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Post-History, technical images
and freedom in times of barbarism

Thought through montages in Walter Benjamin

There are, above all, two important essays, apart from the article *On the concept of history*, necessary to understand the new narrative formats envisaged by Walter Benjamin: *Experience and poverty*, from 1933 and *The Narrator*, written between 1928 and 1935. Both of them set off what Benjamin called loss or decline of the experience, that is, the experience in the strong and substantial sense of the term which rests on the possibility of a tradition shared by a human community; a tradition resumed and transformed, by each generation, in the continuity (duration) of a word transmitted from father to son.

The loss of the experience of duration leads to another loss: the traditional forms of narrative who have as their source this common memory and transmissibility. In this diagnosis, Benjamin brings together reflections about traumatic memory, and about the experience in the form of shock, key concepts of his analysis of the lyric poetry of Charles Baudelaire and of the surrealist practices.

In *The Narrator*, Benjamin formulates another requirement: apart from verifying the end of traditional narrative, carried out through the means of transmissibility and duration, he outlines the idea of another narration: a narration carried out from the ruins of the narrative, a transmission carried out through the shards of a tradition in crumbs. The narrator and the historian, according to Benjamin, do not have as their aim to gather the great deeds. They should gather more of what is left to the side, as if it were something without any significance, something that appears to have no importance or meaning, something with which official history doesn't know what to do. Or still: the narrator and historian should transmit what tradition, be it official or dominant, just does not want to remember.

It is within this context that Benjamin proposes the idea of montage, borrowing it from the cinema as a strategic method to think about historiographical writing, that is, historiographical narrative. Within this perspective history and media mingle together: history is thought of as a medium/media, as a type of collage of times and memories. Like the film editor who edits/cuts/interrupts the filmic *continuum*, the historian rewrites history: he implodes the *continuum* of

the history of domination and opens a space for the present time and the revolution. According to Benjamin, the historiography should, therefore, be redrawn by the work of memory: fruit of a *rewriting* which would produce not the imitation/repetition of previous narratives, but a different repetition.

In his article *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,* published in 1929, Benjamin inscribes the artistic practice of the surrealists as a possibility to understand "the present time and the time of the revolution". He says: "the surrealist proposal tends to the same end: mobilize to a revolution the energies of intoxication. We can say that this is its most authentic task". (Benjamin 1993, 32)

Not by chance surrealist films are excellent examples of 'new' narrative formats envisaged by Benjamin; formats that implode, through the montage in the form of shock and through the use of antitheses, the *continuum* of the narrative/history. Let's remember the first scenes of *An Andalusian Dog* – a surrealist film produced in 1928 with the collaboration of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali – that draws a parallel between the image of a moon being cut by a cloud and an eye cut by a razor. In this sequence the idea of the 'tiger's leap' becomes evident, as Walter Benjamin would say, between one plane and the other, as resources of the montage in the form of a shock. Within this perspective we can also think of the temporal synchrony proposed in the first scene that draws a parallel between the image of the film's protagonist and the image of the painting 'The Lacemaker' - (17th century) – by Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. Or even, of the use of the resource of superimposing images, in the scene where the character rides a bike. All these scenes are, in a way, operative strategies that seem to break with the idea of a linear, traditional and homogeneous narrative.

Post-history, technical images and new temporalities in Vilém Flusser

Like Benjamin, Vilém Flusser develops his thought looking to understand the cultural and anthropological mutations which occurred in the contemporary world due to the impact of the media and image culture.

According to Flusser we live in a period similar, and even comparable, to that which occurred in the ancient past, when humanity went from a pre-historic and mythical stage to a historic stage, based on alphabetic writing.

In the present stage, named by Flusser as *post-historical*, the 'writing' is made up not of texts, but of images which are characteristic of our present culture: TV, video, and cinema images; i.e., technological images. That is, our every day life is dominated by images, that is, by surfaces, which determine our lives and our way of acting and thinking:

According to Flusser, the way of reasoning resulting from the written alphabet - predominantly formal and linear - becomes hegemonic with the invention of the printing press and the spread of literacy. This form of 'producing' thought however changed when technical images came in to play. According to the philosopher, the decadence of the alphabetic writing brought with it the 'end' of linear history and thought and the beginning of a new cultural era, which he names post-historical, based on the return of a predominantly image-based thought: "(...) what should be noted, on the contrary, is a volatilization of historical consciousness. The temporal experience which is understood together with the categories of history, that is, as something irreversible, progressive and dramatic, stops existing for the masses, for the people, for those for who the superficial codes prevail, for who the images substitute the alphabetic texts (....) the decadence and the fall of the alphabet signify the end of history, in the strict sense of the word". (Flusser, 2007, p.37)

