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# Flusser's Belief

Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* was first published in German as *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, by European Photography, in 1983, and later in Flusser's own English translation, in 1984, but it did not reach a wider Anglophone readership until Reaktion Books in London published Anthony Mathews's translation in 2000. It has since been translated into many languages all over the world.[1]

Flusser's title is deceptively modest. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* is an original phenomenological approach to photography, but it also introduces a radical theory about future sweeping changes in our communications environment that Flusser would continue to elaborate and interrogate until his untimely death in 1991 in an auto accident. He begins the book by stating the stakes involved with these coming changes: "This book is based on the hypothesis that two fundamental turning points can be observed in human culture since its inception. The first, around the middle of the second millennium BC, can be summed up under the heading 'the invention of linear writing'; the second, the one we are currently experiencing, could be called 'the invention of technical images.' … This hypothesis contains the suspicion that the structure of culture—and therefore existence itself—is undergoing a fundamental change."[2]

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser positions photographs as the first "technical images," and the camera as the first apparatus of the coming digital revolution, the first black box (the Portuguese version of the book published in Brazil is titled *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* [Philosophy of the Black Box]).

Like any good phenomenologist, Flusser begins by defining terms, and they are laid out in a "Lexicon of Basic Concepts" at the end of the book. *Image* is "a significant surface on which the elements of the image act in a magic fashion towards one another." *Magic* is "a form of existence corresponding to the eternal recurrence of the same." *Imagination* is "the specific ability to produce and to decode images." He contrasts the world of magic, "a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context," with the world of history, "in which

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[2] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 7.

nothing is repeated and in which everything has causes and will have consequences," and concludes that "the significance of images is magical."[3]

Linear writing, Flusser contends, was invented in order to subdue the magical world of images with history, which begins "as a struggle against idolatry." "Texts do not signify the world; they signify the images they tear up," he writes. In the dialectic between texts and images, "textolatry reached a critical level in the nineteenth century," and history, per se, came to an end. "During this crisis of texts, technical images were invented: in order to make texts comprehensible again, to put them under a magic spell—to overcome the crisis of history."[4]

These technical images (initially, photographs and films, and eventually including television, satellite and computer images, holograms, and virtual reality) were very different, historically and ontologically, from traditional images (paintings and drawings) in that "traditional images signify phenomena whereas technical images signify concepts." Flusser points to the ontological status of technical images that makes them difficult to decode: "They appear to be on the same level of reality as their significance." Consequently, "their criticism is not an analysis of their production, but an analysis of the world," which makes it difficult to keep it within bounds as criticism. He warns, "This lack of criticism of technical images is potentially dangerous at a time when technical images are in the process of displacing texts—dangerous for the reason that the 'objectivity' of technical images is an illusion." Again, the stakes are high: "The universe of technical images, emerging all around us, represents the fulfillment of the ages, in which action and agony go endlessly round in circles. Only from this apocalyptic perspective, it seems, does the problem of photography assume the importance it deserves."[5]

Flusser then embarks on an analysis of the camera as a black box, as the prototype of the ubiquitous apparatuses that are to come in the telematic world (an information society based on images). One way that these new apparatuses are different from the machines of the industrial world is that they do not intend to change the world, but "to change the meaning of the world. Their intention is symbolic."[6] In political terms, it is those who control the "soft programs," not the hard objects, who now have power: "This shift of power from the material to the symbolic is what characterizes what we call the 'information society' and 'post-industrial imperialism.' "[7]

In Flusser's reformulation, the camera has a program (in the sense of a computer program: a list of instructions telling the device what to do), and most humans taking photographs are simply functionaries in the service of this program. Thus, "their actions are automatic camera functions,"[8]

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[3] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 9.
[4] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 13.
[5] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 20.
[6] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 25.
[7] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 30.
[8] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 58.

and a kind of "ritual act" that produces "a permanent flow of unconsciously created images." In terms of reception, most people think that photographic images do not need to be decoded, since their relation to the real is self-evident. This makes it possible for humans to be persuaded and controlled by images, and to "act in a ritual fashion in the service of a feedback mechanism for the benefit of cameras."[9] It also makes a real criticism of photography extremely difficult.

The only way for photographers to make improbable images (to produce information) is to work against the camera's program. "This specifically human and at the same time unnatural ability is called 'mind,' and culture is its result, i.e., improbably formed, informed objects."[10] Or, what may be called art. Flusser believed that artists create reality. They have the ability to stretch the limits of language and create new forms.

