his essay “Problemas em tradução” [Problems in Translation], Flusser rejects the theoretical efforts by Plato, Descartes, Kant and Marx to deny linguistic diversity. Flusser does not see Babel as a catastrophe to be repaired, but as a myth that reflects the actual functioning of thought and human language. Similarly, George Steiner, in *After Babel* (1975: 232-233) considers that “[...] the ripened humanity of language, its indispensable conservative and creative force lie in the extraordinary diversity of actual tongues, in the bewildering profusion and eccentricity (though there is no center) of their modes. The psychic need for particularity, for ‘in-clusion’ and invention is so intense that it has, during the whole of man’s history until very lately, outweighed the spectacular, obvious material advantages of mutual comprehension and linguistic unity. In that sense, the Babel myth is once

again a case of symbolic inversion: mankind was not destroyed but on the contrary kept vital and creative by being scattered among tongues.”

According to Kanavillil Rajagopalan (1998: 39), “all languages already show, in their own constitution, [...] a tendency to unlimited dispersion and hybridization.” Moreover, as Flusser had already observed, there is no sense in speaking of a primeval language from which the various languages would have evolved. If it is true that there are aspects in which linguistic diversity is a disadvantage, it is also true that innovation and change are elements that are intrinsic to language and give it richness. The centripetal and centrifugal forces, in Bakhtin’s conceptualization, are in constant struggle within language.

Dialogism and Multiculturalism

I find that I myself am a translation problem, that is, a multiplicity of systems to be translated among themselves into a metasystem.

(Flusser 2002: 194).

Considering the questions now raised by globalization and the so-called multiculturalism, Flusser’s perception of life as “a translation problem” proves to be of great relevance and importance. Living between languages, ethnicities and cultures is, nowadays, a fairly common experience, and the multilingual competence becomes a necessity. How to deal with so many different narratives, identities, experiences and languages?

Rajagopalan (1998: 40-42) notes that “The individual identity as something complete and stable has no practical use in a world marked by increasing mass migration, as well as cultural, religious and ethnic intermixing, on an unprecedented scale.” In a formulation that applies very well to Flusser’s theory and experience of translation, Rajagopalan proposes that the identity of an individual can only be constructed “in and through language,” implying that language itself is a changing, dynamic phenomenon. “In other words, the identities of language and individual have mutual implications. This means that such identities are always in a state of flux.”

Stuart Hall (1992: 310, italics in the original), another scholar who studies the dynamics of identity and culture, claims that “Everywhere, cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed, but poised, in *transition*, between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and which are the product of those complicated cross-overs and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world.”

Hall contrasts “Tradition” – the attempts to restore former purity and recover the unities and certainties which are felt as being lost – with “Translation” as understood by Kevin Robins and Homi Bhabha – the acknowledgement that identities are exposed to the play of history, politics, representation and difference. Hall (2002: 87-89) doesn’t agree that identity in globalization is destined to end up either returning to its roots or disappearing through assimilation and homogenization; in a similar way, Flusser rejected both a return to the past and the ideas of assimilation or homogenization. Flusser found the antidote to homogenization and massification in the process of creating new information through dialogue, just as Hall sees in “Translation” and in the “translated men,” who “must learn to inhabit at least two identities,” another possible future, potentially more creative.

There are certain affinities between Flusser’s dialogism and the quest undertaken by thinkers like Homi Bhabha (1990) and Edward Soja (1996) of a “Third Space” as a locus of interaction between self and other, native and foreign, global and local – neither an idealized globalist notion of multiculturalism, which neutralizes differences, promotes a supposed consensus and at the same time destroys minority cultures, nor a chauvinistic localism.

In an interesting essay on Flusser, Christopher Larkosh (2008: 6) discusses the problem of cultural intersections: “In this dispersed transcultural prism of often contrasting global border regions, one might come to the realization that perhaps the most serious danger to cultural diversity is the limited perception that only a single, primary border lies on the horizon, or that one is always on one side of it or the other.”

Flusser referred to this problem in *Bodenlos* (2007: 68): “Once one’s own culture has been transcended (that is, in the situation of groundlessness), one starts to hover over a complex set of various cultures, and one sees oneself hovering in this way. This implies problems on various levels. For example: one sees cultural intersections, and abysses between cultures, and sees the various dynamisms that make cultures intersect, distance themselves from one another, and devour one another.”

