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Nomadology: A Philosophy of Migration. Vilém Flusser between Worlds

1 Introduction

Vilém Flusser (1920–1991) was a thinker of a very particular kind. Trained as a philosopher in Prague – a cosmopolitan Central European city in the interwar period – he then migrated in the late 30s to Brazil as he and his family foresaw the imminent danger of the Nazi threat. In São Paulo, Brazil, he reinvented himself as an intellectual figure of an immense critical capacity. Back in Europe in 1971 after three decades, he was able to develop a philosophical work with a relevant component in a theory of media and social communication that has much in common with the Frankfurt School of Philosophy, yet displays a vitality of its own as it encompasses elements from Phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger), Philosophy of Language (Wittgenstein), and Philosophical Anthropology (Ortega y Gasset).

While this very brief description of his intellectual trajectory would seem to leave out Flusser's Brazilian years as a relevant influence for the development of his thought, one needs only to pay attention to the descriptions Flusser elaborates on diverse texts to sense how his engagement with a foreign culture which he came to embrace as his own became for him a strategy for a vital form of philosophizing. As he writes in *Bodenlos*, one of his most intimate texts: "Philosophy is played in the same way as chess problems are solved, except that philosophy is even more interesting than chess because it reveals even better than chess that it is a game. This is how [I played] philosophy in São Paulo at that time."[1] For Flusser then, thought assumes the shape of life and vice versa, and Brazil embodied his notion of philosophizing as a form of life – yet not as content necessarily, as we will see, but as an intensity.

This intensity is recognizable in Flusser's essays through his characteristic style: relentless, agile and ludic, anti-academic. But it is also condensed into some recurring themes, some of which were never expanded into essay-length texts on their own, nevertheless traverse his work as obsessions that open peculiar trails themselves. This article concentrates on how Flusser delineates a philosophy of migration – which he calls a nomadology[2] – using his own experience of being

1 Vilém Flusser: *Bodenlos*. Düsseldorf: Bollman 1992, p. 51. All translations in this text are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

2 Flusser developed his own theory independently of the notion of the same name suggested by Deleuze and Guattari in their work *Anti-Oedipus* from 1972. Even if Flusser frequently hides his

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between-worlds and uprooted as an object of study, prefiguring in many ways one of the most important topics in political philosophy in the 21st Century: the constitution of a migrant subjectivity. This article will present the main features of this theme and will also aim to show how its traits were the product of a lived experience of a Central European *Weltanschauung* colliding with the radical alterity of the Brazilian reality.

2 Beyond the Nationalist Trap

As he was in Brazil, Flusser was aware that his own condition of exile was running counterclockwise to the mainstream creation of nations that was spawning during the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, new countries and their corresponding national-subjects were being created around the globe, as heralds of freedom, progress and civilization. To be sure, Flusser did not speak against the fights for independence of any people, yet he was wary of what these new nationalistic emotions could unleash. As he wrote:

> The French nation, this invention of the French Enlightenment, has led to the emergence of countless other nations. This has produced indescribable atrocities throughout the world, and this fact has been clearly brought to consciousness by various analyses. Nevertheless, the French nation still exists. This is one of the reasons why we should despair of man as a self-conquering being.[3]

But even if this did not imply condemning the struggles for self-determination of oppressed peoples, he did write critically against one of the movements he was most familiar with, giving his Jewish background: Zionism. As he put it: "Zionism was dubious, because the Praguean *forma mentis* had already overcome this type of nationalism [. . .]. Zionism conceded to Judaism a role contrary to the Praguean one: to be a bridge between peoples."[4] Naturally, his emigration to Brazil instead of Palestine was the fiercest of arguments in this regard, for he was an intellectual

sources, an analysis of both uses renders a different conception of the notion. While Deleuze and Guattari attach to it a conceptual framework influenced by psychoanalysis, in the interplay between paranoia and schizophrenia, Flusser expands his idea out of his own experience and through a phenomenological approach. Flusser's conception ends up being less ideological and more pragmatic and grounded, even if there are clear crossovers between both frameworks. A detailed analytic comparison lies beyond the scope of this article, but a broader comment on this parallel development can be found in Doris Pandžić: Nomadism – the Right to Non-identity. In: *Культура/Culture* 6,14 (2006), p. 37–45.

