

Baruch Gottlieb

To Save Philosophy in a Universe of Technical Images

“Linguistic communication, both in the spoken and written world, are no longer capable of transmitting the thoughts and concepts which we have concerning the world. It has been clear for several centuries now that, if we want to understand the world, it is not sufficient to describe it by words. It is necessary to calculate the world. So that science has had ever more recurrence to numbers, which are images of thoughts. For instance, “2” is the ideogram for the concept “pair” or “couple”. Now, this ideographic code, which is the code of numbers, has been developed, in a very refined way, lately, by computers. Numbers are being transcoded into digital codes and digital codes are, themselves, being transcoded into synthetic images. So it is my firm belief, that if you want to have a clear and distinct communication of your concepts, you have to use synthetic images, no longer words. And this is a veritable revolution in thinking” (Flusser 2010: 36)¹

The invention of the photograph is a pivotal moment in Vilém Flusser's history of humanity. What is so special, so transformative about the discovery of photography? With Flusser, it is often helpful to tap back into etymology and look again at the words ‘*photos*’ (φωτός: light) and ‘*graphein*’ (γράφειν: writing). For Flusser, the photograph is a technical or synthetic image, an image that is programmed and projected from the scientific knowledge, which generated the chemical processes and materials where the image appears. Photographs are images of texts, the scientific arguments at work inside every photograph. These arguments are invoked through the chemicals in the photo paper by light, at the speed of light. Photography is writing at the speed of light, and in this extreme acceleration resides its enormous transformational importance.

Writing at the speed of light appears to compress linear thought into momentary images. These seem to operate in the same manner of the images of pre-literate times. “Before the invention of writing, power was in the hands of magicians, those who manipulated behavior and made the decisions in function of ritual and magical values.” (Flusser 2010c:22)² Today’s technical images still maintain their magical power over us, but, unlike the prehistorical, preliterate images of the apocryphal magicians and priests, today’s images are post-historical. Technical images are not mere representations, icons, stand-ins for the outside world, they are “images of texts”, products of the humanist tradition of rational, historical thinking which emerged with the invention of linear writing, and thereby subject to criticism through rational argument.

¹ Vilém Flusser, On writing, complexity and the technical revolutions. Interview by Miklós Peternák in Osnabrück, European Media Art Festival, September 1988.

² From Vilém Flusser, On technical images, chance, consciousness and the individual Interview in München, the 17th of October 1991 (38’).

Technical images are part of an image-making apparatus Flusser analyses as “structurally complex but functionally simple” (Flusser 2010d:37). Functional simplicity means the operation of the device requires no specialized knowledge, a television or smartphone are other examples. The functional simplicity of the camera tends to obscure the structural complexity of the image technology working behind the interface. According to Flusser this conditions the users of the apparatus into functionaries of the apparatus, impulsively performing the program encribed in the apparatus.

So when Flusser challenges us to “use synthetic images” and “no longer words” (Flusser 2010d:36) to communicate and exchange the ideas we have about our world, ostensibly to cultivate some negentropic agency and save our civilization. As we enter the “universe of technical images” Flusser implores us to remember their textual origin, and, that our agency, if we have any, resides there in the textual programming of the images and our ability to intervene there. Whereas technical images appear to communicate all-at-once, like the magic icons of ancient times, they are in fact produced through procedural, automated processes, in the black box of the apparatus.³ These technical images in-form us in a media barrage which seems inexhaustible and inaccessible, but Flusser offers us a way in through understanding the new images as projections of causal processes.

This means, unlike the ancient “magical” images, which communicated all at once, in an eternal, cyclical, closed-in world where all meanings are foreclosed, that the new images are the result of linear, causal thinking, rational thinking underlying the science and technology which reproduces the image. Underlying the apparent chaos and randomness of the contemporary mediascape, Flusser says, there are rational codes, which we can access, understand and in which we must intervene, if we wish to exercise autonomy in a world increasingly over-determined through automated processes.

Flusser provocatively implores us, the citizens of a world transfused with invisible, light-speed, electronic information exchange, to communicate using synthetic (or technical) images and “no longer words.” Yet, in his analysis of such technical images, he always maintains that these are fundamentally images of texts, and that the textual sub-structure is key to understanding their power and to generating alternative worlds. How are we to resolve these positions?

The Sao Paulo Bienal suffered a credibility crisis in 1969 as a result of boycotts led by French artist Pierre Restany, who refused to participate to protest the military dictatorship in the Brazil. In 1971, in response to this and expectation of Howard Szeeman’s radically participative 1972 Documenta V, the director and founder of the Sao Paulo Bienal Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho invited experts from the

³ “Everything is a happening. In the linear, processual world, nothing happens, everything is an event. The difference between a happening and an event is that a happening is the result of chance, of accident. It is an accident, which becomes necessary. Those of you who know Monod, for instance, “Le Hazard et la Nécessité” and those who know the reflections about chaos, which are now in fashion, will understand what I mean. The world of ‘happening’ is a chaotic world, but everything repeats itself in that chaotic world. But in the event of history, in the vision of the world as a process, nothing ever repeats itself, everything is an event which has causes and will have effects.” (ibid.)

