

## Francesco Restuccia

### Flusser against Idolatry

L. Beke: I think that all your hypotheses, and all your whole way of thinking, starts from a basic point... and it has a very strange link with the Bible. Or, not only the Bible, but the main topic of the prohibition of images [...].

V. Flusser: It is quite true. The older I get, the more Jewish I get.”

Flusser 2010: 32

#### 1. A thread running through Flusser’s writings

The concept of idolatry has often been neglected in the studies on Flusser. However, it can be considered a central concept in his thought and, together with the concept of apparatus, can be tracked as one of the main threads connecting Flusser’s early writings on literature and religion with the later ones on communication and telematic society.

Idolatry is an ambiguous concept – and probably that is why it had such an appeal on Flusser – as it means both worshiping idols (false gods) and worshiping images (in Greek: *eidola*)<sup>1</sup>. There is, on the one hand, the moral problem of valuing something more than it’s worth, and on the other hand, the aesthetic and epistemological problem of the image and its almost magical power. Thinking of images in connection with the problem of idolatry means looking at the issue of its feedback effect. Images are not only objects of contemplation or products of our technologies: they act on us, modifying the way we look at the world (*imagines agentes*) and therefore our beliefs and our behavior. They are means of knowledge and communication, they are *media*: we need them but we need to go beyond them, as far as possible.

The words “idolatry” and “idol” occur in Flusser’s writings from his early works in the 1960s, to his final essays in 1991, with an interesting gap in the early 1970s. This gap allows us to recognize two phases and two approaches to idolatry in Flusser’s oeuvre. The first uses of the concept are clearly embedded in Flusser’s Jewish education and appear mostly in the context of his essays on hierophany<sup>2</sup> and secularization, especially the ones where Flusser posthumously argues with his mentor Vicente Ferreira da Silva. From 1978, “idolatry” appears in a new context,

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek term *eidololatria* (*eidolon*: image, *latreia*: worship) was employed for the first time in the I century CE in the *Sibylline Oracles* (III 38), a Jewish text modified and expanded by Christians, and almost in the same years by Saint Paul in his letters. The word *eidolon* (image) was first used meaning “idol”, fake god, in the Greek translation of the Bible by the Septuagint, in the III century BCE. The Hebrew words used in the Bible for “idol” are *pesel* (wooden statue), *elilim* (vanity), *elohim* (gods), *gilulim* (filth). The Hebrew expressions for idolatry only appear later, in the III century BCE, in the rabbinic literature: *avodah zarah* (the foreign cult) and *avodah elilim* (the cult of vanity).

<sup>2</sup> The manifestation of the sacred according to Mircea Eliade and Vicente Ferreira da Silva.

namely his essays on media theory and communication, especially where image and writing are confronted.

This contribution proposes that the second use of idolatry is linked to the first. This word has a deep meaning to Flusser and when he starts using it again, after many years, it is not a coincidence. Perhaps, he realized that the new problem of image as a code in the context of communication studies was related to the old problem of the image as a hierophany. Even though it is tackled from a new angle, the problem remains the same.

## 2. The sources

When Flusser writes about idolatry he mainly refers to the Bible: the Torah, especially Exodus and Deuteronomy, and the Prophets. David Flusser, Vilém's cousin and professor of Early Christianity and Judaism of the Second Temple Period at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, declared in a video interview (stored at the Flusser Archive) that he was surprised upon noticing how Vilém knew all the six parts of the Mishnah, a collection of the oral traditions regarding Jewish Law. One of the volumes of the *Seder Nezikin*, the Order of the Damages (the 4<sup>th</sup> part of the Mishnah), is called *Avodah Zarah*, the Foreign Worship, and is dedicated to idolatry. Flusser mentions the Jewish medieval philosopher Maimonides in at least one essay (Flusser 1997: 160), whose most known work, *Guide for the Perplexed*, contains a chapter about idolatry (1:36). Maimonides thinks idols are mediations between God and us, which cannot but misrepresent Him. In a letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva (12/01/1979) Flusser writes that he read and enjoyed *Difficile liberté* by Emmanuel Lévinas and refers to a *Midrash*, mentioned by Lévinas, where Abraham breaks all of his father's idols except the biggest one and tells him the idol did it: when his father acknowledges Abraham's responsibility, he is implicitly admitting that his belief in the power of the idols was a false one.