3 Vilém Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*. Hamburg: eva 2013, p. 95.

4 Vilém Flusser: *Groundless*. São Paulo: Metaflux 2017, p. 26.

who, following Ortega y Gasset, approached one's life as an organon of thinking.[5] Therefore, in opposition to Zionism, Flusser strived to make sense out of one of the central themes of cultural Judaism: the experience of exile. And he connected this experience not only with a search of a post-national subject, but also with the peculiar experience of the individual in the information age, overwhelmed by technology and disoriented by competing discourses for power and control. In a quotation packed with meaning, he states:

> In exile, everything is unusual. The exile is an ocean of chaotic information. The lack of redundancies there does not allow to receive this flood of information as meaningful messages. The exile, being unusual, is uninhabitable. In order to be able to live there, one must first process the information whirling around into meaningful messages; one must "process" this data. This is a question of survival: if one does not perform the task of data processing, then one is swallowed up by the waves of exile. Processing data is synonymous with creating. The displaced person must be creative if he does not want to decay.[6]

In that sense, exile prefigures a form of existence proper to the information age that the nationalist zeal tends to mask, since an emotional fervor fulfills a sort of identitarian balm. The existential condition of exile – a category that for Flusser performs close to what Heidegger terms *Geworfenheit*[7] – is brutally obscured, commodified, instrumentalized under a political agenda that attempts to impose a specific interpretation of reality.[8] Exile, on the other hand, hints to a wound, a hurtful but rather liberating opening: "The world around us has become an uninhabitable desert in which the wind of chance necessarily piles up dunes. We our-

5 Or as Flusser put it, he aimed at turning his "own life into a laboratory for others." Ibid., p. 11.

6 Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*, p. 103.

7 Martin Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2006, p. 175.

8 Here we find an application of the notion of alienation that Flusser expands to other fields. In his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, the duality between nationalism and exile is played out in a similar fashion through the binarity of black-and-white vs color photography. Black-and-white images are conceptual in origin, problematic dualities which however do not conceal their critical distance to the reality they represent; on the opposite end, color images are full-fledged ideological, in the sense that they conceal the work of representation they engage in. Flusser writes: "The 'more genuine' the colours of the photograph become, the more untruthful they are, the more they conceal their theoretical origin. [. . .] Looked at uncritically like this, [photographs] accomplish their task perfectly: programming society to act as though under a magic spell. . ." (Vilém Flusser: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: reaction books 2006, p. 44–48). In this play of equivalences, exile has a relation to black-and-white photography in that it always seems upsetting and in need to be overcome. Flusser, however, explores precisely the uncomfortability proper to them.

selves want this contingency, and we stack up dunes to gear up ourselves in the process. We have become nomads."[9]

Furthermore, Flusser exposes the conceptual ploy that the notion of "homeland" [*Heimat*] – a bulwark of nostalgic intensity – comprises. We are usually told that the homeland is a place of safety and belonging, while our "dwellings" [*Wohnung*] are replaceable. Yet for Flusser, the opposite is indeed the case: the homeland is expendable and interchangeable, but, as the homeless well know, one needs a dwelling to survive. The dwelling becomes then a place of becoming, a site of experience, the foundation for a consciousness that grants a certain access to the world. Otherwise, without a dwelling, without a shelter to protect oneself from the ordinary and the habitual, "everything that arrives is noise, nothing is information, and in an informationless world, in chaos, one can neither feel nor think nor act."[10] In this sense, the native-nationalists [*Beheimateten*] that defend passionately their homeland make a categorical mistake that evidences their profound misconception, for

> [. . .] they perceive their home as cute, just as we all perceive our home as cute. And then they confuse cuteness with beauty. This confusion comes from the fact that the native-nationalists are entangled in their homeland and therefore are not open to the ugliness that approaches, which could be transformed into beauty, for example. *Patriotism is above all a symptom of an aesthetic disease.*[11]