There are, according to Vilém Flusser, at least three diverse moments in the history of humanity, linked to the predominant codes of each period: the pre- historic, when there was the predominance of conventional images of a "magical" character - characteristics of the periods prior to the invention of writing; the historic period, which established the written code and a type of linear, process-oriented thought, and the third period, where there is the predominance of technical images which bring together with them the dimension of a post-historic time: "The consolidation of conventional images as the main code for humanity constitutes its prehistory until a crisis of confidence (...) in this type of two-dimensional code which occurred around the second millennium BC, gave rise to the invention of writing, through the placement of a fixed series of symbols that were previously spread throughout an image-based surface. Writing, as *par excellence* a linear code, gave origin to history itself as a sign of the Western mode of existence. (...)" (Duarte 2012, p.156).

Our period is characterized by another type of image, technical images that lay the foundation for the post-historical period. Flusser states: "(...) Recently new channels of thought articulation have arisen (such as films and TV) and Western thought is increasingly making use of these new means. They impose a radically new structure to thought as they represent the world through moving images. This engenders a sense of being in the world, in this case the post-historical world, for those who actively engage with these mediums." (2007, p.110)

It is important to emphasize that the meaning of post-history for Flusser does not entail the supersession of history in objective terms, but the construction of a new type of "narrative", one that is different in relation to our concept of linear history: "we are supplanting the historic existence, not history *tout court*". (Flusser *apud* Duarte 2012, p. 126)

On the other hand, but not less importantly, different to the historicist concept of history, characterized by a view of time as unique and linear, the post-historic vision foresees the dimension in various temporalities 'existing' concomitantly: "If the world is "explained" casually, then the world will be read as thoughtit were made up of lines, like a book (...). Conversely, if you see the world as an image, then the causal chain no longer makes sense. For time doesn't run following a straight line, but like the eye of the observer over the surface of a screen". (Flusser *apud* Duarte 2012, p.131)

On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that the Flusserian discourse with regards to post-history does not complete itself if we do not understand this thought with regards to technical images.

Technical images, freedom and art: opening the black box

In *Filosofia da Caixa Preta,* photography is taken as an example to develop a critique of the relations between technology and society based on what Flusser calls technical images.

Photography is a basic model of apparatus whose characteristics will be re-signified in cinema, video, and television until they reach the current mediatic images. In this sense *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* is not only a book about photography, but about the production of technological images, that change, as mentioned before, our way of relating to the world. Photography, in this context, worked more as a pretext and instrument to verify the functioning of our society marked by the collapse of text and the hegemony of mediatic images.

The advent of technical images marks the beginning of a new relationship with the visible, which structures itself in a distinct way compared to that of the written language model: the technical images propose themselves as surfaces that aspire to be representations of the world, but this actually hides its true dimension, which is nothing other than being an image.

The exercises used by Flusser is, exactly, to on noticing a new level of culture contaminated by the explosion of the techniques and medias, cast a critical eye on the devices seen as *black boxes*, apparatuses which have programed and programmable interiors that are completely opaque and undetermined.

It is interesting to note how the photographic device, the black box, is used as a metaphor for society. Like the photographic apparatus, the social reality is a large apparatus whose functioning is previously programed: all of us only have supporting roles in this totally programmed apparatus: "The supermarket and the cinema form the two blades of a fan that infuses in the masses the movement of progress. At the cinema the masses are programmed for a consuming

behaviour in the supermarket, and in the supermarket the masses are freed to re-program themselves in the cinema". (Flusser *apud* Duarte 2012, p.186).

Within this context, the subject tends to convert himself, through the action of techno-social programmes, into a programmed and programmable worker, of whom responses are expected to the issues raised by the technical apparatus. We are increasingly machinists, button pushers, interface users: "workers" of the machine. We deal with programmed situations without being aware of it. We think that we can choose and, as a result of this, we imagine we are inventive and free. But our freedom and our capacity of invention are restricted to an operating software, a group of possibilities given, *a priori*, by the black box and that we don't entirely master. In other words: what we really see, in a world dominated by technical images, is not a world, but certain concepts relative to the world impregnated in the mediatic structure.

If the photographer lives the totalitarianism of the devices, if his gestures are programmable, if all of us, without exception, are programmable, there is, however, one exception, derived from those who try to 'cheat' the devices subverting their program. Introduce elements in the devices that were not expected, thus re-establishing freedom in a context dominated by machines: "The photographers that are so called experimental; these know what it is about. They know that the problems to be solved are those of the device's image, the programme and the information. They consciously try to force the device to produce the informative image that is not in its programme. They know that their praxis is a strategy directed against the device (...) they do not know that they are trying to find an answer for their praxis to the programme of freedom, in a context dominated by devices" (Flusser, 1985, p. 84)

Live Archive: a possible dialogue with Walter Benjamin and Vilém Flusser

Despite the differences between the discourses of Walter Benjamin and Vilém Flusser, in both cases it is possible to identify not only an exercise to create a thought in dialogue with the characteristics of the language of our times, but also a strategy for the building of and understanding of history – be it a Benjaminian 'against-the-grain' type of history or Villém Flusser's post-history - which not only goes beyond the hegemonic discourses, but which allows us to see indistinctly new possibilities beyond what is already programmed.
On the other hand, both Walter Benjamin and Vilém Flusser see the artistic manifestation as a fertile ground for the understanding of possible strategies of 'deprogramming' of the black box.

