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Media, Gestures, and Society:
Dialogues between Vilém Flusser and Fred Forest¹

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with the development of new media devices and facing a new stage of the history of culture based on the automation of production, distribution, and consumption of information, we perceive a new series of theoreticians who have taken the media as a starting point for theoretical development contemplation?. Beyond merely analyzing apparatuses and devices as no more than technical objects, these theorists consider the media as conceptual articulators for new epistemological and ontological views of the world.

Henri Bergson (2005), who developed a *philosophy of duration* in dialogue with the *dispositif*² of cinema; Walter Benjamin (1993), who postulated the concept of *optical unconscious* based upon his analysis of photography and cinema; and, more recently, Peter Weibel (2003) who, coming from an analysis of new media, and who developed, together with Otto Rosler, a phenomenology of the interface, are just a few examples of how theorists have worked with the questions raised by the languages of media. (the years behind Bergson and Benjamin are confusing – I know they refer to the publications in Brazil, of course, but to readers not fluent in media history it seems as if they are still alive; it may be worth providing their biographical data, just for context)

Among the various media thinkers that have emerged in the second half of the last century, perhaps Vilém Flusser has been the one whose importance lately has increased the most. Two of his books *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* (1983) and *Les Gestes* (1999) are fundamental to the understanding of his discourse on media.

In *Filosofia da Caixa Preta*, photography is taken as an example so as to develop a critique of the relationship between technology and society based on what Flusser calls technical images. Photography is a basic model of *dispositif*, whose characteristics would be re-signified in cinema, video and TV until arriving at our current media images. In this sense *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* is not merely a book about photography, but rather about the production of technological images that modify our way of relating to the world around us. The photograph, in this context,

¹ Translation by Stephen Sinsley.

² Editor's note: The term *dispositivo* is commonly translated into English as "apparatus" or "device," which focuses on a more technical dimension. But the Portuguese *dispositivo*, like the French *dispositif*, carries the original meaning of the Latin *dispositio*, which in classical rhetoric was a system used for the organization of arguments in the sense of arrangement.

functions more so as a pretext, or as a vehicle, to examine the functioning of our society, marked by the collapse of the text and by the hegemony of media images.

According to Flusser, the advent of technical images marked the beginning of a new relationship with the visible which is structured quite differently from the model of written language: technical images are surfaces that aspire to be representations of the world, but in reality hide their true dimension, which is none other than to be a mere image.

The exercise employed by Flusser was, in fact, perceiving a new stage of culture contaminated by the explosion of media techniques and turning a critical eye upon the devices seen as “black boxes”, whose programmed interior is completely opaque and uncertain.

Within this context, the subject tends to become, by the actions of techno-social programs, a programmed and programmable employee who is expected to respond to the questions raised by the technical apparatus. We are becoming more and more mere machine operators, button-pushers, interface users: “servants” of the machines. We deal with programmed situations without even realizing it. We think we have a choice, and as a result, we think we are inventive and free. But our freedom, and our capacity for inventiveness, are restricted to software and a collection of possibilities provided by the black box which we do not control. In other words: what we really see in a world dominated by technical images is not the world, but predetermined concepts relative to a world impregnated this word is unclear in this context! in the media structure (Machado 2007).

This is the point where Flusser wants to intervene and to call for reflection on the possibilities of creation and freedom in a society that is ever more programmed and dominated by technology. If the photographer lives under the totalitarian control of his or her equipment, if her or his gestures are programmable, are not those excepted who try to fool the equipment, introducing into it unexpected elements, re-establishing in this way freedom within a context dominated by machines? “The so-called experimental photographers; they know what is happening. They know that the problems to be solved are of the image of the equipment, of the program, and the information. They consciously try to make the equipment produce an informative image that is not in its program. They know that their praxis is strategy directed towards the machine (...) they do not know that they are trying to provide an answer through their praxis to the program of freedom in a context dominated by equipment.” (Flusser 1983: 84) These questions are taken up again in *Les Gestes*. In this book Flusser produces a phenomenological description of certain human activities that he calls the gestures: a movement of the body or of a tool connected to it, for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation; a movement that simultaneously escapes programming and chance. In *Les Gestes*, Flusser discusses

gestures such as writing, loving, and speaking as well as technological gestures such as the gestures of filming, of photography and video. In short, Flusser presents and discusses, embracing a broad perspective, anything from common daily gestures to gestures mediated by machines. What becomes evident in this work is that gestures, whether or not tied to technology, reveal a certain way of being-in-the-world.