Flusser often mentions Plato together with the Prophets, stressing that the fight against idolatry was something shared by many in ancient times, even though he admits that the mistrust towards images was stronger among the Jews than among the Greeks. However, this comparison poses some problems, since there is at least one important difference Flusser should have been aware of: the Jews rejected any kind of picture, accepting only the internal image of God, while Plato distinguished *eidola* (idols), bad images that only represent the exterior subjective appearance, and *eikones* (icons), that mirror something of the inner essence of what is represented,

offering a more reliable model of knowledge<sup>3</sup>. Flusser's condemnation of images is not as radical as that of the Prophets and seems close enough to Plato, at least when he defines *Abbilder* (images as copies) and *Vorbilder* (images as models).

Flusser also had a good knowledge of Christian theological culture, thanks to Vicente and Dora Ferreira da Silva and to his cousin David. In the article "Ame teu outro como a ti proprio" he mentions the "commandment of love" (Mt 22, 37-40; Mt 5, 43-44) and in other essays he refers to the Gospel of John and the letters of St. Paul. In "Judaismo como anti-paganismo" he quotes Tertullian, a Church Father author of the first essay on idolatry. Augustine is the Christian theologian Flusser seems to know the best: he quotes *De Civitate Dei* in "Do Messias" and the *Soliloquia* in "Judaismo como anti-paganismo". In the correspondence with Dora Ferreira da Silva, Flusser mentions Augustine several times: he thanks her for sending him a book by Augustine (28/05/1974)<sup>4</sup>, he makes a comparison between the Christian Church Father and Omar Khayyam (08/02/1975), he considers Augustine the one mainly responsible for the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of Jewish thought into Christian thought (12/02/1976), and he claims Augustine would agree that the worst sin is to bear the Cross only for being noticed (16/05/1985). In the letter dating 25/09/1978, Flusser tells Dora that he has been studying the Byzantine iconoclasm between the sixth and the ninth centuries. In an autobiographical essay, "In Search of Meaning", Flusser states that he has been studying Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross and Angelus Silesius (Flusser 2002a: 198). His ownership of a text by Thomas Aquinas further indicates his familiarity with this author. In a letter to Milton Vargas (30/05/1979) he writes that he has read the Christian theologian Jean Danielou and the historian of religion Ernest Renan, while in another letter to Dora (16/03/1980) he complains that Vicente died before reading authors such as Paul Tillich and Karl Barth.

Why is it important to stress Flusser's knowledge of Christian theology<sup>5</sup>? Because his conception of idolatry remains the Christian one, at least in one respect: the idea that idolatry does not emerge automatically through contact with images (and therefore not all images are idols), but it is produced by reversal of means and ends.

Finally, Günther Anders' use of the concept of idolatry left its mark in Flusser's thought. In a letter to Abraham Moles, dated 24/02/1979, Flusser recommends him reading *The Obsolescence of Humankind* by Anders. Anders is mentioned by Hans Belting, together with Flusser, Baudrillard

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<sup>3</sup> Flusser seems to be aware of these differences when he writes that "the Judeo-Christian tradition" can't identify itself in the Platonic one: not only because it mistrusts the images in a more radical way, but also because it mistrusts philosophy just as much (Flusser 1988a: 6).

<sup>4</sup> Although in this case he might be referring to their common friend, the Portuguese philosopher Agostinho da Silva.

<sup>5</sup> Vilém Flusser, similarly to his cousin David, does not oppose the two religions, but stresses the common elements and conceives Jesus (Rabbi Yehoshua) as the perfect Jew. He feels close to the Christian radicalization of the principle of love, but he seems uncomfortable with the idea of incarnation.

and Debord, as the authors who developed a theory of a contemporary idolatry (Belting 2000), but Anders and Flusser are the only ones who explicitly use the word idolatry to refer to this sort of alienation in the age of new media. The Jewish education of Anders is, again, not a coincidence.

