

Antônio Frederico Lasalvia and Marcos Beccari
From Sound to Sign: Writing as Worldmaking in Vilém Flusser
and Walter J. Ong

Introduction

Flusser's early reflections on language and writing may appear overshadowed today by his later and more widely cited media theory (although this bias is slowly being countered by the translation and publication of earlier works). Yet it is in these formative texts that many of the author's central intuitions first emerge: that language constitutes reality, that codes operate concepts and that writing is not just a tool for communication, but a threshold technology that transforms thought itself. By returning to these early insights and placing them in conversation with Walter J. Ong's theory of literacy as cognitive rupture, this article revisits Flusser's work from a contemporary vantage point. In particular, we explore how writing, in Flusser's philosophy, operates as a hinge between object and concept, which eventually develops into the relation between text and technical image. In doing so, we draw attention to an often underappreciated dimension of his thought (which could be framed as a speculative ontology of language). This may prove especially resonant in an age increasingly shaped by digital information, artificial intelligence, and the shifting status of writing itself.

The invention of writing marks a rupture in human symbolic life, a transformation which had both epistemological and ontological consequences. While the writings of Vilém Flusser are mostly attentive to the latter, Walter J. Ong's focus more clearly on the former. For both authors, however, writing is not simply a vehicle for thought but a code that transforms the very structure of the mind (Ong) and the experience of reality itself (Flusser). This article overviews some of their key positions in order to explore how the two sets of insights can be read in a complementary way.

In 1963, Vilém Flusser published his first book¹ in Brazil, titled *Língua e Realidade* (recently translated into English as *Reality and Language*). Following Wittgenstein's insight that language constitutes the limits of the world, Flusser radicalizes this claim by rejecting the idea of a universal language, emphasizing instead that language always manifests in particular forms – each of which

¹ Although *Língua e Realidade* was Flusser's first book to enter circulation, the author wrote two other volumes before the 1963 publication: the first one was published in Brazil, in 2017, under the title *O último juízo: Gerações* (*The Last Judgment: Generations*, in free translation), and the second one was published in Germany, in 1965, and translated into English in 2014 as *The History of the Devil*.

constitutes a particular world. In this sense, the mythical status of language implies diverse capacities in the different contexts where it forms and founds reality.

According to Flusser, the process of codification and abstraction is both a dialogical and an intersubjective process, which phenomenologically shape's one's experience of reality. Within the complex mechanisms for the signification of what is, written language represents not only a way to store ideas but fundamentally restructures thought itself. In this sense, writing is situated on a broader arc of abstraction, which begins with bodily manipulation of the world, continues through language, and culminates in the rise of technical images. In later texts, such as *Filosofia da Caixa Preta*, Flusser attributes the emergence of linear thinking to the act of writing things down, which takes place one signifier after another. In effect, the theme of written language, which is merely suggested in *Língua e Realidade*, later showed itself to be a perpetual problem on the background of Flusser's thought, and eventually found further expression on later works (some of them posthumous, like *Elogio à Superficialidade*, *O Mundo Codificado* and *A Escrita*).

In 1982, Walter J. Ong published *Orality and Literacy*, which has as a subtitle “*the technologizing of the word.*” The different thesis Ong presents can be summarized under a single rubric: writing reconfigures human thought because it detaches language from its performative and dialogical origins, enabling linear argumentation, analytical distance, and reflective interiority. For Ong, writing operates primarily as an epistemological shift – a radical restructuring of how humans think, remember, and conceptualize. Literacy externalizes memory and fosters critical detachment; it promotes an inward turn, giving rise to the solitary reader, the rational subject, and the linear text. This technological invention, for Ong, generates the epiphenomenon of interiorization as a direct consequence of inscription. Ultimately, Ong's focus lies in how writing transforms consciousness. In other words, writing changes not only what we know, but how we come to know.

