Chapter 5.

From Ugly to Beautiful: On homelessness and the secret art of being with others

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Abstract:

This chapter revisits Vilém Flusser's philosophy of communication to explore *Homefullness* as a speculative and situated response to homelessness. Moving beyond critiques of material deprivation, the discussion considers philosophical notions of dwelling, place, and relationality, with emphasis on community activation through design and creative media. Drawing on Flusser's concept of technical images alongside Aileen Moreton-Robinson's ontological belonging and Boaventura de Sousa Santos's decolonial epistemologies, the chapter interrogates how communication can foster meaningful connections to place, including the more-than-human world. Two practice-based examples – Commoners Press's *10press l*etterpress project and a *Soil Food Web*-inspired bioregional media inquiry – demonstrate how community activation through micro-media, speculative inquiry and obsolete technologies can facilitate interpretive communities. These examples illustrate how technical images, shaped by apparatuses, can enable co-creative meaning-making and intersubjective dialogue. *Homefullness* is thus reimagined not as nostalgic rootedness, but as a dialogical, embodied practice of belonging – attuned to Indigenous sovereignty, ecological systems, and ethical co-existence. By embracing the philosophical and technological tensions in Flusser's work, the chapter offers provocations for reclaiming communication as a pathway to re-worlding in our fractured contemporary condition.

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In our age of social media algorithms and AI-assisted warfare, re-visiting Vilém Flusser's work serves as an incursion to reflect on our contemporary technical capabilities. This chapter explores Flusser's philosophy of communication as a framework for understanding acts of *Homefullness*, inviting a discussion on belonging, place, and community activation through design and creative arts.

While addressing material deprivation and shortcomings in housing supply, infrastructure, and social services remains critical, this chapter focuses on a creative exploration of Homelessness through the philosophical notions of dwelling, place, abode, and the unhomely. I will provide two examples of community activation via design and creative arts, illustrating how interpretive communities can be activated and how speculative media inquiries can be developed into technology and related communication practices as constituting acts of *Homefullness*.

My aim is not to critique conceptual shortcomings but to contextualise my interpretation of Flusser and explore community activations in broader community settings, including the more-than-human world. Flusser expands on Martin Heidegger's notion of homelessness as an existential critique of modernity, contemplating what it means for individuals to dwell and belong meaningfully (Heidegger, 1977). By emphasising the communicative aspects of being-in-the-world, Flusser draws upon Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas's work on intersubjectivity, particularly Buber's concept of the dialogical life in *I and Thou* (Buber, 1923/1970).

Living on and writing from Dja Dja Wurrung Country in Victoria, Australia, I find that Flusser's notion of homelessness – shaped by his experience as a life-long émigré – offers a provocative lens for examining belonging in a settler colonial context. His idea of exile as a condition of radical openness challenges the dominant cultural narratives of rootedness that underpin mainstream settler identity in Australia, or what Flusser calls the secret art of being together (1992).

In *I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society,* Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003) argues that 'Indigenous belonging challenges the assumption that Australia is postcolonial because our relation to land, what I call an ontological belonging, is omnipresent, and continues to unsettle non-Indigenous belonging based on illegal dispossession' (p. 24). This stark contrast between Indigenous and settler relationships to place foregrounds the limits of Flusser's metaphorical homelessness when applied uncritically in postcolonial contexts. Yet, I propose that Flusser's philosophy of communication can still serve a purpose: it may aid in reckoning within settler society's inherited sense of dislocation – a kind of inherited homelessness – while resisting the urge to universalise that condition.

Bringing Flusser into conversation with Moreton-Robinson's ontological belonging and Boaventura de Sousa Santos's decolonial epistemologies allows for a more grounded and politically attentive reading of communication, place, and identity (de Sousa Santos, 2017). It becomes possible to reframe homelessness not simply as absence, but as an opportunity to listen, unlearn, and participate in alternate ways of knowing and being with place.

