

Introduction: Music and Sound in Vilém Flusser's Work

“Music is pure beauty. Music is the articulation of reality. [...] Music is the ultimate argument. After music, nothing more can be said. And what cannot be said must remain silent. Music dissolves God and the Devil; it annihilates both. Every argumentation and dialectic is overcome and made meaningless by music; music puts an end to them.”

Vilém Flusser, *A História da Diabo*.
Translated by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, 7.1.2.2

The above quote might surprise many Flusser scholars, particular those unfamiliar with the period of his early writings in Portuguese in the 1960s, where the quote is taken from. Music and sound, have not been considered central themes of Flusser's oeuvre and the resulting discourse around Flusser in areas such as media theory and media philosophy, communication studies, image theory and visual culture, architecture theory, design theory and migration studies, amongst others, reflect the diverse areas in which Flusser's ideas have taken root, with the notable absence of the fields of music and sound.

Yet unbeknown to many Flusser scholars, Flusser did in fact write about music and sound on occasion. These writings, far from being of a trivial nature, indicate that music carried a significant importance in Flusser's thought, as demonstrated in the quote above. Due to the vast volume of Flusser's work which is still currently unpublished, and not yet translated (most notably from his two major languages Portuguese and German into the international language of English), Flusser research is in a constant state of flux due to the limited accessibility and multi-lingual nature of his texts.

This issue came about via the kind invitation of Rainer Guldin to collect work from researchers interested in the musical facet of Flusser's thought. We would like to offer our deep thanks for this invitation. We saw this not only as an opportunity to compile essays from researchers who were dealing with Flusser, music and sound in their work, as is traditionally done in an academic journal, but also as a chance to use the format of an online journal to show other media – sound, video, images (to be described in following) – related to Flusser's work. It was our endeavour to show writers, researchers and artists in dialog, in a Flusserian sense, with his body of work.

Inspiration for this issue was sparked by the discovery in the Vilém Flusser Archive¹ of two

¹ The Vilém Flusser Archive is situated at the University of Arts (UdK) Berlin under the direction of Professor

unpublished manuscripts by Flusser that explicitly treat music - “Na Musica” and “Na Musica Moderna”. These two essays are taken from a lecture series Flusser held under the title “The Influence of Existential Thought Today” at the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy, São Paulo in 1965. Read in relation to German texts by Flusser on music, which have been published such as - “Kammermusik” (Chamber Music), Chapter 19 in “Ins Universum der technischen Bilder” (Into the Universe of Technical Images) and “Die Geste des Musikhörens” (The Gesture of Listening to Music) – these disparate texts can now be considered in relation to one another. Other scattered references to music can be found in various essays, collected in the appendix attached below.

The recent surge of translations of Flusser's work from Portuguese and German into English have greatly helped in allowing his work to reach a wider audience. These cross-translations allow for researchers of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to access Flusser's ideas – this becomes increasingly acute when the primary texts on a given subject are as limited as they are with music and sound. Therefore, Rodrigo Maltez-Novae's consequent translation of “On Music” and “On Modern Music”, and indeed his translation of “The History of the Devil” which contains passages on music, become indispensable for the enquiry and for opening up of Flusser discourse to encompass all works, particularly from the Brazilian period in the 1960s up until his death in 1991. The text “A História Do Diabo”, although also existing as a German text under the same title “Die Geschichte des Teufels”, exemplify a familiar Flusserian trait of sharing a title, but in fact containing substantially different texts – notably, the passages mentioned music which appear in the chapter on “Pride”, are much longer and more elaborately detailed in the Portuguese version compared to the German version.

One can note that between 1961 and 1965 were perhaps Flusser's most intensely prolific years of production. In this period, he wrote four monographs (one with 355 typescript pages), twelve courses (similar to the one, in which “Na Musica” and “Na Musica Moderna” appear and some of which were intended to be published as books), fifty-six essays for periodicals and academic magazines, plus several self-initiated essays that remain unpublished. The bulk of this production was in Portuguese without subsequent versions in German. This could account for the discrepancy between how Portuguese readers and German readers view Flusser's work.