These propositions immediately raise important questions, such as: if writing changes the perception of the world, what are the potentialities of deploying it after its structuring condition has been acknowledged? And, if technology reshapes thinking, how can it be integrated in the mind's processes as a reflexive tool? While this paper does not intend to give a definite answer to these questions, it may shed light on the problem by putting these author's insights in comparison.

Vilém Flusser

Although less cited than his later works on media and communication, *Língua e Realidade* lays the foundation for Flusser's lifelong philosophical project: understanding language not merely as a tool for communication, but as the very condition for the constitution of reality. At the time of its

publication in Brazil in 1963, the book did not receive significant academic recognition, partly because it emerged outside dominant intellectual circuits and partly due to its idiosyncratic fusion of linguistics, phenomenology, and metaphysics. Nevertheless, *Língua e Realidade* anticipates many of the conceptual directions that would later define Flusser's philosophy of media, including the notion that writing, as a specific codification of language, instantiates a process of abstraction that reshapes the world.

Flusser describes writing as part of an escalating abstraction of reality, which detaches it from concrete lived experience toward increasingly virtual (or programmable) representations of the world. In this epoch-spawning process, writing succeeds the oral world of mythical images and precedes the post-historical universe of technical images. While Ong remains concerned with the interior shifts of human cognition (or, at most, inter-human relations), Flusser tilts the focus outward: his reflections point to how symbolic codes produce new relationships between humans, objects, and their shared world. Writing, in this view, is not the culmination of abstraction but a transitional stage between the prehistoric and the post-historical.

The durability of artifacts, as Flusser suggests in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, already functioned as a primitive means of storing and transmitting information: "We entrust the relative permanence of the objective world with our acquired information, and for this reason we entrust it with our memory" (Flusser 2023: 109, our translation). Before the invention of writing, humans encoded knowledge materially through tools, objects and gestures. These early forms of "objectified memory" enabled the reenactment of skills and traditions over time, thus inaugurating a form of historicity grounded in the persistence of matter rather than in symbolic abstraction. However, such material inscriptions were limited in their capacity to convey complexity or to support reflexivity.

Writing emerges precisely at the point where the exteriorization of memory becomes symbolic rather than material. In Flusser's terms, writing does not only preserve knowledge, but also reorganizes it. It marks the moment when abstraction becomes systematic and linear, when signs begin to stand in for phenomena and to model experience. Writing thus represents a second-order codification: unlike objects, which embody knowledge through form and function, written language abstracts knowledge into linear, conceptual structures. As such, writing allows for the emergence of history, not simply as accumulated experience, but as a narrative logic.

In this sense, writing occupies a crucial transitional space in Flusser's schema: it mediates between the pre-symbolic storage of knowledge in objects and the post-symbolic logic of technical images. While tools suggest intentionality through use, and technical images simulate the world through computation, writing uniquely binds symbol and syntax, enabling the development of phi-

losophy, science, and the entire historical episteme. Yet writing also sets the stage for its own overcoming: by abstracting experience into discrete signs, it paves the way for even more abstract systems of representation which will eventually surpass the linear constraints of text.

Thus, for Flusser, writing is a pivotal moment in the arc of human abstraction, as it allows knowledge to become *textual* and, through this, *programmable*. In this regard, writing prepares the ground for the technical image, which no longer narrates the world, but simulates and operationalizes it. The abstract logic of writing, once revolutionary in its capacity to render thought explicit, becomes the substrate upon which more complex systems of codification are built.

These new symbolic codes, it must be noted, did not replace writing, but rather added to it. After all, to claim that writing has been surpassed would be to remain within a logic of linear history – the terrain of writing *par excellence*. The new codifications build upon writing, giving rise to what Flusser calls “technical images” that, instead of offering representations to be interpreted or deciphered, act as interpreters themselves, in the sense of producing interpretations and worldviews.

