Vilém Flusser, **Gestures**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 193 pp., $60 (hardcover), $20.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Raúl Rodríguez-Ferrándiz
University of Alicante, Spain

Toward a General Theory of Gestures

Gestures are perhaps the everyday signifying practice that receives the least analytic attention. We process oral and written texts, photographs, films and videos, music (with or without lyrics), paintings, drawings, and graphics of all kinds. We value the design and functionality of the objects that surround us, and we use them on a daily basis. However, we tend to dismiss the gestures that not only accompany but also produce and manipulate the texts and objects that surround us. We incessantly make and interpret gestures, but our analytical attention dismisses them and focuses on their products—what we say, write, build, paint, photograph, film, record, seek, and love—not on the gestures that produce them and, by doing so, frame and shape their meaning. This dimension of the message is greatly neglected, not only by the nonspecialized user but also by the expert analyst. Fortunately, the book reviewed here, **Gestures**, by Vilém Flusser, offers a deep, extremely original, meticulous, and suggestive reflection on gestures.
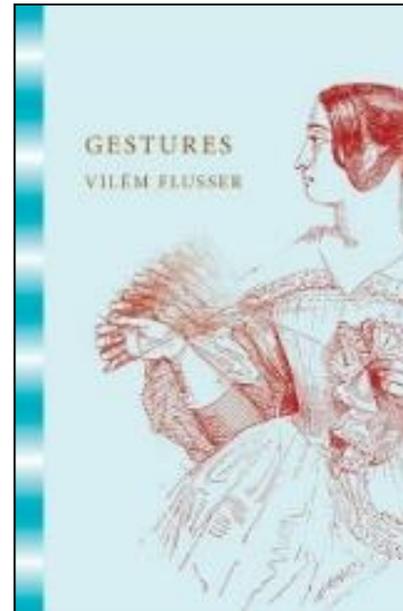
The Author

Vilém Flusser (b. Prague, Czech Republic; 1920–1991) was a philosopher and media theorist whose work has been well known in Germany (his native tongue was German) since the 1980s. Like many Jews, Vilém Flusser was forced to leave his birth nation to flee the Holocaust, which in turn allowed him to disseminate his written work in at least four countries and four languages. In fact, his philosophical autobiography is titled *Bodenlos* (1992), which means groundless, rootless in German, and he wrote a book of essays titled *Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (1994/2003). The Czech author, who lost all of his family in the extermination camps, managed to flee first to London in 1939 and then to Brazil in 1940. He stayed there for more than 30 years, where he was a professor of philosophy and communication theory at the University of São Paulo. His first texts were written in Portuguese: *Lingua e Realidade* (*Language and Reality*, 1963) and *A História do Diablo* (*History of the Devil*, 1965). With the arrival of the dictatorship to Brazil, Flusser returned to Europe—first to Italy in 1972 and then to France in 1976—where he continued to publish in German and occasionally in French. Consequently, until recently, his works were little known in the English-speaking world. His most influential and cited work, written in 1983, was published in English in 2000 under the title *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Flusser, 1983/2000). Thanks to the University of Minnesota and the excellent translations by Nancy Ann Roth, three very

important works by Flusser have appeared in English in recent years: *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985/2011) and *Does Writing Have a Future?* (1987/2011), both in 2011, and *Gestures* in 2014. The last one reproduces the German edition of 1991, which in turn includes texts that were originally written by Flusser in German, French, and English in the 1970s and 1980s and that were selected and ordered by him just before his death.

Sean Cubitt (2004) made a very accurate comparison of the impact of the few works Flusser had published in English back in 2004: "Imagine Walter Benjamin's essays of the 1930s had only just become available, or that Marshall McLuhan had died in obscurity but was now for the first time appearing in dribs and drabs" (p. 403). Cubitt is right because the work of Flusser reflects Benjamin's philosophical illuminations and subtle analysis of the impact of technologies on individuals and confronts it with McLuhan's insights about the changing media ecosystems. The result is a very McLuhanian ambition to "understand the media" (p. 167), but from a critical point of view.

The Book

Flusser starts by outlining the current definition of *gestures*, which are "movements of the body and, in a broader sense, movements of the tools attached to the body" (p. 1), just to immediately propose its reduction by excluding from it involuntary movements (pupillary light reflexes, clenching the fist in pain). For him, gestures are always "expressions of intention" and therefore of will and freedom: Effectiveness is not what separates movements from other gestures (there are involuntary yet effective movements that correspond to reflections), but the expression of a decision. Neither truth nor honesty are what makes a body movement a gesture: Actually, the freedom that animates the gesture is capable of lying because it is "the freedom to hide from or to reveal to others the one who gesticulates" (p. 164).

However, the merely causal explanation of gestures is unsatisfactory, given their nature. We could outline the physical, physiological, psychological, social, economic, and cultural causes of a gesture, like lifting an arm, for example, but none would encompass its whole meaning, its interpretation. We "read" gestures, and this is where Flusser's inquiry becomes semiotic: Gestures are symbolic movements that go beyond, and render useless, their causal explanation. This is a problem that is solved and deactivated by identifying the cause. The semiotic explanation, Flusser says, transforms the gesture from problematic to *enigmatic* for the analyst. This enigma has several hierarchical levels whose resolution can never be completed. If my arm was pinched and I moved it, one could argue that the movement of my arm expressed the pain that I felt and the pinch is used to explain the movement, which would be seen as a symptom. However, I can raise my arm in a particular way when it is pinched,

> but this time there is no seamless link between cause and effect, pain and movement: a sort of wedge enters into the link, a codification that lends the movement a specific structure, so that it registers as an appropriate way to express the "meaning"—pain—to someone who knows the code. (p. 4)