Extending Flusser's understanding of communication, I turn to the biological entanglements evident in the *Soil Food Web* (SFW) practice, which introduces a non-human dimension to communication. By reflecting on technology's role in his philosophy, the *10press* project also complicates the technological determinism in Flusser's account – particularly when engaging

with obsolete technologies such as the letterpress, which in this context becomes a site for regenerative and embodied public pedagogy.

These layered readings help to ask: what might *Homefullness* mean in a settler colonial context? Where – and with whom – can it be found? Rather than a fixed destination or identity, *Homefullness* might be understood as a situated and ongoing relational practice: one that honours Indigenous sovereignty, attends to the more-than-human world, and reimagines communication not only as exchange but as co-existence.

Both practice examples centre on the use of visual media, whether through letterpress prints or digital microscopy images, as a means to facilitate discussion and collective interpretation. On one hand, these practices align with what Flusser describes as technical or synthetic images; on the other, I propose them as communicative acts of *Homefullness*, while remaining attentive to the ways technology shapes the intersubjective relations at play.

Alongside Flusser's philosophical engagement with homelessness, this discussion is informed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos's work on decolonial epistemologies and the Heidegger-inspired ontological design movement associated with Tony Fry. Framing the examples as forms of micro-media, as theorised by Félix Guattari (2017), I draw on de Sousa Santos's (2017) concept of interpretive community gatherings to guide the analysis, while also attending to Fry's proposition that everything we design – objects, systems, environments – simultaneously designs us, shaping how we think, act, and experience the world.

By reflecting on these two examples, I aim to introduce a set of provocations – not to revise Flusser's universe of technical images, but to open up parallel pathways within it. These are not critiques of conceptual shortcomings, but contextual responses to contemporary technological conditions and explorations of what might constitute an *act of Homefullness*. The provocations include:

1. micro-media practices as facilitation of interpretive communities
2. questions regarding bioregional communication
3. obsolete technology as a form of public pedagogy

The two examples discussed here are part of micro-media practices that engage communities in the collective production and interpretation of images as a series of small-scale actions to drive social change.

The first example of micro media practice is the *10press* print project by Commoners Press, a letterpress print studio based in Melbourne/Naarm (Australia). The project commissioned 11 artists living or working in the Merri-bek area in Melbourne/Naarm to visually document their everyday – in one or two colours – during the municipality's transition, changing its name from Moreland to Merri-bek. The name change was in response to the colonial background of the

name ‘Moreland’ that Farquhar McCrae, a Scottish land speculator, brought to the municipality (Merri-bek City Council, n.d.). McCrae, whose family were involved in Jamaican slave plantations from 1770 to 1796, landed in Australia in 1839 and purchased land west of Sydney Road, which was taken without consent from its traditional Indigenous owners. Eleven artworks were selected, printed as a portfolio, and presented in a local exhibition documenting everyday life during this transition time, where the artists were invited to discuss their work.

The second example is inspired by my search for a bioregional media practice. Bioregionalism is according to Peter Berg (2014) about ‘re-inhabiting place’. While clearly distinct from what Moreton-Robinson describes as an Indigenous connection to Country, this might be considered the closest equivalent offered by a modern Western sociocultural perspective on relationships with land and water. Framed as a speculative media inquiry, my intention was to broaden the concept of communication in a bioregional context and to include not only the more-than-human world but also to expand the notion of dialogue itself. Could communication extend beyond human language or printed images to encompass, for instance, the exchange of bacteria? After all, human bodies contain more foreign cellular matter than human cells and in the presence of others, we are arguably more likely to exchange microbes than words or even eye contact. In the spirit of Berg’s bioregionalism and the connection to the land we live on, I am in particular focussing on microbes in the soil and the relational network of what the American soil scientist Elaine Ingham coined the *Soil Food Web* (SFW 2025). This example is based on a soil analysis of my attempt to produce *BioComplete*™ compost using a microscope as part of my SFW School training. *BioComplete*™ compost is a means to stimulate soils with the right kind of biology. SFW describes the complex, interdependent network of microorganisms (bacteria, fungi, protozoa, nematodes) and larger organisms (arthropods, earthworms, plants) that cycle nutrients, build soil structure, and maintain ecosystem health. By fostering a balanced soil food web, soils become self-sustaining, reducing the need for chemical fertilisers and pesticides while enhancing plant growth and resilience. A functioning SFW also stimulates the growth of Indigenous Microorganisms (IMO). Eating produce grown in soils with a functioning soil system present means we are inoculating ourselves with IMO amongst others and most likely spreading them among our compatriots while entering a deeper entanglement with the SFW.