The question of how to read Flusser's writings on music still remains, standing as they do, somewhat anachronistically amongst his larger body of work. His texts on music, do not convey the intention to be understood as musico-historical or musicological analyses. Flusser was not attempting a historical or aesthetic analysis of music with the intention of contributing to an

international discourse on music. Rather, his writings on music can only be read and understood within his own philosophical project, how they fit within his own larger project on language philosophy, the philosophy of mind, specifically the Western mind, and his media and communication theory.

As mentioned, Flusser's writings on the theme of music and sound have been collected in the appendix attached below. In the spirit of continual development, this list is not intended as exhaustive and contribution to the gaps of knowledge from other Flusser scholars is strongly encouraged.² If we observe Flusser's work as a whole, music was a leitmotif to which he repeatedly returned, even if these returns were brief, scattered and obscure in appearance. Yet, as a leitmotif, it forms a continuum between his first themes, since it is a subject that is present from the first texts of the 1960s until the very last ones of the late 1980s. The contributors to this issue of *Flusser Studies 17 – Music and Sound* refer mainly to these texts. The texts form a common basis, given the limited number of texts by Flusser on this topic. Yet each contributor uses these ideas in his or her own constellation of thoughts, examining music and sound with various focii in Flusser's work. Music, although occurring rarely, appears to occupy a privileged place, as noted by the authors of this issue. The meaning and signification of music caused a variety of interpretations.

In her article “Between Representation and Projection: Music in Vilém Flusser's Work”, Marta Castello Branco looks at “pure music” as representative of the mathematical-logical structure of thought. Yet, by resisting figurative representation, “pure music” reveals a development of Western culture of abstract mathematical thought, the same type of thought, which gave rise to machines and apparatuses. Thus, computers that project onto human senses and “pure music” as expressive of mathematical thinking can use projection as a creative possibility. She links Flusser's concept of projection to his concept of “pure music” and in her examination of “Kammermusik” (Chamber Music), explores this musico-mathematical metaphor within the model of a telematic society described by Flusser.

Paulo Chagas in his article “Creativity with Apparatuses: from Chamber Music to Telematic Dialog” focuses on Flusser's ideas on creativity with apparatuses in relation to communication within telematic society. Reading Flusser's notions of music against the information society of technical apparatuses, he looks at music technology and examples from post-war electronic and electroacoustic music. Flusser's thought is expanded upon by introducing Walter Benjamin's notions of technical reproduction and Katherine Hayle's notion of the post-human to the discussion of music in composition, performance and listening to music. The telematic dialogue

² Researchers are invited to email the authors with further references missing from the list, at anniegoh@udk-berlin.de.

of technical images discussed by Flusser in *Chamber Music* is brought up to date in a contemporary discussion questioning conceptions of creativity within electroacoustic and digital music.

Focusing on the two texts “The History of the Devil” (1963) and “Into the Universe of Technical Images” (1985), Rainer Guldin's article ““Making music with imagination”: On the relationship between music and mathematics in the work of Vilém Flusser”, looks at the complex dialectics of sound, number, image and word as well as at the relationship between hearing and seeing. Despite the twenty-two years in between the dates of these two texts, Guldin illustrates the inner coherence of Flusser's oeuvre. In dealing with Flusser's notion of the technical image, Guldin identifies an all-encompassing synthesis of many diverging aspects of Flusser's work.

Applying methodologies from the relatively young field of sound studies, Annie Goh searches for the dimension of sound in Flusser's work in her article, “The Dimension of Sound in Flusser”. Her two-fold approach involves firstly a dissemination of three (German) texts by Flusser on music, “Chamber Music”, “The Gesture of Listening to Music” and “Hörigkeit/Hearing Aids” to examine how Flusser used music and sound in his thought, and secondly an examination of Flusser's thesis “Crisis of Linearity” which largely ignored sound. With a focus on the “Crisis of Linearity” as an epistemological thesis, she uses the commonly noted dominance of vision “ocularcentrism” from the field of sound studies to critique Flusser's visual focus on his thesis and assess its contemporary relevance once more.