Every homeland is a mystification of the banal, a familiar broth of emotional attachment masquerading in mystery. In contrast, exile is an invitation to abandon subjectivity-making under the aegis of the nation-state and to explore the human potential of becoming. Consequently, exile abhors ontology (the study of how the world is) and embraces nomadology (the perpetual iteration of change). This implies a refocusing on detachment, on reverting the adoption of social customs and frameworks, on re-engaging with oneself beyond social roles and expectations. As Hannah Arendt writes: "one is never such a master of oneself as when nobody knows you and your life is exclusively and mainly in your hands."[12] This self-alienation is anchored in a powerful exodus of the subject from a pretended, stable social identity, as he or she embraces instead volatility and flux. Flusser expands further this idea: in exile "we no longer imagine that we contain some solid kernel (some kind of 'identity', an 'I', a 'spirit' or a 'soul'), but rather that we

9 Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*, p.62.
10 Ibid., p. 27.
11 Ibid., p. 29, highlight JT.
12 Hannah Arendt: *Rahel Varnhagen. Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik*. München: Piper 1981, p. 85.

are immersed in a collective psychic field, from which we emerge like temporary bubbles, acquire some information, process, share, to submerge again."[13]

Exile as the central structure of nomadology mobilizes dwelling over the homeland, experience over possession, fluidity over fixation, iteration over certainty, the future over the past. But it also privileges dialogue over force and coercion. After all, an "I" is never a particle that can stand on its own; co-creation, correspondence, collaboration are not only desired, but become central tenets of a nomad's *savoir faire*.[14] In another text, which recalls the core of Martin Buber's thinking, Flusser argues: "We only really become an 'I' if we are there with and for others. 'I' is the one to whom someone says 'you'."[15] Between an "I" and a "you", an inhabitable interzone emerges. But this interzone cannot be explored under the nationalist zeal that pushes towards a mythic "we" shaped out of accidents and coincidences turned into essentialist traits. Therefore, instead of asking "who am I?" or "who are we?" in that relation, as questions that strive for a negation of plurality, we can only ask "who am I this time?" or "who are we this time?", recognizing thus the transient permutations and contingencies that inhabit the encounter, which are activated or called into being every time an "I" faces an "other" as a nomad fellow.[16] As such, the "other" is not so much opposed to as constitutive of the "I": a witness to her trail-making, to her rising. A unique passage in Julio Cortázar's novel *Rayuela* (1963) describes this possibility at length, making a parallel over the notion of Brownian movements, random motions observed in particles suspended in a liquid or gas:

> [. . .] we compose an absurd figure, we draw with our movements a figure identical to the one that flies draw when they fly in one room, from here to there, abruptly turn around, from there to here, that is what is called brownoid movement, do you understand now? a right angle, a line that goes up, from here to there, from the back to the front, upwards, downwards, spasmodically, slowing down and starting in the same instant in another direction, and all that weaves a drawing, a figure, something non-existent like you and me, like

13 Vilém Flusser: The crisis of linearity. Transl. by Adelheid Mers. In: *Boot Print* 1.1 (2006), p. 21.

14 In a formulation that precedes one of the main theses of Étienne Balibar's *Citizen Subject* (2016), Flusser writes: "In my now achieved freedom I am the one who spins his bonds with his fellow men, in cooperation with them. [. . .] That is, I think, what it means to be free. Not the breaking of the bond with others, but the braiding of this connection in cooperation with them." Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*, p. 20.

15 Vilém Flusser: *Into the universe of technical images*. Minneapolis: UMP 2011, p. 93.

16 In that sense, if we insist on referring to a "homeland", Flusser would change its terms: "It is not that Brazil is my homeland, but that my 'homeland' are for me the people for whom I carry responsibility" (Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*, p. 26). Likewise, a "nation" could only be seen as a virtual process, not a real state; not a "way of being", but a "form of searching" (Vilém Flusser: *Brasil, ou a procura de um novo homem: por uma fenomenologia do subdesenvolvimento*. Rio de Janeiro: UERJ 1998, p. 21–22).

