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## Deception and the “Magic” of “Technical Images” According to Flusser

The communication theorist Vilém Flusser has no explicit theory on deception but as with many critical thinkers, his theory is to a great extent a *theory of deception*, in this case formulated from the point of view of communication. According to Flusser, we need symbolic systems to “orient” us in the world, but eventually the message functions as substitute for the codified situation, leading to “alienation.” Furthermore, the nature of some codes can preclude or, on the contrary, foster critical thinking. For Flusser, the two-dimensional nature of images necessarily precludes critical thinking and leads to deception in the form of “magico-mythical” consciousness as “idolatry.” On the other hand, according to Flusser, the one-dimensional code of the alphabet fosters the critical consciousness, but eventually it leads to deception, too, and to be sure, to the deception consisting in what he terms “textolatry.” Particularly, the “technical images” lead to a new magic, namely a “magic of second degree,” which, as any magic, is deceptive, too. The aim of this text is to briefly reconstruct Flusser’s theory of deception, as it is implicit in the ideas mentioned, particularly in the idea of a new magic consciousness generated by technical images.

### The Codified World and the Structure of the Message

Flusser thinks of the human being as “an unnatural animal” (Flusser 2002: 3)<sup>1</sup> in so far as he possesses a “second nature” (Flusser 2002: 4) consisting of *codes*. That is, Flusser conceives of man as a *symbolic* animal. So, the human world is a “codified world” (Flusser 2002: 4), and this world “(...) makes us to forget the ‘first nature’ (the signified world)” (Flusser 2002: 4). This could be seen as a first, very basic and broad concept of deception by Flusser, which he terms “human alienation” (Flusser 2002: 65) in the sense that man lives in “(...) a world that has become inaccessible to him immediately” (Flusser 2002: 65). However, we must engage with what might be termed Flusser’s Kantian heritage: instead of the Kantian “phenomena,” constituted – structured – through *universal*

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<sup>1</sup> For the abbreviations see the Works cited at the end of this text.

*characteristics of our consciousness*, we have to do with phenomena as *signified things* whose very concrete structure depends on the *characteristics of the way in which we communicate*. The world is for us a “codified world” and the phenomena we are referring to depend on the “structure of [the] *message*” (Flusser 2002: 15). Therefore, instead of a linguistic turn we find in Flusser a kind of *symbolic turn*.<sup>3</sup>

In general, Flusser thinks that the “symbolic systems” or “codes” (Flusser 2002: 9) may lead to deception. In its very origin, each code helps to orient us in the midst of the “things” it signifies, but at a certain point it interposes between such “things” and us, and we are not capable anymore of “deciphering” the symbols of the code. We begin to live *in function of* the messages articulated through the code (c. Flusser 1983: 9n., 10n.).<sup>4</sup> We “(...) become alienated.” (Flusser 2002: 29) But beyond this “reversal” (Flusser 1983: 10) in the role of the codes from orienting to deceiving (“alienation,” Flusser 2002: 29, 65), one can ask here to which extent the “structure of a message” (Flusser 2002: 15) possesses in itself a deceptive potential. In order to answer this question, we have to refer to a basic Flusserian distinction, namely the distinction between the *structure of codes* and the *dynamic of communication*. Both are decisive for the “structure of the *message*” and, thus, for the structure of the phenomena, which is to say, for the very way in which we experience the world and, furthermore, for the mode of deception.