It was within this perspective, of thinking about history's status, and in a way, taking a critical look at what was already previously 'programed', that I developed the curatorial project entitled *Arquivo Vivo*, presented in October, 2013 at the Paço das Artes.

Composed of 22 Brazilian and international artists, the main idea of the curatorial proposal was to present contemporary artistic productions that dialogue with archival devices, as a way of thinking about the current narratives.

Artists who appropriate themselves of archival material, who create fictitious files, who develop projects from an archival mode, who re-enact famous works of art history, artists that call into question the processes of cataloguing and archiving, artists who incorporate the file in the body's own tissue, were some of the procedures incorporated in the exhibition, from the articulation of three main vectors: 1. Archiving and appropriation of documents and works of history and art history; 2. Archiving in the body and the body as an archive and 3. Artist's archives, institutional archives and database.

In the first vector – and the one which I will focus on primarily in this article – we incorporated projects that in many cases appropriate historical documents or re-enact emblematic works/documents of the history of art. On making these archives/documents his own, the artist de-constructs and changes its 'original' meaning, alluding to the idea that the archive is always open to other readings and interpretations and that history, in being a discourse, can always be rebuilt in another way.

This was the case, for example, of the project *As pérolas, como te escrevi*, by Brazilian artist Regina Parra. The project is a video-installation made up of three synchronized projections. Each projection is composed of images of immigrants that entered Brazil clandestinely and that currently live in São Paulo. The immigrants read excerpts from the letter *New World* written by Américo Vespúcio in 1503. The projection, on multiple screens, added to the polyphony of a number of different immigrant accents that read the historical document of the discovery of the Americas, does not only make an allusion to the fragmented and multiple narrative, which is built in the relationship with the viewer, but also refers to the power relations and the colonization processes which marked our history, breaking and offering a different view in relation to the letter *New World* written by Américo Vespúcio.

Within another perspective, we can highlight projects which appropriate themselves of the 'archive' of the history of art, or better, of the works of art considered, here, as a type of 'documentation' of the narrative of the history of art.

In the film *La Liberté Raisonné (Justified Liberty)* by Spanish artist Cristina Lucas, actors re-enact the painting by Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty leading the people.* In its reconstruction, the artist establishes a less happy end for Liberty: its death makes reference to the crisis of the utopias and the downfall of that so desired victory of liberty, which, at least historically, seems to not have really happened amidst the evils of global capitalism. In the case of this film we can say that there are various times that 'exist/live' "concomitantly" in the images: the first makes an allusion to the

historic happening; the other, the painting by Eugene Delacroix and the third, creates reinterpretation not just of history, but of the 'work/document' of the history of art.

In these two projects it is possible to notice that the artists work the images in a way in which to allow us, through the use of archive material, to have a 'de-programmed' look in relation to historiographical writing and the usual interpretative readings.

But it was not only with the choice of the works of art that these new meanings were developed in the curatorial context but, also, in the way in which we arranged the works in the exhibition space. The curatorial work, within this perspective, was also woven from the relations and dialogues between works in the sense of producing new significations in regards to those which our eyes are accustomed to see/read.

As an example, we can cite the act of bringing the film *Marca Registrada* by Letícia Parente , in which the artist sows on the sole of her left foot the inscription "Made in Brazil" – physically closer, in the exhibition space, to the work *Cara Metade* by Ivan and Mario Navarro – formed by six windows with newspaper material which reveal the military cooperation between Brazil and France during the 70s, above all in relation to the torture tactics exported from France to Latin America via Brazil. In this sense what interested me in this dialogue, was not only to point to the discussion about performance and/or video-performance documentation in relation to the work by Letícia Parente, but above all the fact that the body can be understood as a 'text' that incorporates significant cuts, marks and messages.

Although they are diverse, many of the projects presented in *Arquivo Vivo* brought to the forefront discussions about narrative and history, pointing to the idea that history, and the history of art, are always open to other and new interpretations. One major concern in the exhibition was to precisely offer, from a curatorial perspective in dialogue with thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Vilém Flusser, diverse approaches to the usual interpretative and hegemonic readings.

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