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How to teach in the media environment:

A reading of a lesser-known Flusser text from 1972

“Knowledge is made of residues of what is known, assembled in order to make it possible to know more and in a different way. In this imbalance between what is known and what is not known, traditional knowledge suffers from a decentralization, an estrangement that challenges the implacable traditional logic because, when referring to the established cognitive possibilities, that mismatch requires verifying its dissimilarity with the knowledge that establishes the predictability of the world.”¹

Lucrecia D’A Ferrara

Introduction

As far as we know, Vilém Flusser never wrote a major work on education. Among his best-known books there is not one concerned specifically with education or pedagogy. In fact, at first sight, he never addressed educational problems in depth, and there seem to be no more than scattered references in his books and occasional papers. This seems to be far more curious considering that Flusser was not only a teacher, but a very good one, as several of his former students remember, notably Bernardo (2002) or Batlikova (2010).

That does not mean that Flusser was not interested in education. He wrote some important essays on the subject (Flusser 1983; 2015); there are also a number of studies aiming to draw the educational and pedagogical ideas and insights from Flusser’s work (Lastoria 2017; Bornhausen 2020a; 2020b; Duarte 2020; Conte 2021; Freiberg 2021).

While in Brazil, in the 1970s, he taught in Communication Theory and Design courses at Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado (Faap). Later in that decade, he also taught in France, at the University of Marseille. Some of his unpublished writings in the Vilém Flusser Archives shows his caring about the courses and the students: there was an ongoing preoccupation with what should be taught, and how his students would engage in the classes.

¹ Um conhecimento feito de resíduos do que se conhece para ser possível conhecer mais e de modo diferente. Nesse desequilíbrio entre o que se sabe e aquilo que não se sabe, o conhecimento tradicional padece de uma descentralização, um estranhamento que desafia a implacável lógica tradicional porque, ao se referir às consagradas possibilidades cognitivas, aquele descompasso exige constatar sua dessemelhança com o conhecimento que estabelece a previsibilidade do mundo (FERRARA, 2013, p. 140)

As a communication teacher, Flusser seemed to be particularly aware of the fact that he should prepare his students to deal with a media-saturated world, a fully codified environment, and that communication students should be able to decode and deal with it. Flusser's communication theory classes aimed not at the mechanical recall of theory and concepts, but to a deeper formative level: a practical learning of theory as a living tool to engage with reality – a progressively mediated reality.

However, being a good teacher and engaging students with a meaningful learning environment was just one aspect of Flusser's concerns with education. Although, as noted, he did not write extensively on education, there seems to be an ongoing pedagogical, and even didactical, preoccupation underpinning his work as a teacher: how to teach people who were primarily engaged with a media environment? In Brazil, during the decades of 1960s and 1970s, the media industry grew at a fast pace: television became more and more popular, and by the end of the 1970s it was the main communication medium in the country.

Television shows and soap operas, the 'telenovelas' emerged as the main entertainment, along with the news. In addition, movies, comics, radio, and popular literature found a special place in the public life: popular culture became the dominant reference in Brazilian culture. There were several backlashes and contradiction in this process: as some authors such as Ortiz (1995) note that the growths of communication media was closely linked with a political project of 'national integration' by the military government in power from 1964 to 1985. The rapid media expansion also had ties with the expansion of North American influence in South American through mass culture products such as television serials, comics and movies.

Despite its contradictions, and criticism notwithstanding, Brazil quickly accommodated this new media environment. It would be difficult to deny that new media codes spread through the society, and that a new public emerged – an audience that had grown accustomed to television images, soap opera dramas, newspapers and radio talks.

For a communication teacher such as Flusser, that new media environment raised at least two issues: Firstly, what would future communications professionals need to learn? What would he or she have to know about that new, changing, and challenging environment? What knowledge and skills should one have to deal with it in a career as, say, journalist or designer? Secondly, how should one teach them? How does one communicate meaningfully with students that probably knew more about the media than any teacher? "The spectator sees an image on the screen, an image filled with signs (he also hears sounds). His mind codifies, according to his codes, creating

new signs, and in this process, he includes his perceptions, his culture, his imagination, that is, his fiction.” (Capelatto, 2014, p. 62)²

Of course, the students do not ‘know’ about the media in a scholarly way; they have lived with it, and through it, in their everyday lives. Would be possible to teach anything about television to someone who spends several hours in front of it every day? Would it be possible to attract their attention to a lecture if they are far more familiar with the fast pace of movie images and television shows than the lecturer?