The idea of “the structure of codes” (Flusser 2002: 14) could be considered the most general approach of Flusser’s to the problem of communication. We could even say that the question of the “dynamic of communication” (Flusser 2002: 18) can be developed first on the basis of a clear idea of the structure of codes. Focusing on the structure of the codes, Flusser postulates two main kinds of codes, the two-dimensional and the lineal or one-dimensional codes. *Lineal* codes are the writing systems in general, especially the alphabetical ones. *Two-dimensional* codes consist of images, but Flusser differentiates between “traditional images” (Flusser 1983: 13) and “technical images” (Flusser 1985: 21), so that in the end Flusser thinks of three important kinds of codes: the traditional images, the alphabetical writing, and the technical images.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Italics within a quotation are always mine, when not otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> As it shall become clear in this text, Flusser is indebted to Kant in the sense that are all of those sustaining the so called linguistic turn: they are not things in themselves what we experience but only things as they are made possible for the experience by some factors of consciousness. For the representatives of linguistic turn such factors are embedded in language; for Flusser they are symbols. Symbols of some kind, not only words but also images, are what structures “phenomena”, that is, things as we experience them, as they are for us. On the last theme see A. J. L. Carrillo Canán *The Mediatic History of Mind. Comparing McLuhan and Flusser*, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> The abbreviation c. means *compare*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, *Line and Surface*, in: Flusser 2002: 21-34; furthermore, *Alphanumerische Gesellschaft*, in: Flusser 1993a: 41-60.

The “structure of *codes*” must for its part be distinguished from the “structure of [ ] *message*” (Flusser 2002: 15). For the moment we need only say the last one involves both the *structure of codes* and the *dynamic of communication*, whereas the structure of codes concerns the “(...) the rules that order the symbols *physically* (...)” (Flusser 2002: 14) and “(...) the rules that order them logically (...)” (Flusser 2002: 14). It seems that for Flusser the first set of rules depends almost completely on the “*physical* property of [the] symbols” (Flusser 2002: 15), which constitute “the repertoire of the code” (Flusser 2002: 9). Precisely this focusing on the “*physical* propert[ies] of symbols” (Flusser 2002: 15) leads to Flusser’s central distinction between the traditional images, writing, and technical images. Accordingly, we can speak of three main versions of “the codified world” (Flusser 2002: 4) – and of deception as “alienation” – namely, the phenomena *imagined* through the traditional images, the phenomena conceptualized through codes “like alphabets” (Flusser 2002: 28), and, finally, the phenomena imagined through the technical images. “Imagination” (Flusser 1993b: 76), “conceptualization” (Flusser 1993b: 76) and “technical imagination” (Flusser 1993b: 79) are the corresponding abilities of codifying and deciphering. It should be mentioned here that, for instance, the negative, properly speaking, deceptive situation, in which the code of traditional images can no longer be deciphered, and we begin to live in function of images, that is, the situation in which we begin to “adore the images” (Flusser 2002: 65), corresponds to the “inversion” of imagination into “hallucination” (Flusser 2002: 65) as “hallucinatory imagination” (Flusser 2002: 65). Flusser says: “Imagination has reversed into hallucination” (Flusser 1983: 10).

We mentioned Flusser’s general idea according to which the orienting function of codes *reverses* into deception or, in his words, “alienation.” Why such a “reversal” should be the case is a relatively obscure point in Flusser’s thought. In fact, Flusser observes a sequential dominance of different kinds of codes (traditional images, alphabets, and technical images) and then he seems to fit such a succession into a sort of Hegelian scheme of quasi-necessary development through a series of reversals. On the other hand, and quite independently of the “reversal”-theory, Flusser provides an interesting analysis of the “structure of the codes” on the basis of the “physical property of symbols” (Flusser 2002: 15). The main idea here shows again certain Kantian elements, now concerning *time*. In deciphering an image and deciphering a text there is a “(...) difference between the one-dimensional line and the two-dimensional surface (...). This difference is one of *temporality*” (Flusser 2002: 23).

