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Between Images and Texts: Vilém Flusser at the Intersection of Art and the Post-Historic Crisis

Abstract: Vilém Flusser argues that human beings are active parts in a socio-historic fabric made of images, texts, numbers, spoken languages and other symbolic codes shared intersubjectively. Flusser constantly refers to three basic communication codes: written texts, traditional images directly produced by humans, and technical images produced by the mediation of apparatus. Technical images are the focus of his attention because of their critical complexity, which points to the relation with the image-text that structures them. This establishes a recurrent reception scenario in which their “textual” aspect is neglected, leading to a direct association between technical images, like videos or photographs, and reality. Since they are not perceived as symbolic codes, but as mechanical manifestations of reality, observers do not focus on the work of deciphering them. This paper points to the possibility that forms of experimentation-and-deciphering that are more common in the field of arts could work as a model to overcome this communicational crisis of post-history.

Keywords: technical image; philosophy of language; post-history; art; communication; art criticism.

The Czech-born Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser approached the problems of communication in a structural way, seeking to understand the various forms in which human beings create intersubjectivity. Understanding the relation between images and texts in Flusser’s philosophy requires having some knowledge of how the philosopher gives meaning to the term *thought*. This meaning can be perceived not only conceptually but also in the way he conceived the short philosophical texts he published in Brazilian newspapers, which became a kind of formal application of his premises. Flusser generally organized ideas into short texts that approached only one subject, without any direct reference to the authors used in the construction of his argument. He seemed to understand texts as imagination constructors, with the aim of creating mental images. Add to that the fact that his introductions of the subjects of research were usually given

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by a *reflexema*, that is, a high impact subject pill¹. This method of textual construction points to another interesting characteristic: the fact that Flusser was an outsider in the Brazilian scene. Because of his ‘literoprensante’² style, *without academic rigor*, as the USP professors used to say in the 60s,³ Flusser never gained the sympathy of Brazilian’s scholar philosophers. Therefore, he remained mostly a stranger for Brazilian academic readers during the period in which he lived here, even though he was engaged in the São Paulo Biennial, in publishing texts in newspapers and in the production of criticism about several Brazilian artists and authors.

It is interesting to note that his method of construction of texts as mental images enlarges the democratic and critical potential of his writings. Flusser provokes the reader to come out of passivity and engage in the philosophical problem, either by agreeing or disagreeing with his proposals. Therefore, his writings become open places for discussion, instead of closed and finalized articles. He enables the reader to form creative relationships with his ideas and that makes the Flusserian texts a kind of invitation to dialogue. Gradually, the Vilém Flusser reader becomes an interlocutor of his texts, adding other possible mental images to his initial proposals. Considering that the activity of thinking between images and texts has become the main logic of thought construction nowadays, the theme is more and more current and pressing. We focus this investigation on the books *Language and Reality*, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, and *Into the Universe of Technical Images*⁴, although our expanded understanding of images and texts also depends on some of his short articles and on his development of a singular philosophical style.

The linguistic character of thought production was deeply explored by Flusser since his first book, *Language and Reality*⁵, first published in Portuguese in 1963, in which images are always presented as a form of language that has a particular structure and acts differently from written texts. So, how does image-thinking work and

¹ [...] these subject pills (*reflexemas*) are, in fact, pills of reflection formed by short argumentation, which have the power to refer to a wider universe, which then becomes penetrable by them. [...] [*Reflexemas*] place the reader before the picture he will face throughout the text, prepares his (in)disposition to it by giving, right away, a kind of dramatic shock of high rhetorical value and, above all, aligns, in the author’s spirit, a mnemonic, evocative sequence of arguments already loaded with commitment and engagement. Gustavo Bernardo Krause and Ricardo Mendes, eds., *Vilém Flusser no Brasil*. (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 2000), 35.

² A neologism to denote a style of thinking philosophically through literature.

³ Ricardo Mendes, “Flusser: uma história dos diabos,” Masters Degree Diss. (University of São Paulo, 2006), 48–57, <https://issuu.com/fotoplusbrasil/docs/2000-me-mendes-vilemflusserbiografia>, acc. on May 22, 2021.

