

Vilém Flusser

A New Way of Reading called Computing

*(Does Writing have a Future?)*¹

“The basis of all critical reading is exposed as a belief that cannot be criticized.

Hens believe that corn kernels are good. Science makes this belief relative: corn kernels are good in relation to eating (and sand kernels in relation to the beach). That rests on the scientific belief that reality is value free. To approach this belief critically is to realize that reality is as we believe it to be. And this third belief can no longer be criticized. For now it is clear that to be able to criticize what is there, another belief must come into play. Only on the basis of some kind of belief is reading possible. All critical reading must start from a belief that is not open to criticism. Without it, nothing can be criticized, nothing is legible. We have lost this uncritical belief. With it, we've lost the capacity to criticize and to read at all. It makes no sense to learn to read and write. There is nothing more to read and even less to write.

The puzzle-solving reading that science endorses as the alternative to interpretive, critical reading has shown itself to be critical reading in disguise. This shatters the foundation of reading, namely, the belief in legibility (unconditional decoding). Yet it is still possible to find within this crisis an entirely different kind of reading and to go on reading in the future. Until now, to read was understood to be the unraveling of a mystery. Wittgenstein rightly points out that there is no longer anything to unravel. Having lost our faith, we are actually incapable of recognizing a mystery in the world or in ourselves that can be read and resolved. But it is also possible to translate to read as “to guess,” and rather than mystery, one might have a montage game—a jigsaw puzzle—in mind. So to read could mean to peck and assemble kernels in such a way that something meaningful is produced. This new way of reading is beginning to crystallize now. It is called, of course, “computing.”

It is characteristic of computing to assume that the world and we are meaningless (absurd), that either can be picked into kernels, and that the kernels can then be assembled into something that does have meaning. The calculating way of reading lends meaning to a meaningless original text. We are dealing with a reversal of the vectors of meaning: no longer does the reader draw a meaning from

¹ Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, 2011, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, translation by Nancy Roth [German original 1987], p. 84-85.

what is read; rather he is the one who confers meaning on what is read. To this new reader (and to artificial intelligences), there is nothing out there or in here that means anything at all: there is nothing behind it. The only meaning to be derived from the whole nonsense will be that projected through peckable, assembled mosaics, selected from particles out there and in here (e.g., synthesized images). The mosaics are fictions, figures, feints; in the aftermath of the antiquated ways of reading, they are the only reality we will have in which to live.

With this, all criticism has reached its original goal, the Enlightenment is everywhere victorious, and there is nothing more to criticize or illuminate. Everything has become clear, above all that all criteria, values, and measurements are ideological and that nothing stands behind these ways of reading (appearances). A fully enlightened consciousness no longer needs to be intelligent, to be about extracting meaning. It can concentrate on creative amalgamation. This transition from the old ways of reading to the new involves a leap from historical, evaluative, political consciousness into a consciousness that is cybernetic and playful, that confers meaning. This will be the consciousness that reads in the future.”