

Vilém Flusser Nucleus Research Group

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Presentation

The Vilém Flusser Nucleus Research Group (VFN), presented as follows, constitutes one of the projects of the group coordinator, Prof. Dr. Michael Hanke, who is conducting “Productivity Scholarship in Research,” supported by the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), valid from 8/1/2003 to 7/31/2006. The project is devoted to the topic “Vilém Flusser and Communicology – Science of Media and Communication,” and the VFN’s purpose is to bring together researchers, teachers, Master’s degree and undergraduate students interested in taking part in, and contributing to, studies in communication and media emerging from such scholarship.

Justification

The arrival of the digital media and communication era and profound changes in modern societies, have brought the study of communication up against new challenges. The analysis of changes in mass communication media needs, on the one hand, a philosophically determined conceptual apparatus and, on the other, an empirical elaboration by the social sciences. As an empirical and theoretical model for analyzing and describing this change in mass media that occurs through digitalization via a social, theoretical, cultural and media esthetic point of view, we are proposing communicology – the media and communication philosophy developed by the Czech-Brazilian Vilém Flusser.

The concept, coined by Flusser in a specific theoretical communicology context (1998 a) and “Media culture” (1997), deals with media’s development, and, in particular, with technical and image media: photography, films, television and computers. Flusser was asking about the possibilities of analyzing communicative processes in relation to the changes introduced by technical means. The latter influence communication decisively, for they develop their own codes, which not only add to traditional exchange processes, but fundamentally modify them. Flusser developed the main ideas for his media theory as early as the seventies, surprisingly foreseeing both the development of the digital media and the science relating to it which only came about at the start of the nineties. Especially in Germany,

Flusser's ideas were seen as central from the beginning, although, too, as idiosyncratic theoretical elaborations not exempt from contradictions (Hanke 2004a, 2004b).

The reasons for the importance of Flusser's thinking can be listed in three points: In the first place, Flusser, as a pioneer, developed a genuine, complex theory of media in modern contexts. That is, the formulation of this theory constitutes less a question of analyses of content and ideological criticism, approaching mass communication from the outside, than the scrutiny of technological conditions that determine communication, even producing it in several aspects. From early on, Flusser placed a historically and technically oriented understanding of media at the core of his reflections.

Secondly, Flusser conceived of media changes as historical and cultural. Thus, he investigated in a fashion similar to the Toronto school (Harold Innis, David Havelock, Marshall McLuhan) historical periods determined by media, which he tried to conceive from prehistoric, oral and imagetic societies to those societies supported by writing (as far as cultures influenced by technical equipment), thereby presenting media also as a model of evolution. His theses on the development of images had an extraordinary impact on theoreticians, as the new forms of images were no longer comprehensible with traditional concepts in modern technical media. The difference Flusser saw between traditional and modern images resides in the fact that, formerly, images were intuitive codifications, while the modern ones derived from technically produced concepts.

Thirdly, Flusser's writings do not limit themselves to investigations on technical conditioning, but show a peculiar fluctuation between describing technically conditioned transformations and observations inspired by phenomenology. On the one hand the technical image media produce their own codes and concepts that are manifested in images; on the other hand, Flusser always worked with the issue whether, in the face of these self-produced processes, human autonomy manages to make a statement and how signs of that autonomy could be drawn from technical equipment producing a world with its own logic.

Flusser's Communicology

The term "Communicology" is the translation of the title of the book *Kommunikologie*, published in German in 1998, and is at the same time the name Flusser gave his theory on human communication. "Communicology" deals with the forms and codes of this communication, which is defined as

processing, storage, and disclosure of already existing information and includes the creation of new information.

According to Flusser, communication always depended on the media, and perhaps the greatest discovery made by him was to perceive that any media had its own logic, that is, the media transmit information on reality in accordance with their own laws. If we change the media structure, we also change the information and, thereby, reality as it is perceived.

Flusser's idea of a particular media logic was present perhaps in embryonic form in his first published book *Language and Reality* (1963), recently reprinted (São Paulo, Annablume 2004). Here language is conceived not only as a map of reality (echoing Wittgenstein), but as something that makes up a feedback of reality, allowing an ontological, epistemological and esthetic conception of reality, as Flusser himself sums up (1999a: 144-45). Influenced by philosophies of language, Flusser at that time considered dialogue to be the essence of language, an idea stimulated by reading Martin Buber. Language is brought into effect in conversation and "*is a synonym of intellect if defined as 'a field in which words are organized'*" (Lafer, 1999: 7). So it is that man's "*impenetrable interior constantly produces symbols and ordered structures*" (Flusser 1999a: 240), as already noted by Cassirer who coined the expression of the human being as *animal symbolicum*. Flusser, therefore, fits into the tradition of semiotics, one of the main sources of communication science.

