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Vilém Flusser and the Philosophy of Technical Images

POLAND AND CANADA (TORONTO)

Wieslaw Michalak

Wieslaw Michalak was born in Lodz and in 1981 left Poland for France and later Canada, Australia, and UK. Since 1994 he lives and work in Toronto. In Lodz he was studying Earth Sciences, Philosophy, and Esthetics under the direction of Prof. Tadeusz Pawlowski. He finished his education in France and Canada where he studies visual arts and completed a Ph.D. He is Director of the Master of Fine Arts in documentary media degree and lectures in photography and new media programs at Ryerson University. He took part in exhibitions in Canada, USA, France, and Poland and published over forty papers and book chapters and over fifty papers at conferences and meetings in North America, Australia, and Europe.

Ce qui n’est pas fixé, n’est rien, ce qui est fixé, est mort.

Paul Valery

During the last two centuries there were significant changes in the way in which meaning and content have been communicated in culture. The emergence of technical means of image production, reproduction and distribution has altered the principal channels of cultural communication. The literary culture founded on linear text has been increasingly challenged by visual channels of communication based on mass production and reproduction of imagery rather than text. In the terminology of Vilém Flusser, the linear narrative of historical consciousness is in the process of being supplemented by the non-linear visual narrative. The proliferation of screens in the contemporary urban culture attests to this gradual evolution. It is the multiscreen displays, television, cinema, Internet, podcasts, cell phone networks and integrated multi-function electronic devices such as iPhones or the lineup of Nokia products, that form the basis of distribution of data and information in contemporary cities. Very little of this activity resembles the traditional literary
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culture. This has prompted some critics to dismiss the visual narrative of the XXIst Century as somehow insignificant or inferior to the past. This brief review attempts to address this issue.

Vilém Flusser was a Czech-born philosopher who most of his life lived in Brazil and France. For many years he was an obscure academic theoretician who wrote on various aspects of culture, civilization, technology and art for a narrow group of specialists. Until recently, he was virtually unknown in Canada and the United States but in the last few years he has become increasingly popular in Europe. This is somewhat ironic for Flusser died in a car crash in 1991 during the first trip to his native Czech Republic after more than 50 years. During his lifetime he enjoyed only a very brief period of recognition both by his peers and wider public.

Because he wrote mostly in German (although some of the key works are in Portuguese and a few in French) his texts are best known in German-speaking Europe, especially in Germany. There he has been increasingly promoted as a post-modernist theoretician who attempted to provide art and, especially, photography and new media with a body of theoretical context. It is well known that many European critics and art historians consider the relative lack of solid theoretical and philosophical foundations in photography and new media their weakest side. Many are convinced that despite the new popularity of still image making and almost universal acceptance by museums, galleries, and public at large, a solid philosophical base would provide photography, and by extension digital still-image making, with the long overdue key to universal legitimacy. Although there were quite a few attempts at such systematization, it is difficult to write about photography and still-image making in general. Its “essence” is elusive, difficult to pinpoint and quite different from other media employed in art. This somewhat puzzling property explains, in part, its growing popularity among artists eager to search for new ways of expression and theoretical context. Perhaps this is one of the principal reasons why an obscure Czech philosopher living most of his life in Brazil would become a celebrity in the sophisticated European art circles, critics, and academia.

Like many European thinkers raised and educated in the Germanic sphere of influence in Europe – the mythical Mitteleuropa of the Germany, Poland, and Austro-Hungarian Empire – Flusser’s writing style and terminology are somewhat difficult to interpret. He was intentionally a controversial writer and it is not easy to place him in the history of thought. On the one hand, he shares with most post-modernists a kind of pessimism, or even cynicism. On the other, one can see him as a thinker who desperately attempts to save increasingly scarce pieces of humanism and builds them into a new kind of utopia about the future. His choice of the non-linear narrative of the new visual
media is no accident since it injects a new kind of hope into his perspective. His language is full of neologisms, metaphors, and parabolas. Typically, Flusser himself encouraged both views, seemingly enjoying the ambiguity of his intellectual position (Ströhl, 2002). In this sense, he was more of an artist than an academic philosopher in the best Socratic sense of this word. This is probably why he enjoyed a provocative writing style which so annoyed some of his critics as well as why most of his followers are artists. Towards the end of his life he was admired by an increasing circle of both obscure and well-known artists such as Jiri Hanke, Bernard Plossu, Herlinde Koelbl, Henri Lewis, Lizzie Calligas, Boyd Webb, Paolo Gioli, Ulrich Martens, Gerd Bonfert, Astrid Klein, Nancy Burson, Joan Fontcuberta, Herbert Franke, or Andreas Müller-Pohle, among others. In addition to his theoretical work he wrote many short reviews, papers, and reviews on photography and culture in general.