## Codes Determining Existence

According to Flusser, imagining is to “represent” a situation through images (c. Flusser 1985: 13), or in another formulation: “‘Imagination’ means (...) the ability to reduce situations to scenes and, conversely, the ability to decipher scenes which substitute situations (...)” (Flusser 1993a: 24). The key concept here is “scenes.” Situations, events, or facts, are “reduced” to scenes. Images are scenes on a closed or limited surface, within the reach of human vision. The corresponding scenes are deciphered by, first, contemplating the surface as a whole, that is, synchronically: “An image is a surface whose meaning is grasped at once. It ‘synchronizes’ the situation which it, as scene, means.” (Flusser 1993a: 24) This is the first effect of the image as a closed surface. “But after this grasping the eye has to wander around the image *analyzing* it in order to get the meaning. It has to ‘diachronize synchronicity’” (Flusser 1993a: 24.) To be sure, analyzing or “scanning” (Flusser 1983: 8) the surface implies that “(...) the hovering eye grasps the one element after the other establishing a temporal relationship between them (...)” (Flusser 1983: 8). This is diachrony, but of a certain kind. The surface limiting the image is closed, so that the “hovering eye” (Flusser 1983: 8) has to return to the same element, so that “(...) the scanning reconstructs the time of the *eternal return* of the same thing” (Flusser 1983: 8). It is the time of “the *eternal return* of life” (Flusser 2002: 65). In this way the traditional images generate the “attitude of mythical being” (Flusser 2002: 118), namely “one of circulating time, the eternal recurrence within a static space full of values, its world picture being a scene” (Flusser 2002: 118). The “circulating time” (Flusser 2002: 118) is the time of “magico-mythical existence” (Flusser 2002: 68). The “mythical time” (Flusser 1993b: 57) is the consciousness of time fostered by the code of “traditional images.” Such a consciousness corresponds to the “scenic character of the codes” (Flusser 2002: 37). If we were here to follow the Kantian elements in Flusser we should point out that deciphering images generates a temporal consciousness, which in its turn *structures phenomena* (Kant 1781<sup>1</sup>, 1787<sup>2</sup>). But, contrary to Kant, at least at this point, this constitutes not time as succession but as return, as “circulating time.” So, “circulating time” as a form of consciousness is not a trans-historical mark of our consciousness but the very specific mark of the consciousness of those human beings who “imagine” the world through images. Contrary to Kant, sensibility becomes historical.

On the other hand, according to Flusser, “[t]he *invention* of writing consisted not so very much in the invention of new symbols, but rather in the unrolling of the image into rows (‘lines’). We can say that with this event, prehistory ends and history in the true sense begins.” (Flusser 2002: 38) By

“unrolling the image into rows” (Flusser 2002: 38), writing “(...) rolls the scene out and transforms it into a *story*. It ‘explains’ the scene in that it enumerates each individual symbol clearly and distinctly (...). For this reason, the line (‘text’) does not directly mean the situation, but rather the scene of the image, which for its part means the ‘concrete situation.’ Texts are a development from images, and their symbols do not directly signify something concrete, but rather images” (Flusser 2002: 38). With regard to time the point is that lineal writing “(...) trans-codified the ‘circulating time’ of magic into the lineal one of history. That was the beginning of ‘historical consciousness’ and of ‘history’ in the precise sense.” (Flusser 1983: 10) Here, we find Flusser’s version of Kantian time: time as succession;<sup>6</sup> but, other than with Kant, this time consciousness first makes possible lineal thinking, and, thus, history. Contrary to Kant, time has not ever been lineal but it becomes lineal first by means of “explaining” images and by putting their elements in a series.