### 3. Anti-paganism (1958-1972)

The first occurrences of the word idolatry date from the early 1960s. “Idol”, “idolatry”, “idolater” and “idolatrous” appear in a series of articles and short essays about the Jewish legacy in Western civilization written in Portuguese in the 1960s. Some of these articles were published in magazines such as *Crônica israelita* (“Judaísmo como anti-paganismo”, 1963; “Judaísmo como fonte do ocidente”, 1965) and in the *Suplemento literario* of the newspaper *O estado de São Paulo* (“Não imaginarás”, 1965), some were collected in *Da religiosidade* (“Coincidencia incrível”; “O projeto”, 1967), some were collected posthumously by his wife Edith in *Jude sein* (“Judaísmo como ritualização”; “Ser judeu I”; “Ser judeu II”; “Ser judeu III”, 1995). Others are only accessible in the *Flusser Archive* (“Do Messias”; “Do paganismo”). In some of these articles the word “idol” and its derivatives are not used, but Flusser clearly deals with the same topic when he writes about paganism, hierophany, myth and magic.

Flusser’s Brazilian period was marked by the dialogue with Vicente Ferreira da Silva and other thinkers in the same milieu. Vicente, relying on Vico, Nietzsche, Cassirer, Heidegger and Eliade, thought the Jewish and Christian anti-idolatrous conception of the world was responsible for the secularization of western culture. By refusing different forms of the manifestation of the sacred as superstition, Judeo-Christianity drastically decreases hierophany and magic in our world and lays the foundations for the development of modern science and technology. The complete realization of this project (*Entwurf*) would leave a global technocracy with no space for any experience of the sacred or for any “adventure”. According to Ferreira da Silva, the anti-pagan *Weltanschauung* is responsible for modern anthropocentrism.

Flusser was fascinated by these ideas, since he believed that the anti-idolatrous conception of the world was the main driving force of secularization and the condition for the technologization of our way of living. However, he disagreed with Ferreira da Silva’s anti-intellectualist interpretation of the Judeo-Christian “project”. The modern violent domination of humans over nature, reducing everything to a usable resource (*Bestand*), would have been rejected by the Prophets or the Church Fathers as idolatry. According to Flusser, anthropocentrism does not depend on the achievement of rational values and the secularization process, but on the survival

of idolatry. The anti-idolatrous struggle against superstition is our only way out of anthropocentrism and has not to be confused with a fruitless intellectualism. “The anti-intellectualism of a large part of today’s philosophy is an error and a danger. It is an error because it confuses faith in the intellect (correctly abandoned) with the framing of the intellect within a faith in a new reality to be found. It is a danger because it spreads and deepens the nihilism that it intends to combat” (Flusser 2014b: 13).

Among the many articles from this period about religion and secularization there is one dedicated entirely to the problem of idolatry and the prohibition of images: *Não imaginarás* (Thou shalt not imagine). Here, Flusser recommends rereading the second commandment (Exodus 20, 4). At first, out of context, it seems it could be part of the instructions for a contemporary art exhibition: avoid any figurative depiction. It almost sounds like a recommendation for abstract art and, according to Flusser, abstract, dada and surrealist art could be actually seen as modern reinterpretations of an anti-idolatrous drive. Upon a closer reading, however, this apparently aesthetic commandment is strongly connected with a moral and even an epistemological dimension (besides the theological one).

“I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20, 2-6).

This “aesthetic” norm (do not make “any graven image, or any likeness”) is connected to an ethical principle: do not betray your God with foreign gods. What is not obvious in this commandment is the connection between the other gods (Ex. 20, 3) and the images (Ex. 20, 4). The prohibition of image-making is followed by the prohibition of worshiping them, but this “them” ambiguously refers both to the images and to the gods. Moreover: how can one betray the only real God with gods that do not exist? To understand this, Flusser looks at the third dimension of the commandment, the epistemological one: the connection between images and knowledge. God revealed Himself through language, not through images, therefore any visual representation of God will be misleading. Here, Flusser realizes something very important: behind the prohibition of images in the Bible and the fear of idolatry, there is an implicit media theory. The medium we use to worship God or even just to share information about Him (and more generally to share relevant information) *affects* the information itself, the way we think and even the way we behave.