Despite the fact that he spent most of his life outside the Czech Republic, Flusser considered himself a member of the same intellectual tradition as Jan Hus, Franz Werfel, Franz Kafka, Edmund Husserl, Rabbi Löw, Antonin Dvorak or Rainer Maria Rilke. However his greatest philosophical influences were, of course, German idealists such as Kant, Fichte, Hegel and that most controversial of them – Marx. Nevertheless, Flusser broke away early in his life from the Marxist tradition after the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, and there is no doubt that his popularity, in part, can be explained by his opposition to Marx. His greatest influences were quite different from the majority of artists or theorists of the 1960s and 70s – which were mostly, one way or another, Marxist in their countless guises – and included Buber and Wittgenstein but first and foremost Edmund Husserl. Although this is nothing out of the ordinary for a trained philosopher of Central European origin – very few of his contemporaries looked beyond Marx and Marxism. Other sources of his thought are Marshall McLuhan and Thomas Kuhn.

Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction depends on *bracketing off the reality*. This method enables knowledge *a priori* but not empirical. Of course, this is in direct commentary on Kant's synthetic knowledge, and Husserl's objective was just that – to move beyond reductionism and empiricism of Kant. Unlike the west of Europe where the traditions of British empiricism fused with French rationalism produced the *positive method* and “hard sciences,” Central Europe became fascinated with the possibilities of direct experience of the idea – very much in the tradition of Aristotle rather than Plato. This is the key to understanding the difference between so-called post-modernism and Flusser's proposal. The phenomenological method led Flusser to construct apparatus-operator complex (*Apparatus-Operator Komplex*) as the motivating force, *movens*, behind all change in culture. In his *Kommunikologie* (*communication*?) he demonstrates how this complex destroys texts to change them
into what he calls collectively *techno-images*. This altered relation between readers/consumers and the texts impedes the perception of texts. The complex seem to imply that there is no significant difference between the *apparatus* itself and the *operator* of the apparatus. Perhaps it is this idea that made Flusser so influential with photographers. He seems to suggest that it is the *relation* between the apparatus and the operator that matters (this type of philosophical position can be traced back directly to Husserl). Without this relation they do not really exist. Flusser called this the *black box*. There is a clear attempt on his part of a methodological shift from a procedural, linear narrative (the History – in philosophy this is most closely associated with Hegel) to a post-historical methodology not only capable of grasping the whole *essence* of being but also providing epistemological tools. Here Flusser resembles McLuhan.

Another source of inspiration for Flusser were natural sciences; in particular the second law of thermodynamics (the Universe tends towards entropy – the equilibrium – and the unimpeded loss of information) but also Heisenberg's uncertainty law and Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift. Particularly the last one – implying that quantity eventually turns into qualitatively new model – was often invoked by Flusser. He seems to use it as a metaphor for technological change (revolution?). The qualitative shifts in technology led to new forms of consciousness: “digital codes currently direct themselves against letter, to overtake them [...] no more a synthesis of the opposites (dialectic), but rather a sudden, almost incomprehensible leap from one level to another” (Flusser, 1992, p. 130). This links him to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* – it is the relations that are real, not things; dialogues not men themselves are relevant. Only the relations between subjects and other subjects are concrete.

Flusser builds a unique post-historical communications philosophy by fusing his original ideas with these of Husserl, Buber, and Wittgenstein. The ultimate purpose of human existence is a leisurely life of contemplation and celebration (Lyceum and Academiae), in a society that delegates work to machines and enables its members to live a life of creative communication. The objective of Flusser's work was the creation of specific communicative and technological conditions for a society of free, independent, and responsible citizens. In many ways, therefore, Flusser went much beyond Daniel Bell's post-industrial idea and stepped into the sphere of positive utopia. This alone should refute any attempts to characterize Flusser as a post-modernist.