While it is impossible to provide a complete overview of Flusser’s work in this chapter, I will focus on his thoughts about homelessness and what we can learn from them concerning community activations. To summarise, the three takeaways that I am drawing from Flusser’s philosophy are firstly to positively reframe the philosophical notion of homelessness as a starting point and communication opportunity. Secondly, to consider the epochal nature of technology as a shaping force of society and everyday life. In essence, technology is both a tool that we use and a force that influences the way we think, act, and relate to the world. It has a profound effect on our ‘technological consciousness’, and Flusser (2011) stresses that we must recognise our relationship with technology if we are to understand and critique its role in shaping modern life. And finally, the idea of time as cyclical helps us see how we've shifted through technological eras from an image-based culture to a writing-dominated one around three thousand years ago. Now, it seems the pendulum is swinging back toward an image-driven culture, shaped by today’s

digital technologies. This also echoes a critique of the linear progress as often associated with technology, which Flusser finds unconvincing for a species that must confront its own mortality. For a large part of one's existence, Flusser argues, the human being is a dwelling but a homeless being.

> One considers one's homeland to be relatively permanent and one's dwelling to be a changeable location that can be moved. The opposite is true: one can change homeland or have none, but no matter, one must always live and shelter (Flusser, 1992, p. 260).

Being keenly attuned to language, Flusser finds homecoming in dialogue that acknowledges the freedom of our counterpart. Here, communication is a relational process between people, signs and the environment through which everything defines each other. The discussion here presents two sides of communication: on the one hand, it is a process that can be 'calculated' and programmed, while on the other, it holds the utopian potential described by Buber as the '*dialogical life'* (1970).

From this standpoint, Flusser understood technology as a fundamental part of the communication process, which he viewed as a significant force in human history. He argued that technological progress contributed to our understanding of homelessness, yet it also enhances our ability to engage in open dialogue while encountering each other free from geographic limitations and the dynamics of related groups such as nation-states.

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger (1977) states *Heimatlosigkeit* [homelessness] is the fate of modernity, where everything is reduced to a standing reserve, leading to human alienation not just from place and culture but from being. In this aspect, Heidegger agrees with Marxist notions of alienation as a result of capitalist modes of production contributing to our *homelessness* in the historical unfolding of Being itself.