In the spirit of Flusser's concept of “Neue Einbildungskraft” (new imagination or new power of imagination or sometimes called by Flusser himself “techno-imagination”), we are very pleased to feature some artistic works inspired by Flusser's ideas. The two recordings of orchestral compositions by Gustavo Brinholi “O Sete Teso” and “O medo do Demo” and his accompanying text show how a series of coincidences led a Brazilian musician with European origins living in Germany to discover and find continued inspiration in Flusser's work. The video of a computational-art installation by Alberto de Campo, Hannes Hölzl and students entitled “Varia Zoosystematica Profundorum – Experimental Studies in Deep Sea Communication” was inspired by Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec's “Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis” and confronts the strangeness of the unknown in human and non-human worlds. A sound piece by Constantin Engelmann entitled “auditory projections” explores the perception of sound in time from the threshold of recognisable speech from recorded voice shifted to a gesture of its musicality, to mechanical repetitive phrases modulated by the discrete sample accurate time of the computer and the continuous time of a physical pendulum.

As editors we were curious and open to hear a variety of responses to the almost entirely

unknown texts from 1965 - “On Music” and “On Modern Music”. We sent these texts to various authors and asked them to contribute spontaneous thoughts and responses to these texts. Media theorist and media-archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst has contributed a short essay revising his previous (and common) perception of Flusser as a thinker “without ears” and associating a plethora of media-archaeological examples to Flusser's sonic side in his text, “Discovering the ears on Flusser's face: A respectful revision.” Media artist and theorist Rosemary Lee has contributed a short essay entitled, “Interiority/Exteriority and Techno Clubs” associating Flusser's remarks on electronic music with techno and its dialectic of interiority and exteriority. She has chosen a photo gallery with photographs from Martin Eberle to accompany her text. An interview with sound artist and composer Sam Auinger explores his experience of reading these two texts, approximately twenty-five years after meeting Flusser at Ars Electronica. As part of a gesture to grasp the internet as a telematic network, we would like to extend this offer to respond to these texts to all readers of *Flusser Studies*. Comments are warmly encouraged and can be added to a growing discussion.³

With this issue *Flusser Studies 17 - Music and Sound*, we as guest-editors have hoped to explore a hitherto largely overlooked aspect of Flusser's work. By opening up this debate, we hope to have thereby illuminated a new facet of Flusser's work and to spark further discussion – to challenge and reexamine Flusser's ideas across contemporary fields of various disciplines.

Our warmest thanks go to Vilém Flusser Archive and the Flusser family, Professor Siegfried Zielinski as director of Vilém Flusser Archive, Rainer Guldin as Editor-in-Chief of *Flusser Studies*, Daniel Irrgang, Claudia Becker, Jason Wagner & Drew Burke of Univocal Press, without whom we would not have been able to realise this issue of *Flusser Studies* and to whom we are very grateful for their support.

Marta Castello Branco, Annie Goh & Rodrigo Maltez Novaes
Berlin, May 2014

³ To add your comments to the “Responses” section. Please email your comments to Rainer Guldin with subject title “Flusser Studies 17: Music and Sound - Comments” (guldinr@usi.ch).

Appendix

Summary of known writings by Vilém Flusser on music, sound, listening, hearing, acoustics:⁴
As of May 2014

“Limites da Lingua Musica et Pintura” In: O Estado de São Paulo (1962)

“Língua e Realidade” (1963)

“Da Religiosidade” In: O Estado de São Paulo (1964)

“Na Musica” (1965) In: “Influencia do Pensamento Existencial Sobre a Atualidade”. Vilém Flusser Archive, 2-IPEA-15_1662.

“Na Musica Moderna” (1965) In: “Influencia do Pensamento Existencial Sobre a Atualidade”. Vilém Flusser Archive, 2-IPEA-15_1663.

“A História Do Diabo (1965)

“Kammermusik” in “Ins Universum der technischen Bilder” (1985)

“Hörigkeit” in “Angenommen” (1989)

“Die Geste des Musikhörens” in “Gesten” (1991)

“Die brasilianische Sprache” in “Bodenlos” (1999)

Undated essay manuscripts:

“Die Melodie der Sprachen”, Vilém Flusser Archive, Best. 1608 Nr. 2462

“Hoerapparate”, Vilém Flusser Archive, Best. 1608 Nr. 2444

“Negertrommel”, Vilém Flusser Archive, Best. 1608 Nr. 2391

“Tribuene der Kritiker von Schallplatten”, Vilém Flusser Archive, Best. 1608 Nr. 2479

“Ein musikalischer Einfall”, Vilém Flusser Archive, Best. 1608 Nr. 2611

⁴This summary is likely not exhaustive. Researchers are invited to email the co-editor of this edition Annie Goh with additions at: anniegoh@udk-berlin.de