In *Não imaginarás* Flusser also recommends reading a second version of the commandment, for its “curious form”, in Exodus 34: “Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods” (Ex. 34, 15-17). This passage is interesting for two reasons. The first one is imitation: the habit of being close to idolaters will make you an idolater. The commandment does not simply forbid the worship of foreign gods, but it also prohibits the worship of God in a foreign way. The second is that idols are related to prostitution: they are seductive and impure at the same time. They attract you, but it is a false love: they need retribution for their services. The metaphor of the betrayal of God and prostitution is recurrent in the Bible (Hosea 2; Ezekiel 16), but the parts are often inverted: sometimes the people of Israel are considered prostitutes who betray God with foreign gods for what they offer them, at other times the idols are portrayed as prostitutes and the people of Israel offer them sacrifices to have something in return – but they won’t have anything in return, since the other gods do not exist. The concept of idol can be compared with Baudrillard’s concept of simulation: an illusion that produces real effects.

The idolater’s mentality is based on retribution and *quid pro quo*: no space for love and the value of gift. To describe idols Flusser uses the metaphor of prostitution too: “They just appear, within reach, prostituted and ready to be assimilated and understood. They are compact, full of themselves, circumscribable and manageable. They let me rule them and this disgusts me. Prostitution of models, the offer of idols to be used: this is paganism. The worship of Ishtar, for example, is my manipulation of Ishtar. It is magic. Magic is the construction of models that are taken for real and then are used for manipulating this supposed reality. This is idolatry and that is why it is disgusting” (Flusser 2014c: 212). In contemporary language, idols are *user friendly*. We stop questioning them and questioning ourselves. We forget we built them as means of knowledge and communication and we start behaving as if they were our only reality. Idolatry is thinking the world is at our disposal, completely under our control: the illusion of believing that our models, the schemata we use to think of the world, coincide perfectly with reality. That is why Flusser reminds us that God is unimaginable doubly: “He can not be imagined, and He must not be imagined” (Flusser 2014c: 210). We are not able to create an image that represents Him and any attempt would be a betrayal. Idolatry is the hubris of thinking that we can do without Him.

This conception is strongly connected with the Jewish notion of truth. The Greek word for truth, *aletheia* (just as the Latin one, *veritas*), implies research and discovery, somehow almost a conquest. The Greek concept of truth, according to Flusser, could be pictured as the *intentio* of

the one who knows towards what is known. On the contrary, the Jewish conception of truth, *emet* (related to *emunah*, faith, fidelity) could be understood as a relationship that opens from what is known towards the one who knows. “*Emet* is the revelation of reality” and “the human exploratory activity is limited to the clarification and the explanation of the revealed reality” (Flusser 2014c: 92). The Greek truth is discovered by opening and looking inside, the Jewish one by listening. Revelation, faith and truth are strictly connected in this process of knowledge where the human element is not the central one: that is why the opposite of truth, in the Jewish thought, is not error, but sin. Every attempt at knowing in a dominant way, by projecting on reality a predetermined model, is both sinful and doomed to fail.

In contrast to Vicente Ferreira da Silva, Flusser thinks that the anti-idolatrous way of thinking is an antidote to anthropocentrism and the danger of a global technocracy. Phenomenology and existentialism are the modern outcomes of this conception: the first as a “patient submission to the thing revealing itself”, the second one as a form of “fidelity to the very authenticity that reveals itself in the consciousness” (Flusser 2014c: 95-96). The idolatrous way of thinking is charming: by explaining the world through models it makes reality imaginable and let us understand it easily. If I see the world according to the Ishtar<sup>6</sup> model, for example, everything will appear to me through the lens of fertility, but I’ll be blind to the rest of it: “idols, models, are horrible because they hide the vision of reality and hinder it from acting on us” (Flusser 2014c: 212).