> the two dots lost in Paris that go from here to there, from there to here, making their drawing, dancing for nobody, not even for themselves, an endless figure without sense.[17]

As Flusser in São Paulo, Cortázar describes the uprooted lives of two Argentinians – Lucía (la Maga) and Horacio Oliveira – in Paris, embodying Flusser's nomadology in rather precise terms. For as Flusser argues elsewhere, in a sentence that could be read as a comment to this passage: "The 'absurd' is a term that also means 'groundless' in the same sense as 'without reason', just like the sentence 'two times two is four at seven o'clock in São Paulo' is groundless. This sentence is an example of absurd thinking, and it leads us to the sensation of hovering above the abyss, in which the concepts of 'true' and 'false' do not apply."[18]

3 The Category of Groundlessness

Exile is the structural condition of the nomad, but Flusser aims at moving beyond a metaphorical layer, and thus explores, through a reflection of his own life, the existential condition of the migrant as groundlessness. All poetic remnants are left behind, to describe the modality through which a migrant develops sense-making by collapsing cultural frameworks and the certainties of a socio-national life. In *Bodenlos* (*Groundless*), Flusser's intellectual biography, he writes: "One who hovers above time, who is groundless, can interpret the apparent clash [between a previous and an adopted culture] as a form of interchangeable perceptions."[19] Groundlessness produces an agitation of the senses and an involuntary form of awareness, as if being removed from a specific order of things would allow one to see the layered construction of the whole world. In short, the groundless subject realizes that the culture we are born in is a determined aspect of the environment into which we are thrust at birth. This is a painful discovery that strikes one as "a malady"; on the other end, "the ones who 'truly' belong to their cultures do so because they never grasped such a discovery."[20] Groundlessness implies therefore a process of transcending one's own culture, a constant process of self-alienation, of distancing to one's own self, and a permanent state of inebriation of sorts. It also entails approaching different

17 Julio Cortázar: *Rayuela*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana 1963, p. 160.
18 Flusser: *Groundless*, p. 19–20.
19 Ibid., p. 48.
20 Ibid., p. 90.

cultures as different games one plays. As Flusser puts it: "seen from this situation, every culture emerges as a field for engagement."[21]

Of course, this is a process, frequently agonizingly painful before it is liberating, and can only be understood as stages in a course of becoming. Because of its hardships, the migrant subjectivity is difficult to hold; the migrant subject is willing to move to the new cultural reality as soon as possible to get away from her distress. As the philosopher observes: "To put it simply, one 'reality' gradually replaces the other and the abyss of groundlessness is never revealed."[22] This is why we have seldom explored the type of subject this process engenders. But the state of mind of the migrant, if assumed, displays an ecstatic sense of wonder and curiosity which correspond, according to both Plato (*Theaetetus* 155d) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 982b), to the ur-condition of a philosophical mind: *thaumazein*. This wonder is at the base of groundlessness, yet not as a pseudo-foundation in a paradoxical manner, but as an attitude or a state of mind. And this state of mind depends on sustaining indeed a paradoxical form of existence: between being and non-being, between engagement and distance, between certainty and doubt, between desire and frustration. In the philosophical tradition to which Flusser responds, this implies holding unresolved the dialectical synthesis between two recognizable poles, or in other words, performing an *epoché* (Husserl) that means a suspension of judgment that allows a phenomenon to be seen in its fleeting, unstable, and contradictory concreteness. As Flusser concedes:

> The "loss of grounding" seemed to be the loss of the models for experience, knowledge, and values [. . .]. Now this also seems to be the loss of the structure that organises these models, hence, the loss of the Western structure in the following manner: the tacit presupposition of the Western tradition is that "Being" (irrespective of what that means) is real, positive, and sheltering. And that "Non-Being," is the annihilating danger that surrounds "Being" on all sides. Within such a structure, any salvation (be it Jewish, Christian, Marxist, or any other) means to place oneself in the bosom of Being, sheltered from Non-Being (for example: in God, History, or Idea). Non-Being means Hell. Alas, Wittgenstein and Kafka define thought as "Non-Being" and remain Western. If they want to liberate themselves from thought, it means they want to be free from Hell. However, [my] own problem is different. [I] accepted thought as "Being" and wished to be sheltered in Non-Being.[23]

Being sheltered in non-being implied for Flusser a contact with a culture of unfathomable dimensions, at some time the distant Eastern tradition, but most certainly the imminence of the Brazilian reality, at once morass and sensual extravagance.