“Magical” or “mythical being” (Flusser 2002: 117) and “historical being” (Flusser 2002: 118), are two quite different modes of human existence based on a radically different kind of time consciousness. Going beyond the Kantian lead, these two very different kinds of consciousness of time are for Flusser not merely two forms of the “conditions of possibility of the objects of experience,” but rather the corresponding “(...) codes [that] give[] rise to [] specific way[s] of life (...)” (Flusser 2002: 37). At issue here is the “physical property of symbols,” that is, of images and writing, for here “[t]he relation between symbol and meaning (...) oscillate[s] between two extremes” (Flusser 2002: 13). In the case of images, we have to engage with “‘connotative’ (...) arrays of symbols” (Flusser 1983: 8). In deciphering an image the hovering eye “(...) can always *return* to every given element of the image (...)” (Flusser 1983: 9). In this way “(...) arrays of meaning [appear] in which the one element endows another element with meaning and gets its meaning from that other element” (Flusser 1983: 9). “[R]eciprocal meaning” arises (Flusser 1983: 9) based on “reciprocal relations” (Flusser 2002: 126). In other words, “[t]he eye that decipheres an image scans the surface, and it thus establishes reversible relations between the elements of the image. It may go back and forth while deciphering the image” (Flusser 2002: 64). The existential consequences of this fact are extremely important: “The reversibility of relations that prevails within the image characterizes the world for those who use images for the understanding of the world, who ‘imagine’ it. For them, all things in the world are related to each other in such a reversible way, and their world is structured by ‘eternal return.’ It is just as true to say that night follows day as that day follows night (...)” (Flusser

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<sup>6</sup> See: wir „(...) stellen die Zeitfolge durch eine ins Unendliche fortgehende Linie vor, in welcher das Mannigfaltige eine Reihe ausmacht (...) (Kant 1781<sup>1</sup>, 1787<sup>2</sup>: B50). That is, we “(...) represent the succession of time by means of a line reaching into the infinity, a line in which the manifold constitutes a series (...)”.

2002: 64). According to Flusser that is the very origin of “magical consciousness (...) and (...) magical behavior” (Flusser 2002: 126): “The consciousness is *magical*, because the environment, where things affect one another in reciprocal relations, is experienced as *scenic*: the eye hovers across the surface of the image, and produces relations that may be *reversed*. The behavior of the addressees is magical because the images are not experienced as a function of the environment, but rather *the environment as a function of the images*.<sup>7</sup> There is a consciousness for which *time* circulates in space, to order space. And there is a behavior that works to obey the structures of time and space seen in the image” (Flusser 2002: 126-127). Scenes order the world, and the structure of this order can be recognized as the structure of time. Thus, we find here once more a Kantian sense in which time orders or structures experience: “In such a world, circular time orders all things, ‘assigns them their just place,’ and if a thing is displaced it will be readjusted by time itself” (Flusser 2002: 64). Time has, therefore, “a moral and ethical function” (Flusser 2002: 117) – other than with Kant. And the circular character of time arises from the two-dimensionality of images and the scenic elements contained in them, for such two-dimensionality conditions the “reversibility of relations that prevails within the image” (Flusser 2002: 64). This is nothing else than the “physical property of symbols” determining consciousness and behavior.

On the other hand, writing tends to develop “‘denotative’ (univocal) arrays of symbols” (Flusser 1983: 8). As a matter of fact “[d]enoting codes transmit clear messages about their universes (...); they allow their receivers only one interpretation” (Flusser 2002: 13). This has manifold consequences for the articulation of consciousness. According to Flusser, the most important of them are the consciousness of time as linear time, which in its turn leads to recognizing the “chain of causality” (Flusser 2002: 118). According to this, “[n]othing repeats itself, every day is new and singular, and every lost moment is definitively a lost opportunity to comprehend the world and to intervene in it” (Flusser 2002: 118). This is again the “physical property of symbols” determining consciousness and behavior, in this case as “historical existence.”