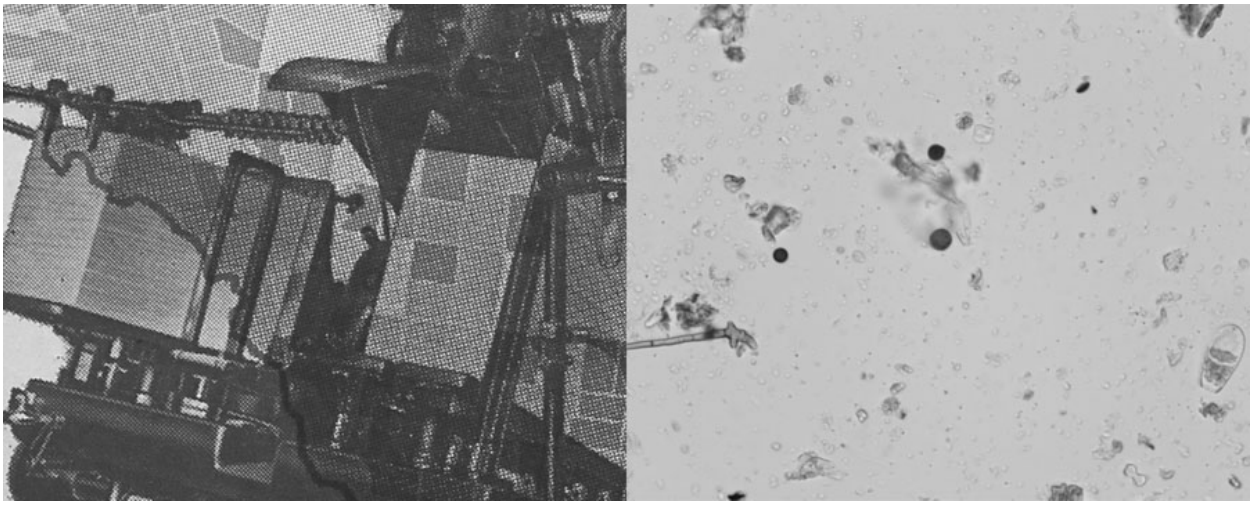
Flusser, however, turns the experience of the Heideggerian *homelessness* into something positive with recourse to the work by Buber and Levinas on intersubjectivity. He also famously remarked that one can dwell anywhere: 'under the bridges of Paris … in the huts of the Paulistan favelas, and even in Auschwitz' (Flusser, 1999). This stark example is not offered lightly – Flusser's parents were murdered in Nazi concentration camps, and his evocation of Auschwitz reflects the extremity of exile and the existential challenge of dwelling after catastrophe. To dwell becomes the existential human pre-condition for Flusser to embrace the world and life. However precarious, our place of dwelling offers more than mere shelter; it protects by enabling the development of customs and routines through which we make sense of the world.

> The secretive ties that individuals form with their homeland (Heimat) – whether characterised by love and friendship or hate and hostility – challenge the emigrant because it puts in question the freedom they have gained from dire circumstances, which are the dialogical threads of responsibility and the answering for each other (Flusser, 1992, p. 252) [my translation]).

According to Flusser, *Heimatlosigkeit* [homelessness] exposes us to *Mitsein* [being-with others] where it could be said that: '"I" is the one called by someone "You"' (2011, p. 93) because in the absence of a fixed *Heimat* [home], identity is shaped through relationality, where the self emerges in dialogue with others.

Therefore, the fateful blow of being homeless becomes an opportunity where we are now free to weave new interpersonal threads and take responsibility for these connections because our subjectivity is born out of relating to another's subjectivity. In dialogue, two participants coming together form an encounter, which generates the 'responsibility' to listen to the other, turning the ugly into beauty by overcoming prejudices. However, Flusser didn't stop here, but carefully considered how these encounters are enabled and shaped by technologies.

Searching for Dialogue: two examples of micro-media practices



<Figure 5.1. here>
Figure 5.1. Dialogical Life in Two Registers. Left: Excerpt from the 10press project poster by Commoners Press, 2022. Right: Microscope view (400x) of a soil sample by Jan Brueggemeier, 2024.

10press and the *Soil Food Web (SFW)* and its *Biocomplete*^{TM} composting use micro-media practices to engage small-scale communities in the collective production and interpretation of images. Micro-media has been explored and popularised by thinkers, including Félix Guattari (2007), as collective arrangements of enunciation. For example, Guattari saw Radio Alice, a pioneering free radio station in Bologna, Italy, active from 1976 to 1977, as a micro-media example of a small, decentralised media platform that operated outside the mainstream. For Guattari, the free radio station was a key tool of his concept of 'molecular revolution,' which reimagines how society is organised and how politics function. It creates space for more diverse,

inclusive forms of expression and contributes to social change through 'molecular practices' (Guattari, 2007, p. 17).