Technology is a human construction: does it make it idolatrous? This is a question Flusser starts asking himself from his earliest writings. In “Judaismo como anti-paganismo” he writes that tools are the opposite of idols: thanks to technology, nature, with its pagan hierophanies, is subordinated to the “supernatural order of the thought” (Flusser 1963). On the contrary, in “Coincidência incrível” the instrument is considered “the equivalent of the old times idol. Idols can be voracious. Moloch devours his worshippers. This proves it works. It confirms and strengthens the faith of the worshippers. The H-bomb strengthens the modern faith. Somehow, by destroying humanity, it proves that man is God” (Flusser 2002b: 35). Did Flusser radically change his mind in such a short amount of time? Probably there is no real contradiction: technology is not idolatrous or anti-idolatrous itself, but it is submitted to the inner dialectic of mediation. When a medium is effective, even if it is used to overcome idols, it starts being considered necessary, irreplaceable, until it stops being an instrument and its functioning becomes the aim of our actions, the center of our world.

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<sup>6</sup> The Babylonian goddess of fertility and love.

#### 4. Reading images (1972-1978)

Flusser's move to Europe in the early 1970s coincides with a movement of the focal point of his thought from language, literature and religion, to the theory of communication and technology. From the late 1960s he stops using the word "idolatry", preferring a terminology borrowed by cybernetics, but from 1978 the concept of idolatry starts being included in his theory of communication, especially in his model of cultural history. In Flusser's better known writings on technical images from the 1980s, the concept of idolatry seems somehow out of context. If he decided to return to it, it is because of a theoretical need and not just a stylistic one. Even during the years where this word is not employed, Flusser never stops considering the relationship between religiosity (the existential climate connected with a belief system) and the structure of communication of the society (determined by its media and technologies). In other words: Flusser's early writings (and his sources) can help us understand the key role of the concepts of idolatry, magic and myth in his later texts.

In "Line and surface", published on the US magazine *Main Currents* in 1973, Flusser lays the foundations of his future theory: the opposition between a linear and a superficial thought, the role of images and texts, the emergence of a new form of culture, the crisis of written culture, the link between history and writing and therefore the concept of post-history. Here a reference to the Bible can be found, which is very important in order to connect his theory of communication with a theological background: "Western thought is 'historical' in the sense that it conceives the world in lines, therefore as process. It can be no accident that historical feeling was first articulated by the Jews – the people of the book, i.e. of linear writing" (Flusser 1973: 100). Is the Jewish anti-idolatrous mentality the cause of the dissemination of the technology of writing, or vice versa is the internalization of the linear writing the cause of the development of a linear (therefore anti-idolatrous) thought? According to Flusser every technology "strikes back" (*schlägt zurück*) and affects the consciousness of the user, but at the same time a new technology is developed and spread only when people feel the need of it, that is when the dominant existential climate (*Existenzklima*) of a society has already changed. Later, in his book on writing from 1987, Flusser states that typography produces a standardization of the thought, but only a standardized mentality, a "typifying kind of thought" (*typisierende Denkart*) could feel the need of its invention (Flusser 2011b, 53). Instead of "production" we should speak about a "correspondence" between a type of code and "particular existential climate" (1997: 89). Flusser is not a determinist, although sometimes he may indulge in determinist terminology.

The word “idol” occurs in 1974, in the essay “Für eine Phänomenologie des Fernsehens” (Flusser 1997: 103-123), even though this concept doesn’t have a central role: he writes that the TV is becoming an idol for critics of media, since they pull it out of context.

In those years Flusser worked on a book about his communication theory, *Umbruch der menschlichen Beziehungen?*, which would be published posthumously in 1996 with the title *Kommunikologie*. Here he developed the topics of “Line and Surface” stressing the technological and cultural upheavals (*Umbruch* or *Sprung*): the transformations that happen on the level of the structures of communication, correspond to the changes that occur on the level of the consciousness. The maladaptation to these changes is called by Flusser estrangement (*Verfremdung*): every transformation of the structure of communication produces, at first, a different degree of estrangement (*Verfremdung<sub>1</sub>*, *Verfremdung<sub>2</sub>*...). In “Alienation and Stereotype”, written in French in 1975 and published in 2016 as a chapter of *The Surprising Phenomenon of Communication*, Flusser analyses culture and communication again through the lens of its pathology: alienation. It is easy to recognize idolatry behind the concepts of estrangement and alienation.