The definite optimist source for Flusser was Martin Buber. He adopted some key elements of Buber's religious ethics but emptied it of any transcendental theology – “Judeo-Christian tradition breaks through to our present time not as theology, but rather as a search for intrahuman relationships” (Flusser,
Flusser became famous because of his “forecasting” work on the future of post-industrial or, as he called it, telematic society. However, a closer examination of his texts reveals that the centre of his work is the possibility of a dialogue and the concept of *bottomlessness*. Bottomlessness is the basis of freedom – this theme is often explored by exiles and refugees who emigrated against their will – the sense of detachment from any cultural ballast is the basis of existentialist thought. Ströhl (2002) argues that his communication theory was an unintentional side issue that emerged from an analysis of the central distinction between dialogue and discourse. The application of this media theory made Flusser look like a media theorist – but strictly speaking this is not true and it is almost certain that Flusser himself would argue against such interpretation. Communication is possible only when dialogue and discourse cancel each other out. In contemporary society, dialogue is discouraged rather than fostered. Ironically, the principal products of the process of globalization are the sense of isolation, solitude, and increasing distance from traditionally defined culture. This is caused by the overwhelming structure and influence of the media (according to his interpretation the popular media come close to fascism) and the corresponding Byzantine architecture of modern institutions such as state, nation, political parties, churches, and many other transglobal bureaucracies.

Dialogue offers an escape; thus, modern telematic media based on the proliferation of visual images offer an escape from totalitarianism of the official media. Communicology (Flusser, 1996) describes a system of communication structures constructed through various combinations of dialogue and discourse. Using Husserl’s method he analyzed several communication structures. On this basis he developed his own analysis of communication structures. In short, the idea of *dialogical life* or *dialogical philosophy* (a theme reappearing in European philosophy from Kierkegaard through Buber to
Husserl) combined with the analysis of various communication structures and technological progress led Flusser to the utopia of liberated and free society. The ideal form of the communicative act is a discourse without coercion. Flusser relegates the Enlightenment way of thinking to a paradigm of slowly vanishing historical thinking.

In 1983, Andreas Müller-Pohle published a short text by Flusser titled “Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie” (Flusser, 1983). This is the text that made Flusser famous. In this text he starts with a philosophical analysis of photography as an act of communication and ends with a completely novel systematization of cultural techniques. This is also the first time that he describes in more detail this systematization as a paradigm shift from two-dimensional, magical, circular culture, to linear, text-based narrative, and then to technical images (which include photography, film, video, digital image processing, and multiple screen installations). Photography, as first of the technical means for mass reproduction of images, serves as a model for freedom in a post-industrial context.

Unfortunately, according to Ströhl (2002) the public interpretation of the book, on the whole, has missed the point. The objective of the book is not to investigate the question of the documentary essence of photography (that is the fundamental question of the relationship between the object and its representation) but rather on the epistemological separation of science, technology, and art. The phenomenological method enables synthesis of these modes of enquiry in photography. The History (capital H) does not have to rely entirely on history (small h) because photography literally freezes events into scenes. In other words, the photograph is the first post-historical image. It is post-historical because its origin is not in the process of abstraction but in the process of concretization. Instead of being studied as techniques of representation, photography should be perceived as a projection of values and ideas held by the photographer and executed through an opto-mechanical device. He emphasizes the ideas of calculation, computation, and projection instead of the traditional question about the “realistic” quality of the photograph, i.e. is there a universal language of photography? In fact, Flusser’s philosophy of photography represents a general analysis of cultural and media techniques; a type of cultural anthropology rather than media theory. His focus is on structures of communication not the content of communication (i.e., message). In this he goes beyond McLuhan’s hot and cold media. He extrapolates an entire universe of political and cultural phenomena out of a handful of fundamental communication structures. A good example is his outline of the evolution of codes used in cultural techniques. It starts with the four-dimensional time-space nexus of individual experience, then it moves onto a three-dimensional
sculpture, after which there are flat two-dimensional images which are trans-
lated, in turn, into one-dimensional binary code of pixels, computers and
multiscreen displays.