More recently, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2017) advocated for the proliferation of *neo* or *interpretive communities* in his decolonial critique of the *monopolies of interpretation* of the Global North. Santos identified interpretive communities as pivotal in facilitating emancipatory practice:

> They are...local-global territorialities and immediate-final temporalities that encompass both knowledge and life, interaction and work, consensus and conflict, intersubjectivity and domination, whose emancipatory unfolding consists of an endless trajectory from colonialism to solidarity guided by and constitutive of emancipatory knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2017, p. 93).

The close-up detail on the left of the poster in Figure 5.1 promotes the *10press* project (Commoners Press, n.d.), which was a community-based printing initiative exploring community activation through creative arts, and features a photographic impression of a printing press over the map of the inner-city area of Merri-bek in Naarm/Melbourne (Australia). Created with a halftone printing technique to simulate continuous-tone imagery while using only one colour, *10press* commissioned artists to print their art. I view *10press* as a prototype of an interpretive community, as its collaborative processes included operating the old letterpress print technology with artists, as well as a public discussion at an exhibition in Merri-bek. This allowed for a broader dialogue to take place with the *10press* participants recalling history, legacy, memory, intergenerational living, craft, neighbourhoods, audiences, human and non-human, (de)colonisation, and changing landscapes (Haslem & Brueggemeier, 2024).

In Figure 5.1 on the right, we see an excerpt of a photograph of 400x magnification of a soil sample of one of my attempts to achieve a *Biocomplete*^{TM} compost as part of SFW training. To my great delight, we can spot some beneficial fungal hyphae and a testate amoeba in the sample. These are all promising signs for the quest to revive mutual biological relationships in the soil I live on. This quest is shared by an international community of practitioners who are passionate about regenerative ways of agriculture. Given the vast lack of knowledge about the diverse biological groups that live in soil, a common study practice for SFW students is to share photos of soil microscopy to identify whatever your microscope has unearthed when analysing a soil sample. This SFW practice operates as both a micro-media and molecular practice – literally, in terms of its scale and materials, and metaphorically, in Guattari's sense of small-scale actions driving social change. It offers a regenerative approach to caring for soil that stands in direct contrast to the so-called 'Green Revolution' – a mid-20th-century agricultural transformation characterised by the widespread use of high-yield crop varieties, synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, and irrigation technologies, which significantly boosted global food production, particularly in developing countries.

Both practice examples follow a micro-media approach of small-scale action to drive social change. They represent a communicative practice of facilitating interpretive communities while extending the notion of being in dialogue. In each case, *technical images* serve as the medium through which such dialogue is activated, and this is the last aspect I will explore here.

Flusser draws a clear distinction between *technical images* (such as photographs, films, and digital media) and *traditional images* (like paintings or drawings). Whereas traditional images are abstractions created through imaginative representation, technical images are the result of apparatuses – like cameras or computers – translating calculations into visual form. These apparatuses, in turn, shape not only what we see but also how we interpret reality.

In his philosophy, Flusser defines the 'apparatus' as a system of technology or tools that governs and mediates human interaction with the world (2015). It's not just any machine or device, but a complex network of technology, cultural practices, and the power structures behind them. For Flusser, an apparatus is not neutral; it is an active participant in creating meaning and shaping the culture around it. It enslaves us to a certain extent, as we become dependent on these devices and technologies to interpret the world, often without realising their influence.

Yet, Flusser also saw possibility in this condition. His artistic collaborator Louis Bec recalls that for Flusser, philosophy was no longer practised through writing alone but increasingly through images. Bec elaborates:

> The power of the image is not only enhanced by rigorous foundations of thought but profits from the forceful effects of its polysemy… because he [Flusser] knew that it was only images that could bring logic and the imagination closely together in one meta-language. (Bec, 2015, p. 224).