The connection between idolatry and the communication theory becomes explicit for the first time in a short essay named *The Codified World*, where Flusser looks for historical examples of the cultural effects of a medial crisis. “The dialectic between surface and line, between image and concept began as a battle, and it was not until later that texts sucked up images. Greek philosophy and Jewish prophecy are battle cries against images on behalf of texts: Plato, for example, despised image making and the prophets inveighed against idolatry” (Flusser 2002a: 39). After this simple reference Flusser begins developing a real theorization of idolatry in the context of the communication theory. In a letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva of the same period (25/09/1978) Flusser tells her about his new (and at the same time old) research topic: “You know for months I’ve been chewing over the dialectic between image and text, and this not just structurally (how do texts explain images and images illustrate texts?), but also historically (can Western history be focused as a fight between image and text, with an imminent victory of the image?). All this led me to plunge into the Byzantium between the sixth and the ninth century, that is into the fight between iconolatry and iconoclasm”. The letter continues with an accurate description of the theories of both parties and considers the threshold between iconolatry and idolatry. Dora is very interested by Flusser’s ideas and replies, proposing him to publish his letter on the magazine she edits, *Cavalo azul*, but he prefers to send her the Portuguese translation of a conference paper that he was going to give in Paris on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1978, at the Ministère de la culture et de la communication, about “reading images” (*la lecture de l’image*). Baudrillard, Gaillard and Demelier also participated in the same conference, respectively speaking

of symbolic value, the violence of images and Job, Jonas and Janus. Flusser notices the proximity with the topics of the other speakers and comments: “it is definitely no coincidence: the problem of image and idolatry is in the air” (Letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva, 25/11/1978).

The text of the conference is written in French and is entitled “L’iconoclastie”, but Flusser also wrote a German version and a Portuguese one for the publication. The three versions are slightly different, the French one being the roughest. The only published version is the Portuguese one, “Iconoclastia” (Flusser 1979), but the different translations are a proof of the relevance of this text for Flusser. In this essay he rethinks his communication theory focusing on the concept of idolatry, which turns out to be the motor of the medial transformations. He analyzes the slow transition from oral culture, where the main material means of communication were images, to written culture, in order to understand the transition happening right now from written culture to a new image culture. According to Flusser, every transition is marked by the manifestation of idolatry, which is both a cause and an effect of this medial transformation. The concept of idolatry will be central in all the later reformulations of his model of cultural history: *Post-history* (1983), *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), “O mediterrâneo e a imagem” (1984), “The Future of Writing” (1984), *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985), “Design: Obstacle for/to the Removal of Obstacles” (1988), “A New Imagination” (1990), “Das Politische im Zeitalter der technischen Bilder” (1990), “Die Macht des Bildes” (1990).

#### **4. Idolatry and imagination: a model of cultural history (1979-1991)**

In the “Lexicon of Basic Concepts” at the end of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, idolatry is defined this way: “the inability to read off ideas from the elements of the image, despite the ability to read these elements themselves; hence: worship of images” (Flusser 2000: 83). Images are worshiped when they are not decoded, when they are not understood or recognized as signs: that is, when they “have a hold over people as objects” (Flusser 1999: 60). Undeciphered images keep their charming mystery and replace what they should represent. Sometimes they are mistaken for reality; at other times we recognize them as images (we can read their elements), but we still behave as if they were real (we are unable to read what their elements represent). A similar “semiotic” definition of idolatry was proposed by Augustine in *De doctrina christiana*: “Now he is in bondage to a sign who uses, or pays homage to, any significant object without knowing what it signifies” (III, IX 13).