21 Ibid., p. 91.
22 Ibid., p. 92.
23 Ibid., p. 65.

And from there he asserts: "The problem was one's insertion into the local context. Not in the sense: 'How can I be inserted into this context?' But: 'Where am I, when I see myself inserted into this context?' [. . .] The problem was how to synthesise the contradiction 'engagement/distance'."[24] Yet, as we have argued, groundlessness exists precisely because the contradiction remains unsynthesized. If this seems irresolute or rather fragile, it is because it is a counter-epistemology that approaches theories as territories or fields where one plays, and not as explanations or functional models for objective realities. As Flusser explains: "In my view, scientific propositions do not reflect real situations. On the contrary, reality is broken down [in science] into situations through the corruptive (analysing) action of scientific discourse. [. . .] For me, science is *poiesis*, in a diabolic sense: the formal breakdown of reality."[25] Rather than with mere arguments, Flusser engages with seemingly contradictory phenomena, approaching experiences, analyzing gestures, making sense of encounters, testing the resistances to language and observing the overflow of life. For instance, in his book on gestures, Flusser analyzes bodily movements as a communicational notation of sorts, which escapes the (scientific) cause-effect relationship and should be approached instead as a set of monadic units that render meaning. He writes:

> [. . .] with concrete phenomena, it is difficult to distinguish between action and reaction, representation and expression. For example, I see tears in someone's eyes. What criteria could I use to justify saying that this is a representation of a state of mind (a codified symbol) and not its expression (symptom)? In the first case, the observed person is active, "acts out" a state of mind. In the second case, this person suffers, "reacts" to a state of mind.[26]

In that sense, instead of merely claiming a take on objectivity, science should make sense of its technical-discursive framing, and philosophy – uphold in groundlessness – must make sense of an art of living. And by this he means an art of living "in the real sense of the term", where "the only working categories are aesthetic: intensity, variety, and emotional or informative charge." For to him, "to become fused with concreteness" is precisely "to separate the concrete from the aesthetically repulsive ideological scum that covers it; to live in the raw and bare beauty of what is concrete – and which is beautiful precisely for being raw and bare." In short, this means an "engagement against what is false, and in favour of what is absurdly true."[27] For Flusser, groundlessness is therefore the form of existence of a critically-deconstructed human life, attuned to the extravagances of cultural frame-

24 Ibid., p. 74.
25 Ibid., p. 270.
26 Vilém Flusser: *Gestures*. Minneapolis: UMP 2014, p. 5.
27 Flusser: *Groundless*, p. 124–5.

works and ideological structures. Groundlessness implies engaging radically with the affect of the absurd, to subsume it into a climate of religiosity – not under the aegis of a specific religion and its contents, but rather as an existential form of spirituality –, which means taking a leap of faith into the abyss of the non-sensical, existing thus more intensely, if "'to exist' is interpreted as 'to live on the outside'."[28] Only then, holding this critical distance, can one's life be taken as an integral (art) work of ethico-epistemic achievement, a vital laboratory for oneself and for others.

4 The Migrant as Figure of the Avant-Garde

For most of the 20th century, the figure of the migrant was rendered as a fragile form of existence in a state of flux and in need of protection, definition, and identity. Fortunately, the material precarities of *refugees* and *asylum-seekers* – migrants with legal, political and/or economic constraints – have been justly highlighted in more recent approaches, and their needs and concerns prioritized in the specialized literature, especially within the increasing environment of racist and xenophobic rejection spreading throughout the Western World. However, as a political figure among others – the citizen, the foreigner, the sovereign – the migrant has been delineated and conceptually strapped by a nation-state-based institutional terminology, which stresses its irregular legal status, curtailed rights and non-membership. In that sense, the migrant has been overwhelmingly represented through its negative traits, as a lack, a problem to be solved, a pariah. For as Hannah Arendt argues, the migrant as a stateless being is suspicious, and therefore embodies "the true symbols of *Pariatum.*"[29] Flusser is aware of this stigma and offers a deeper explanation on other grounds: "For the native-nationalist, the immigrant is even more alienating, more uncanny than the wanderer out there, because he exposes what is sacred to the native-nationalist as banal. He is hateful, ugly, because he exposes the beauty of the homeland as kitschy cuteness."[30] As it is evident from this remark, Flusser links the migrant's existential condition, which grants him a particular epistemological vantage point, with a political circumstance. Because the migrant is groundless, she is embarked in a specific quest, engaged in a form of mutual freedom-seeking and concerned with an existential form of de-alienation. This poses a threat to the legal order of the nation-state. It also underlines the utopian impulse of the migrant as a political figure. Arendt has written that, willingly or not, the pariah misrecognizes