Thus, more than mere abstractions of concrete data, technical images “make the abstract and the inconceivable concretely experienceable” (Flusser 2019: 10, our translation). In these terms, while traditional images translate concrete experience into abstract indicators, technical images operate inversely: they transform abstract concepts into concrete situations. The “concreteness” of a photograph, for example, does not reside in what it shows as a record, as material proof of some past, but in how it is capable of “materializing”, in a given situation, experiences, codes, discourses, etc. It is not a case of claiming some kind of autonomous order for technical images; it is a matter of seeing them as central elements of broader processes, in terms of mediation or sociocultural articulation, than those provided by writing.

Put differently, if the technical image is not meant to represent or abstract, but to concretize our insertion into the world, then what it “says” matters less than the modes of being it opens up. And such ways of being materialize abstract codes not only in the sense of organizing, signifying or dissimulating them, but rather as an articulation or weaving of distinct realities: what there is to be apprehended, said and understood about the world is the very way in which we relate to it, that is, through the infinity of realities that technical images weave and engender.

This correlation between weaving and concretization already appears in *Língua e Realidade*, when Flusser (2010a: 49, our translation) compares the intellect to “a loom that transforms raw cotton (sense data) into threads (words). Most of the raw material, however, already arrives in the form of threads.” In a sense, technical images make explicit this ambiguous relation between codes and raw data, as threads that connect nothing to nothing, webs of virtual relations which, nonetheless, articulate something very concrete: the actualization of virtualities. Just as in cinema, where

motion is created from the succession of static frames, the universe of technical images is realized through programmed codes that generate and update themselves.

From this perspective, the classical segmentation of the real into well-defined, compartmentalized domains, such as nature and culture, subject and object, human and nonhuman, begins to dissolve in the multiplicity of meanings produced by technical images. Flusser's perspective signals a technology capable of revealing the virtual dimension operating at the core of every language, every mode of being, a virtuality that becomes actualized on the concrete surface of the world around us. This *superficiality*, then, is the new mode by which we inhabit the world, and at the same time, the very material through which the world becomes concrete, albeit through processes of codification and textual abstraction.

In short, by prophesying the emergence of a new consciousness and a new culture arising from the union between images and concepts (codes, texts, programs), Flusser extended the inquiry begun in *Língua e Realidade*, whose central proposition asserts that “language, that is, the ensemble of symbolic systems, is equivalent to the totality of what is apprehended and understood; in other words, the totality of reality” (2010a: 201, our translation). Given this premise, it is possible to understand the heterogeneity of themes addressed by Flusser over almost thirty years: philosophy, religion, literature, art, communication, photography, design, electronic media. These are developments of a single investigation: the language structures that encode and concretize the diverse manifestations of thought and expression.

Walter Ong

Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, published in the United States in 1982, has become a cornerstone in media theory, especially for its articulation of how writing as a technology transforms not only communication but consciousness itself. In this work, Ong argues that the transition from orality to literacy marked a radical restructuring of human cognitive patterns. While Flusser approaches writing ontologically, as a symbolic operation that models reality, Ong traces its epistemological effects. In other words, the Jesuit scholar points to how writing externalizes memory, reorganizes thought and makes possible abstract, linear and analytic reasoning.

Ong opens his book by challenging inherited assumptions about thought, pointing to the fact that many aspects of literate expression (which are widely found in philosophy, science, and daily communication) are not natural features of human existence, but consequences of literacy. Thus, he calls for a revision of our understanding of human identity. Ong's work builds directly on

the insights of Eric A. Havelock, particularly *A Preface to Plato* (1963), in which Havelock argues that the birth of Western philosophy was made possible by the shift from oral to literate culture in Ancient Greece. Havelock famously suggested that Plato's metaphysics was not only a response to, but a rejection of oral-poetic cognition, which he saw as unsuited to abstract thought. Havelock writes: "Between Homer and Plato, the method of storage began to alter, as the information became alphabetised, and correspondingly the eye supplanted the ear as the chief organ employed for this purpose. The complete results of literacy did not supervene in Greece until the ushering in of the Hellenistic age, when conceptual thought achieved as it were fluency and its vocabulary became more or less standardised. Plato, living in the midst of this revolution, announced it and became its prophet." (Havelock 1963: vii)

Ong takes this insight further, expanding it beyond classical Greece to consider orality and literacy as two fundamentally different modes of human cognition, each with its own logic, memory system, and sense of self. Like Flusser before him, Ong points to the existence of language(s) in the plural, and acknowledges the eminence of orality in the majority of the systems of communication ever developed by humankind. He underscores the preeminence of orality throughout human history, noting that only a tiny fraction of languages (about 106 out of thousands) have ever been written to the extent of producing literature.