According to Flusser, the capacity of reading an image is the same one we employ to make an image: imagination. This faculty operates at a first degree of abstraction, selecting relevant data

from our perception and coding it on to a surface. Flusser doesn't really distinguish the mental image and the material picture, because the internal and the external images are part of a same process: we need a mental image to create a material one, but we need to experience an external image to elaborate an internal one. Following Kant (reinterpreted through Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Husserl and Cassirer) he believes imagination is a crucial step in our cognitive process, as it provides the schemata we need to organize our experience and orient ourselves in the visible world<sup>7</sup>. Thanks to imagination we can step back (Heidegger's *Schritt zurück*) and simulate the view we have from a hill (Flusser 1990), elaborating an overview (*Aussicht*) on the scene we're observing. What is the role of the material picture? In his essay on photography Flusser writes that we produce images in order to represent the world, to mediate between us and the world, framing it like a window. But how does this mediation actually work? In his book on gestures, a hint can be found: the products of our material culture, especially works of art, can be conceived as "a frozen gesture" (Flusser 2014a: 5, 70, 169)<sup>8</sup>. Gesture is in turn the articulation and expression of our inner world. Therefore, material images can be read as externalizations of the schemata our imagination produces to orient itself in the world. Contrary to our mental images, material images can be manipulated: we can modify them on purpose, acting back to our internal images. The practice of image making takes part in the process of imagination. In his essays on television Flusser explicitly asserts something that fits with this interpretation: the technology of video, "to borrow from Kant, makes it possible to deliberately manipulate the categories of perception" (Flusser 1997: 123).

Idolatry, the inability to read representations in the elements of an image, is a malfunction of imagination: the inability to use images to reflect back on the categories of perception, changing the way we see the world. Idolaters only see reality through the lens of their categories and they cannot modify them.

"Imagination is a method to overcome alienation, to orient oneself in the world. [...] But imagination can dialectically reverse and become hallucination. Images resulting from this reversed imagination stop working as mediation and become opaque surfaces hiding the world. The semantic vectors invert and point towards their producer instead of pointing towards the world. This sort of imagination becomes an intensified form of alienation and the human becomes instrument of its own instrument: instead of using the image, he ends up worshipping it. It is against the danger of such idolatry that writing was invented" (Flusser 1979: 79-80). Idolatry is a reversal of imagination. The term reversal (*Umkehrung*) occurs quite often in Flusser's

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<sup>7</sup> In the letter of the 19/02/1985 to Daniela Mrazkova and Vladimir Remes Flusser refers to Kant's *Einbildungskraft* and defines it a "conceptual imagination".

<sup>8</sup> Flusser was probably inspired in this theory by his friend Bernardo Bagolini, archeologist of prehistory, who believed that human tools can be read as a sort of "recorder" of applied cognitive processes.

writings, especially related to idolatry: “This reversal of the function of the image [*Bildfunktion*] can be called idolatry” (Flusser 2000: 10). This is an important remark, because it means that neither the role of the image or the imagination is idolatrous. On the contrary, they are both crucial. That is why their reversal is so harmful.

How can the reversal of imagination be avoided? Flusser says that writing was invented as an antidote to idolatry. He was certainly aware that no one “invented” writing, so his provocative formulation must be translated: the need to overcome the problems caused by the failure of images as the major media (namely idolatry), was the condition of the slow affirmation of writing as the primary communication tool and as the main means of storing shared information. The second hypothesis is that the first writing systems stem from early images, in a process of simplification and rationalization of the symbols<sup>9</sup>.

“Writing, the set of codes that order symbols in lines, stems from the images. We can observe this phenomenon on some Mesopotamian bricks. There we can notice a few images printed on the clay with seals, together with aligned symbols inscribed in the clay with sticks. It may happen that the aligned symbols show the same shapes contained in the image (‘pictograms’). The obvious aim of these symbols is to comment, explain, describe the image, which is presented, that is: to make its reading easier. These ‘texts’ are essentially images unrolled in lines, and hence clarifications of what was implicit in the image. The lines of the text are like threads unrolled from the fabric of the image, and in this respect writing is a ‘deployment of the image’. Writing is iconoclastic because it tears the image apart” (Flusser 1979: 78-79).