Flusser left some important indications concerning the first group of questions. His correspondence with Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado (Faap) officers, and the syllabus of his communication courses shows that he had a clear understanding that a meaningful teaching would be concerned with technical codes, the relationship between people and media technology, a match that touched nearly every single aspect of the human experience (Martino 2020). So, communication theory should provide learners with the conceptual repertory to understand this environment.

The second group of questions, however, was not easily answered. How should those concepts be taught? What should a class be like? Was it still possible to teach in a media-saturated environment in the same way teachers taught centuries ago? Should schools leave the television, comics and movies outside? Will the university ever abandon its medieval origins and fully embrace the contemporary world? Are schools and universities ready to perform a new role in teaching and learning, aimed to students who live, communicate and thrive in the media environment? Flusser did not fully answer these questions in a single text or a book, but he left important indications in some of his texts.

This paper outlines some aspects of Flusser’s concept of teaching as shown in some of his texts about education. It focuses mainly on a paper published in 1972 at the *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* (Brazilian Philosophy Review), titled ‘How to philosophize in mass culture?’. Grounded on a close reading of the paper from 1972, this paper will discuss the three aspects of teaching that he identified in the early 1970s, and that remain particularly important to contemporary teaching: First, he sees culture as a living environment, and challenges the divisions between ‘high’, ‘popular’ and ‘mass’ culture; (2) in order to be meaningful to students, teaching should treat mass culture seriously, both as reference and object; (3) teachers should not be afraid to include mass culture in their courses, as it is the student’s main cultural code. These elements are discussed against the social and media background of Flusser’s article.

² O espectador vê uma imagem na tela, uma imagem recheada de signos (ele também ouve sons). Sua mente codifica, conforme seus códigos, criando novos signos, e neste processo ele inclui suas percepções, sua cultura, sua imaginação, ou seja, sua ficção (CAPELATTO, 2014, p. 62)

The context gets in

The *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* was the journal of the Instituto Brasileiro de Filosofia (IBF) [The Brazilian Institute of Philosophy]. It was a particular institution, without any university links, and privately funded. It is arguably one of the oldest scholarly societies in Brazil, and it attracts mainly philosophers outside the academy. It is important to note that by the 1960s and 1970s, only a very highly economically placed élite had access to university. Some independent institutes provided courses for a growing urban population, but this was outside the formal university and college educational systems. The Instituto Brasileiro de Filosofia, although not aimed at the general public, was one of these institutes.

The *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* was the main vehicle for the IBF members and associates to make their ideas public. It was funded by two associations of commerce and industry, Sesi and Senai. There is no information about the reviewing process of the papers, and one can only speculate about how an article by someone got to be published. It is important to take into the account that there was no more than an incipient university and research culture in Brazil, and the notion of a peer-reviewed publication was still to be implemented. Thus, the *Revista Brasileira de Filosofia* seemed to be more a collection of papers than a modern research journal – once more, it is important not to be anachronistic in judging it with modern eyes: it should be placed in the context of a different conception of what ‘researching’ and ‘publishing’ was.

Who, then, published on the *Revista*? A brief answer can be provided by looking at some issues. There is a wide range of authors, from Culturalists to Phenomenologists, from Existentialists to Christian philosophers. Critical thinking has a lesser place, although there were some Marxist texts in the *Revista*. It is important to remember that in the 1960s and the 1970s, the Communist Party, and the Marxist thinking, as a whole, was outlawed by the military government.

Flusser was not a regular author for the *Revista*. It is worth remembering that although he had had some regular university teaching, Flusser was mostly an outsider in the Brazilian university system; some of his main papers were actually contributions to newspapers and occasional articles written for particular purposes – a lecture or a conference. So, it is not a surprise that his scholarly production was not driven by the ‘publish or perish’ culture of the modern university system. As an outsider, Flusser seemed to be more at ease with occasional papers and books where he could develop his ideas in a very characteristic way, without the constraints of academic publishing.

