

Rootlessness – On Flussers Understanding of Tacit Knowledge ¹

Christoph Ernst (Univ. of Bonn)

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I. Overview

The Questions I want to share in our dialogue concern the notion of ›tacit knowledge‹ (Michael Polanyi) in Flussers works. (cf. Polanyi 1966) First, I will give you briefly some context, why I'm interested in this question: In my current research, I'm interested in the relation between media theory and theories of tacit knowledge.

For two new projects, I'm currently looking into connections between – if you will – canonized or otherwise ›classic‹ authors of media theory and how they deal with the question of tacit knowledge. (cf. Ernst/Schröter 2017)

In this context, Flusser wasn't exactly the first author that came to my mind. Nevertheless, I was surprised that we can find something on the subject in his works which is quite interesting.

Given, that media theory at moment is heavily interested in practice theory, this might provide us with opportunities for interesting re-readings of Flussers work in current contexts.

I will begin with a very familiar argument:

The Argument is, that Flussers description of Bodenlosigkeit – or ›having no ground‹ can be read as the backdrop for his philosophy of media. (cf. Ernst 2006)

Implied in the metaphor is the loss of a solid ›ground‹ on which somebody stands. Of course, this ›ground‹ is not to be taken literal. It is accompanied by the notion of Heimatlosigkeit which indicates the loss of Verbindungen (relations) and Wurzeln (roots) as one of the main aspects of Bodenlosigkeit.

More as it is expressed in the German term ›Heimat‹, the English metaphor rootlessness (Heimatlosigkeit / Wurzellosigkeit) illustrates this loss of relations, that constitute our understanding of living at a place.

In this regard, roots (Wurzeln) are to be considered as ›tacit‹ relations in a specific culture. This fabric (Gewebe) of roots is not an explicit one. Roots consist of habits, customs and other forms ›tacit knowledge‹.

So, if we want to understand if there is a relevant notion of tacit knowledge in Flussers works, I think it is important to examine the metaphor of rootlessness.

This can be done here of course only very briefly. I will rely only on one essay which is also a part of Flusser's autobiography *Bodenlosigkeit*.

Flusser, as far as I know, seldom talks explicitly of tacit or implicit knowledge. Nevertheless, he has an interesting point when he conceptualizes tacit knowledge as being central for the differentiation between relevant information (Information) and irrelevant noise (Geräusch). So what is his idea?

II. Rootlessness – Flusser's Notion of Tacit Knowledge

I will focus only on one text by Flusser – the essay *Taking Up Residence in Homelessness* [*Wohnung beziehen in der Heimatlosigkeit*].²

In this text Flusser considers migration – as it is typical for his works – as a creative and liberating but also very painful process. He writes:

Home is not an eternal value, but rather the function of a certain technique; yet, whoever loses his home, suffers. He is bound to his home by many threads, most of which are secret threads beyond his consciousness. If the threads tear or are torn, then this tear is experienced as a painful surgical incision into his most private self. (Flusser 2002: 93)

A few sentences later Flusser's Metaphor of secret threads (›geheime Fasern‹) turns into the metaphor of secret rootedness – which is for the migrant actually an obscurant involvement (›obskurantische Verstrickung‹).

It is not hard to see what Flusser means here.

Most of what constitutes the state of ›living at a place‹ belongs to the realm of an unspoken lifeworld, of implicit practices and most of all: of tacit knowledge – understood here in the broadest sense as a way of practice-based knowing how which we are not fully able to explicate by means of language. (cf. Polanyi 1966: 3-25, Ryle 1971)

To explore this entanglement means to become free, and to actually achieve a liberation. The migrant achieves the ability to reflect on this tacit rootedness:

The loss of home sheds light on this secret. It brings fresh air where there was once a comfortable fog. It discloses what it really is: the seat of most (perhaps all) of our prejudices – the judgments made before any conscious judgements. (Flusser 2002: 93)

Losing the secret threads, the secret roots is a tragedy and a chance for new freedom. Freely chosen connections become the new basis for freedom.

So far, so good. But of course – read sociologically and philosophically – the scenario Flusser seems to give us here is a little bit naïve or even elevated. But what is *really* meant here?