In this dynamic universe of complex relationships between languages and cultures, translation becomes for Flusser the antidote to the apparatus, to authoritarianism based on the exclusion of the other. In the words of Seligmann-Silva (2009: 157), Flusser “cultivates multilingualism in response to the shock of the exterminationist monolanguage”. Flusser’s response to a fascist world dominated by apparatus is dialogue, shifts between different models, nomadism in the broadest sense: he was a nomad moving between different countries, languages, cultures, and models of thought. Flusser’s view of life as translation, of life between multiple languages, can help us to better understand the complexities of today’s world. It can help us orient ourselves

better in it, through the creation of alternative cartographies, more sensitive to the various nuances, contrasts and overlaps.

Translation as Transcendence of Models

In “Da tradução” [On Translation], an essay published in the journal *Cadernos brasileiros*, Flusser (1968: 74) observes that language problems are central in the current philosophical thought, to the point that, in a sense, this is what characterizes our time. Language occupies nowadays a prominent place in philosophy because “it is in the form of language that we sense the world; it is in the form of language that we give it meaning, and language is the model through which we act upon the world.” This is a condensed formulation of the ideas developed by Flusser in *Língua e realidade*, but here he emphasizes the connection between “language” and “model.” The existence of different languages implies that “our thoughts manifest themselves in different ways. We sense the world in different ways. The world has different forms of meaning for us. We act upon the world through many different models.” (1968: 76).

This apparently obvious fact only came to be realized in the context of contemporary philosophy. All classical philosophy clung to the idea of “*one* human reason” and “*one* reality.” Everyone was supposed to think alike. Of all the religions, only *one* would be real; of all cultures, only *one* would be universal; of all knowledge, only *one* would be definitive; of all values, only *one* supreme. “The monistic bias persisted, despite the obvious contrary evidence, because when we abandon it we feel extremely uncomfortable. If I admit the diversity of forms of thought, the diversity of insights and models, and if I admit their equivalence, I am assuming that, in some ways, the differences between me and my peers are insurmountable. I’m not saying (mind you) that no religion is true, but that all may be true in their context. I’m not saying that no culture is universal, but that they all have the justified aspiration to universality. I’m not saying that no knowledge is valid, but that all kinds of knowledge are valid in their own model. I’m not saying that there is no value, but that all values are valid for their respective structures.” (1968: 76-77).

Flusser (1968: 78, bold in the original) asks how it is possible to be aware that we are confined to a model, and states that “The admission of diversity and equivalence of languages takes place beyond all languages, in a way. It takes place in the space between languages and beyond languages referred to by the term **translation**. The problem of translation is therefore the problem of transcendence, of abandonment of the prison, of being beyond all models. In other words, it is the problem of freedom.”

Translation is therefore the transcending of models of reality. This transcendence is not absolute; it is limited, to a certain extent, by the mother tongue: “I am a prisoner of a model of reality (of a language). The model imposes on me the forms of my intuition, the categories of my knowledge, my values, and shapes my actions and my sufferings. But through translation I can transcend my model and contemplate it from outside. The possibility of translation is my freedom. The limitation of the possibility of translation is my conditioning. I am free to the extent that I can translate, and determined to the extent that I cannot translate. In translation I am beyond several models, and can choose among them: I am free. But in translation I am inside a model (although larger), and can choose only between a limited number of models: I am determined.” (1968: 79-80).

From the limited transcendence offered by translation, you can return to the initial model and act on it, change its structure. Thanks to translation, language is still a prison, but a malleable prison, which can be modified. The changes we have introduced in our prison are evidence of our passage through it, and provide a way to immortality, to the extent that they enable us to participate in “future conversations.” (Flusser 1968: 80-81).

Flusser (1968: 81) concludes the essay by aptly summarizing his view on the historical, ontological and epistemological importance of translation: “In short: this is the reason why the contemplation of translation characterizes the era in which we live: it highlights the problematic of reality, it emphasizes the relativity of all models that seek to understand it, it makes such models transparent, and it defines freedom as a choice between models that were made transparent.”

More than twenty years later, Flusser will again address the problem of transcendence of models as connected to translation in his essay “Pontificar” [Pontificate], published in Brazil in the anthology *Ficções filosóficas* [Philosophical Fictions], in 1998. A footnote explains that the text was written in January 1990; it belongs, therefore, to Flusser’s final period. In this essay, Flusser discusses the concept of translation with a very broad approach, covering both translation itself and intersemiotic translation, in Jakobson’s terminology.