Publishing in a journal of philosophy, on the other hand, also meant being part of a network of authors that formed an incipient intellectual life of that period without being lawyers, journalists or writers of literature; it would be possible to say that Flusser’s generation of philosophers, in Brazil, was the first to see itself as such. They were interested in other ways of getting their ideas

across to a broader public as well, both by teaching private courses and publishing articles in newspapers. This may explain why it was important to Flusser to be published by the *Revista*, and, at the same time, not to be a regular writer for it: as the journal was placed outside the university, it was an ambivalent place for the publishing of philosophical ideas and concepts.

This context in which ‘How to philosophize in mass culture?’ appeared in 1972, in number 86 of the journal. As far as it is known, it was the only time it was published: there seems to have been no reprint since its original publication. It has not been included in Flusser’s books, and it does not appear on any collection of his essays: apart from the *Revista* itself, there is only a digital copy of that available from the Flusser Archive.

For the purposes of this paper, the original physical number of the *Revista* was consulted. Although the digital version obviously bears the same content, it seemed to be methodologically important to have access to the original publication, as it lets us see Flusser’s article in its relation to other texts at that time.

The main concepts: ‘mass’ and ‘philosophize’

It is possible to grasp some of the main questions of Flusser’s text by taking a closer look to its title: ‘Como filosofar em cultura de massa?’ This could be literally translated as ‘How to philosophize in Mass Culture?’, and the meaning would be close enough: there would not be much lost in translation. Flusser uses the verb ‘filosofar’ (philosophize), a word derived from the noun ‘filosofia’ (philosophy). It is a very unusual phrase construction both for Portuguese and English: to ‘philosophize’ implies the ‘act of doing philosophy’; it is a verb that suggests action. But what does it mean ‘to do philosophy’ or to ‘philosophize?’ Flusser does not actually explain it, but he seems to refer to the very exercise of thought, a sort of rigorous speculation grounded on an imaginative reason – exactly as he does in most of his work. Throughout his books, Flusser shows that to philosophize is not the study of Philosophy, but the engagement with the living experience of thinking, the very confrontation with reality from which something new emerges, a fresh look at human experience and environment.

Flusser invites us, that is, not to study Philosophy, but to ‘do it’ in a very practical and engaged way. That is why the title does not ask ‘how to do Philosophy?’ nor ‘how to study Philosophy?’, but how to engage in thinking, philosophize. Perhaps it would be possible to understand it as a simpler, yet deeper, question: ‘how to think’. It seems that Flusser is asking ‘how to think’, suggesting that philosophy might be equal to a sort of reflexive thinking.

Would it be possible to find a hint of irony in Flusser’s question? It seems possible, judging by the way he further develops the question in the paper. He argues that there can be no divide

between life and philosophy: the challenge, accordingly to him, is to understand philosophy not as an academic discipline, not as a body of knowledge sedimented through the centuries, but as the very living core of existence. It seems that to Flusser the act of being alive is automatically the call to think about it – in other words, to philosophize. The title's question seems to address ironically the idea that 'philosophy' is something apart from everyday life, and 'to philosophize in mass culture' would imply an attitude towards academic philosophy: Flusser asks how to think in a world depleted with mass culture. The hidden paradox: if the answer is 'no', then the article itself, the very act of writing, or thinking, would be a contradiction. As a result, to philosophize is not only possible, but a necessary condition for living in mass culture.

That might lead to another question: what does it mean to write about 'mass culture'?

Nowadays the expression might as well seem outdated, antique, or associated with a remotely imagined world without the Internet, social media, and digital communication. 'Mass culture' appears to be an old concept, covered with the dust of the time, an object in an imaginary Museum of Theory. Newer expressions, such as 'media culture', 'digital culture' or 'cyberculture' seems to have pushed the notion of 'mass culture' to a marginal place in communication studies after decades of hegemony as the leading concept in media research. Actually, 'mass culture' has historically been the correlate of 'mass communication', and it would be virtually impossible to split them. However, in 1972, when Flusser was writing, the situation was far different. It would be important, then, to take a closer look on the last part of the article's title, which reads '...in mass culture?'.

The particle 'in' is significant. The preposition 'em', in Portuguese, means more or less the same as the English 'in'. Curiously, Flusser does not use the word 'with' ('com') mass culture, which would have been more familiar to Brazilian readers, but 'in', as in 'inside': Flusser's assumption seems to be that we live inside mass culture, and Philosophy's challenge is to be alive and well in that environment. The question would not be how to philosophize 'with' mass culture (for example, by taking a movie or a comic as an object for a philosophy class or essay), but from the inside of it, employing mass culture as a means to philosophize. To live, not only to analyze: the 'in' of the title seems to ask not for a deeper understanding of mass culture, but for a displacement of the very *locus* of philosophy, perhaps no longer surrounded by the halls of academia, but dispersed throughout the mass culture environment.