world of arts and technology to re-envision the Bienal in discussions and projects which explored of how to engage with the transformative potential of electronic communications. (Spricigo 2013)⁴ At that conference Flusser sketched out a bold project to completely reformulate the Bienal, transforming it from an discursive arts exhibition into a dialogical participative space where people from all sectors of society could congregate and engage with the contemporary crisis in communications and its social ramifications.⁵

This new constellation of concerns pushed conventional arts practice and artists to the periphery. As a potential candidate to be presented in this new vision of the Bienal, René Berger suggested that Flusser contact the video artist Fred Forest who, a year ago in 1971, together with Hervé Fischer and Jean-Paul Thénot, had founded a movement for sociological art. As we will see below, Fisher's work on a new social repurposing of art practice seems to have appealed to Flusser's project of synthetic thinking.

René Berger also introduced to Flusser the video art work of two more of his students Jean Otth and Gerald Minkoff. Common to the practices of Otth, Minkoff and Forest was the conscious exploration of the feed-back potential of the live electronic visual medium. This rudimentary cybernetic interaction between sender and receiver in live video installations became paradigmatic in Flusser's imagination of a telematic utopia based on live networked communication.

Forest would eventually be invited to exhibit in the XII Bienal with his SPACE-MEDIA project, where he would cause empty spaces to be inserted into newspapers for the readers to write in their own ideas and send them back to him. Since the military dictatorship was still in full swing in Brazil at the time, many dissenters took avidly to the invitation; the dissenting messages displayed in the Bienal would subsequently be censored by the police. Forest responded by performing "The City Invaded by Blank Space" where he orchestrated what looked like a protest march in the streets of Sao Paulo with the participants holding up empty placards. This action resulted in Forest being arrested by the political police.⁶

Flusser did not personally attend the Bienal, having by then already relocated to Europe. Having learned of the outcome of his curatorial selection, Flusser, outraged, sought out Forest once the latter had returned. Storming into the library where Forest was researching, Flusser allegedly⁷ cried "You traitor!" and proceeded to lambast him for his political naiveté. Nevertheless, the two soon made up, and shortly thereafter embarked on their collaboration "Les Gestes du Professeur".

⁴ Vinicius Pontes Spricigo, *Oui a la Biennale de São Paulo: Vilém Flusser's Anti-Boycott* available here http://www.essex.ac.uk/arthistory/research/pdfs/arara_issue_11/spricigo.pdf

⁵ Vilém Flusser, "Proposal for the organization of future São Paulo Biennials on a communicological basis", Vilém Flusser Archiv, SP Bienal 2, 168/169.

⁶ According to information from his site: <http://fredforestartworks.blogspot.de/>

⁷ From Fred Forest's recollections, I interviewed him 12.08.13 at his home in Paris.

Les Gestes is an early example of Flusser demonstrating what he means with the notion of “using technical images”. In “Les Gestes du Professeur”, Flusser is seen, stripped to the waist, in the garden of his home in Fontevraud, experimentally elaborating his then-nascent theory of gestures. In this remarkable tape, Flusser is explicitly reaching into the potentials of the technical image for a new form of dialogue. His theory is inextricable from his bodily gestures, and, of those of Fred Forest behind the camera. Flusser's dialogical agenda is such that he even reaches out towards the eventual viewer of the tape imploring us to criticize their dialogue with our gestures!



Screenshot from “Les Gestes” (courtesy Fred Forest.)

“I would like to write a general theory of the human gesture. But as I told you, I found out that traditional media, like books or essays in learned publications, that these traditional media are not suitable for of my purpose. And I told you why: because the structure of the media is in disagreement with the structure of the phenomenon which I want to capture.

But now we have video. Video seems to be, at least if looked at it from the outside, an ideal medium to transmit a theory of the human gesture. Because the video is in the same time/space continuum in which the concrete phenomenon of the gesture goes on. And because it allows, being audiovisual, that the concrete phenomenon to be commented on linguistically while it happens. Look what you are now watching. You are watching me gesturing, and at the same time you are watching me proposing to you a theory of the gestures I am making.

But this is not all. I am not by myself in gesturing, nor am I in front of a passive public, which is looking at me. I am looking at Forest while he is filming me. Now what is Forest doing? He is trying to gesture his camera in a way that

can accompany both my gestures and my thoughts. But there is more. He is so deeply involved in the process, that while accompanying me, he is also criticizing me, which you have probably noticed / remarked earlier during this tape. All his motions are in accordance with mine.

On the other hand, I am not totally free in gesturing; I am trying to adapt myself both to Forest and the machinery which he is handling. Which means that Fred Forest is not watching objectively my gestures and my theory of gestures objectively, but that he is involved in the phenomenon. There is an intersubjective relationship between myself and Forest, we are having a dialogue. And the tape which you are going to see is a result of the dialogue between myself and Forest.