28 Ibid., p. 21–22.
29 Hannah Arendt: *Die verborgene Tradition. Essays*. Frankfurt am Main: JV 2000, p. 65.
30 Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*, p. 21.

"what society constructs as reality",[31] which is to say, with Flusser, that the migrant "disrespects" the homeland by insolently refraining from participating in the farcical rituals that lead to the mystification of customs, or as he puts it, to the social "sacralization of the banal."[32] This antagonist relation can be further explored.

The positive role of the migrant in the society in which he or she comes to live has been seldom acknowledged, and when it occurs, it is frequently stated in the superficiality of economic terms (migrants do pay taxes, they do not receive well-fare, etc.) or in the facile theme of the cultural input they provide, which contributes to a melting pot or a multicultural society. While these statements are true, they miss the central pillars of the migrant's unique contributions to modern political societies. Thomas Nail, for instance, has focused on the movement that migration affords to analyze the nature of kinetic social forces and locates there a neural thread that mobilizes history. For him, "the figure of the migrant exposes an important truth: social expansion [i.e. progress] has always been predicated on the social expulsion of migrants."[33] In his book-length essay, Nail explores the dynamics of motion in its distinct phases and organizational stances to denounce the stigmatization and even criminalization tactics which different powers have conceived to extract that invaluable force from migrant bodies, their agencies and their practices. In that sense, he is able to establish that "the figure of the migrant has always been the true motive force of social history. Only now are we in a position to recognize this."[34] Of course, what Nail tries to pin down in modern terms is what the tradition of exile from the Jewish experience has been suggesting for centuries. Exile, as we have seen previously, implies in fact a strategical form of movement. And as Calasso writes, trying to explain an epochal transformation: "The Modern is born when the eyes observing the world discern in it 'this chaos, this monstrous confusion', but are not unduly alarmed. On the contrary, they are thrilled by the prospect of inventing some strategic movement within that chaos."[35] In that sense, the migrant, as a strategist of motion, could be even seen as the true herald of Modernity.

In a different approach, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges also revalues the innovations and achievements of foreigners and migrants as contributions to the culture in which they develop their work. In a now classical text from 1953, Borges unfolds his argument in two steps. In the first one, he decries the expansion of nationalism as its narrowing scope reaches the production of litera-

31 Hannah Arendt: *Die verborgene Tradition*, p. 56.
32 Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*, p. 26.
33 Thomas Nail: *The Figure of the Migrant*. Stanford: SUP 2015, p. 7.
34 Ibid.
35 Roberto Calasso: *The Ruin of Kasch*. Cambridge: HUP 1994, p. 40.

ture in particular, and culture in general: "the idea that a literature should be defined by the distinguishing features of the country that produces it is a relatively new idea; also new and arbitrary is the idea that writers should seek out themes from their own countries."[36] In a second step, Borges describes the role of migrants and outsiders as cultural innovators. Drawing on Veblen, an American sociologist, Borges follows the question on the perceived preeminence of Jews in Western culture. Veblen, Borges writes,

> [. . .] wonders whether this preeminence allows us to conjecture an innate superiority of the Jews, and answers that it does not; he says that they excel in Western culture because they act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by a special devotion [. . .]. The same can be said of the Irish in the culture of England. When it comes to the Irish, we need not suppose that the profusion of Irish names in British literature and philosophy is due to a racial preeminence, because many of those illustrious Irishmen (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) were descendants of Englishmen, were people who had no Celtic blood; however, it was enough for them to feel Irish, different, to innovate in English culture.[37]