Instrumental to Ong's project is a phenomenological contrast between oral and literate expression. As pointed above, language, in its most enduring and widespread form, is spoken. In oral cultures, words are not seen but heard; they are ephemeral events rather than durable objects. This has a profound effect on the currency of meaning. Because speech disappears as it is produced, oral societies must rely on constant repetition to preserve and transmit accumulated knowledge.

The difficulty of keeping relevant information when the only way to do so is through vocal performance is a problem effectively solved in primary oral cultures by creating "memorable thoughts." In Ong's words, thinking by mnemonic patterns means that the formulations of the mind become heavily based on rhythm, "in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper', and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form." (Ong 2012: 34)

In contrast to this mode of producing and storing ideas, writing introduces a spatialization of language that fundamentally alters how knowledge is stored, retrieved, and restructured. While describing the qualities of distinct media, Ong emphasizes that seeing and hearing engage the world differently, and points to how writing eventually leads to the possibility of a detached and objective idea of knowledge: "Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside

what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer. Vision dissects, as Merleau-Ponty has observed. Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelopes me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence.” (Ong 2012: 72)

Furthermore, Ong calls attention to the situatedness of sound, since its unfolding thought orality is intimately tied to a particular context. Put differently, there is usually an empathic identification between the knower and the known. Words acquire meaning through “gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs.” (Ong 2012: 46-47). Consequently, discourse in this setting can be directly questioned or contested, as oral speech is not detached from the person who utters it.

In contrast, Ong advances that writing enables a new form of discourse: autonomous, context-free, and detached from the speaker. Written words no longer depend on gestures, tone, or situational presence. As Ong notes, writing produces a form of language that “cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author.” (Ong 2012: 78). One obvious consequence of this is the rise of hermeneutics, which is a direct byproduct of intertextuality, or the simultaneous and independent existence of different texts.

What is more, the permanence and fixity of the written word create a sense of completion, a finality that oral discourse lacks. This permanence is eventually emphasized with the rise of the printing press, which affects not only how texts are interpreted but how they are produced: “Print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion. This sense affects literary creations and it affects analytic philosophical or scientific work.” (Ong 2012: 132).

On the most basic level, Ong argues that abstract, sequential, classificatory examination of knowledge becomes possible by the interiorization of writing, which happens in literate cultures. If words need to be uttered in order to be remembered, their materiality only exists as sound, and complex lines of thought cannot be revised or recalled easily. After stated, they leave no trace or visual memory, and are essentially ephemeral events. “Suppose a person in an oral culture would undertake to think through a particular complex problem and would finally manage to articulate a solution which itself is relatively complex, consisting, let us say, of a few hundred words. How does he or she retain for later recall the verbalization so painstakingly elaborated? In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not.” (Ong 2012: 33-34).

By contrast, writing (and printing in particular), give rise to an “isolationist aesthetics,” with notions such as “‘originality’ and ‘creativity’, which set apart an individual work from other works even more, seeing its origins and meaning as independent of outside influence, at least ideally.” (Ong 2012: 133). Paradoxically, intertextuality leads to a paranoia of influence, as authors become agonizingly aware of literary history. Ong’s remarks resonate with Harold Bloom’s influential theory of poetic succession, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), in which he argues that modern authorship is haunted by an Oedipal struggle with predecessors. Thus, by stabilizing texts and authorial identity, the rise of print makes the burden of influence both more visible and more inescapable than writing before it.