In breaking with the dualistic view of subject and object, *Les Gestes* warns us about dealing with machines as if they were contaminated by a fixed objectivity of the world: the book suggests the construction of a more phenomenological relationship with our media devices with the intention of opening up/creating space for new ways of being-in-the-world beyond the realm of black box programming: “The analysis of gestures shows us in what way existing and being free are synonymous: in the sense of meaning. A gesture is free, and not a conditioned movement, when it signifies an intersubjective relationship” (Flusser 1999: 193).

Vilém Flusser and Fred Forest: dialogue between practice and theory

One of the strong points of *Les Gestes* is its description of the gesture of video that points, through video’s dialogical characteristics, to a more active attitude towards reality. This is different from the gesture of filmmaking, which narrates what has happened — a story that has occurred. The gesture of video, given its connection with real time, introduces an unedited dialogical capacity that is not possible in traditional cinema: “ La bande vidéo ressemble à la pellicule du film. Mais le film est composé de photographies. Sa dimension temporelle est le résultat d’un trompe-l’œil. Dans la bande vidéo, les réflexions des scènes se recourent...L’opérateur vidéo se trouve devant le moniteur au même titre que la scène par rapport à laquelle Il prend ses décisions (...) Le photographe est obligé d’être “objectif”. L’opérateur peut être intersubjectif, mais, en tout cas, il est obligatoirement phénoménologique (...). La bande établit un dialogue entre elle-même et la scène, le film est un discours sur la scène, donc interdit tout dialogue immédiat. La bande est une mémoire dialogique.” (Flusser 1999:156)

To record a video signifies the direct placement of images. It is not filming in order to view the developed film later. The video, according to Flusser, is a dialogical memory, and the *video-maker* a phenomenological subject par excellence. The gesture of video, therefore, brings along a dialogical structure that opens up beyond the programming and the happenstance. “C’est dans le contexte de la convention, de l’intersubjectivité, qu’il faut poser la question de la liberté, et les gestes, ces mouvements libres par définition, en sont la preuve.” (Flusser 1999:192)

We must point out that Flusser's comprehension of videographic language anticipates, to a certain degree, the debate regarding real time and conversational nature, the starting point for new media theoreticians. Flusser was very receptive to the phenomenon of video at a stage of technological modification and of artistic experimentation — about which he wrote many articles, especially on the relations between art, life, and media — largely based upon his dialogue with the media artist Fred Forest in the 70s.

In this dialogue we can cite important moments, not just because they revealed Flusser's interest in the theory and interface between art and communication, but also because it spotlighted his reflections upon video and the gestures with which, together with Forest, he would carry out direct experiences.

In the essay “Fred Forest or the destruction of established points of view” (Flusser 2006), the dialogue between Flusser's theory of gestures and the action of video recording developed by Forest becomes evident. In this essay, video is taken as a symbolic concept, as a gesture that opens different possibilities for being-in-the-world from a phenomenological perspective. The reference to the theory of gestures in “Fred Forest or the destruction of established points of view” makes evident the clear break with the dichotomy between subject and object proposed both by Flusser's theory of the necessity of a rupture with the black box, and by the phenomenological actions developed by the artist Forest. “It was a hot afternoon in 1974 when Forest visited me in Fontevrault, Touraine, where I had begun to write a phenomenology of human gestures (...) I explained to him my thesis according to which, if it was possible to decode the meaning of gestures, one could find the meaning of being in the human world. Forest, always armed with his video equipment, spent his time recording, almost automatically, my explanations. I continued to verbally explain, accompanied by, as always, with appropriate hand and body gestures. The camera that Forest had in his hands obligatorily followed my gestures with corresponding ‘gestural movements’. But these gestures obliged, in turn, my own gestures to modify themselves in response. It is in this way that a dialogue established itself, and of its multiple levels, neither Forest nor I were even fully conscious of, since not all of them were deliberate (...). In this example, the method followed by Forest is the observation of a social phenomenon (in this case: myself observing Forest) accepting, ever more consciously, the fact that this observation changes both the phenomena observed as well as the observer of the phenomenon. This is, indeed, a variation of the phenomenological method. But with this difference: in philosophy and in science this method is ‘contemplative’ (a look), while in the case described, becomes active participation. A ‘technique’, an ‘art’. It is in this way, that the instrument (the video equipment) imposes, due to its structure and its function, an active attitude

on the part of the observer. This is not an alleged reformulation of the phenomenological method. Forest did not choose video for a more attentive observation. Quite the opposite; without realizing it, an instrument imposed upon Forest a revolutionary method of observation.” (Flusser 2006:93)

It is interesting to note that in this text the theory of gestures directly speaks to the verification of the actions of Forest, pointing to a methodological exercise in which Flusser seems to synchronize his theory and video practice as such. One could say that Flusser’s method is phenomenological par excellence: the object theorized and the theory are part of the same spectrum of discussion.