Prehistoric images were maps that enabled their creators to orient
themselves in their environment. The image-makers submerged in their own
subjectivity. Linear writing was invented to replace magical consciousness and
magical behaviour (magical meaning non-linear) with enlightened conscious-
ness and historical action. Texts explained images; that is, they organized
human experience into events and causal relationships. They were tools to
control environment – progressively control the nature. Thus historical images
(i.e., images that appear independent of texts such as church stained-glass
windows, columns, or oil paintings), can be understood as illuminations of
imaginative consciousness that are opposed to the linear conception of history.
The dialectic by which images become more conceptual and texts more imag-
inative was the dynamic behind history. The printing press disrupted this
balance. Images as “art” were expelled from everyday experience. Because
images were created for an elite who was trained to read them, they became
almost inaccessible for the uneducated. In practice, that meant that culture
was divided into a narrative and visual spheres. The narrative has driven
progress (in a linear sense), industrial revolution and beyond into the digital
era, while the visual was on the decline. Photography (or rather technical
images in general) changed all that once again. They brought perceptions back
to experience (phenomenology). This had been possible because photography
– and later digital image processing in general – enabled mechanical reproduc-
tion of the visual, its copying and distribution. The artificial division between
science and art has been overcome first by photography. Photographs are only
first and earliest of the post-historical images. In synthetic images (i.e., digital
photography – although it should be termed digital imaging) the distinction
between the historical and post-historical images is even more pronounced
although the essence remains the same. Both technologies are, essentially,
mosaics – photographs are mosaics made of the molecules of silver compound,
while synthetic images are made of the cells of the raster that defines it as a
data structure. Thus, photographs, and even more multiscreen displays, are
not imaginations but rather visualizations. Imagination is an ability to step back
from the sensory environment and create an image of it. Visualization refers
to the ability to display raw data or sensory experience without compressing
it into a generalized information: “That is, visualization is the power to con-
cretize an image from possibilities” (Flusser, 2002, p. 129). This is why these
images are post-historical; they are not narrative but magical in the original
sense. However, because this concept of photographic images is not yet com-
monly accepted, most of what has been written about photography is narrative
– that is, historical. There is a significant discrepancy between the post-historical multiscreen visual communication and popular interpretation of what photography and other visual techniques represent both as media and documents.

Perhaps the most controversial implication of the emergence of post-historical images is the decline of the significance of texts and writing in general. This is where most of Flusser’s critics concentrate their anger. To reiterate briefly, Flusser argues that written letters represent sounds which, in turn, represent tangible things, concepts, or institutions. This makes writing a multilayered and highly ambiguous code. Since contemporary images are calculable and computable – that is they are technical – it is unlikely, according to Flusser, that writing will remain a paradigmatic cultural technique (Flusser, 1983). Text has been detached from the image it represents through the process of epistemological abstraction. The contemporary technical images represented throughout multiple screens are very different from those that existed before the invention of writing. Pre-narrative images were directly related to things or concepts they represented. The technical images represent texts that, in turn, represent images and then things. The process of abstraction has been reversed. This represents a radical epistemological and aesthetic innovation in culture. This is why Flusser argued for a society in which individuals would incorporate the new proactively rather than passively witnessing the transition. Using the code of writing, he reflected on the material conditions of writing and its imminent death that, ironically, writing itself brings about: “The Enlightenment has run its course, and there is nothing in the new left to explain” (Flusser, 1992, p. 55). Flusser’s prediction of the “end of writing” drew comparisons to “the end of history”. This is probably why initially his thesis was often dismissed or ignored. Of course, this is a misunderstanding that merely reveals the level of ignorance, even among supposedly educated, of the history of philosophical thought. Flusser most certainly did not suggest that writing will disappear and will be completely replaced by images. He argued something far more fundamental, that is, History is a function of writing, its linear mode of operating, and of consciousness which expresses itself in writing. Nevertheless, “the end of writing” is the chief reason why Flusser is often compared with such post-modernists as Jean Baudrillard or Paul Virilio. In fact, this is a misunderstanding since Flusser meant something different. He proposed the end of a certain type of historical consciousness; the beginning of multiscreen visualization as the mode of interaction and communication. He objected to the idea that reality and fiction could be unequivocally distinguished from each other by a criterion of truth. These should be, instead, distinguished on the basis of higher and lower probability.
References