⁴ All the books used in this article are published in Portuguese. The excerpts cited throughout the article were translated by the authors exclusively for this context.

⁵ *Language and Reality*, originally published in 1963, is one of the most provoking philosophical essays written in Portuguese. It is in this book that Flusser develops his own method of phenomenological analysis of language, which allows him to capture language as a living element, capable of transforming the chaos of immediate data into the cosmos of words filled with meaning, that is, in reality. In the book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser structures the problem of photography, and technical images in general, in a concise way. It was the first book on the subject published by the philosopher, in 1983. The book *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, published in 1985, works as a kind of continuance and more complex approach of the problems addressed in the previous book.

how does it relate to written and spoken language? Does it have a privileged place among the various existent languages? Mostly, why do we produce images? Flusser argues that the production of images is one of the first methods that human beings created to produce intersubjectivity – which means, after all, the world of our existence, the ‘reality’. Therefore, every image creation is also a creation of a possible world, a construction of a livable complex of meanings. Between the lines, this means that he does not understand the world or the reality as an essential and immutable substance. Rather the opposite, there is nothing immutable in a world constituted by meanings created intersubjectively through images, texts, and other symbolic codes. In this dynamic, what we call *thought* is constituted by the various symbolic codes that we use in daily life. In other words, thought is a web of relations constructed by the plurality of existing codes in each culture.

Human beings are active parts in a socio-historic fabric made of images, texts, numbers, spoken languages and other symbolic codes shared intersubjectively. Furthermore, it is important to consider that we live in a world increasingly composed of images. It is also important to consider that there is more than one type of image. Flusser starts *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* with the following sentences: “Images are surfaces that claim to represent something. In most cases, something that is out there in space and time. Therefore, images are the result of the effort to abstract two of the four dimensions of space-time, keeping only the dimensions of the surface”.⁶ This definition of image can be understood in the logic of the *reflexemas*. Although it has a universalist appeal, it is only a description of a type of image, the one understood by the philosopher as a ‘traditional image’.

Traditional images are two-dimensional images produced by humans in all cultures, and they are, as far as we know, one of the first communication codes made in a durable material. After the first subject pill, the philosopher expands his definition of image by exploring various aspects of what it means to be a symbolic code functioning as a medium between human beings and the world. Flusser constantly refers to two types of images: the one produced by humans, which he calls traditional images, and the one produced by apparatus, which he calls technical images. This second type is the focus of his attention. Technical images are produced through the mediation of devices and machines, which, in turn, are produced mostly through the application of scientific theories (mechanics, optics, chemistry, physics, etc.). Therefore, technical images are indirect products of texts, scientific texts, and that gives them a different historical and ontological position:

[...] technical images are third-level abstractions: texts abstract one of the dimensions of the traditional images (they are second-level abstractions); then, one of the abstracted dimensions is reconstituted, in order to result in an image again. [...] ontologically, traditional images imagine the world; on the other hand, technical images imagine texts that explain

⁶ Vilém Flusser, *Filosofia da caixa preta* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2002), 7.

images that imagine the world. This condition of technical images is decisive for deciphering them.⁷

Technical images are the focus of Flusser's attention because of their critical complexity, which points to the image-text relation that structures them. The philosopher notices an important deciphering problem that comes from the fact that they are constituted by both images and texts. That sets up a reception scenario in which the 'textual' aspect of the technical image is neglected because their appearance leads to a greater proximity to images and to the referents of images in the world. The result is that its encoded symbolic character is usually forgotten.

Of course, all kinds of media require a different work to decipher their different symbolic character. This brings up the difference of temporality between appreciating an image and reading a text. When someone looks at a static image, the eyes capture its various facets in an apparently random way, going back and forth, creating a circular temporality in this process. This temporality is organized by the relation established between the image and the observer. In the case of texts, the eyes gradually add up the phonemes and words to organize them according to grammatical rules and semantic expectations, following a linear path that creates, therefore, a linear and progressive temporality. Theoretically, the temporal experience with images is a little less ruled than the experience with texts, besides, observers generally minimize the importance of interpreting its symbolic aspects. For example, a photograph is often perceived as a direct, mechanical portrait of reality.