Flusser was also one of the first to perceive the consequences of the revolution caused by the new media and information technology, and became "*the only philosopher to take on, at first with reservations, the challenge of a future molded by the media ... starting with his philosophy of photography.*" (Ströhl 2000: 58-59). Modifying Marx, he no longer considered elements of property and economy, but focused on information and communication as being what empowers and constitutes a society's infrastructure. (Flusser 1997: 155) He identified two industrial revolutions: the first one, which changed work and the second, begun by photography and telegraphy, which changed communication. The latter also affected social relations, that is, along with the types of media, the codes that operated in them were transformed. According to him the code revolution caused by TV, computers and video is as profound as the revolution caused by the steam engine (1998a: 236). At the time, Flusser put forward that we were in the middle of this process of changes and breaks, and for this reason needed a media and communication science. Just as technology dealt with the first revolution, "communicology" should deal with the second, that of the mass media and technical images. In order to understand this new cultural revolution, that is, the level at which it was and is taking place, it was the communication level that needed to be analyzed. (1998a: 235-36, 265)

In the book “Media culture” (“Medienkultur”), Flusser describes the current state of society and the communicational revolution, the telematic information society, and transformations in space and time. Here the image theories dealing with the relation *world – image – text – technical image* are laid out, and he develops a phenomenology of photography, film, video, television and cinema. The proliferation of images and the current trend in modern society of presenting an increasing amount of information in audiovisual images instead of via texts (Manovich 2001: 78) – a process that has been receiving scholarly attention with the term *iconic turn*, coined by W.J.T. Mitchell in 1994 – had already been anticipated by Flusser because his book contained reflections on the growing preponderance of technical images as a means of communication. In that phase, which he called “*post-historic*,” a concept that comes from a change of paradigms in the codes with which we communicate (and should not be mixed up with “*post-modernity*” (Ströhl 2000: 49-54), writing systems are replaced by technical images, in a “*circular process that retranslates texts into images*” (Santaella 2000: 125). These writing systems produce threats to society, so that criticism of Flusser’s communication and images may look like a criticism of society and culture. It is thus that Flusser diagnoses, early on, the collapse of texts and the hegemony of images in post-historic societies: in the “*technical image revolution*”, they “*become ‘false’, ‘ugly’ and ‘bad’; besides not being capable of reunifying culture, they melt society down into an amorphous mass.*” (Flusser 1998b: 38) Despite little influence from Critical Theory and from the concept of the culture industry, the Flusserian position is quite similar to these ideas and concepts, as was highlighted recently (Duarte 2002).

The field of research on image theory places the techno-image concept at the center of investigations (Behrens et al. 2004). To begin with, the difference between the analogical media (photography and film) and the digital media (in part television and computers) must be specified in connection with Flusser’s ideas. He described the different media both individually and collectively. The different technical media converge in that they do not produce images and codes as concepts learnt linguistically. Here the term “code” is central. Flusser did not understand them just in semiotic terms, but rather as a conceptual constellation produced by the equipment. Images are, therefore, not just theorizable, which, in itself, would be a surprising thesis, but theory is, as it were, immanent to the images of mass communication images, photography, and even the computer. Thus, Flusser touches on an extremely sensitive point in image theory, in which arguments are outlined that are not exhausted on ideological, semiotic, and iconographic concepts of an image. The appearance of digital media and the discourse of the “universe of technical images” does not mean the end of them, but rather a new imagetic culture that takes place at the intersections of intuition and abstract concepts. At this moment, popular media comes into play – above all television, which is a difficult medium to understand in

several aspects, for it visibly behaves transversally to the usual representations of art and popular culture, image and its destruction, representation and simulation, and places a particular demand on image theory.

From there results a double task for research: firstly, an outlining of the conceptualization of the technical image media in Flusser; secondly, the comparison of Flusser's ideas with current image theories of electronic media.

In addition, with the digitalization of television, a change is currently taking place in the media that enables questions on the retroactive and current effects of digitalization on classical media, to be investigated in exemplary fashion.