It could be argued that this does not mean to think about mass culture from a philosophical point of view, even a critical one, as many 20th thinkers actually did (Theodor W. Adorno would epitomize the notion of a thinker creating philosophy about mass culture). It rather reviews the philosopher's own place in society. The philosopher lives in a society, a mass society, and her or his primary environment is not necessarily different from the one in which the rest of the people

live: they read the newspapers, watch television, even support a favorite football team, pay taxes, text messages in smartphones and post in social media.

Philosophy, in Flusser's view, is part of existence as such; to live in a media-saturated world means to philosophize from the inside of that environment. Therefore, the question could not be 'how to philosophize with mass culture?', but only from the inside: if there is a way to philosophize as an existential condition, the only road is from mass culture to a different level of thinking, grounded on the philosopher's self-reflection on the living conditions and the environment where she or he actually is. As a result, to think in a mediated world would be to face this striking question as it appears in the title: how to philosophize in mass culture?

Answering this question, for Flusser, demands a deeper dive in the notion of 'culture'.

Throughout the 20th century, 'mass culture' has been the preferred expression for a rather broad notion of a culture created by new communication technology and broadcast to a public far wider than any before. The term is related both to the development of then 'new' media, such as the radio, movies, tabloids and, from the 1950s, television, and to a 'mass society'.

This later notion can be traced back to the end of the 19th century, when French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon (2013) published his highly influential book 'Psychology of the Multitude'. Briefly, Le Bon related a 'mass society' to the demise of the individual, absorbed by a collective spirit distilled by the gigantism of megalopolis and the work in industries. The 'mass' emerges as an almost non-rational entity that could be easily manipulated since there was no place for individual decisions; the notion of the 'herd spirit', as first stated by Nietzsche, is taken out of context by Le Bon to identify the new form of association where the collective precedes the individual. The notion of 'mass' has been presenting epistemological problems since its very beginning, as it is a difficult concept to grasp in its relationship with the reality it should explain. However, in spite of the criticism, the idea has established itself as one of the most powerful concepts to explain modern society.

Works of art seem to have been far more sensitive to the concept: the notion of 'mass' could be easily grasped from texts such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'The man of the multitude' or movies like Charles Chaplin's 'Modern Times' or Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis': they capture, in different ways, the awe and terror that the masses inspired as they appeared in the streets. Urban people were long identified with 'mass', and both words quickly became synonyms in scholarly research and academic works.

“In a broad sense, these models can also be thought from the technologies of daily life, such as cell phones, apps, televisions, increasingly faster, more and more accurate, more and more magical, exerting a huge attraction on their consumers, to the point of attributing to them their own capacities, mainly cognitive.”³ (Bornhausen, 2020a, p. 78).

It is worth noting that the importance of ‘mass culture’ as an analytical tool for media and communication research has diminished greatly since the 1990s, if it has not been completely abandoned. The emergence of the Internet and digital media, as much as social media a decade and a half later, seems to have presented insoluble problems for the notion: if anyone can broadcast a message, does it still make sense to talk about ‘mass’ communication? On the contrary, communication seemed to have become more individualistic than ever.

By the mid-2000’s, it seemed that ‘mass culture’ or ‘mass communication’ were no more than memories of a long-lost era when communication went from one-to-many; the new digital landscape, some believed, had brought about a new time when the one-to-one communication would be reality. That was long before digital influencers and algorithms filled the Internet and digital platforms with a renewed one-to-many communication. Castells (2009) goes further to argue that digital media has created the first-ever ‘mass communication’, as anyone could send a message to another person. This view, obviously, does not take back the old meaning of ‘mass communication’ or ‘mass culture’, but breathes new life into the terms.

In short, the very notions of ‘mass’, ‘mass culture’ and ‘mass communication’ have been abandoned altogether for most part of academic research in favor of more contemporary alternatives such as ‘media culture’ (Kellner 2003), ‘convergence culture’ or ‘spreadable culture’ (Jenkins 2006; 2012), among others. ‘Media’ has replaced ‘mass’ as the imaginary center of modern society, as Couldry (2010) puts it, and that would be enough to outdate the original notions.