Toward the end of his book, Flusser elaborates a dark vision of the programmed world to come. He defines the program as "a combination game based on chance," like the throw of dice: "In this subhumanly mindless sense, apparatuses 'think' by means of chance combinations. In this sense they are omniscient and omnipotent in their universes." In this way, human beings become pieces in the game, or functionaries: "The photographic universe and all apparatus-based universes robotize the human being and society."[11] Flusser calls for a new cultural criticism, to analyze this new order, and predicts that "within such cultural criticism, the camera will prove to be the ancestor of all those apparatuses that are in the process of robotizing all aspects of our lives, from one's most public acts to one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires."[12] He recognizes that the whole complex of apparatuses, beginning with photography, "is being linked up by cybernetics to other apparatuses," resulting in "a super-black-box made up of black boxes." What needs to be criticized and analyzed, he says, is the automaticity of apparatuses: "The criticism of apparatuses proposed here sees its task precisely in uncovering the terrible fact of this unintentional, rigid, and uncontrollable functionality of apparatuses, in order to get a hold over them."[13]

As in all of Flusser's writings, the principal concern, in the end, is human freedom. But how does this apply in the future of technical images, when life will mean "feeding apparatuses and being fed by them"? In the last section of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser asks the question, "If everything is based on chance and necessarily results in nothing, then where is there space for human freedom?" His answer is to look to the photographers he points to earlier, who are working against the program of the camera and producing improbable images (he calls them "experimental photographers"). Flusser doesn't give any examples of these, but I would think here of

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[9] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 64.
[10] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 49.
[11] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 70.
[12] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 71.
[13] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 74.

artists including Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Frank, Harun Farocki, Joan Fontcuberta, Friedrich Kittler, Agnes Varda, Carolee Schneemann, and Hito Steyerl. "Freedom is the strategy of making chance and necessity subordinate to human intention. Freedom is playing against the camera."[14]

Flusser's dystopian view of the future of programs and apparatuses, and the postindustrial universe opening up before us in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, is tempered, in the end, by a curious mixture of hope and resignation. "A philosophy of photography must reveal the fact that there is no place for human freedom within the area of automated, programmed and programming apparatuses, in order finally to show a way in which it is nevertheless possible to open up a space for freedom. The task of a philosophy of photography is to reflect upon this possibility of freedom—and thus its significance—in a world dominated by apparatuses; to reflect upon the way in which, despite everything, it is possible for human beings to give significance to their lives in face of the chance necessity of death. Such a philosophy is necessary because it is *the only form of revolution left open to us."*[15]

## Beyond Belief

After *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser went right to work on its sequel, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, published two years later, in 1985. Unfortunately, an English translation was not published until twenty-six years later, in 2011, as *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Although Flusser meant this volume to be "a continuation and amendment of those arguments articulated in" his earlier essay, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* is very different in tone and intent. Whereas the first book was a cautionary tale, warning against the possible pitfalls of a future cybernetic society (governed by communication and control processes in mechanical and electronic systems, based on feedback), this book exhibits a level of optimism about the telematic world to come that would make Ray Kurzweil blush.[16]

In the opening of this book, Flusser writes that a "future society that synthesizes images … will be a fabulous society, where life is radically different from our own." As in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, the stakes are high, and the situation unprecedented: "What is happening around and

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[14] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 80.
[15] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, p. 81-2 (emphasis added).
[16] The mathematician and philosopher Norbert Weiner was the originator of cybernetics (from the Greek, to "steer" or "govern"). His work had a tremendous influence on that of the anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, and on the poet Charles Olson. The American inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil has written extensively on artificial intelligence, transhumanism, the technological singularity, and life extension. He is a director of engineering at Google.

in us is fantastic, and all previous utopias, whether they were positive or negative, pale in comparison to it."[17] This unprecedented utopia "will no longer be found in any place or time but in imagined surfaces, in surfaces that absorb geography and history." Flusser says that his essay will seek "to grasp this dreaming state of mind as it has begun to crystallize around technical images: the consciousness of a pure information society."[18] It is no wonder that Flusser quickly became a revered and much sought-after prophet of the cybernetic revolution.

When Flusser was writing *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, internet connections were dial-up. The World Wide Web was five years away, smartphones and their cameras were two decades away, and the first widespread social-media platforms even further. But, based on his analysis of photography, Flusser envisioned, with a remarkable particularity and precision, the communications world that we now live in.

Even under the spell of this coming utopia, Flusser continued to insist on the need for criticism, to question the bases of the new order, and to analyze and judge their effects. For him, as always, "the point of cultural criticism is to maintain and increase human freedom and dignity," and he saw how the new order could move toward limiting these principles, especially when it comes to artificial intelligence. "The question of how human intelligence and artificial intelligence are related will become the center of the dialogue very soon. We will face the unpleasant choice between humanizing artificial intelligence and making human ones move like apparatuses"[19] (remember, this is in 1985). If we make the wrong choices, the only right we'll have left is the right to say No, "and this command to stop, this veto right, this right to say no is the negative decision we call 'freedom.' "[20]

Flusser does not often address the question of belief, per se, but he does write a good deal about doubt.[21] For my purposes here, doubt is not the opposite of belief, but rather the opposite of certainty. Flusser asserted that "technical images don't depict anything; they project something," and I think that something projected is belief. In fact, his ecstatic envisioning of the future telematic society has a basis in belief; the way he approaches the subject of technical images and media is infused with questions of belief (in love and death).