This leads to one of the most interesting passages of Flussers essay. I quote it *in extenso*:

The sociologists would have us believe that the secret codes of home can be learned by strangers (for instance, by sociologists or by those without a home), because natives had to learn them. The initiation rites of so-called primitive peoples prove this. Thus, a person without a home could travel from home to home and find his way into each of these, if he were able to bring with him a master key that unlocked all these homes. The reality is different. The secret codes of homes are not made of conscious rules, but rather spun from unconscious habits. What characterizes the habit is the fact that one is not conscious of it. The person without a home must first consciously learn the secret codes and then forget them, to be able to immigrate into a home. However, if the code becomes conscious, then its rules turn out not to be sacred but banal. (Flusser 2002: 95)

First of all, Flussers argument is problematic. Sociologists didn't claim that migration into a new social context or a new culture is simply a problem of learning an explicit code. In fact, the opposite is true. A brief look in the works of Alfred Schütz, especially on the stranger, proofs Flusser wrong. (cf. Schütz 1944)

Nevertheless, Flusser makes an important point here. His idea will become clearer when we look at the tradition of theories of tacit knowledge.

We find such theories in different contexts:

1. one of them is pragmatics in linguistics and language-philosophy,
2. another one is the pragmatist tradition,
3. social phenomenology is a third context
4. and a fourth would be the newer field of science & technology-studies (STS). (cf. Reckwitz 2002)

Basically, all of those traditions agree on two premises:

First: tacit or implicit knowledge can't be replaced by conscious choices, because every choice is in itself practical – that means it only functions on the basis on another layer of tacit knowing how.

Second: because of that, the usefulness of explicit codes and explicit rules in a given sociocultural situation is limited – or to be more precise: explicit code is limited by the practices those codes are accompanied by and are used in.

To position the experience of the migrant and his otherness as a way of reflecting on our ›tacit condition‹ can't be plausible in the sense, that we are able to change or cultural belonging or cultural identity at will. (cf. Schütz 1944)

In other words: the migrant archives a competence which is part of a tacit set of practices, performed in a certain cultural space and at a specific time.³

This is why Flusser's essay is concerned with the interpretation of the culture of Brazil as an open network.

For Flusser, the Brazilian culture nourishes and benefits the constitution of such a new secret code:

This weaving together of future secret codes, of a future Brazilian home, of a transformation of adventure into habit, and of a sacralization of habit was exciting as long as new waves of immigration continued to find acceptance. Preoccupied with making new connections, the network remained open. (Flusser 2002: 98)

The Brazilian culture transforms the confusing adventure of migration back into the regularity of habits while never completely regulating those habits.

From the standpoint of theories of tacit knowledge this is interesting because – at least in an unspoken manner – it accounts for a very important differentiation. We have to differentiate between unthematic codes which can be made thematic, and implicit – or tacit – codes which can't be made explicit. (cf. Renn 2004)

This is what Flusser is aiming at, when he states that no explicit code can substitute the learning of secret codes when coming into a new culture. Basically, he says: no formalization can account for the real thing, you have to live it.

III. Wohnen – Living, Habits, Communication and Media

This brings me to the third part.

The key concept Flusser establishes for his understanding of tacit knowledge is the metaphor of *wohnen* – to live at a place – which is based on a wordplay.

Flusser writes:

[...] when one is without a home and unprotected from the usual and what one is used to, everything that comes to us is noise and nothing is information. In a world without information, a world of chaos, one can neither feel, nor think, nor act. (Flusser 2002: 100)

Flusser is using the German word ›*wohnen*‹, translated with ›living at a place‹, and the English word ›habit‹. The terms imply both 1. ›to live at a place‹ and 2. ›to be accustomed‹ – which is also present in the Latin ›*habitare*‹.

A few sentences later we read:

I make my bed in redundancy, to receive noise as information and to produce information. My home, this network of habits, serves as a net that captures adventure and serves as a springboard to adventure. (Flusser 2002: 100)

The translation here in the English edition of Flusser's *Writings* is here not entirely correct. The original quote in German is:

Ich bin in Redundanz gebettet, um Geräusche als Informationen empfangen und um Informationen herstellen zu können. Meine Wohnung, dieses Netz von Gewohnheiten, dient dem Auffangen von Abenteuern und dient als Sprungbrett in Abenteuer. (cf. Flusser 1999: 261)

The first sentence is in German »Ich bin in Redundanz gebettet« – a passive phrase. So the correct translation of the first sentence should be: »I am embedded in redundancy«. In the context of tacit knowledge the difference between active/passive is quite important.