All of this contemporary discussion was light years away from Flusser when he wrote that essay in 1972. Computers were still big machines with little practical utility for everyday use, personal computers had recently been devised by some visionary minds and the idea of a smartphone would be easily likened to fiction. It is a surprise, however, that Flusser considers his media environment as filled with ‘new media’, closely related to ‘mass communication’. In 1972, the color TV was, by far, the best example of ‘new media’ one could find. ‘Mass’ seemed to be the condition of great cities, and the incipient communication research, in Brazil, had fully adopted ‘mass communication’ as the main concept to understand a complex set of phenomena.

³ Em sentido amplo, estas modelações podem também ser pensadas a partir do cotidiano tecnológico, como os celulares, aplicativos, televisões, cada vez mais velozes, cada vez mais precisos, cada vez mais mágicos, empregando em seus consumidores uma enorme atração, a ponto de delegarem a eles suas próprias capacidades, cognitivas principalmente (BORNHAUSEN, 2020a, p. 78).

By choosing ‘mass culture’ to title his paper, Flusser joins a long tradition of studies concerning the mass and its relationship with culture. He also aligns himself among those who, coming from other fields of enquiry, turned their attention to the study of media and communication. The result was an analysis that places mass culture in a broader picture of the history of ideas in what could be named ‘western civilization’. It also identified a new environment where a person should philosophize.

These two points are the pillars of Flussers’s argumentation: any approach to mass culture requires a critical appraisal of it, as it seems to be a unauthentically created form of culture; in spite of that, it is the only culture known by most of the population; therefore, if a person chooses to think about the existence, the only option is to philosophize in mass culture.

In the next section, this essay will follow both arguments in order to show how Flusser positioned philosophy in mass culture.

Mediated philosophy

Flusser starts his essay with a rather common argument: Philosophy is facing a sort of ‘crisis’. However, he immediately leaves this trail and moves towards another proposition: one might endlessly debate the ‘crisis’ in philosophy regarding its contents; it is time to focus on the means one must philosophize. If there is a crisis, it is not in the ‘content’ of philosophy and its history of propositions, discussions, and arguments. The crises might be located in the *modus operandi* of philosophy: how do we philosophize? What means, what channels are available to people to think? In other words, which media do people employ to philosophize?

Flusser changed the focus from the content to the media of philosophy; instead of looking at what we think, he raises the question in how it is possible to think. It is not a coincidence that ‘how’ is the first word of the title: Flusser seems to be interested in the possibility of philosophy in a media-saturated world; to put it another way, he appears to seek the mediated methods of thinking. Having chosen a road less travelled, he addresses an important, however neglected, point in philosophy: the material conditions of thinking, the simpler requirements one needs to philosophize.

Of course, anyone might develop a sharp mind, and the personal, or existential, exercise of thinking does not require any complicated equipment. However, philosophy needs a channel: as it is impossible to grasp the very matter of thinking, one can only think through a medium that enables a person to do it – words, images, sensations, discourse, and any other means of expression. The notion that philosophy is a domain apart from the rest of the world, and even from the philosopher’s mind and body needs to be reviewed if we are to keep philosophizing.

Flusser argues that, for centuries, philosophy has been deeply intertwined with writing. The classical (or, better yet, commonsensical) view of philosophy and philosophers has been closely associated with the written word, and the book has been its material support or ‘platform’. The image of the philosopher in a library, surrounded by books and writings from which wisdom and knowledge might be grasped is a common media stereotype. Writing has been the medium of thought since the dawn of philosophy, and the printed page its main way to reach the public.

“Flusser stresses as prominent aspects of this medium the one-directional flow as well as its unrepeatability, aspects of writing that militate if not determine a cultural inscription of time as progressive. Practices of writing and reading, for him, induce a linear sense of time and give prominence to diachronicity in general as compared with synchronicity.” (Poster, 2010, p. 10)

This whole circuit, however, is facing the biggest crisis ever, Flusser states. Classical culture, grounded on reading, writing, and teaching, has been challenged by the emergence of new codes, New communication machines undermines the very notion of ‘culture’. At the beginning of the essay, Flusser summarizes the cultural and historical changes that have directly been affecting philosophy. His approach is not a detailed account of changes, but an overview concerning the main characteristics of the differences.