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[17] Flusser, Into the Universe, p. 3.
[18] Flusser, Into the Universe, p. 4.
[19] Flusser, Into the Universe, p. 113.
[20] Flusser, Into the Universe, p. 122.
[21] One of Flusser's major early Brazilian works is *Da dúvida* (On Doubt), written in the mid-1960s, but not published until 1999, and in a full English translation, by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, and edited by Siegfried Zielinski, in 2014, as *On Doubt*. "In the preface to the 1999 edition", writes Rainer Guldin in the foreword, "Celso Lafer mentions that in 1965 when he was a student at Cornell University, he gave a German version of *A dúvida* to Hannah Arendt at Flusser's request. Lafer mentions that he had the opportunity to look at the text with Arendt and discuss the contents" (p. ix-x).

Flusser believes that telematics will eventually permit us "to recognize ourselves in others through images festively, leisurely, without purpose." Robots will do all the work, and everything humans do will be relaxed, living in play, learning, and celebration. Flusser had finally found an opening to what one of his earliest influences, Martin Buber, called "dialogic life," writing that the two possible futures are "a centrally programmed, totalitarian society of image receivers and image administrators," or "a dialogic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors." "Judaism forbade the making of images, and Christianity and Islam, each in its own way, have followed the same path. This is because images made by human beings obscure the "true image." The 'true image' is any human face. It is the image of the absolute other, the 'likeness of God.' …"

"All pretelematic images, from Lascaux to video, are discursive, broadcast images, projected against the other, obscuring his face. They are forbidden. They lead the wrong way, away from God. Telematic, dialogically synthesized images, on the other hand, are media between one human being and another, through which I may see the face of the other. And through this face, I may see God. …

"We may be at the point of finding our way back, on a strange detour through telematics, to being genuinely human, that is, to a festive existence for another, to purposeless play with others and for others. Even now, we are beginning to be repulsed by pretelematic existence, an existence bound up with purpose and motives, always harping away at what is one's own, as a frightfully serious, joyous, and so profane way of life. A new, completely unorthodox religiosity is beginning to emerge from the musty corners of our consciousness, and this, surprisingly, in the form of the dreamlike universe of technical images."[22]

Flusser sometimes approaches a sort of Gnostic threshold when he contemplates "the implacable tendency of the universe toward disinformation," which would result in "heat death," so "technical images are reservoirs of information that serve our immortality." "The apparatus," he writes, "functions just as the universe does, namely, automatically," which is evil. So we need "envisioners," producers of technical images who "try to turn an automatic apparatus against its own condition of being automatic."

The unrelenting techno-optimism has a pessimistic counter: "The world has become meaningless, and consciousness will find nothing there but so many disconnected elements." Rather than becoming more connected, we are all becoming part of a disconnected world, due to the disappearance of writing and meaning. In the world of technical images, questions about meaning have no answer, because such questions "assume a distinction between true and false, and in the

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[22] Flusser, Into the Universe, pp. 156–157.

universe of technical images, such distinctions have become superfluous." What's more, any resistance to this new order is futile. "The energy required to withstand the penetrating force of technical images would project such a person out of the social context."

Flusser falls into a best-case, worst-case rhythm. Either the world will be transformed into a free and powerful nirvana, or it will descend into a meaningless morass. He says that "technical images themselves are apocalyptic," but he then makes a call for an intervention to avoid catastrophe: "The traffic between images and people is the central problem of a society ruled by technical images. It is the point where the rising so-called information society may be restructured and made humane."[23] Flusser always leaves a way out of the morass—into a cultural criticism of the future. "If the point of cultural criticism is to maintain and increase human freedom and dignity, then its focus must be on just these new forms." And "today's revolutionaries are not Khaddaffis or Meinhofs but rather the inventors of technical images. Niépce, Lumière, the numberless and nameless inventors of computer technology, these are the ones who have brought the new social forms about."[24] But "technology has become too serious a matter to be left to technicians."[25]

In contradistinction to *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, where almost no sources are mentioned in the text, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* is studded with a range of them, including Plato, Hegel, Vico, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Buber, Nietzsche, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, Baudrillard, McLuhan, and Žižek. I've been told that Flusser's traveling library also included works by Giordano Bruno and Jacob Boehme.

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I believe that Flusser, especially in *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, vastly underestimated the persistence of the drive for hegemony and control in the form of Surveillance Capitalism and the dangers to democracy in the urge toward technological totality and determinism. But much of his theory about the coming changes to our communications environment has proved sound, and he was really the only one who accurately saw photography, and the photographically derived image (the technical image), at the center of these developments.

The third volume in Flusser's trilogy, *Does Writing Have a Future?* begins this way: "Writing, in the sense of placing letters and other marks one after the other, appears to have little or no future. Information is now more effectively transmitted by codes other than those of written signs."[26] The epochal shift from linear writing and literacy to technical images is transforming the

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[23] Flusser, Into the Universe, p. 60.23.24
[24] Flusser, Into the Universe, p. 63
[25] Flusser, Into the Universe, p. 65.
[26] Flusser, Does Writing Have a Future?, p. 3.

world, just as the rise of linear writing and widespread literacy transformed Greece in the fourth and fifth centuries BC.[27] It is my contention that this epochal shift is significantly affecting and being affected by the relation between photography and belief. How do we believe technical images, and how is that belief changing?

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[27] See Havelock, Preface to Plato.