Flusser begins the essay by asking with what right we translate *há* as *there is*, or *il y a*, or *es gibt*, and where we are when we do it. He admits that there are intersections between languages, but reiterates that their various nuclei are separated by abysses. What justifies jumping from one nucleus to another?

This is a crucial question in today’s world, when we are facing the problem of high specialization in all scientific fields. The Newtonian, unified model that provided the explanation for our world until the nineteenth century has crumbled, and now we are forced to split up the world into three different orders of magnitude: “[...] the *big order of magnitude*, where the Einsteinian rules are valid and the astronauts wander; the *medium order of magnitude*, where the Newtonian rules still

apply and where we are born and die; and the *small order of magnitude*, where Planckian rules are valid and nuclear power plants explode” (1998: 198, italics in the original).

The concepts belonging to each of these orders are hardly translatable into the other. And this example is only one among many that could have been used to describe the abysses created by the specialization of knowledge: there are abysses between verbal and visual discourse, between the algorithms of scientific theories (or even musical compositions) and the “national” languages, and so on. Translation “is becoming again an epistemological and existential problem of the first magnitude” (1998: 197). Flusser calls the translators “pontiffs,” from the Latin word *pontifex*, which literally means “bridge builder” (*pons + facere*), and says that they are experts in “leaping across the abysses.”

Then Flusser discusses the possibility of building devices that automatically translate words into images – as electronic intermixers that translate images into sounds and sounds into images, or artificial intelligence that translates objects into algorithms. The problem is: where in the universe would be located such devices? The answer that they would be located in a “meta-universe that encompasses all universes” is not satisfactory, which Flusser explains based on his conception of language and translation: this is not possible, in the first place, because “every universe from which I translate is a meta-universe of the one into which I translate: if I translate *há* for *there is*, the Portuguese universe is a meta-universe of English, and includes such a universe (which proves the imperialism of all universes)” (1998: 199, italics in the original). That statement echoes what Flusser (1963: 138) had already written in his first published book, *Língua e realidade*: “Each language includes in its universe all the other languages through the method of translation.” The second reason why the “pontiff-devices” couldn’t be located in a meta-universe that encompassed all the universes is that “such meta-universe would have to be composed by situations like *há* implies *there is*, implies *il y a*, implies *es gibt*, or vice versa.” (Flusser 1998: 199). So that universe wouldn’t be a “discursive” one, and hence it wouldn’t work for discursive devices.

Another kind of pontiff is needed. But “how to pontificate, when the relationship between universes is so confused?”, asks Flusser. Giving up is not an option, because “thinking and translating are synonymous.” In his poetic and paradoxical style, Flusser (1998: 200) insists: “although pontificating is perhaps impossible, it is indispensable.”

Flusser resolves the aporia by quoting the school maxim that translations should be “as faithful as possible, as free as necessary.” The competence of each language limits fidelity (“faith”) and imposes freedom. This is what allows Flusser (1998: 200) to specify “the ontic place of the future pontiffs”: they will be seated “at the extreme boundary of faith, where freedom and necessity co-implicate each other.” In other words, future pontiffs will be sitting at the boundary between order and chaos.

Flusser (1998: 200) concludes the essay by alluding to the mystery of the “sacred,” which many ideologies associate with language. The Jewish Cabalism in particular considers that the spiritual exile (*galut lebekebinâ*) is dispersion of words. Nowadays, as “we are necessarily multilingual, the ‘sacred’ is in the abyss between words. In that striking silence that calls us to pontificate. [...] Pontiffs/bridge builders are urgently needed.”

Negentropic (Post)-Utopies

Hovering over languages and models, Flusser observes the world from a privileged non-place, a sort of Borgian Aleph, a focal point that only exists because it is the junction of all networks that constitute his “self.” Flusser projects a utopian world in which everyone is *Bodenlos* and hover, like him, over languages and models.