This kind of direct association between technical images, like videos or photographs, and reality sets a dangerous scenario for the reception of these images. Since they are not perceived as a symbolic code, but as a mechanical manifestation of reality, observers do not focus on the work of deciphering them. According to Flusser, all communication codes are mediations, and, in their proper functioning, they work as a map or a magnifying glass to guide human action in the world. However, this mediation involves a risky ambiguity: codes can replace circumstances, that is, they can become opaque screens and block access to the tangible world. When that happens, humans cease to act according to the web of intersubjective relations that constitute the world and start to act according to the codes, that is, they start to praise codes instead of creating or deciphering them. Every symbolic code has these two possibilities: they can be maps, magnifying glasses, or they can be opaque screens. The balance between these two characteristics maintains the existence of the code.

This is especially important if we consider that each culture adopts a predominant communication code which acts as the main organizer of thought. Human thought replicates the symbolization structure as well as the encoding and decoding modes of the predominant communication code. It is from this principle that Flusser divides western culture into three major periods: 'prehistory' was the era in which traditional images were the dominant code, 'history' was the era in which the media structure of writing predominated, and 'post-history' is the era in which we

⁷ Ibid. 13

find ourselves, where the predominant media is the technical image. In prehistory, when traditional images become opaque screens, a type of alienation called idolatry emerges. In history, when texts become opaque screens instead of magnifying glasses, there is an alienation that Flusser calls ‘textolatry’. In both cases, the symbolic and constructed character of the code is forgotten, generating a communicational crisis due to the inability of deciphering it. Ultimately, a communicational crisis is a crisis of the critical capacity to articulate intersubjectivity.

Flusser argues that in the second half of the 20th century western culture was in a moment of migration from the written code to the technical image code. That means, on the one hand, that the symbolic structure of the relation text-image established by technical images currently shapes human thought. On the other hand, it means that the present alienation crisis has conjugate aspects of idolatry and ‘textolatry’. This type of alienation or communication crises operates by fusing the society into an amorphous mass, which starts to live in function of apparatus that dominate the production, manipulation, and storage of information. Therefore, they dominate the human capacity to apprehend and formulate the world. The different devices pre-program the thought and the actions of each individual, making him a kind of subordinate employee limited to following the rules dictated by its programs⁸.

Considering that we think mostly through technical images, Flusser argues that we need to create decoding tools different from the ones we use to decipher both traditional images and texts, but he does not go much deeper into describing them. It is within this context that we propose to use Flusserian analyzes of the arts as a possible model for projecting solutions to the current alienation crisis. When Flusser writes about visual arts, cinema, theater, and literature, he generally discusses the plastic quality that exists in written languages⁹. Any visual construction created as a symbolic code has a plastic quality, including texts. What Flusser calls plastic quality is an aesthetic experience of the language, a sensible quality that is not negligible because it is part of the construction of thought. The question is: how this plastic quality appears in each code and in each language?

⁸ The programming of human thought and action by means of apparatus became even more pressing after Flusser’s death, when we can observe its unfolding with Big Data and artificial intelligence. These technologies of massive data collection, profiling, and targeted information (including deliberately false information) go so far as to greatly influence the outcome of elections, as in the case of the 2018 Brazilian elections.

⁹ The plastic quality of written language is not easily perceptible in inflectional or agglutinative languages, but it seems an obvious quality in isolating languages, like Chinese. Flusser develops extensively this subject in *Language and Reality*: “In fact, there are basically only three types of languages: the inflectional, the agglutinative and the isolating languages. There are, therefore, only three basic kinds of worlds in which the human intellects live. The world of inflectional languages consists in elements (words) grouped into situations (sentences = thoughts). Within the situations, the element retains its identity and establishes a relationship with other elements. There are rules governing the modification of elements in different situations, and there are rules governing the structure of situations. The elements and the rules vary from language to language, but the basic character of the world is the same: elements come into relations with each other, changing, but retaining their identity. [...] Each situation is constructed in such a way that we can distinguish in it a center (the subject), a process radiated by the center (the predicate), and a horizon towards where the process is irradiated (the object).” Vilém Flusser, *Língua e Realidade* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2004), 61–62.