Concerning the theory of deception there are two points. The one is Flusser’s idea according to which humans cease to decipher images and begin to live “in function of” (Flusser 1993b: 75) them. This is an obscure point in his theory. He only says that images “(...) *may* become opaque to the world and cover it, even substitute for it. They *may* come to constitute an imaginary world that no longer mediates between man and the world, but, on the contrary, imprisons man. Imagination (...) becomes hallucination (...)” (Flusser 2002: 65) Additionally, Flusser mainly refers to the historical

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<sup>7</sup> Notice this general criticism against the deceiving character of magic.

fact that “[t]he prophets were critics of the images of gods (idols), and the pre-Socratics were critics of mythical imagination” (Flusser 2002: 43).<sup>8</sup> But, on the other hand, for Flusser the problem seems to be not only idolatry but magic itself, that is, the problem lies in representing the world through images, or “imagining” it, which is a result of the “physical property symbols” being images. He says: “Grasping and changing the world through images is a magical action. If one wants to go back to the situation without the mediation of images, one must free the action from its magical character, then tear the representations out of the magical context on the surface of the image and *order* them in another way” (Flusser 1985: 13). This is the other point to be considered. The “magico-mythical” being precludes any *criticism* as known from the Greeks onwards, and so it seems to be deceptive by itself.

According to Flusser, “[i]t is against (...) idolatry of images, as a therapy against this (...) alienation, that writing was invented” (Flusser 2002: 65.) Concerning writing as therapy, Flusser says that “[c]ritical thinking results from the praxis of linear writing. It can be proved that linear writing was invented (...) with the intention of counting. *Counting* is the act of tearing things out of their context, to arrange them in rows. Counting is the core of critical thinking. We have developed our critical capacity to the extent that we have mastered writing” (Flusser 2002: 42n.) In other words, “counting” things, picking them out of a heap, amounts to the “explaining” of images mentioned above, destroying the scenic character of images by tearing their elements out of their context and ordering them in rows. This should be considered the core of any criticism or critical thinking: “Originally, critical thinking meant the criticism of images. It was directed against the image, it was directed against pictorial thought: it was iconoclastic thinking.” (Flusser 2002: 43) It is in this sense that the prophets and the pre-Socratics were “critics of mythical imagination” (Flusser 2002: 43). According to Flusser those men “(...) tried to rip the images which had become screens, in order to free the way back to the world behind them” (Flusser 1983: 10). At any rate, the intention of criticism “(...) is to emancipate people from the mythical power of images and, thus, to replace the magical praxis following from it with another, ‘rational’ one” (Flusser 2002: 43). More precisely, “[c]ritical thinking divides images – separates them into elements – (...) breaks them apart – perpetrates crimes against images – because it casts doubt on myth and magic.<sup>9</sup> The result of critical thinking is Western *history* (...)” (Flusser 2002: 43). Linearity is the “physical property of symbols”

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<sup>8</sup> In the same vein: “The first writers fought against idolatry, against a life in function of images” (Flusser 1993b: 75).

<sup>9</sup> See Innis: “The spread of writing checked the growth of myth and made the Greeks skeptical of their gods.” (Innis 1951: 8)

enabling and embodying critical, “*iconoclastic* thinking” (Flusser 2002: 43). Ripping or tearing down images supposes a new “physical property” of the resulting symbols.

Certainly, “[l]inear codes” (Flusser 2002: 39), writing, “(...) substitute[s] the world of conception for the world of imagination (...)” (Flusser 2002: 65), and “[t]he purpose of writing is to mean, to explain images, but texts *may* become opaque, *unimaginable*, and they then constitute barriers between man and the world” (Flusser 2002: 66). So, we find yet again what seems to be a Kantian legacy. Flusser refers to “unimaginable explanations” (Flusser 2002: 66) – that is, in Kantian terms, to “concepts devoid of intuition,”<sup>10</sup> – as another kind of deception. He finds the paramount instance of “opaque explanations” (Flusser 2002: 66) in modern science: “(...) scientific texts (which are the most characteristic form of writing, and therefore the ‘aim of history’) tend to become explicitly unimaginable (one reads them erroneously if one tries to imagine their meaning) (...)” (Flusser 2002: 66). This implies a particular sense of deception as alienation. Flusser does not question at all the scientific truth of such texts. His point is that science is knowledge concerning a universe which “(...) existentially considered is void, *absurd* (...). The knowledge offered to us by science has no relation to our life-world but to that universe impossible to be experienced. Knowledge is an *absurd* knowledge” (Flusser 1993b: 38). In fact, the universe reported by modern science has “neither goals, nor causes” (Flusser 1985: 38).<sup>11</sup> The opacity of scientific texts and scientific knowledge is an existential one, so that modern men “(...) have to live in the life-feeling of *absurdity* (...)” (Flusser 1993b: 38). For modern science “(...) the situation to be described falls apart into a cluster of information-bits (...)” (Flusser 1985: 14), and such elements “(...) are not capable of being grasped, nor imagined, nor conceived – they are out of reach for hands, eyes, and fingers” (Flusser 1985: 14). The abstract and increasingly formal meaning of modern scientific concepts, their non-sensible character (Kant 1781<sup>1</sup>, 1787<sup>2</sup>), is the mark of the *existential absurdity* of the “unimaginable explanations” offered by science. Flusser recovers here the topic of the modern world as a world devoid of guiding myths of gods, birth and death, origin and end, and in the very end, of a world devoid of any guiding moral principles. That is, Flusser’s theme of “unimaginable explanations” –