The case of the *Bienal*: opening the black box and constructing parallel circuits

In 1973, the XII São Paulo International Bienal faced, among other challenges, not only the creation of a clearer management model but also the development of a better liaison with the public. At that time Flusser was invited to join the restructuring project for the Bienal, specifically for the organization of the *Art and Communication* segment, which included, among others, the participation of Waldemar Cordeiro (1925-1973).

We must remember that the XII Bienal, occurring at the height of the military dictatorship in Brazil, witnessed a wave of experiences derived from neoconcretism and its followers, interested in breaking with the notion of the stable artwork that is contemplated passively by the spectator.³ The idea was to stimulate the public and to increase their interaction with the proposed works. These participatory works, in general installations and environments, were housed exactly in the section on *Art and Communication* developed by Flusser.

It is for this section that Flusser invited Forest, who, incidentally, created the video *Les gestes dans les professions et la vie sociale* in 1972. The project that Forest presented in the Bienal, *Animação da Imprensa* [Activation of the Newsmedia], is part of the series *Media-Space*, in which blank spaces are carried broadcast² by the media calling for the free participation of the public.

In the *Animação da Imprensa* [Activation of the Newsmedia] project, Forest developed a series of actions by creating a parallel circuit of free expression in an era marked by silence and by the ideological dictates of the national political scene. One of these actions consisted of obtaining blank spaces in newspapers of wide circulation in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, for the purpose

³ Catalogue of the Bienal 50 anos: 1951/2001. Ed. Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2001, p. 164.

of having the public draw or write messages in these spaces. These texts were subsequently incorporated into the Bienal. Another action was to make telephones available to the public and to amplify [transmit] the conversation in the expo hall. All of these actions show an attempt to lead the public to the Bienal, thus permitting a greater dialogue between the public and the exhibition space, while simultaneously creating a parallel circuit of expression at a time when freedom of expression was curtailed.

Beyond the confined space of the Bienal, Forest's actions were developed in the day-to-day urban space in parallel to the events in the gallery, so as to question established *territories* and using the city as a protagonist of aesthetic expression. In a certain way, these actions echo the aesthetic and political program of the *Situationists* who defended the union of the aesthetic dimension with social and political experiences.

From this perspective, it is worth remembering *O Branco invade a cidade* [*White Invades the City*] from 1973. This action consisted of a simulation of a demonstration in the center of São Paulo — from Largo do Arouche to Praça da Sé — with around ten people all carrying blank signs. Hundreds of curious onlookers joined the “demonstration” blocking traffic for several hours. Forest was arrested by DOPS [secret police], and the Bienal's organizers and the French Embassy had to intervene on his behalf.

Forest's actions work specifically with the unpredictable, the unusual —disturbing the established circuit. The “Blank Spaces” developed in the 70s in the newspaper *Le Monde*, and repeated in other newspapers around the world; the interruption of television transmission for 1 minute (with a French TV channel in 1972); *La photo du téléspectateur* (1976); actions on radio stations such as on *Jovem Pan* (1973), *Télé-choc-télé-change* (1975) — an experimental TV program based upon comments about objects sent in by listeners; or even *Apprenez a regarder la T.V. avec votre radio* (1984) provoked commotion throughout the media universe, either for operating beyond the norm, or for permitting the public to participate in the programs.

As in a kind of *ready made*, Forest creates parallel circuits, actions, interferences in the middle of a communication circuit only to then play it back. This is exactly why he provoked noise in the established circuits calling our attention to the mechanisms for the production of information in our media-driven society. One could say that Forest opens up the black box, giving us a glimpse of its mechanism in action. He establishes alternative channels through media actions that unmask its instrumentalizing program: “A few years ago, early in his research, Forest managed to convince, by persuasion and cunning, some newspapers in France and abroad to include blank spaces in their columns. Somewhere below these blank spaces was this message: “Dear reader here is your space at last. You may take possession of it as you wish, and send a reply to Fred

Forest.” Hundreds or thousands of replies to this provocation were received: political messages, obscenities, crazy graffiti, works of art, insults, etc. Forest organized them, “studied them” and then exhibited them in order to provoke yet another reaction from the public. I believe that the purpose of this action was not well thought out by Forest, who was at that point very ingenuous in his research. His work seemed more like a visceral engagement with the alienating effects of the mass media (especially the print media), and against its dictatorial discursive structure. He wanted to break up the endless discourse of newspapers by forcing some open spaces into the dialogue. There also existed, in this engagement, the belief that the “artist” (if he actually exists) should avoid two pitfalls: to be absorbed by the mass media, or to ignore it and become, thusly, an elitist. The way out of this dilemma, for Forest, consisted of engaging with the mass media as if it were a material and not a means of communication. To act upon, and not in the mass media (...) From the point of view of information theory, it is an attempt to introduce noise into a highly redundant channel, and change its discursive structure into a channel that permits dialogical communication (...) Forest could not change the press, but he could show us what it is. That is important since a new vision can result in a new action.” (Flusser 1999: 97)

Media and society: the construction of a new social field

The impact of communication media and the explosion of media images prompted Flusser to think, beyond conditioned gestures, about the existence of a small residue of freedom in a world dominated by the black box. There is a need for the creation of strategies that enhance the perception of our conditioning, of our programmable existence. The critical spirit in relation to media culture, so evident in Flusser’s texts, reappears cloaked in the sociological art of Forest.