Flusser devoted several texts to the so-called techno-images in structuring his media theory, and he repeatedly attributed particular importance to television in image media (Flusser 1977, 1995b, 1991 a). A feature of the "contemporary cultural revolution," as diagnosed by Flusser, is the passage to the so-called telematic information society, which has become quite a different form of society than that influenced by mass media (1999: 147). They differ as to their communicative structure: mass media society is characterized by a unidirectional communicative structure inside the media (a transmitter and several receivers with no possibility of a response); telematic information society, in contrast, is characterized by network structures (transmitter and receiver with interactive features). Flusser interprets this as a different "cable switch" that leads to a communication revolution.

Flusser speculates that the current "disappointment with television," caused by unilateral communication directing, is a passing phenomenon; perhaps television should "just be commutated differently, in order to keep the promise contained in its initial syllable 'tele'" (1995a: 214). With the offer of varied digital data banks, made possible by digitalization, television would not only be transformed from a closed into an open system, but would also accomplish Flusser's idea of the possible future development of this media: the coupling of television with a computer in an open television network. (1997: 121) From this idea result the following research plans: a systematic elaboration of Flusser's theory on television, just as it was presented in his reflections about telematic information society's communicative structure and in his image and media theory, as well as an empirical verification from the first forms of digital television. Finally, Flusser stated that television would work in Europe and in emerging countries fundamentally in the same way (1997: 106). From this Flusserian hypothesis, one of the questions motivating the development of this project and the formation of the Research Group is the question whether it also applies to television's digitalized form.

Project aims

Bring together interested scholars and students from different areas to study the contributions of Vilém Flusser to Media and Communication Studies, so-called “Communicology”;

Research media transformation in contemporary society under past and present effects of progressive digitalization on classic media (written press, radio, films and television);

Develop research on the following areas:

- a) studies devoted to Flusser’s work contributing toward understanding it;
- b) studies that develop a comparison between two or more theories, one being the theory of Flusser (Flusser and Critical Theory, Flusser and Benjamin, Flusser and McLuhan etc.), or a historical contextualization;
- c) apply Flusser’s approach to a case study of an exemplary object (radio or digital television, interactive digital art, etc.).

Team

The team is able to count on the collaboration of the participants presented as follows. Special mention has to be made of the interdisciplinary character of the group, bringing together professors from the Faculty of Languages (FALE – Prof. Dr. Georg Otte) and the Faculty of Humanities (FAFICH – Prof. Dr. Rodrigo Duarte, from Philosophy), which should contribute toward the variety of perspectives. The integration of students at different levels of doctor’s and master’s degrees (the group is open to undergraduates, too) considers the requirement of integrating all the academic levels in the group, and contributing to the introduction of beginners to scholarship.

Coordinator

Prof. Dr. Michael Hanke (Social Communication, FAFICH, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte)

Participating Guest Professors

Prof. Dr. Georg Otte (Germanic Literature, FALE, UFMG)

Prof. Dr. Rodrigo Duarte (Philosophy, FAFICH, UFMG)

Prof. Dr. Patricia Moran (Social Communication, FAFICH, UFMG)

Prof. Dra. Geane C. Alzamora (Social Communication, Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais)

Doctoral Students

Osmar G. Reis Filho (Social Communication, UFMG)

Master's Degree Students

Carlos-Henrique Santiago (Social Comunicação)

Fernanda C. P. Duarte (Social Comunicação)

Raquel C. O. Costa (Philosophy)

Other students

Karla Ferreira (Social Communication)

The number of people in the group is expected to increase.

Timetable and work plan

Period of validity of the project

1st December 2004 until 30 November 2006 (two years).

Overview of the research

Monthly meetings beginning in the 1st semester of 2005, with individual presentations of work by members of the team, to be submitted for criticism by the group.

2nd semester: continuation of the activities begun in the 1st semester: presentations of papers by team members. Invite other Brazilian researchers to take part in the activities, specifically those who cooperate with the newly founded “Brazilian Society for studies on Flusser.”

Begin to prepare congress entitled “The media culture from the perspective of Vilém Flusser — reception and current applications,” at UFMG in 2007: create a web page, call for papers, form congress preparation teams on the organizational and conceptual level.

2006: continuation of scholarly activities. Evaluation of activities and decision on the question, whether they are to be continued and, if so, in what way.

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