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After Technical Images: Towards a Theory of Post-Technical Imaging

Introduction: The Evolution of Imaging

Vilém Flusser's concept of *technical image* transformed our understanding of modern visual culture. In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), Flusser argued that technical images marked a revolutionary shift from traditional representation, revealing how apparatus-mediated images, such as photographs, operate within programmed possibilities rather than direct representation. This transformation opened new pathways for understanding how mediation functions within a society increasingly defined by technical images.

However, contemporary imaging practices have evolved beyond the theoretical boundaries Flusser established. Flusser's technical image emerged from the operation of a singular apparatus recording visible light within human temporal and spatial scales. Today's imaging systems function through networked assemblies processing data entirely beyond human sensory capabilities.

This essay argues that these developments represent significant departures from Flusser's traditional and technical images rather than mere extensions of them. We propose that contemporary imaging has transcended the *corporeal limit*, the boundary where technical images remain tethered to human embodied experience, and is now entering domains of post-technical imaging that require new theoretical approaches.

The Corporeal Limit: Where Technical Images End

Flusser's technical image, despite its radical departure from traditional representation, remained bound by what we identify as the corporeal limit. The photograph results from an apparatus extending the body and thus links it directly to the physical and perceptual constraints of human embodiment. As Flusser noted, the photographer exists within "the program of the apparatus" (Flusser1983: 68); however, we realize this program still serves human vision and functions within human-comprehensible parameters.

The corporeal limit manifests across multiple dimensions, including temporal, spatial, and spectral. *Temporally*, Flusser's discourse on technical images remained bound to human timescales, what he sees as accumulative decisions (ibid.: 39) within the act of photographic capture, such as the duration needed for chemical or digital processing, and the human rhythm of production and consumption. *Spatially*, images were constrained by human perspectives and the physical possibilities of positioning apparatus within human-navigable environments. *Spectrally*, they operated within or near the visible light spectrum that human vision could interpret.

Even though Flusser introduces a potentially non-anthropocentric view by arguing that the apparatus is displacing human decision-making, the technical image ultimately functions within human purposes and perception. The photographer, while navigating within programmed constraints, maintains agency through their embodied relationship with the apparatus. The corporeal limit becomes evident when we consider imaging practices that operate beyond human sensory capabilities. The creation of images from data sources that are beyond human perception, the synthesis of visual information across temporal and spatial scales that exceed human experience, and the algorithmic generation of images from mathematical relationships rather than light-based recording all point toward departures from technical imaging as Flusser conceived it.

A Corporeal Taxonomy of Post-Technical Imaging

To theorize these departures, we classify imaging practices according to their relationship with human embodiment.

Intracorporeal Imaging Mark-making, which includes drawing, painting, and writing, happens through direct bodily engagement with materials. When sensory perception occurs, information is processed internally and then translated through the body to produce marks. Time unfolds at the human scale, with the body serving as both medium and mediator. Light enters through the eye, and processing takes place through human cognition before manual output. This represents something similar to what Flusser identified as traditional imaging, where the image is a two-dimensional translation of the three-dimensional world (ibid.: 8).

Extracorporeal Imaging: Images produced through apparatus-mediation, processed externally through equipment, while remaining tethered to human scale and purpose. As Flusser explained, the technical image is an image of concepts translated by apparatus into images (ibid.: 43). The camera extends human perception while imposing its technological constraints; however, the photographer

maintains an embodied connection to the process through the viewfinder, exposure decisions, and spatial positioning. Unlike intracorporeal imaging (traditional images), which involves direct human interpretation, technical imaging introduces what Flusser called *programs*, sets of finite possibilities embedded in the apparatus that constrain and enable image production (ibid.: 26). These programs still operate within the corporeal limit, serving human vision and temporal experience.

Hypercorporeal Imaging: Images transcending conventional temporality, generated from data collected across larger temporal scales, from microsecond quantum interactions to geological periods, synthesized into visual representations that no human could directly experience. They operate beyond the visible light spectrum, incorporating hyperspectral, radio wave, and other forms of electromagnetic data that extend beyond human visual capabilities. The images further function through networked assemblies rather than a singular apparatus. This represents a genuine departure from Flusser's framework, requiring new theoretical approaches, illustrated by the Event Horizon Telescope's image of a black hole. Rather than emerging from a single apparatus operated by a human photographer, this image resulted from coordination among multiple radio telescopes globally, processing data through algorithmic systems. The resulting "image" synthesizes mathematical models, computational visualization, and data processing to create a visual representation of something no human could ever directly observe. The implications of hypercorporeal imaging extend beyond mere technical advancement. These images represent knowledge that exists independently of human sensory experience, yet must be translated into visual forms that human consciousness can interpret—a paradox of depicting and reading realities.

Incorporeal Imaging: Images generated through processes with no direct reference to bodies and time. Incorporeal images no longer index what exists but emerge through, for example, algorithmic processes. Machine learning models produce "hallucinated" (Maleki et al. 2024) images. These images arise from missing conceptual data, which results in the loss of indexical connection to reality. An artificially generated image of a house does not point to any real house in space and time. This represents the most radical departure from Flusser's framework, as these images operate entirely outside the program-apparatus-human triangle that defined technical imaging.

Implications for Image Theory

A new photographic universe of non-indexical images that will increasingly shape human knowledge and experience requires new theory. Flusser's technical images, while foundational, cannot adequately

address these contemporary imaging practices. The corporeal limit that bound technical images to a single human embodied experience has been transcended through networked assemblies and algorithmic processing.

Generative AI systems exemplify this departure, creating images through mathematical processes in high-dimensional spaces without apparatus mediation or human operation in any sense Flusser would recognize. These systems represent forms of non-human universes that generate non-indexical visual content. Rather than extending human capabilities through apparatus, post-technical imaging operates independently of human consciousness while remaining partially accessible through translation into human-readable formats. This does not represent evolution within Flusser's framework but a transcendence requiring new theoretical approaches.

The question is no longer only how to understand technical images but how to theorize forms of contemporary visual dimensions. What does it mean when these different taxonomies of body relations coexist? How do we receive and interpret images beyond the corporeal limit?

The technical image, as Flusser conceived it, has reached its limit. Understanding contemporary visual culture requires recognizing that we have entered domains of post-technical imaging that operate according to different principles, challenging fundamental assumptions about the relationship between vision, consciousness, and reality.

References

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Maleki, Negar, et al. (2024) AI Hallucinations: A Misnomer Worth Clarifying, in arXiv https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2401.06796 (accessed Aug