

Marco Menon

Francesco Restuccia, *Il contrattacco delle immagini. Tecnica, media e idolatria a partire da Vilém Flusser*

Francesco Restuccia is a young Italian scholar who, in recent years, has been contributing to the development of Flusser scholarship with several praiseworthy academic articles published in both Italian and international journals. His first book, *Il contrattacco delle immagini. Tecnica, media e idolatria a partire da Vilém Flusser* (*The counterattack of images. Technology, media, and idolatry in the wake of Vilém Flusser*), is a real gift for all readers interested in the Czech philosopher and, more generally, the relationship between human beings and technology.

At the center of Restuccia's study stands in fact the concept of *Rückschlag* (which can be translated as 'rebound', 'repercussion' or 'counterstroke', but also as 'feedback'), on which Flusser wrote some important articles in the last years of his life, as the author points out: "Between 1989 and 1991 [...] Flusser reformulated his entire theory of technology in the light of this notion" (p. 47). Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this theory is that it overcomes the anthropocentric conception of technology, according to which the latter is merely a set of extensions of the organs of the human body. According to the *Rückschlag* theory, technology is undoubtedly a set of prolongations of human limbs, but the relationship between humans and technology should not be understood as a merely instrumental or subject-centered one. In fact, every technological innovation has major setbacks for human beings, who in turn modify the technical world that surrounds them, in a mutual exchange of influences where it is impossible to clearly distinguish an active subject from a passive object. The relationship between human beings and technology can be understood as a game of mutual externalization and internalization: "We use our body as a model to design technical objects, until they fight back and we end up taking them as models of behavior and experience: only in this way we can actually extend our form of life, acting and thinking in a new way. The culture of each epoch, according to Flusser, is marked by the counterstroke of the dominant technological system" (p. 87).

Restuccia dedicates the first part of his work to the analysis of this central concept, and of Flusser's philosophy of technology in general. Here, he carefully takes into consideration many authors who influenced the development of Flusser's thought, or who show points of contact with it; among them we find Ernst Kapp, Ernst Cassirer, and Walter Benjamin. With respect to

technologies of the mind such as writing and images, influences include Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and André Leroi-Gourhan.

The second part of the work focuses on a specific technology: images, be they traditional or technical. As a technology of the mind—that is, as an extension of a visual scheme that is projected onto the world, thus structuring our experience—images influence the behavior and the way of thinking of the human beings thanks to the “counterstroke” effect: “Our behavior and the structures of our thought are thus restructured in depth, internalizing the new code, a process that can only occur with a consolidated practice, even after millennia from its diffusion” (102). In this part, the ideas of authors such as Leroi-Gourhan, McLuhan, and Ong are particularly well reconstructed and deepened, compared and distinguished with extreme care from the theoretical stance held by Flusser.

One of the most important issues that emerge in this second part concerns the character of the externalization implemented by technologies of the mind, such as images. The apparatuses that calculate and compute particles in order to synthesize images, in fact, imagine in our stead, encouraging a certain passivity in our imaginative faculty, thus leading it to atrophy. But, as Restuccia correctly points out, Flusser is not a hopeless pessimist. His counterstroke theory is not deterministic. Thanks to the technologies of the mind, in fact, unprecedented possibilities open up; and our imaginative capacity, if adequately trained, can overcome its limits and project new alternative worlds. Yet this is the point where the problem arises: if this new techno-imagination is not properly trained, the counterstroke of images becomes a form of alienation; or, more precisely, of idolatry.

The third part of the book is then dedicated to the concept of idolatry, which is meticulously reconstructed from a historical point of view. Restuccia analyzes a truly vast literature on the subject, highlighting the decisive historical moments in the conflict between iconoclasm and idolatry, and showing how both attitudes are founded on a conception of images that attributes to them a manipulative power over human beings. But in truth, this is not the case. As Restuccia observes, “it is the gaze that is idolatrous, not things in themselves; hence it is not a question of drawing a boundary to preserve purity or truth, but of creating schools to exercise one’s visual thought. It is necessary [...] to learn a different way of using images”. In order to counteract idolatry, we need “a work on images that allows us to emancipate them from their worship value, thus recovering their potential for use” (218, 221). On this point, it seems to me, Flusser appears as a very ingenious follower of Walter Benjamin, and I believe that Restuccia himself intends to suggest this closeness with his precise choice of terms.

In the third part of the book, there are at least three interesting arguments that open many promising research perspectives for the future. First, the treatment of Flusser's relationship with the Christian tradition and the theory of secularization is particularly fascinating, in part because it is less often explored. (While dealing with this topic, Restuccia discusses also the philosophical views of perhaps Flusser's only real teacher, the Brazilian thinker Vicente Ferreira da Silva, another aspect that deserves great consideration.) Second, Restuccia illuminates with great insight the theological presuppositions of Flusser's media theory, showing how elements belonging to the Jewish tradition are highly active in his thought. He also uncovers elements belonging to the Christian tradition, as shown by the discussion of the peculiarly "Christian" structure of *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, or of Flusser's reading of René Girard's *The Scapegoat*. Finally, the pages where Restuccia deals with the work and thought of artists close to Flusser (above all Harun Farocki) are very intriguing; by showing the potential application of Flusser's ideas, it both succeeds in explaining the Czech philosopher's thought, and also indicates alternative ways to practice philosophy—with media other than writing.

All in all, the book under review is an impressive piece of research, written in a very elegant and captivating style—an aspect that is unfortunately increasingly rare in academic literature nowadays. The author manages to combine polished prose with scholarly research that spans, without ever losing focus, the philosophy of communication, existentialism, and the theory of media, all backed by a wide range of bibliographical references to numerous first-rate authors and studies in the areas just mentioned. Restuccia has an admirable knowledge of Flusser's work and draws heavily not only from the books that Flusser published during his lifetime, but also from the (too) many (published and unpublished) papers he wrote over a thirty-year career. It is also important to underscore that *Il contrattacco delle immagini* offers not only a very detailed and careful reconstruction of Flusser's thought; it is also a great piece of philosophical thinking in its own right. The thesis that, in the wake of Flusser, Restuccia advances with considerable depth, is the following: if we know the dynamics of the setback of a specific technology on our being-in-the-world, then we can—to a certain extent—foresee it, anticipate it, and therefore actively participate in it. With such knowledge, in other words, we could gain the ability to shape ourselves freely. Still, Restuccia notes that "Flusser is well aware that the very concept of counterstroke, which he considers as 'the engine of human history,' is the result of the counterstroke of a historically determined technology, the apparatus. Flusser would not have had the conceptual tools necessary to name the return effects of technology, without first having internalized the notion of feedback" (p. 87). One wonders, then, whether technology (in our case, the apparatus), is always one step ahead of us; if so, it would be impossible to transcend the "program of the apparatus".

In conclusion, *Il contrattacco delle immagini* is a perfectly successful and enjoyable *opera prima*, which deserves to be welcomed with enthusiasm by the community of scholars; we can only warmly recommend reading it, and hope for more from the same author.

Francesco Restuccia, *Il contrattacco delle immagini. Tecnica, media e idolatria a partire da Vilém Flusser*, prefazione Andrea Pinotti, Biblioteca / Estetica e culture visuali, Meltemi editore, Milano, 2021, € 20.90 paper, 311 pages.