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<sup>10</sup> One should recall one of the most famous passages in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*: „Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer. Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind. Daher ist ebenso notwendig, (...) Begriffe sinnlich zu machen (...) als (...) Anschauungen (...) verständlich zu machen.“ (Kant 1781<sup>1</sup>, 1787<sup>2</sup>: B75) That is: “Thoughts without content are *void*. Intuitions without concepts are blind. Therefore, it is as necessary (...) to make concepts sensible (...) as to make intuitions understandable.” Of course “explanations” are conceptual, and so, “unimaginable explanations” are nothing more than concepts devoid of intuition.

<sup>11</sup> McLuhan refers to this situation *as well* by pointing out that with the rise of modern science the Aristotelian final cause *was conquered* by the efficient cause: “If it works, should be allowed to exist (...)” (McLuhan and Powers 1986: 78), a point of view contradicting the tradition according to which “[t]he first question that could be asked was not whether it was possible to create something, but whether it was desirable in human terms” (McLuhan and Powers 1986, 78). Desirability has nothing to do in the considerations of modern science.



instead of the Kantian concepts devoid of intuitions – is the theme of the demythologization of the modern world. Instead of the Kantian topic of knowledge as necessarily sensible knowledge, and recovering German Idealism, Flusser seems to miss the unity of knowledge and goodness, referring, rather, to an existential absurd knowledge. The new element added by Flusser is that such a world – for Flusser the “historical world” – is a product of the “physical property of symbols,” in this case, the alphabetical ones: in the end, the alphabetical world becomes one of existential absurdity, for in it imagination wanes. That is the limit point of the iconoclasm of “conceptual thinking,” for “[w]e are now able to step backward from our imagination into an unsurpassable abstraction” (Flusser 2002: 113). Communication dominated by the abstract and formal concepts of modern science leaves us with a feeling of absurdity. It becomes a kind of textolatry, a kind of life in function of texts, which amounts to deception in that our basic communication mode does not help us orient ourselves in the “life-world.” The paramount mathematician or physicist does not find any existential guidance in his scientific field.<sup>12</sup> It is thus apparent that in shifting the attention from mere Kantian sensibility to imagination as “magico-mythical” consciousness, Flusser implicitly assumes the criticism of German Idealism vis-à-vis Kant in looking for the unity of knowledge and moral, which prevailed before modern science – and Kant.<sup>13</sup>

## Techno-images and Deception

Absurdity as life-feeling marks, for Flusser, the exhaustion of linear codes as dominating codes – McLuhan would say: their overheating.<sup>14</sup> It is the absurdity of concepts torn apart from imagination, which is a result of the “physical property of symbols.” Modern, “historical” human are therefore in the need of making sense of the alphabetical messages, above all, of the messages of science. According to Flusser, “techno-images” (Flusser 2002: 67) are made possible by linear codes, but above all they arise to fill the existential void of such messages. Photography, film, video, TV, and computer images, all of them are images, and, as such, two-dimensional symbols, along with traditional images. But techno-images are products of scientific theories, that is, of scientific texts or messages. For this reason, they are quite different from traditional ones. Whereas “[t]he images

<sup>12</sup> See H. Innis: “(...) science lives its own life (...)” (Innis 1951: 192).