Haroldo de Campos, in one of his last works, argued that we now live a time of loss of utopian perspective and decline of the avant-garde ethos, and called attention to the replacement of totalizing utopian projects with a “pluralization of possible poetics”: “Faced with the monological pretension of the one word and the last word, faced with the absolutism of a ‘final interpretant’ that blocks the ‘infinite semiosis’ of sign processes and hypostatizes itself in the messianic future, only provisional syntheses are presently known, and the only utopian residue that can and should remain is the critical and dialogical dimension inherent in utopia.” (Campos 1997: 269).

In this post-utopian moment, translation has become “indispensable critical apparatus.”⁴ Campos (1997: 269) refers to Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*, or “now-time,” by remarking that “Translation – seen as a practice of reflective reading of tradition – allows to recombine the plurality of possible pasts and make it present as difference in the *hic et nunc* singularity of the post-utopian poem.”⁵

In the post-history envisioned by Flusser (2011: 150), images produced with digital codes are present everywhere at the same time and “can always be called into the present at any time, even in an unthinkably distant future.” The world is no longer experienced as a linear sequence of events, but as context of realization of virtualities. As a result, we are experiencing a reversal of time, which no longer flows from the past toward the future but rather from the future toward the present. This vision of a future that “turns into multidimensional compartments of possibilities that unravel outward toward the impossible and inward toward an image realized in the pre-

⁴ “um dispositivo crítico indispensável”.

⁵ “A tradução – vista como prática de leitura reflexiva da tradição – permite recombina a pluralidade dos passados possíveis e presentificá-la, como diferença, na unicidade *hic et nunc* do poema pós-utópico”.

sent” and of a space that “is just the topology of these compartments” differs from Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*, but it is certainly similar in its radical and dramatic shattering of the “continuum of history” in multiple fragments that can be freely combined by the new *Homo ludens*.

In his essay “*Double-Bind: Walter Benjamin, a tradução como modelo de criação absoluta e como crítica*” [Double-Bind: Walter Benjamin; translation as a model of absolute creation and criticism], Seligmann-Silva (1999: 57, italics in the original) cleverly relates Benjamin’s analysis of the technical reproducibility of works of art to translation in today’s society, and draws very interesting conclusions: “With the possibilities of reproduction and, more than that, of *synthesizing virtual spaces*, the revolution initiated by technical reproducibility has expanded its reach to such an extent that can also be understood in terms of an expanded theory of translation: more than ever, the notions of uniqueness of the art objects and of belonging to a tradition have been called into question. [...] There is no longer room for limits on reproducibility: translation and original are just two links in a chain of new translations and other ‘originals.’ [...] today, more than ever, the traditional notion of representation has been shaken. Poly-translation seems to have reached such a stage that *the very paradigm of translation is gradually ceasing to make sense*. The desire that Benjamin discerned in the masses to bring everything closer (GS VII: 355) reached, thanks to television, the ubiquitous electronic ads, the internet etc., such a point that the very notion of *passage*, of transition from one point to another, of *oscillation*, that characterized the view of being as *Über-Setzung* gradually ceases to dominate. *Translation exists only in the realm of difference; rather: in the space of continuing differentiation*. Extremely increased circulation and the synthesis of virtual realities in the *pixel* of the computer and television screen eliminate the rejuvenating interchange of differences.”

In Flusser’s works, we can find an optimistic answer to this problem – an answer that involves dialogue and translation. The irreversibility of entropy was always one of Flusser’s biggest concerns. One of the negentropic solutions he proposed was to gather exceptionally improbable and highly informative moments and, through dialogue, collect and explore them. Entropy and the consequent end of translation are almost certainties, but dialogism opens other possibilities. Since language is shaped by both centripetal and centrifugal forces, dialogue can keep plurality alive. Douglas Robinson (1991: 106) sees Bakhtin’s heteroglossia as an “internalized Babel” and the translator as a person who has been “somatically polyphonized, and then has trained himself in the art of Maxwell’s Demon, sorting mixed molecules into two jars, hot and cold,”⁶ that is, someone able not only to feel the richness of heteroglossia, but also to sort out “the interjostling words and phrases into separate languages.” This discussion can be extended to Flusser’s telematic net – if we see the translator’s task as one of “guarding” the materiality, individuality and

⁶ It is curious that Robinson has used one of Flusser’s recurring images, that of Maxwell’s demon fighting against entropy, to refer to translation.

uniqueness of each language, and if we understand translation as criticism. Then we would have a translator-imaginer, at the extreme limit reached by abstraction, in the zero-dimensional universe, fighting against entropy.

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