There seems to be a deep gap between a verbal language and a sculpture, for example, in fact, an ontological abyss. Whereas the conversation is, according to this analysis, the realized potentiality, the sculpture seems to be something extra linguistic, therefore unreal, although of a dubious ontological position. After all, it is difficult to say that a sculpture is not realized, since it shows the productive work of the intellect.¹⁰

The feeling of ontological abyss comes from the fact that inflectional languages are poor in plastic aspects since the written language is a secondary derivation of the spoken language. Inflectional language speakers have the feeling that a sculpture or a painting is an extralinguistic product because the structure of our intellect is shaped by our mother tongue, which is the primary foundation of our perception of the world. Furthermore, Flusser understands Abstract Painting and Concrete Poetry as attempts by inflectional language speakers to explore the plastic quality of language. Both were at the height of their development in Brazil, at the time when Flusser was making his first philosophical writings in Portuguese.

Concrete Poetry works with the inseparability between the written language and its plastic quality, showing how the visual quality of the text produces meaning. The Noigandres group, formed in São Paulo in 1952 by Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, committed themselves to developing a poem-object that would unite visual, verbal, and spoken elements of language (like James Joyce's *verbivocovisual*). It is also important to notice that Concrete Poetry can be read in a non-linear way, as its meaning flows through its visual surface in a very similar way to how Flusser described the temporality of images. This relationship of profound intimacy between image and text already pointed to the way he understood, years later, the production of technical images.

Regarding Abstract Painting, it is interesting to note that, in Brazil, it was mainly developed by a group that called itself 'concretist' and maintained several dialogues with Concrete Poetry. The "I National Exposition of Concrete Art" happened in São Paulo in 1956, traveling to Rio de Janeiro the next year, and showcasing both visual artists and poets. These painters devoted their work to investigate the interdependence of visual elements on the canvas: the colors, shapes, and sizes of the canvas and, above all, its assumed flatness. They developed intertwining geometries, and conceptual, nonlinear arrangements that would force the eye to move in different trajectories. The affinities between Abstract Painting and Concrete Poetry suggest ideas that would become central for Flusser in later years around the relation text-image, non-linear reading, plasticity of texts (including his own philosophical texts, as we stated at the beginning), and the integration of art, design, and mass communication. However, we are mainly interested in pointing out the following: although originally poetry is text and painting is traditional image, Concrete Poetry is an imagetic text, that is, a text that requires an understanding of its plastic, visual aspects; conversely, Abstract

¹⁰ Ibid. 172.

Painting functions as a textual image, as it requires reading its constitutive pictorial elements and the rules that structure relations between them in a way analogous to the grammatical rules of inflectional languages. And it is not by chance that both appear precisely at the moment when technical images started to acquire more space and importance in the configuration of western culture, its means of information and communication and, therefore, of current human thinking. In this sense, studies on the interpretation of Concrete Poetry and Abstract Painting could offer the first clues for deciphering images made by apparatus.