<sup>13</sup> It is modern science that embarks on the process in which „(...) die Bilder beginnen (...) die (...) magische (ethische) Dimension zu verlieren (...)“ (Flusser 1996: 123), that is the process in which “(...) images begin (...) to lose the magical (ethical) dimension (...)” More clearly: „Vor dem Sieg des Alphabets über die Bilder ließ sich ihre ästhetische Dimension nicht von der deontologischen und epistemologischen trennen (...)“. That is: “Prior to the triumph of the alphabet over the images it was impossible to detach their aesthetical dimension from the deontological and epistemological (...)” one.

<sup>14</sup> See the chapter *Reversal of the Overheated Medium* (McLuhan: 1964).

created by the traditional imagination are two-dimensional, because they have been abstracted from a four-dimensional life-world (...)” (Flusser 2002: 114), the images “(...) of the new imagination are two-dimensional, because they have been projected from zero-dimensional calculations. The first type of images signifies the life-world; the second type signifies *calculations*” (Flusser 2002: 114).

As stated above, the information-bits “(...) are not capable of being grasped, nor imagined, nor conceived – they are out of reach for hands, eyes, and fingers. But they are,” says Flusser “calculable (...) and can be synthesized (computed) by means of especial apparatuses furnished with *keys*.” (Flusser 1985: 14) Such apparatuses are photo- and film-cameras, computers, and the like. The “new image creation (...) reveals itself as a gesture of the gathering together of dot elements (of *calculated* subject matter) into images. It reveals itself as a computation.” (Flusser 2002: 113) The chemical or electrical bits of information gathered together (calculated) by the apparatuses are themselves dimensionless, and, as such, devoid of any existential meaning. The linearity of writing falls apart “spontaneously” (Flusser 1985: 20) into dimensionless points, and “[o]ne cannot live in such a void and abstract universe. In order to live, one must try to make concrete the universe and the consciousness. One must try to get together the point-elements in order to make them concrete (conceivable, imaginable, manageable)” (Flusser 1985: 20). The techno-images are “(...) put together on surface elements like photons or electrons” (Flusser 1985: 21). But such elements cannot be sensed, nor seen, nor seized. “For this reason apparatuses must be contrived, which grasp what cannot be grasped, which imagine what cannot be imagined, which conceive what cannot be conceived. And such apparatuses must be furnished with *keys* in order for us to control them. Such apparatuses are the requirement for the technical images” (Flusser 1985: 21). *Typing keys* is something absolutely different from drawing or painting, and from writing. Key typing makes concrete, by synthesizing, the senseless. It endows it with meaning. This key typing is nothing but *programming* apparatuses in order to get synthesized images. Thus, in watching Don Giovanni on TV, we do not see point-elements but meaningful images, and, thus, something possessing existential concretion and density, and, therefore, an ethical dimension.<sup>15</sup> The “techno-imagination” (Flusser 2002: 69) overcomes the absurdity of meaningless point-elements. “[T]raditional imagination” (Flusser 2002: 114) abstracts (from the space and time into a surface), but techno-imagination, the “new imagination” (Flusser 2002: 113), performs the very opposite: it concretizes by trans-codifying “zero-dimensional calculations” (Flusser 2002: 114) into two-dimensional symbols, that is, into images.

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<sup>15</sup> „Selbst in ihrer gegenwärtigen Dekadenz sind Bilder Erlebnismodelle und haben daher ethische und epistemologische Aspekte (...)“ (Flusser 1996: 113). That is: “Even in their present decadence images are models for experiencing, *containing, therefore*, ethical and epistemological aspects (...)”

