

Anne-Laure Oberson

Flusser as ‘Envisionary’

Flusser was a visionary. More than that, he was an extraordinary ‘envisionary’. Well over thirty years ago, he understood with acute clarity and foresight the world we are living in today. He provided us with new sets of keys to enter the time of the synthetic image and actively participate in a new technical society by “drawing the concrete out of the abstract”¹.

The richness and complex implications of Flusser’s theory, the scope of his argumentation and their ramifications into other fields do not cease to fascinate as they purvey catalytic material to practical work.

Three moments have had major impacts on the development of my own philosophy of images and illustrate the pertinence and continuous relevance of his contribution to today’s philosophical quest: the concept of functionary, the quantum nature of the technical image and images as articulations of thoughts.

“To call photographers functionaries”² was an iconoclastic statement, yet one that came from a completely cathartic analysis of photography that Vilém Flusser developed in his seminal essay *Towards a philosophy of photography*. Like photographers, we are all, as viewers of events, mere functionaries of the programs we receive, operators of apparatuses over which we have no competence. But if we understand the new model that Flusser has constructed, we can see the program as a concept of freedom - the true informative image lies outside the perfect realisation of the program and stems from a series of quantum-like decisions that amount to the act of photography - it brings back a heightened level of criticality towards the image that is inherent to it.

Flusser’s prescient analysis that “the structure of the act of photography is a quantum one” has provided the basis for all of my research. In light of his hypothesis, I have investigated his claim that a single image holds all possible images. Photography, and by extension the technical image, isn’t fixed but transient and undetermined. This very continuous time of the technical image allows drawing the parallel with the mental image and explaining the process of thinking. This is the door that Flusser has drawn opened for us when he claimed in an interview that “Images no longer represent the world. [They] are articulations of thoughts.”³ This envision of a possibility of a philosophy of images has inspired my entire doctoral research to unravel how exactly images articulate thoughts.

Many of Flusser's anticipations have come true, beyond his imagination, yet a true shift in paradigm is still to happen. Despite and even though images are now overwhelmingly predominant, even though we collectively produce and exchange them, we are still very much functionaries of redundant information, that we still understand with a linear logic. More than ever today we need to apply his envision in order to set ourselves free.

References

- Flusser, V. (2011). *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 38.
- Flusser, V. (2000). *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion: 27.
- Flusser, V. (1988). *On Writing, Complexity and the Technical Revolutions*, Interview at the European Media Art Festival, Osnabrück. Osnabrück, Germany: 7min55.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyfOcAAcoH8>.