“Each technology creates its imagination, its mythology, its needs and its defenders. The main characteristic of the most revolutionary technologies is to be understood in the social imagination as unavoidable. Writing founded a system of social hierarchy, with scales, categories, awards, benefits, distinctions, functions. How to imagine the permanence of this hierarchy without its foundation?”⁴ (Silva, 2013, p. 54)

For centuries, Flusser states, ‘culture’ had a well-defined meaning, and the boundaries between its varieties were similarly sharp.

The image could be that of the pyramid: on the top, the elite, or ‘high culture’, the knowledge commonly associated with instruction and formal education. Traditionally, only a tiny fraction of a society had access to it. Fine arts, literature and academic knowledge formed the very core of high culture – the word, in fact, comes from ‘cultivate’, as in the sense of ‘growing’ knowledge and self-formation.

⁴ Cada tecnologia cria o seu imaginário, sua mitologia, sua necessidade e seus defensores. A característica principal das tecnologias mais revolucionárias é se imprimir no imaginário social como incontornáveis. A escrita fundou um sistema de hierarquia social, com escalas, categorias, prêmios, benefícios, distinções, funções. Como imaginar a permanência dessa hierarquia sem o seu fundamento? (SILVA, 2013, p. 54)

The middle is the ‘national culture’, an artificial construct that refers mainly to the characteristics of a people, or a nation, defined by its boundaries with other countries. This second level might be defined as the ‘national identity’, a social construct with a highly political influence on the collective life of a people. It defines the traditions, rituals and particularities of a nation.

Finally, the lower level is popular culture. This notion might be particularly difficult to understand without a closer look. For English-speaking readers, the expression ‘popular culture’ might refer to television shows, comics, movies, pop music and so on, as a sort of synonym, or a more modern replacement, for ‘mass culture’. However, there is another meaning, perhaps more familiar to the Brazilian audience Flusser was addressing when he wrote the essay. ‘Popular culture’, in this sense, refers to a more traditional culture, created by the people, without any contact with the media. A better expression would be ‘folklore’, since it refers to a traditional body of knowledge originated by the people. Flusser seems to bear in mind this later meaning.

He argues that the tripartite notion of culture – high, national, popular – is outdated, replaced by another set of divisions. Flusser’s argument goes on to say that contemporary culture has only two levels: mass and high culture. Mass culture actually encompasses both popular and national cultures; high culture becomes more and more isolated from the majority of people. In other words, as mass culture becomes dominant, high culture tries to ensure its own survival by becoming more and more inaccessible, except to experts – the stereotypical image of an intellectual’s ‘ivory tower’ could easily apply here. This radical change in culture is brought about by communication media.

The replacement of popular and national cultures by mass culture is a consequence of the emergence and spread of the mass media as one of the central features of contemporary society. Flusser is not a mediacentric determinist, but he emphasizes the importance of the media in social and cultural change. “Flusser’s history of media evolution as translation and retranslation has its origin in his vision of linguistic translation” (GULDIN, 2012, p. 45). Although Flusser's view is not deterministic or fatalistic, he credits the media with having produced the conditions in which this dualistic relationship between mass and high culture arose and was sustained.

Where should philosophy be placed? To Flusser, the answer is far from obvious. It is true that, for most of its history, philosophy has been the epitome of high culture: it is ‘difficult’, ‘complex’, and ‘just for the few initiated’. Flusser does not dispute these assertions, but sees them in the context of the media employed by philosophy to convey its ideas: writing and printing have long been media that, in spite of their revolutionary effects, were inaccessible to large parts of the population.

Since late antiquity, philosophy has been disconnected from the majority of people and restricted to a small group of thinkers who, first of all, had access to teaching and books. However,

it has not been always the case: there was a time, long lost ago, when philosophers spoke to the people, with the people, in a language nearly anyone could understand. Writing has distanced philosophy from the people, as the written word support more and more complex thought.

At the same time, mass culture is far from being the place for Philosophy. It is ‘vulgar’, ‘simplistic’, and ‘common’, and definitely not a friendly environment for philosophizing. The first condition for a message to be broadcast, in Flusser’s time, is to be simple: anything that takes more than a second to understand is too complex to retain. Philosophical problems could never be solved in an environment like this, where the rule is to avoid complexity – and philosophy is seen as a particularly complex issue. Mass culture may convey any message, as long as it is adapted to its code. However, adaptation comes with a cost: the radical simplification of any meaning. That would be virtually impossible for philosophy: how can the ideas of a thinker such as Kant or Wollstonecraft be reduced to the duration of a television show or a social media post? The answer may not be a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’: one cannot simply choose not to be in a contemporary world and surrounded by a digital media environment.

