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Phenomenological crossroads between Husserl and Flusser. Toward a Phenomenology of the Image in the post-digital age of AI

1. Introduction

Phenomenology, as formulated by Edmund Husserl, begins with the idea that consciousness is always intentional—that is, always directed toward something. Husserl’s quest was to return “to the things themselves,” investigating how meaning arises in the structures of lived experience. Decades later, Vilém Flusser would turn his attention to a new horizon of perception: the world of technical images—photographs, films, and digital visualizations—produced not by human hand, but by apparatuses. Today the apparatus has given rise to a digital age. But it still functions as a Flusserian apparatus, according to a fixed program which transforms people into replaceable functionaries or manipulable objects. So, the concept of apparatus implies a co-relation between apparatus and its human functionaries. Both are shaped by the apparatus’s internal program, leading to a form of post-historical existence where human activity is reduced to following the apparatus’s pre-determined logic, which in turn is based on programmed functionality. An apparatus is characterized by its complex inner working and its execution of a specific program. Its post-historical function in a post-historical age is to configure the world as an apparatus.

Flusser might have compressed his responses to the apparatus as follows: the apparatus has codified the world in order to entertain us. It has turned the world into a spectacle. It is now seeking to sensationalize our own death, having already sensationalized the deaths of others. It has overcome mourning. It has turned the death of others into kitsch. It will turn our own deaths into kitsch. Once this has been achieved, we will have been reprogrammed. Our unhappy consciousness will finally rest. Programmed life shall be totally entertaining. This is the aim of the programs which we are collaborating.

This paragraph is neither a statement of Flusser’s position nor a projection of current circumstances into the future. For us, it indicates the way apparatus and human being interact within the programmed functionality of the universe of technical images. Technical images construct

fundamental phenomena of lifeworld (Lebenswelt), including good (ἀγαθόν), such as happiness, as well as death.

In Flusser's universe of technical images, the phenomenological lifeworld is replaced by the life-image. The experienced world becomes a simulated world. Flusser's apparatus has, then, re-defined intentionality: from the active, defining feature of consciousness to an effect of programmed consciousness.

How can we resist the apparatus? Flusser's position emerges here:

We are counterrevolutionaries in both senses: we dread romantic anti-rationalism as much as enlightened rationalism. We know that they are both within the program and we know their realizations: fascism and the apparatus society. In other words: we know that intelligence has stupidity, which the stupidity of the heart ignores. This makes our counter-revolutionary zeal ambivalent. We are counter-everything. Our engagement with freedom is totally negative.

Though separated by historical context and scientific orientation, Husserl and Flusser share a deep concern with how reality is constituted in and through human perception. Flusser's philosophy in particular examines the ways technical images affect a subject's capacity to imagine the world. How do changes in the communications code and finally the bodily and gestures affect a subject? This article brings them into dialogue, asking: how does the rise of technical images change the phenomenological structure of intentionality? And what happens to the Husserlian lifeworld when perception is filtered through automatic, codified, and synthetic images? In short, what happens when a human being is dominated by digital images?

2. The sense of image in Husserl

Husserl's phenomenology centers on the epoché—the bracketing of naturalistic assumptions to investigate how phenomena present themselves to consciousness. Central to this method is the noesis-noema correlation: every act of consciousness (noesis) intends an object or meaning (noema). For Husserl, the world is not a given but a horizon of appearance, structured through subjective perception and an intersubjective dynamic.

In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl introduced the concept of the lifeworld (Lebenswelt)—the pre-theoretical ground of all experience, encompassing both the personal and shared meanings. This lifeworld is where intentional consciousness operates most immediately. But how does Husserl define the phenomenological concept of image?

The concept of the image (Bild) appears most explicitly in his analyses of imagination, pictorial representation, and the constitution of aesthetic objects. He describes the intentional structure of image-consciousness (Bildbewusstesein) as tripartite:

- a) physical image-carrier(building) which refers to the material substrate, such as the canvas, photograph, or pixels on a screen and is perceived as a thing in the world.
- b) Image-object (*Bildobjekt*) which refers to the represented image as such which is never not identical with the physical elements on the canvas but constituted through them.
- c) Image-subject (*Bildsujet*) which concerns the real or imagined subject.

This layered structure allows Husserl to explain how an image mediates between perception and imagination. Both are experienced here and now, and refer to something absent. Image-consciousness involves a doubling of intentionality. While we perceive the image-carrier, simultaneously we are directed toward the absent image-subject through the image-object.

Husserl approaches images phenomenologically by way of a structured consciousness with layered intentionality. Flusser's technical images, by contrast, are not just objects of intentionality, but programmed surfaces that shape human experience and communication. For Husserl the intentional condition is the central pivot of his phenomenology. For Flusser the central pivot is the apparatus that produces and conditions image-consciousness.

Flusser's work, especially in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* and *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, offers a media-philosophical interpretation of how perception and culture are transformed by images created through apparatuses. So the technical images are not representations in the traditional sense, as they are in Husserl's theory, but coded abstractions that simulate and construct the lifeworld at the same time. For Flusser, these images are opaque rather than transparent: they do not reveal reality, but instead conceal their own production, mystifying the processes behind them. The human subject becomes a functionary of the apparatus—operating within a program that structures not only what can be seen but what can be thought.

Where Husserl investigated how consciousness constitutes meaning, Flusser is concerned with how meaning is pre-structured by technology. Does intentionality remain intact in an image-saturated environment governed by algorithms? We are suggesting that Flusser is offering us a post-phenomenology which could examine the new human condition.

While Husserl emphasized the givenness of the object in intuition, Flusser's technical images are not given but generated. The noema is no longer a stable object in the world, but a projection within a code-space. Having made such a noematic shift, the subject's experience of the lifeworld is no longer immediate. The technical image inserts itself between consciousness and the world, mediating not only perception but also imagination, memory, imaginary-symbolic-real and finally the desire of the unconscious. In psychoanalytic terms, we might say the image becomes a screen for projection, structuring unconscious investments as well as conscious interpretation.

Thus, technical images alter both the intention as noetic act and the intended noematic content, suggesting that phenomenological approach must now account for media structures that modulate experience prior to awareness. Husserlian described a crisis of meaning in the sciences due to their abstraction from the lifeworld. Flusser diagnoses a deeper crisis: the displacement of the lifeworld itself by a world of images. What appears is no longer the world, but a simulation of the world, generated and governed by apparatuses. In this regard, Flusser extends Husserl's crisis of meaning into a crisis of perception. Thus emerges a new kind subjectivity which can be aware of the codes and capable of decoding and reprogramming the image. Flusser seeks a kind of exemption from phenomenological reduction, to be recovered in awareness of mediation.

3. Toward a Phenomenology of the Image in the post-digital age of AI

Bringing Flusser and Husserl into dialogue reveals the continuity—and tension—between early phenomenology and contemporary media theory. Where Husserl examined the structures of consciousness in a world of physical objects and direct experience, Flusser interrogates how those very structures are reconfigured in a world of digital images, interfaces, and synthetic realities. A contemporary phenomenology, we argue, must contend with the machinic manipulation of appearance—how the object of intention is no longer the thing itself, but an encoded substitute. The phenomenologist of today must confront not only how consciousness constitutes meaning, but how meaning is already pre-constituted by technical systems.

In this light, Flusser's philosophy can be seen as a critical phenomenology of media or a post-phenomenology, one that updates Husserl's method for the digital and post-human age.