Still this is not all. The tape which you are seeing now is a sort of challenge to you to participate (yourself) in the dialogue about gestures and about video tapes in which we, Forest and myself, are engaged at present. You, in the future – and now I am pointing not to space, but to time, the space/time continuum you remember – you will stand, in several months from now, at a point to which I am now pointing now, and you are invited to participate in this dialogue.’⁸

Here Flusser's techno-philosophical utopia is performed in a video-technological exchange between “the professor” Flusser (also wielding a mirror), Fred Forest and his camera, and extending into the entire technologized world, what Flusser refers to as “apparatus”. These same concerns run through his later computer-based collaborations. With both “Die Schrift” and “Hypertext”, Flusser is explicitly investigating the properties of the new technology, and elaborating on its capacity for participative modes of philosophical practice.

Flusser's “Casa da Cor” project investigated the negentropic socio-cultural potential of colour codes as synthetic alternatives, more appropriate than linear textual codes, for the appreciation, understanding, and dialogic elaboration of our post-historical technical condition. Working with Swiss designer Karl Gerstner, Flusser imagined film-like sequences of colours projected into a colorarium, space dedicated to the scientific study of the communicological potential of colours. People were meant to enter the colorarium and experience the colours together. This shared sensual experience was expected to help generate Flusser's utopian negentropic new, unlikely and improbably information. Minus the music and intoxicants, he might have been discussing a discotheque, also a place where people go to experience colours together and generate unlikely information.

Traveling back to the first European Media Art Festival, in Osnabrück, West Germany, 1988, at the dawn of the Internet era, we can then begin to understand Flusser's dissatisfaction with the electronic art on display there, the state of the art of the time, and why he chose to collaborate rather with someone like Louis Bec who was, through studious zoological taxonomic extrapolations, generating new semantic fields into new unlikely life-forms.

“It is my firm belief, that if you want to have a clear and distinct communication of your concepts, you have to use synthetic images, no longer words. And this is a veritable revolution in thinking. And I am very much interested in this,

⁸ From “Les Gestes du Professeur” unpublished, transcribed by the author. This work was completely rehabilitated for presentation in the exhibition BODENLOS : Vilém Flusser & the Arts.

but I have to confess that, as far as my experience in Osnabrück is concerned, I haven't seen much in this sense. The reason may be, that people do not yet really know how really to handle the new apparatus.”⁹

When Flusser complained that the artists in Osnabrück do not yet really know how to handle the new apparatus, he means that they are not aware that the images produced by those apparatuses are images of texts. The only way to communicate one's own concepts and not merely the concepts inscribed in the technical functionality of the device is to synthesise thought into images by working with and against the texts inscribed in the apparatus and not merely use the apparatus instrumentally to express concepts univocally and discursively.

Louis Bec's studiously obsessive taxonomogenic fantasy creatures performed Flusser's instruction to project from abstraction into concretion. In Bec's case, the rational abstractions of techno-scientific code were represented by biological taxonomies, and the concretion occurred in Bec's exquisitely detailed drawings. These are synthetic images of scientific texts conceived from the inside out, from the necessary functioning of individual organs to the external, observable form of the imagined creature.

Flusser's project is to save philosophy in society constantly transformed through infinitesimally complex automated processes. Automation has truly “taken control”. The mortal challenge for post-historical human sovereignty is how to avoid becoming automatons, functionaries of the automated apparatus. Flusser's injunction is a response to the apotheosis of human technical accomplishment exemplified by the industrial scale killing camps at Auschwitz. . The project of Enlightenment humanism was forever tarnished, but nevertheless, being the wellspring of the contemporary technical condition, remains the only agenda, which provides us a possible way out of automated self-destruction.

The “environments”¹⁰ produced through the introduction of new technologies involve us in a world that is increasingly “in-formed” by data processing operations. In-formation, for Flusser, is the process of mutual trans-formation through communication. When we exchange in dialogues, we in-form the other, at best, generating unlikely outcomes which are not pre-programmed in the black-box apparatus of the world we are thrown into.

Despite the revolutionary potential of post-historical consciousness Flusser describes, our freedom to act depends on our cultivating synthetic dialogical/discursive practices, which confront entropic technical conditioning, integrating literacy, causality, rationality, and meta-level technical complexity. This project appears ironically to point us back to the dawn of literacy with the pedagogical Socratic dialogical model transcribed by Plato. Whereas Plato's writing articulates the transition between pre-literate and

⁹ Vilém Flusser, On writing, complexity and the technical revolutions. Interview by Miklós Peternák in Osnabrück, European Media Art Festival, September 1988.

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan uses the word “environment” to describe the field of information and services generated by new technologies, similar to Foucault's dispositive and Flusser's apparatus.

literate philosophical traditions, Flusser's technical images appear to be his suggestion for a way to elaborate the transition between literate and post-literate philosophical traditions.

For a world in-formed by the new technologies we need dialogical forms, practices which can help us grasp and engage with the causality encoded deep within our apparatuses, to help us in-form these apparatuses so that they do not grind us down to undifferentiated data. We need a transversal philosophy, which executes the critical power of rational thinking in a way appropriate for the technical age. We need philosophy of photography.

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