Nevertheless, all images are magical, and that means they “program” their recipients for a non-critical consciousness, for behaving “magically” in putting images in the place of situations and facts. This is, again, the “physical property of symbols” determining the “structure of a message.” It is here that the “*dynamic of communication*” becomes particularly relevant.

According to Flusser there are two main “dynamics of communication” (Flusser 2002: 18), determined by two very different communicative strategies. One strategy focuses on preserving information, on “memory.” That is the basis of “discursive codes (such as painting)” (Flusser 2002: 18). The other communication strategy focuses not on *preserving* information but on *generating* it, on “innovation.” That is the basis for “dialogue” (Flusser 2002: 18).<sup>16</sup> In discourses “(...) messages flow from a sender toward a receiver (...)” (Flusser 2002: 18). In dialogues “(...) messages oscillate between various participants in the process (...)” (Flusser 2002: 18). But “[t]he mass media seem to have an exclusively discursive structure” (Flusser 2002: 18). Photo-magazines, film, TV, for instance, “(...) are constructed so that very few senders emit messages toward enormously numerous receivers who are totally incapable of dialoguing with the senders. This is in fact what characterizes the present: a *discursive* culture without dialogical feedback. [Furthermore:] A culture in which most participants have no access to the origin of information (...) tends to become *totalitarian*” (Flusser 2002: 18). The programming of behavior through the messages of mass media is a programming through images, which by their very nature preclude criticism. At least this deceptive facet of images is now retrieved by the techno-images as mass media. But beyond that, deception amounts now to a tendency towards *totalitarianism*, in the absence of dialogue. On the other hand, techno-images are magical in that they also put themselves between the world and us. “[T]he Vietnam war (...), or Miss Bardot’s breast” (Flusser 2002: 27), the same as “speeches of presidents, the Olympic games, and important weddings” (Flusser 2002: 27), all of them are things of which we do not have any “immediate experience” (Flusser 2002: 27). Nevertheless, they “(...) are real in that they determine

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to notice that with this distinction Flusser solves the contradiction in Innis’s conceiving of oral tradition. According to Innis “[a]n oral tradition implies freshness and elasticity but students of anthropology have pointed to the binding character of custom in primitive cultures” (Innis 1951: 4). In spite of the anthropological insight about the inflexibility of oral tradition, Innis continuously tends to attribute “freshness and elasticity” to oral tradition, for instance, by saying that “[r]ichness of oral tradition made for a flexible civilization (...)” (Innis 1951: 10). This assessment of oral tradition deeply influenced Innis’s ideas about classical Greece, leading him to very nearly the opposite stance as McLuhan’s, who linked democracy in Greece not to oral tradition (c. Innis 1951: 9) but to writing. In fact, oral societies are anything but flexible. The origin of Innis’s confusion becomes clear, when he refers to Graham Wallace, who “(...) assumed that *creative* thought was dependent on oral tradition (...)” (Innis 1951: 191). This makes clear that both Innis and Graham mistake the creativity *inherent* to dialogical communication structures for oral tradition. In fact, an oral tradition is anything but dialogical and it makes for an environment completely unsuitable for democracy or progress of any kind. Innis mistakes “oral tradition” (Innis 1951: 191) for “oral discussion” (Innis 1951: 191) and “oral dialectic and conversation” (Innis 1951: 191). The first is a *discursive* structure (Flusser), whereas the last is plain dialogue! About the discursive character of oral tradition see my article “Culture and Communication” in Glimpse, 2002.

our lives” (Flusser 2002: 27). The “structure of the message” of mass media is determined both by a *discursive dynamic* of communication and by the two-dimensional or *scenic character* of symbols as images. The discursive dynamic of mass media reinforces the magical, deceptive character of their images on a new scale: the global transmission centers take the place of the priests.

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