Expanding this question: could we use forms of experimentation-and-deciphering that are more common in the field of arts as a model to overcome the communicational crisis of post-history? Can art be a possible tool to reverse alienation processes? Not as a naive optimism that assumes that art will save humanity, but as a preservation of a horizon of resistance to the complete programming of human thought. Flusser himself suggests that art could be a way out of the communicational crisis of post-historic western culture, however, he does not develop this issue enough. The philosopher describes how apparatus are programmed according to codes that simulate human thinking and end up replacing it progressively, as they condition individuals to follow their programming. Flusser analyzes the camera as the first prototype of apparatus producing technical images and describes its program as a “black box”, that is, as a complex and obscure mechanism, incomprehensible to ordinary human experience. People, in general, do not follow what goes on inside a black box; they only know the input (for example, a cloud) and the output (the photograph of the cloud). Furthermore, as we stated before, images made mechanically via devices, such as photographs and videos, tend to be perceived as mechanical results of reality, rather than images that need to be critically deciphered. However, art can assimilate the most advanced techniques of the post-historic period, but without being subordinate to the alienating function (idolatrous and “textolatrous”) that these techniques play in the field of communication, economics, politics, and culture in general. Of course, cinema, photography, web art and digital art, as well as Concrete Poetry and Abstract Painting, can be guided by programming ideologies, but they may also not be. Art surpasses technology and technical images even when it uses them because it uses them in a transgressive and critical way, creating “machines that produce nothing and devices that do not work”,¹¹ as Flusser said in a *reflexema* from a short article curiously called “The Spirit of Time in Plastic Arts”.

Art is a poetic way of constructing images, that is, a specific type of image production that problematizes the perception of the image. Artistic interpretation requires the establishment of complex relationships of thought, experience, referentiality, intertextuality and adherence to the plastic aspects that constitute works of art. It is an activity that combines different human capacities to experiment and to decipher symbols and meanings. Deciphering artistic proposals involve paying attention to the

¹¹ Vilém Flusser, “O Espírito do Tempo nas Artes Plásticas,” *Suplemento Literário do Jornal O Estado de São Paulo*, January 3, 1971.

network composed by the image, the artist, the observer, the set of cultural codes and the space-time in which the observation is performed. In this sense, criticism appears as an intrinsic condition for this experience. If artistic interpretation involves all these factors, it works as a training for the translation work between different media and codes. Flusser also investigated extensively the philosophical problems of translation. In this case, translation appears as the critical activity in face of the symbolic character of the artistic images. In art criticism, this translating posture towards images is materialized in some media, usually the spoken or written language, but nothing prevents it from being any other empirical manifestation or even another work of art. An example of this is the famous criticism carried out by the critic and curator Frederico Morais for the exhibition “The New Criticism”, which he curated in Rio de Janeiro in 1970. This exhibition showed works by Cildo Meireles, Thereza Simões and Guilherme Vaz. To comment on the “Coca-Cola Project”, by Cildo Meireles, Morais produced an art criticism *as art* by covering the gallery floor with about fifteen thousand returnable bottles of Coca-Cola, on which the public needed to walk to visit the exhibition. The “Coca-Cola Project”, represented in this exhibition by three bottles of Coca-Cola containing slogans like “Yankees, go home”, consisted of a project of printing critical messages in returnable Coca-Cola bottles. After this intervention in the bottles, Cildo Meireles put them back into circulation, which reveals why this work was part of his broader project called “Insertions in ideological circuits”. Morais’s criticism consisted, as the critic states, of questioning whether the Coca-Cola brand could be able to impose itself in the face of Cildo’s criticism, appropriating back his appropriation and diluting it in its market and ideological system.¹²

Beyond traditional images, spoken and written language, these experimental forms of art influenced what would become, in Flusser’s universe, the “superficial” reading of technical images, the eclipse of text by images and the non-linear description of post-history. The powerful examples of Brazilian art that we mentioned here allow us to glimpse how human thought can unfold critically and creatively in the text-image intersection, going beyond the production of texts typical of the historical period and the production of traditional images typical of the prehistoric period, but also going beyond the risks of the complete programming of human thought by technical images, typical of the post-historic period. Perhaps, it is in this type of dialogue between criticism and art, when there is no hierarchy and the critical debate does not end, since it is an open field of translations and dialogues that we can look for models to overcome the communication crisis that alienates human thought and action in post history.

¹² Frederico Morais, “Frederico Morais, o crítico-criador,” Interview by Gonzalo Tavares Available, 2008. <http://www.cronopios.com.br/site/colonistas.asp?id=3279>, acc. on May 22, 2021.

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