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The fourth meaning of the image: Flusser's invitation to envision the world

The technical image

> "He knew that the power of the image is not only enhanced by rigorous foundations of thought, but profits from the forceful effects of its polysemy. Because he knew that it was only images that could bring the logic and the imagination closely together in one meta-language."[1]

My entire research is indebted to Vilém Flusser's early foray into the philosophy of photography, as his original arguments have planted the seeds for the formulation of a new system of thinking the image. Flusser has defined his working concept of the image as the technical image. It is precise; it is viewed on the screen, coded; it is portable, always mediated. It rarely comes alone but is embedded in a large flux, a world of images as we popularly now conceive the world of media. According to him, the first technical image of the modern era is the photograph that is an image entirely created technically with the help of the apparatus of the camera. But the photograph as such predates the invention of the camera and of the ability to fix it. The origin of the first technical image can be found in the *imago* showing on reflective surfaces, such as Narcissus' reflection on the lake, in the shadow projected by firelight on the cave's walls, in the reversed appearance of outdoor landscapes appearing in the dark chamber of the renaissance painter. Thus the definition of the technical image could be extended to encompass all images that are not handmade, excluding drawings, paintings, sketches, doodles, even if they were created entirely on the computer, but including their mechanical reproductions as well as all mental projections and representations, dreams, etc. If the realm of technical images can be so broaden to include almost any 2D visual representations that are analogical or digital, technical or synthetic, original or reproduced, found or created, of any dimension and quality, on any support, what is significant is not only the technological mode of their production that allows to produce them in a much greater number than ever before but their corresponding mode of diffusion via an ever more sophisticated technology, thru broadcasting and networks, on-demand TV, portable screens, from the ground via satellites

[1] Louis Bec on the image in Zielinski and Weibel, *Flusseriana*, 224.

skipping the newsroom down to our bedrooms. These images are indeed more numerous but furiously more frequent: ubiquity and omnipresence are the real game changer. Today's images are bodiless and as such form a surrounding field, reaching beyond the rhizomatic to form a sphere in the middle of which the seer is located. This field formed by millions of technical and synthetic images demands new consideration. It calls for new imagination, new definitions, new ideas, new words, new texts.[2] Under the entry "image" in the *Flusseriana* toolbox, Louis Bec wonders how he should describe the action of images on Flusser's thought. "How are we to describe that curious, disconcerting ability that consists of constructing highly sophisticated conceptual systems, and which has the power to concentrate their meaning in one dazzling image. How are we to investigate the decisive role of that proliferation of images – always inventive, deliberately offbeat and expressive, mischievous fancies, lush visions of a storyteller – which make some of his text sparkle like works of philosophical fiction."[3]

Indeed Vilém Flusser was a great thinker and a great narrator, one who believed that philosophy could be practiced via the image. He went beyond the dialectic of words and images, discarding them as no longer sufficient to conceptualize a world calculated by numbers. He developed the concept of the synthetic images, which were numbers transcoded into digital code, itself transcoded into images by the computer, and which provided a much better understanding of concepts. As photographs had reintroduced images into the texts after they had been expelled by the invention of the printing press, technical images too were supposed to reintroduce magic into text in order to make them comprehensible again. But in fact synthetic images do not explain anything, they only translate scientific statements: they are metacodes whose unilateral (i.e. TV) function is to program behavior and objectify their receiver. Martha Schwendener took notice of Flusser's sense of anticipation: "images are no longer snapshots or billboards, but non-physical objects; something in a sense predicting the digital files we circulate via the Internet or social media platforms."[4] Now that the exchange of technical images is multilateral (i.e. the Internet) they offer an "immaterial surface" onto which many new significations can be projected by many users at once.[5] We need to remember that this new image is a "pure surface" on which "all the preceding images can be transposed, transcoded into such an image."[6]

Another important characteristic of technical images is that "they are not images at all but ra-

[2] Oberson, *I See. Do You?*, 17.
[3] Zielinski and Weibel, *Flusseriana*, 224.
[4] Schwendener, "The Photographic Universe: Vilém Flusser's Theories of Photography, Media, and Digital Culture," 160.
[5] Flusser, *La civilisation des médias*, 73–74. Flusser wrote this article titled "Images in the New Media" in 1989 with an amazing sense of anticipation for what was to come.
[6] Ibid., 69.

ther symptoms of chemical or electronic processes."[7] This makes them much closer to mental images that any other form of traditional images ever were. Technical images, and that includes most of photography today, are electronic images such as our neuronal stimulations. It makes them even more effective on a cognitive level.