Flusser addresses the gestures of writing, talking, making, loving, destroying, painting, photographing, filming, listening to music, using a phone, and so forth.[1] The acuity of the phenomenological approach is enlightening. Thus, we learn that the gesture of writing is not constructive, but disruptive and penetrating (from the Greek *graphein*, which means scraping or scratching). That is why writing with a typewriter is closer to the original sense than rolling or sliding a pen over a piece of paper. Against what is believed, the typewriter does not limit the freedom of the gesture, but increases it: Freed from the strict "gesture" that makes our manuscripts readable to others, the typewriter allows for greater variation of the gesture. The gesture of creating something, for its part, arises from the meeting of the hands, which seek to connect their symmetry, and the interposition of an object between them: The gesture seeks to give new form (*in-form*) to what separates them by manipulating it. The gestures of painting, photographing, filming, and video recording follow a sequence in which each gesture stands out against the background of the previous technology by providing nuances. Flusser suggests that a general theory of gestures would serve as a bridge between the human and natural sciences in the crossing of anthropology, psychology, neurophysiology, and the theory of communication.

The absence of explicit theoretical references in Flusser's work is striking not only in this book, but in all of them. This is because, as Flusser himself pointed out, the completion of this academic requirement would deviate from the clarity of his thoughts (van der Meulen, 2010). He makes anecdotal references to Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Arendt, but their work is not properly examined in depth. Among his contemporaries, only Abraham Moles and Marshall McLuhan are cited. Flusser implicitly alludes to other authors, such as Heidegger (pp. 27–28) and Umberto Eco (pp. 3-4, 163–164), for whom Flusser had already reviewed an earlier book. There are no allusions to the contributions in proxemics and kinesics or to the previous theoretical corpus on gestures and their meanings (e.g., Erwin Goffman and Paul Ekman).

Conclusion

The book will fascinate all those interested in the interpretation of everyday practices, the analysis of the mechanisms through which meaning arises and circulates, in interpersonal interaction and the human–tool relationship. *Gestures* radiates the same intensity experienced by those who were subjugated not only by Benjamin's *Illuminations* and *Arcades*, but also by Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968/1996) and by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980/1984). Like these works, Flusser's book transcends the time in which it was written. Although the world it reflects—

---

[1] The sources of inspiration for Flusser certainly include his collaboration with the French artist, pioneer of video art, Fred Forest. Flusser proposed the inclusion of an "Art and Communication" section in the 1973 São Paulo Biennial, for which he was a technical advisor. Fred Forest and Eric McLuhan (Marshall McLuhan's son) were invited as guest artists. Forest prepared a series of half-inch, 20-minute-long, black-and-white videos titled *Gestures*, and four of these videos featured Flusser himself: the gestures of the professor, the gestures and mimicry in conversation, the gestures of the pipe smoker, and the gestures of the professor contemplating the gestures of the professor. However, the series contained other types of gestures: the gestures of the photographer and the barber, love, and waiting. This list of videos is practically the index of Flusser's book. The collaboration between Forest and Flusser existed until the death of Flusser, who dedicated several texts to Forest's artistic work (Arantes, 2009).

particularly regarding the machines that surround us—is different from our current reality, which is marked in good measure by electronic networks and devices, his relevance does not decrease as a result, but instead increases and raises new questions. What are the characteristic gestures of the user of the mobile phone (the person who uses it to make a call but also who takes photographs, videos, and selfies or who writes and sends text messages)? The gestures people made when facing the distant movie screen changed when the small screen projected its light over our faces (as McLuhan pointed out (1964, pp. 272–273), the television viewers are the screen). What happens when we hold a touch screen in our hands and interact with it? What is the meaning of the gestures of the video game player or the person who designs and creates objects with a 3-D printer? How is the gesture of loving—which, in the 1980s, Flusser circumscribed to private spaces (so that when it was displayed in public, it became scandalous or a form of protest)—affected by the accessibility of pornography in our time? Some of these questions have already been answered following Flusser's intuitions. For instance, Byung-Chul Han's (forthcoming) work, *In the Swarm,* is full of allusions to the author from Prague.

In Flusser's words, "We don't pay attention to most gestures because we don't pay attention to what is familiar, and so when we concentrate on them, they seem new and surprising" (p. 48). This curiosity around gestures is precisely activated and driven, perhaps permanently, by Flusser's book.

References

Arantes, P. (2009). Media, gestures, and society: Dialogues between Vilém Flusser and Fred Forest. *Flusser Studies, 8*. Retrieved from http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/arantes-media-gestures-society.pdf

Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The system of objects* (J. Benedict, Trans.). London, UK: Verso. (Original work published 1968)

Cubitt, S. (2004). [Review of the books *The shape of things: A philosophy of design*; *Towards a philosophy of photography*; and *The freedom of the migrant: Objections to nationalism*, by Vilém Flusser]. *Leonardo, 37*(5), 403–405.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. F. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1980)

Flusser, V. (1992). *Bodenlos: eine philosophische Autobiographie* [Rootless: A philosophical autobiography]. Bensheim and Düsseldorf, Germany: Bollmann

Flusser, V. (2000). *Towards a philosophy of photography* (A. Matthews, Trans.). London, UK: Reaktion Books. (Original work published 1983)

Flusser, V. (2003). *Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (K. Kronenberg, Trans.). Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1994)

Flusser, V. (2011). *Into the universe of the technical images* (N. A. Roth, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1985)

Flusser, V. (2011). *Does writing have a future?* (N. A. Roth, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1987)

Han, B. (forthcoming). *In the swarm* (E. Butler, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding ,media: The extensions of man.* New York,NY: McGraw-Hill.

Van der Meulen, S. (2010). Between Benjamin and McLuhan: Vilém Flusser's media theory. *New German Critique, 37*(2 110), 181–207.