Philosophy has not kept up with changes in culture. It is still grounded in print culture, and depends on books and verbal teaching to be transmitted from one (the teacher; the philosopher) to many (the students). New technological media have been reshaping the very core of knowledge, but philosophy, Flusser argues, has refused to embrace this the change.

This is not a simple matter of preference, Flusser seems to believe. The question can go a little bit further: can philosophy still be relevant if it does not communicate in a contemporary way? Does it make any sense to philosophize with paper and ink in the era of digital? Moreover, how can a public that has grown up with television and smartphones take part in a philosophical argument that emerges from the print culture? The public relevance of philosophy, it seems, depends on the extent to which it will be willing to embrace the new media: the problem is not, to Flusser, what philosophy says, but how it says it.

Flusser speculates that the media require a simpler way to philosophize: the very codes of media messages do not allow any particularly deep or complex exchange of ideas. He asks, however, whether it would not it be an exercise of intellectual honesty to concentrate on the essential of philosophy. Would not it be a valid challenge for a philosopher to imagine new ways of thinking, ways closer to contemporary media culture, closer to the contemporary audience? The main challenge, Flusser argues by the end of the essay, is to know the potential of technical media to communicate ideas, and also how it might stimulate new ways of thinking. Philosophy has always been drawn something from the surrounding environment as a matter for thought; why should not it take new ideas, themes, and subjects from mass culture? Flusser answers that philosophers cannot ignore mass culture without losing their importance in contemporary world.

“Flusser asserts the need for another way of acting, more engaged and aware of the programmatic structures of the devices, for creative action in the face of information” (BORNHAUSEN, 2020b, p. 109). To philosophize in mass culture requires, nonetheless, a deeper understanding of the main formative tool of today’s world – the media, its technology and codes. Without that, any good idea will sound meaningless.

Final remarks

This paper initially proposed a close reading of Flusser’s essay ‘How to philosophize in mass culture?’ in order to draw some insights concerning education from it. Two main aspects have been stressed, the context of his concepts and theories, and the critical challenges that emerge from that. The idea was not to survey Flusser’s ideas about education, but only to look on a relatively obscure text which still has potential to provide important contemporary insights. “Because Flusser refers to relationships between people and/or things, we realize that his methodology is marked by questions, attentive observation of phenomena and, especially, the courage to doubt”⁵ (MENEZES, 2009, pp. 169).

Even though Flusser never created a comprehensive theory of education, and his works on the subject seems to be sparse, his contribution to the development of a renewed conception of pedagogy, even a communication-based pedagogy, cannot be underestimated. In this paper, the focus has not been on Flusser’s writings on education. It has rather focussed on a little-known essay that addresses the problem of teaching and learning only marginally, but with enough importance to provoke several reflections on the subject. What is the meaning of teaching, in the 21st century, in comparison with teaching centuries ago? When will the school embrace the media culture environment, instead of ignoring it? These questions arise from Flusser’s comments on the need for a reassessment of teaching and learning in contemporary mediate culture. Students who grasp the world of techno-images with a movement of their fingers cannot be taught as if they were medieval monks in a *scriptorium*.

Flusser is not an apologist for technology; it is not enough to equip every classroom in the world with the latest media technology to engage students. The question is not only the material aspect of a technical machine, but the mastering of its codes. The codification of reality by technology demands from teachers not exactly the knowledge of its technical and mechanical aspects, but of the codes it produces and employs. The newest smartphone might become obsolete

⁵ Pelo fato de Flusser se referir às relações entre pessoas e/ou coisas, percebemos que sua metodologia é marcada por perguntas, pela observação atenta dos fenômenos e, especialmente, pela coragem de duvidar (MENEZES, 2009, pp. 169)

in a matter of months, weeks perhaps, but the codes it produces will almost certainly outlive it: the challenge is not how to philosophize with the technical apparatus itself, but how to philosophize ‘in’ (not ‘with’) the codes it creates and shares. If the school is to move from its ancient origins to a contemporary approach, Flusser perhaps could show a way – to be taken carefully, but also courageously.

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