Thinking in image

Historically the image has been imparted the role of "faux-ami" in philosophy, a necessary evil. Metaphysics would only love to do without images, but it cannot. If we scratch the surface of many philosophical essays, the image is never far beneath. Indeed images are at the basis of man's ability to form any kind of cognitive activity, to perceive and to reflect, as well as to develop its verbal systems of scriptures that have enabled humanity to carry over significant amount of data and information in the form of written documents. There would be no philosophy without images. No history. The role of images is thus fundamental and essential, albeit it is an intricate and delicate one. The relation to images is one of love and hate, of fascination mostly, for image have often been feared and used to impose fear. Indeed images are powerful not merely because of their capacity to represent; this is their most benign function. Images can carry, move, transform, envelop, conjure, defy, appear and disappear; hence they have a force of persuasion that is unmatched by text. Text merely explains images, translates what is seen into another language that is less intuitive, more reasoned. Images thus have a fundamental role in philosophy, despite that the ambivalence of their ontological status.

Vilém Flusser has been aiming at the possibility of making philosophy with images and not just with text. He has etched out the way this is possible by reinstating the status of images and drawing parallels between the powers of photography and reasoning. Many artists have indeed produced works that can claim philosophical achievement, a least as much as many philosophical essays. Fischli&Weiss, Robert Irwin, Ron Hueck, Rachel Whiteread, Joseph Beuys, Harun Farocki, John Cage, to name just a few springing to mind from the contemporary era. I could stretch the analogy further and assert that the first hand contours left by projecting pigment blown out of the mouth on one's own hand applied against a wall is a stronger existential statement than any French essay could claim.[8] Filmmakers such as Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Go-

[7] Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 34.

[8] Recent research reveals that symbolic behavior dates as far back as the Neandertal. "Hand stencils (which, unlike positive hand prints, cannot be created by accident) require a light source and previous selection and preparation of the coloring material – evidence of premeditated creation. Because a number of hand stencils seem to have been deliberately placed in relation to natural features in caves rather than randomly created on accessible surfaces, it is

dard have openly claimed the epistemological status of their productions, and Gilles Deleuze established cinema as a 'machine à penser'. Thus it could be said that the case for images is made already and does not need to be defended further. Unfortunately, in the greater scope of things, such artistic and literary efforts still remain marginal. And if we take cinema, which has a far greater audience and definitely plays a role as a shaper of consciousness, it is a machine more often used to divert than to question. There is still a lot of room for many contributions and work to be done until the balance will tip, until a wider audience is made aware and the many are formed to the working powers of images and turn from passive consumers into active thinkers. Actively thinking with images will require effort until it becomes natural again. Because the working of images happens at such a fundamental basis, it happens distinctly from volition or consciousness. Therefore it is important, if one wants to step out of the comfort zone, to become aware in order to reclaim power as citizen, as intellectuals i.e. as humans reasoning intelligibly and emotionally, as deciders and not just as followers or consumers; not as targets of the ones who know how it works. "[…T]he illiterate masses were forced to obey the texts without being able to decode them. With respect to post-historical images, we too are illiterate. We too are incapable of decoding the 'software' generating these images."[9]

If images are the real, then they have an epistemic value. They participate in constructing our beliefs about the world. Popular beliefs say that with the advent of the electronic form of images, as they can be endlessly modified, they cannot be truthful any longer. This is fallacious. For one reason, because images have always had the ability to lie before they were digital, and because even so they are still a source of knowledge. Another belief likes to single out analog from digital images, whereas they actually function the same way and share the same referent. If anything, digital images are actually much closer to our retinal image than analog ones. Thus, the reason why our relation to the image is so complex is due in part to all the literature about photography, its analogy and its indexicality, as if there were no such images before. These analog images existed in the surface of lakes, polished stones, glass and mirrors, in the colored shadows of Puppet Theater, in the projections of the camera obscura. So in truth the only thing that has radically changed is that these previously fleeting images of things can now be fixed for almost ever. I am not trying to undermine the photographic paradigmatic shift and its implications for history and culture but importantly to relativize and accord a finer understanding of the workings of the image. Moreover the indexicality of the photograph doesn't vanish with the digital era, it is not because chemicals have been replaced by electricity that these photographic images are not of something. And as fiction is concerned, the grapes of Zeuxis and the drapery of Parrhasius were

difficult to see them as anything but meaningful symbols placed in meaningful places." Hoffmann et al., "U-Th Dating of Carbonate Crusts Reveals Neandertal Origin of Iberian Cave Art."