To sum up, Ong does not simply lament the decline of orality or celebrate the triumph of literacy; rather, he seeks to illuminate how each mode of communication generates its own cognitive landscape. While some passages in *Orality and Literacy* may appear to favor the reflective depth enabled by print culture, Ong remains attuned to the ambivalences of technological change. As will be discussed on the next point, his notion of “secondary orality” signals not a return to the past but a hybrid formation: a media environment grounded in the structures of literacy, but simultaneously informed by electronic immediacy. In this sense, Ong’s work offers a phenomenology of media transitions that prompts us to consider how each new medium reshapes not only how we communicate, but who we become something else in the process.

From tongue to text and after

Although their emphasis lay on different aspects, both Vilém Flusser and Walter J. Ong understood the invention of writing as a watershed moment for humanity. The consequences of this technology range from the historicization of culture by the exteriorization of memory to the consequent restructuring of the mind. Thus, both acknowledge the existence of different possibilities of thinking and expression according to the development of representation and abstraction.

For Ong, the movement from primary orality to literacy inaugurates a profound reconfiguration of human consciousness. Oral cultures rely on memory, rhythm, and repetition to transmit knowledge; thus, knowledge is embedded in performance, social presence, and the living voice. Literacy, by contrast, enables abstraction, detachment and historical awareness. The written word breaks language free from its context-bound, ephemeral nature and allows it to be fixed, reviewed and revised. When Ong thinks about the analogous impact of contemporary technologies, he identifies a third phase (in his terms, a *secondary orality*), emerging in electronic media, where immediacy and simultaneity return, but without the deeply embedded mnemonic and communal practices of

primary orality. The result is a hybrid form of communication that mimics the oral while remaining rooted in literate technologies.

Flusser offers a similar three-part model, but one that reorients the axis from expression and consciousness to codification and abstraction. His periodization begins not with orality per se, but with language as a concrete, lived relationship with the world. Writing then represents a second level of abstraction: a linear, conceptual, and historical mode of encoding experience. But for Flusser, writing is itself a transitional phase, leading to the emergence of technical images: post-historical representations that no longer signify through words but through visual codes. They inaugurate a new symbolic regime, where reality is no longer narrated but simulated. If writing made the world historical, technical images render it programmable.

Thus, while Ong sees electronic media as a return to orality (albeit a derivative one), Flusser sees them as a overcoming of both orality and writing. Where Ong identifies the decline of literate interiority as both a rupture and continuation, Flusser is even more ambivalent: fascinated by the new capacities of technical media, yet wary of the automatization of meaning and the potential loss of human agency in a world governed by apparatuses and codes, he speculates about the future developments of the written language.

Against this horizon, Flusser (2010b) did not shy away from asking whether there is even “a future for writing?”, as posed in the subtitle of the Brazilian edition of *A escrita*. After all, Flusser was, above all, a writer, but one who found himself constantly compelled to learn (or reinvent) the language in which he wrote and thought. In order to think and write in a language he did not fully master, he first had to unravel the various “threads” that would give shape to his thought (a condition that clarifies his claim that thought exists only in the form of language). It is no coincidence, then, that in *A escrita*, after signaling the decline of writing as the dominant cultural code, Flusser envisions a peculiar operation for assimilating and dissecting the new media: “The new poet, equipped with digitally powered devices, can no longer be so naïve. He knows he must calculate his experiences, decompose them into atoms of experience, in order to program them digitally. And in this calculation, he must assess the extent to which *his experience is already pre-modeled by others*. He no longer recognizes himself as an 'author,' but as a permutator. Nor does the *language* he manipulates seem to him like raw material accumulated within, but rather as *a complex system arriving from the outside, to be permuted by him*.” (Flusser 2010b: 88, emphasis in the original, our translation).