Writing selects, limits and therefore makes meanings clearer, because it imposes a direction to the act of reading. The eyes can’t wander on the surface anymore (*scanning*), they have to follow the line. Writing is to the image what a path is to the plain. It leads to a second degree of abstraction that, according to Flusser and other thinkers as McLuhan and Ong, oral cultures don’t master. The internalization of the technology of writing produces a standardization of the rules of our language and therefore an increase of our conceptual thought. Texts are externalizations of our conceptual thought, just as pictures are externalizations of our visual thought: we use visual schemata to orient ourselves in the world of immediate experience and conceptual categories to orient ourselves in the world of schemata produced by our imagination. Hence, one of the main tasks of the conceptual thinking enhanced by texts would be to control the imagination process and avoid its reversal.

Nevertheless, this “antidote” didn’t work: “Writing itself is a mediation – just like images – and is subject to the same internal dialectic. In this way, it is not only externally in conflict with

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<sup>9</sup> This hypothesis is shared by A. Leroi-Gourhan (1964) and W. Ong (1982), but recently F. Antinucci argues that there is no evidence that all the systems of writing have a pictographic origin (2011).

images but is also torn apart by an internal conflict. If it is the intention of writing to mediate between human beings and their images, it can also obscure images instead of representing them and insinuate itself between human beings and their images. If this happens, human beings become unable to decode their texts and reconstruct the images signified in them. If the texts become as incomprehensible as images, however, human beings' lives become a function of their texts. There arises a state of 'textolatry' that is no less hallucinatory than idolatry" (Flusser 2000: 12). In "Iconoclastia" Flusser opposes *hallucination*, the idolatrous reversal of imagination, to *paranoia* (later called textolatry)<sup>10</sup>, the reversal of conceptualization that leads humans to live on the basis of texts and their literal meanings. This phenomenon is the proof that idolatry is not determined by a structural problem of the image or of the imagination: idolatry cannot be avoided by replacing pictures with other less emotional media. The reversal of the function of the medium (idolatry in the case of images, textolatry in the case of texts) may occur with any form of externalization. It is a problem that concerns mediation and not a particular medium.

The crisis of written culture and the rise of the new images (photos, videos, films, computer simulations) as major means of communication are leading to a "reactionary revolt of repressed texts against computer programs" (Flusser 2011b: 147). Many are speaking out against "the imminent idolatry of technical images" (Flusser 1979: 79). But "it is not the new images that are threatening reason" (Flusser 1979: 84). "The danger is not that images replace texts, but the images being worshiped", he adds in the German version of "Ikonoklastie". What is the *cause* of idolatry? The question doesn't have an explicit answer in Flusser's writings, but it can be read between the lines. Imagination reverses when it is not trained enough. Images that produce idolatry are the ones that don't let our imagination practice. "The technocracy threatening us is not a symptom of the technical imagination, it is the symptom of its absence" (Flusser 1997: 101).

In trying to answer to the question about the causes of idolatry we should go back to Flusser's early writings and reading his communication theory in the light of his studies on religion. Idolatry is first of all a form of relationship: a domineering, almost violent way of approaching otherness. The other of the idolater is an object, just as a prostitute is an object to her client: he demands something from his god and abandons him when he is not effective anymore. To borrow from Augustine, the idolater confuses means and ends, treating his instruments as gods and his God as an instrument. In Martin Buber's words, the only non-idolatrous relationship is the one between an I and a Thou: a dialogue. How can these reflections tell us something about our secularized world? Flusser seems to think that we shouldn't approach our media in an instrumental and utilitarian way, as any subject-object relationship can reverse into an object-

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<sup>10</sup> Paranoia comes from the Greek *para-* and *nous* (intellect): a distortion of intellect.

subject one. On the contrary, we should open to the medium, learn from it and play with it. When Flusser recommends to “play against the apparatus” he is not using a strange formulation for “dominating the apparatus”: he means we should play with it as we play a chess game against someone. We have to anticipate his moves and activate our imagination. Where there is openness to inter-subjectivity there is no idol. That is why, according to Flusser, fighting idolatry above all means building dialogue.

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