Flusser's elaboration shares some elements with these approaches,[38] but has a distinctive tone of its own, which highlights the existential-cognitive-political nexus through which the migrant develops her vital experience and inhabits the world. As with Borges, this experience is not something innate, but a feature that migrants acquire and cultivate as a form of survival. As Flusser writes: "a phenomenological description of the immigration situation by the immigrant himself should strictly speaking be able to unravel the structure of all human life, and this not in spite of, but because of the specific factors that characterize it."[39] As we have seen, for Flusser these factors include necessarily an embrace of the condition of exile, which implies an existential sort of wound – or "sting" [*picada*] as we will see –, and through the confrontation with the absurd gives way to the existential category of groundlessness: the basic elements of a nomadology. As such, this nomadology implies a de-territorialization of subjecthood, a deconstruction of reified forms of existence, of social forms and subjective roles as holders of a personal identity. Instead of defining and fixing, this philosophical approach rarifies and blurs, and in that sense, from a Cartesian point of view that would seek to advance towards clear and defined objects, it would appear to imply a step backward. But this is pre-

36 Jorge Luis Borges: El escritor argentino y la tradición. In: *Obras Completas*, Buenos Aires: Emecé 1981, p. 270.

37 Ibid., p. 272–3.

38 Flusser engages with a form of Borges' argument in his *Phenomenology of Underdevelopment*, p. 16.

39 Flusser: *Brasil, ou a procura de um novo homem*, p. 8.

cisely its aim: "The philosophical step backwards is nothing but the attempt to make the unconscious conscious. And such a philosophical task can be accomplished more easily by the immigrant thinker than by the native born. Because the immigrant finds himself in 'transcendence' of the problem by his own situation, already and automatically."[40]

If nomadology is to be understood positively as a step backward, it is because it implies an irresolute suspension in a dialectical process which prevents a new synthesis to take hold before it even emerges, stressing thus the latencies and refusing reification. We have hinted already at the importance of this procedure, but in his text *Phenomenology of Underdevelopment* (1998), Flusser expands this theme with some remarkable notes. Explaining this development will allow us to show how this peculiar form of dialectics has more to do with an existentialist phenomenological project than with the Hegelian or Marxist traditions with which the name is usually associated. Flusser starts his argument with an evident statement, which he slowly clarifies:

> Immigration is a dialectical process in which the immigrant receives the impact of the environment, and the environment receives the impact of the immigrant. The result of the process, if successful, is the alteration of both factors. Of course: the stronger the immigrant's personality, the more painful and time consuming the process of change, and the better structured the environment, the more superficial the change made by the immigrant. Equally clear: the more flexible and open the immigrant's personality, and the more malleable the environment, the greater the *feedback* between the two.[41]

Flusser explains that a successful process of "integration" depends on the alteration of both the immigrant and the culture in which he or she incorporates. As such, the dialectical process does not immediately imply a sublation (*Aufhebung*) in the Hegelian sense, in a sort of integration into one of the dialectical poles. On the contrary, the success of the process depends on both factors being flexible, elastic, and porose. But we could still argue that agency in the dialectical process comes not from an autonomy from structures, but indeed from a plasticity within them. And yet, further down the text, Flusser describes another direction of the flow: "one can only become Brazilian who first gives meaning to this term. And, in order to be able to give this meaning, one must first discover reality. And, in order to be able to discover reality, one must first change the environment."[42] Surprisingly, we now have not only two poles – the immigrant and the environment – but three: the incidence of reality. Yet reality does not refer to the envi-

40 Ibid., p. 20.
41 Flusser: *Brasil, ou a procura de um novo homem*, p. 13.
42 Ibid., p. 15.

ronment, nor to the background of the immigrant, but denotes a situation that appears between both. However, this does not imply a synthesis, at least in traditional terms, because reality is usually assumed as something that is given, not produced. This is the whole point of an ontology. But what is then the role of reality? At this point we need to follow the argument a step further.