Flusser draws from this two conclusions.

1. first, the condition of living ›at a place‹ and having ›habits‹ is a necessary condition for making experiences in the outside world:

Without a home, I would be unconscious; that is, without a home, I would not actually exist. A home is how I find myself in the world – if at all. It is primary. (Flusser 2002: 100)

2. second, there is a dialectic within the notion of home itself:

If habit is open to the strange, if it recognizes the strange as information, then it cannot be recognized itself. [...] Like a cotton blanket, habit covers up all phenomena. It rounds off the edges of the phenomena that it covers, so that I no longer run into them but make use of them unconsciously. (Flusser 2002: 100-101)

The conclusion Flusser draws in his essay is this: people who have a homeland, or Heimat, fail to see that the condition of wohnen or living at a place is the primary condition and that Heimat is the secondary condition.

Both passages are interesting because they can be read as a critique of older notions that combine tacit knowledge with a sense of having a lifeworld as the foundation for all experience and knowledge.

What Flusser lacks on the side of philosophical explication he makes up by connecting this condition of ›living at a place‹ – being a metaphor for the tacit condition our practical relations – with the problem of communication and media.

›Living at a place‹ – or ›wohnen‹ in German – is the basis to discriminate Information from noise. This is essential for communication. For Flusser, media are supplements to those roots. They become a part of what was called the ›lifeworld‹ (›Lebenswelt‹) and is in our days called ›environment‹ – in the sense of hybrid mixtures of traditional ecological aspects, (media-)technologies and social factors. (cf. Hörl 2011)

This brings me to a summary and my questions:

IV. Summary and Questions

Concerning tacit knowledge, I think Flusser's essay involves at least four aspects:

1. First, his notion is built on a theory of preconceptual judgments (unbewusste Vor-Urteile) – which is a key aspect of many theories of tacit knowledge. Paradigmatic for this is the theory of perceptual judgements, which is important in relation to the phenomenology and the aesthetics of media in Flusser's works.
2. Second, Flusser evokes a strong notion of habit – which necessarily implies that the tacit web of roots is not given to us by just having certain properties, for example a body, but that these properties are always already part of practices – and by that of a certain cultural context.
3. Third, this leads to the consequence that the tacit realm of knowledge is not neutral but normative. This can be read as the basis for the responsibility for the others [›Verantwortung‹] we encounter – which in turn becomes the basis for Flusser's differentiation between ›Heimat‹ and ›Wohnen‹ in the sense of ›living at a place‹.
4. Fourth, it seems that ›rootlessness‹ is two things: it conceptualizes media as modes of establishing a mode of ›living at a place‹; vice versa media are constituted by that very mode – because it is this mode, that differentiates information.

But there also many open questions:

1. What are the secret roots made of? Flusser describes them basically as problems of communication and language. But what about the interaction with material relations and structures? Further discussions on Flusser's philosophy of materiality are needed – for example his readings of Heidegger's ›Zuhandenheit‹.
2. What about the connection of secret roots to the explicit code – especially in times of ongoing digitization, where material networks of autonomous computing machines are not only integrated in our lifeworld but constitute it? (If we still want to use Edmund Husserl's metaphor of ›lifeworld‹ or ›Lebenswelt‹ here). (cf. Husserl 1996)
3. And a last question: If we take the notion of language in the sense of Ludwig Wittgenstein, then language games imply a lifeform. (cf. Wittgenstein 1999: 225-580) Flusser seems to share this idea. But to put it naively: What about a world in which intelligent machines talk, think and act? Do they have a lifeform? Or to put it more radically: can they be migrants?

Thank you very much!

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Notes

1. Manuscript of my talk at the conference ›Playing against the Apparatus‹ at Karls-University-Prague on April 07./08., 2017.
2. Often overlooked in German media studies, Karen Joisten (2003: 273-316) has given an account of the philosophical implications of the notion of ›Heimat‹ from a phenomenological and anthropological perspective. Flusser plays a major role in her argument.
3. See here the discussion on otherness in the sociology of the stranger in Merz-Benz/Wagner 2002. From a philosophical perspective which also takes poststructuralist arguments into account cf. Waldenfels 2006 and Ernst 2006.

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