Questioning the work of art as a purely visual phenomenon and object of consumption, sociological art exposes the *mise-en-scène*, the shortcomings and weaknesses of social codes. Its field of action is constituted by the interventions into the system of relationships upon which society is organized. Its raw material is the network of cultural institutions and the sociological data provided by the environment in which the artist puts into play the concrete reality of social relations that ideologies persist in hiding.

Art for Forest is an attitude, an action. His raw material is not paint or a brush, but reality itself. Far from being a closed object in itself, the actions of Forest are communicative circuits, intersubjective relationships that mimic society’s ability to communicate. One could say that Forest’s method is similar to that of the neoconcrete artists. It is built within a phenomenology of

action that encourages the public to interact with the work. If we assume that communication is the cornerstone of social organization, we can understand that by giving the public the opportunity to be part of his actions and not merely contemplate his work, Forest takes this idea from the field of art to the field of everyday experience. This means he postulates the idea of a less passive attitude on the part of the public despite social and everyday reality.

This is the exercise undertaken by Forest in projects such as *Video-troisième age* (1973) with the participation of Flusser. The experiment, conducted in an asylum in Hyères (France), had a dual purpose: to study the situation of elderly workers after a life of poverty - and to try to help them to break away from the passivity of their lives by inviting them to do something that would give meaning to their existence. Flusser (2006: 92) commented on this experiment: “The experiment was conducted by a team of sociologists, Forest, and I as ‘critical observers’. Forest was equipped, as usual, with his video equipment, and he recorded some of the day-to-day life in this home for retired workers. He then projected these tapes for his subjects. The effect on the elderly residents was as to be expected: they saw themselves from the outside, as others, and became fascinated. Forest explained the basic operation of the equipment to them, and invited them to use it themselves, with his help. (...) Forest’s goal was to get the retirees to see themselves in the present, and to stop dwelling on the past and the future (that is to say: death). He wanted to force them to see the present, that is to say, their ‘reality’. In this case, the ‘reality’ was, of course, the alienation of the asylum from social reality. Forest’s purpose was then, don-quixotic: these people were condemned to die alienated in comfort and stupor, and Forest wanted to make them aware of this inevitable alienation by making them see this situation. The result became a grotesque competition of grotesque films. But this don-quixotic engagement of Forest could be generalized from this example: isn’t this asylum in Hyères, really, a kind of miniature model of our western society today? We can detect, in this case, a fundamental aspect (though not fully conscious) of all of Forest’s actions: ‘be the Don-Quixote of our society’. Proposing grotesque films so we can be able to better see ourselves die.”

The method developed by Forest, in this case, is directly related to the method used in São Paulo on the occasion of the XII Bienal. The elderly were not actors, but real people placed in situations where they are forced to view their own lives as they are. Both in this case and in the proposals put forth at the Bienal, Forest places a mirror in front of our faces so that we can perceive, as clearly as possible, the workings and strategies of the society to which we are part.

Conclusion

The point in common between the theoretical development employed by Flusser and the artistic-media actions developed by Forest is that, each in his own way, served to create a critical and reflective spirit about the world seen as a black box. The lesson that we can take from this dialogue is that of a dense exercise both on the part of the artist and on the part of the theoretician to politicize both the media and technology.

Forty years have passed since the time of the sociological art of Forest and the articles of Flusser. We are currently living an historical moment unparalleled in terms of technological advancements. Every new invention or discovery implies considerable effects in our perception of the world, both in interpersonal relations as well as in our forms of being in society.

The explosion of information technology in our daily lives allows for differentiated forms of socialization and social networks, loaded with new strategies for control and surveillance: we are part of a consumer network that actually sustains the capitalist machine (Deleuze 1992).

What role can the artists, the theoreticians, the critics and the curators play in this new context? Will it be up to the artist and the theoretician, ever more immersed in media society, to reinvent the day-to-day life, create parallel circuits, and outline strategies to uncover the black box?

It seems that this is the meaning of the works of Vilém Flusser and Fred Forest. Without a doubt, it is in this critical perception that both of these men have wagered and invested their energy: *creating strategies, devices, and reflections* upon the possibilities of creation and freedom in a society increasingly programmed and dominated by machines.

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