In this schema, technical images including analogue photography, film, electronic, and digital Media represent an evolutionary leap beyond the traditional image. Traditional images reduce experience to symbolic representation on a two-dimensional surface; technical images, by contrast, are concretisations of computation – grids of calculable points that generate models of the world rather than reflect it.

This evolution signals a broader shift from a text culture to a visual culture. As Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (2015, p. 322) puts it, we are moving from 'one-dimensional, linear, alphabetic writing to zero-dimensional, nonlinear, pixelated technical images.' For Flusser, this overthrow of codes – initiated by nerve-like simulations such as television, video, and computers – was as transformative as the invention of the steam engine (1996, p. 236). He envisioned this transition as the beginning of a *telematic society* – a distributed, dialogical network in which technology could enable what Martin Buber described as a dialogical life (1970), one not bound by geography.

There is a sense of shared hopefulness in this vision, which is reflected in the decision by Peter Weibel and Siegfried Zielinski, editors of Flusseriana – An Intellectual Toolbox (2015), to open their introduction with one of Flusser's many provocative formulations: *'*Synthetic images as an answer to Auschwitz' (2015, p. 6). This phrase is not offered as a redemptive claim, but as a speculative provocation. Flusser asks whether new forms of media – particularly synthetic or technical images – can contribute to building a culture capable of responding to, processing, or even preventing atrocities like the Holocaust. For Flusser, Auschwitz represented the logical endpoint of the instrumental rationality embedded in the cybernetic network of the 'apparatus'. In contrast, dialogical media might help us reclaim agency, ethics, and relationality.

Flusser, however, held no illusions. In *Post-History*, he warned that once co-opted by apparatuses, human life risks falling into a state of 'bored contentment within the nauseating technical paradise of a predictable eternal return of the same' (2015, p. xii). However, the 10press project complicates this deterministic view by re-engaging obsolete tools such as the letterpress. Rather than rejecting technology, it rewinds the technological timeline, repurposing discarded tools as sites for regenerative, embodied public pedagogy.

Obsolete technologies like the letterpress are stranded yet strangely liberated assets of former times. In a Heideggerian sense, obsolescence can release tools from their commercial functions, allowing them to reach new potential when used creatively. From a community activation perspective, the tactile affordances of hardware interfaces as those in letterpress printing offer more transparent, grounded, and relational encounters than most digital platforms. For instance, while many of us may have experienced interactions with strangers in breakout rooms during video calls, the use of obsolete technology such as an old printing press as a form of public pedagogy is not about returning to the past for the sake of crafty nostalgia. Instead, it emphasises technical hybridity (Lovink, 2024) to foster local, translocal, global, and potentially bioregional encounters in the collective creation of images and dialogical encounters.

Conclusion

To summarise this discussion, I suggest that *Homefullness* can be seen as a counterpoint to Flusser's notion of homelessness, although it is not a return to rootedness or nostalgia. Instead, it might be a speculative, situated practice of *re-worlding*: of creating new forms of belonging and relationality in the ruins or gaps left by dislocation, modernity, and colonisation. In this light, an act of *Homefullness* could be a:

- communicative act that rebinds us to place, more-than-human others, or ancestral ways of knowing
- technological practice (like micro-media or obsolete technology) that resists abstraction and reconnects the body and senses to material worlds
- gesture of care, reciprocity, or reparation – especially in settler-colonial contexts – toward both Indigenous sovereignty and ecological systems

- collective or community-based inquiry (in Guattari's sense) into how we might live together otherwise

So, Flusser's philosophy of communication provides a framework for thinking about how technologies shape (and reshape) meaning and relationality. His notion of homelessness describes both the alienation and creative possibility of being unmoored. The question – what constitutes an act of *Homefullness* – can be seen as a response to that condition: a speculative praxis that reclaims communication not just as exchange, but as co-creation of liveable worlds, grounded in situated, embodied, and often decolonial gestures of reconnection.

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