If this new poet insists on writing, like a “necromancer” of codes that refuse to die, it is not in order to oppose or deny the superficiality of technical images, but to engage with this complex system of virtual-concrete permutations. And what is the entirety of Flusser’s work if not a sustained play with the reinscription of multiple linguistic codes? Indeed, in the essay “The Future of Writing,” included in *O Mundo Codificado*, Flusser (2011: 146, our translation) seems to advocate

for his own cause: “In the future, [writing] will mean making the opaque techno-images transparent to the texts they are concealing.” In this way, technical images reinsert writing into the ontological game of codes, not to inform or describe the world, but to recode it, reprocess it, and re-actualize it. In this sense, the future of writing lies in relearning what it means to write, a task to which Flusser dedicated his entire intellectual life.

Ong/Flusser Diagram:

Ong: Primary Orality (word) → Literacy (text) → Secondary orality (electronic media).

Flusser: Language (concrete) → Text (abstract) → Technical Image (virtual/concrete).

Conclusion

Both Vilém Flusser and Walter J. Ong engage with the transformative power of writing as a reflexive tool, which marks a threshold moment in human cognitive evolution. Their analyses, while distinct in method and scope, converge in recognizing writing as a rupture that reorients not only how we communicate, but how we exist in relation to the world, others, and ourselves. For Ong, this transformation is primarily epistemological: writing restructures consciousness, fosters analytic thought and introduces a new interiority. For Flusser, the stakes are ontological: writing is a moment in a broader process of abstraction that displaces concrete lived experience, giving rise to historical consciousness and eventually to post-historical, computational forms of worldmaking.

Although written in the second half of the twentieth century, their ideas acquire uncanny relevance with recent development of Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models. As machines display capacities of writing and reading with increasing effectiveness, one cannot help but wonder about the effect these technologies will have for the very process of thinking in the new generations. After all, their galloping development seem to threaten to externalize not only thought, but the very gesture of inquiry.

On the side of technophobics, it is argued that these powerful resources will make the mind weaker, as people will rely on external resources for lack of their own. On the side of technophilia, the argument for human obsolescence is ultimately a hopeful one, as it pledges that the mind will become detached from mundane chores, and will finally be able to think freely. What both sides of the argument seem to ignore is that human intelligence is inherently reflexive, and, as it has happened before with the development of other inventions, external tools become internalized

over time – and so become part of the mind’s own processes. The paradox of technology is that its artificiality is second nature to humans.

Under this light, both Flusser’s and Ong’s studies point to historical precedents to this contemporary shift. In effect, the latter addresses precisely this point: “Most persons are surprised, and many distressed, to learn that essentially the same objections commonly urged today against computers were urged by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (274–7) and in the *Seventh Letter* against writing.” (Ong 2012: 79). Thus, what is ultimately at stake before the transformations in worldmaking unleashed by information technologies at the dawn of the twenty-first century is not simply the obsolescence of past cognitive modes, but the recognition that new tools of abstraction may again reshape the human mind – just as writing once did.

References

- Bloom, Harold (1997). *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Flusser, Vilém (2010a). *Língua e Realidade*. São Paulo: Annablume.
- Flusser, Vilém (2010b). *A escrita: há future para a escrita?* São Paulo: Annablume.
- Flusser, Vilém (2008). *O Universo das Imagens Técnicas: Elogio da Superficialidade*. São Paulo: Annablume.
- Flusser, Vilém (2019). *Elogio da Superficialidade: o universo das imagens técnicas*. São Paulo: É Realizações.
- Flusser, Vilém (2015). *Filosofia da Caixa Preta: Ensaio para uma futura filosofia da fotografia*. São Paulo: Relógio D’Água / Annablume.
- Flusser, Vilém (2011). *O Mundo Codificado: Por uma Filosofia do Design e da Comunicação*. Edited by Rafael Cardoso. São Paulo: Cosac Naify.
- Flusser, Vilém (2023). *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. São Paulo: É Realizações.
- Havelock, Eric A (1963). *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ong, Walter J (2012). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 30th Anniversary Edition. London and New York: Routledge.