To reach reality (and therefore develop a sense of belonging), Flusser asserts that the migrant needs to be able to change her environment. But – and here is the key – "the immigrant cannot rely on his environment in trying to find himself and his way. He must open his own *sting*, within his new life world, to allow his neighbors and himself to get out."[43] This means that the only form through which a migrant can alter her environment is not by tackling it directly, from the outside, but indirectly, from her inside, from her own *sting*. The theme of the *sting* connects very clearly Flusser thinking with the tradition of existentialism in philosophy. As Aho explains: "When the existentialist refers to feelings of 'nausea' (Sartre), 'absurdity' (Camus), 'anxiety' (Kierkegaard), 'guilt' (Heidegger), or 'mystery' (Marcel) they are describing uncanny affects that have the power to shake us out of our complacency, where the secure and familiar world breaks apart and collapses, and we are forced to confront the question of existence."[44] In Flusser, the migrant's sting provides an access to decode her new environment, and through that, enables an agency over her reality and that of her fellow migrants. Through the theme of the sting, we go beyond a dialectic, and access instead a sort of unfolding of the migrant subjectivity, who can then distinguish the painful duality of her own situation and correlate it to the irreducible condition of human existence to sort out multiple social realities as fields of engagement. As Flusser writes:

> If he wants to live in this environment as a free man, he must open his own sting. 'Free man' means a man who sees his own situation from the outside, projects a map onto it and acts accordingly, who gives meaning to his environment, lives according to this meaning, and thus transforms it into the world of his life. And, so that this given sense is not mere fantasy, he tries to unveil the reality of the situation in which he lives. Therefore: ready to change himself, in order to change the world. This is how the situation of the immigrant in Brazil presents itself, as an extreme example of the human situation.[45]

Nomadology, therefore, could be described as the phenomenology of a non-intentional affect – groundlessness – which confers meaning in the midst of the absurd. Or alternatively, it can also be defined, in a description that echoes Walter

43 Ibid., p. 22.

44 Kevin Aho: Existentialism. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/existentialism/ [March 20, 2024].

45 Flusser: *Brasil, ou a procura de um novo homem*, p. 22.

Benjamin, as a dialectics at a standstill, a dialectics where the process of synthesis is permanently retracted, to open up other forms of social equilibria. The migrant can then discover "his unique ability to synthesize proposals by *spontaneous* methods, which are called 'love' in other contexts."[46] This renders the migrant as a peculiar political figure remarkably sensitive to engage in a politics of care, away from the stubbornly nationalist, liberal citizen, and characterized instead by vulnerability, co-dependence and co-responsibility. The migrant sustains thus the ultimate meaning of human existence in her decision to err endlessly through the arbitrary structures of the social absurd. And this turns her at once a threat to the political status quo – sustained by the structures of the nation-state – and a vanguardist figure, an anti-hero and a herald of the future.

5 Conclusions

Flusser's nomadology is a theory of migration which, due to its own inherent structure, could not acquire a definitive form. Instead, what we find are statements, arguments and autobiographical remarks scattered in different texts that develop features, themes and other latencies in different contexts and discussions. This was probably the only way to put such a theory forth. As Jaffe argues: "For Flusser, the disorienting experiences of the migrant – the receiver of premature, distorted, and unconvincing information – register feedback about national significance from loss of grounding, different signal to noise ratios, and conflicting principles that yield potential for critical experimentalism."[47] Yet we have shown that this experimentalism does not amount to a series of unconnected ideas, but instead forms a critical phenomenology that can be understood as a political existentialism centered upon the figure of the migrant. In that sense, the migrant acquires a political centrality in a project that aims towards a social renewal. As Goodwin remarks: "This idea that immigrants have a responsibility to teach the settled people about the possibility of letting go of their habits and prejudices, and not vice versa as is usually thought, is an important part of Flusser's positive valuation of immigration."[48] In the contemporary information society, the migrant is the one who can actually create something new – i.e. process new

46 Ibid.

47 Aaron Jaffee: *Experience to Experiment, Signs to Signals: Toward Flusser's New World*. London: Bloomsbury 2018, p. 190.

48 Matthew Goodwin: The Brazilian Exile of Vilém Flusser and Stefan Zweig. In: *Flusser Studies* 7 (2008), p. 5.

information – out of her own distinctive experience,[49] which pivots around the condition of exile and the category of groundlessness. The migrant is thus an impertinent stranger that can help to turn every irrational certainty of a socio-national reality upside down, and open the path towards other forms of freedom, based on a politics of mutual care, respect, co-dependency, and vulnerability.

49 See Flusser: *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*, p. 108.