[9] "Photography and History" in Flusser, *Writings*, 130.

as deceitful to their contemporaries as any virtual production is to us today. The real question thus is not the ontological value of the technical image – virtual or real – but of the world itself as Aleksandra Łukaszewicz Alcaraz understands it: "We have lost faith in the existence of the world underlying the image, the Real itself. […] Digital images are how we currently access the world, and they have in a considerable way transformed the real world into a virtual pictorial one."[10]

What Flusser tells us is that the type of images just described that he anticipated but that we have today – computer images travelling back and forth via multi-connected networks – could open up a fourth meaning of the image. The previous three being the cavern painting (a suspended perception and a model), the picture hanging on a wall (a critical contribution to history), the television screen in a bedroom (a method for programming behavior). Indeed, he hoped that because the modes of transmission were changing form the unilateral model of the radio and television broadcast to a network of reversible cables, "it would allow to outplay the intention" and "make it possible to take the political, economical, and social 'powers' out of commission." [11]

Envisioning a new way of thinking

Let's take a usual object of which we can have an image, let's take the example of a table: the theory follows the practice in the sense that the table existed before physicist explained that it is not solid. But in the case of the technical image, the theory preceded the practice as it "required the calculations and computations of a close reading of the particulate universe." And without the theory there would be no practice, no image traveling across the air to land on my tablet. Technical images are "symptoms of chemical or electronic processes" which means that they must be looked at superficially or not seen at all. And therefore require envision: "Envision, then, should refer to the capacity to step from the particle universe back into the concrete." It requires a certain distance. Between the event and my envisioning of it, there are a certain numbers of black boxes that must be activated but remain black. It takes a theoretical scientist to make it possible and understand in depth the functioning but only a technician to produce it, i.e. to press the buttons and activate the links. The viewer of the event is a mere functionary of the program he receives; he understands nothing of the process. It is worth quoting Vilém Flusser at length here: "Given what has just been said with respect to envisioning, the current cultural revolution can be summarized roughly as follows. We are the first generation to command the power to envision in the strict sense of the word, and all vision, imagination, and fictions of the past must

[10] Łukaszewicz Alcaraz, "Epistemic Function and Ontology of Analog and Digital Images," 6–7.
[11] "Images in the New Media" (1989) in Flusser, *Writings*, 74.

pale in comparison to our images. We are about to reach a level of consciousness in which the search for deep coherence, explanation, enumeration, narration, and calculation, in short, and historical, scientific, and textually linear thinking is being surpassed by *a new, visionary, superficial mode of thinking*. This is why we no longer see any sense in trying to distinguish between something illusionary and something non-illusionary, between fiction and reality. The abstract particle universe from which we are emerging has shown us that anything that is not illusory is not anything. This is why we must abandon such categories as true–false, real–artificial, or real–apparent in favor of such categories as concrete–abstract. The power to envision is the power of drawing the concrete out of the abstract.

Perception theory, ethics and aesthetics, and even our very sense of being alive are in crisis. We live in an illusory world of technical images, and we increasingly experience, recognize, evaluate, and act as a function of these images."[12]

We must step out of our condition of functionaries and become (en)visionaries. But for this we must step out of the comfort zone we have been pressed to confine to. "A technical image is directed toward a person. It presses in on him and finds him in even the most secret reaches of his private space. A person no longer goes from the private into the public, to the market, to school to inform himself […] People don't go from the private into the public anymore because they can be better informed at home and because there is essentially no public space left to which to go."[13]

Flusser could not have known but still guessed where the technical image was leading us. His vision was precisely prescient of what was to come. Indeed, today the school, the market, the public come to our own living room as the new social structure has indeed asserted itself. The society is now governed by technical images, and the consensus that images have reached through automatic feedback is beyond beliefs. The worse part of it being that "throughout this seeming and self-obscuring hierarchy of instruction, one senses a general entropic tendency toward a global metaprogram, and no one and nothing other than this implacable self-determination is behind it all."[14]

We have lost control, so can we get it back? Individually we are weaker than the apparatus capacity but as a collective brain we still can outdo the apparatus …

In 1989 when this book came out in German, Flusser was sketching an option out of this nightmare. Today thirty years later – I might as well mention an eternity in technological time – most of his anticipations have come true to a point he could not have *envisioned* in his wildest projections. It seems that the apparatuses have indeed become more powerful than society as a

[12] Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 38. Italics my own.
[13] Ibid., 52.
[14] Ibid., 75.

whole or worse that society, helped by economists pushing politicians, has chosen not to opt out, not to reprogram into a democratic programing. The apparatus has extended beyond the machine into a complex network of monopolistic companies functioning according to the sole logics of control and capital gain. Via their alluring apps and many platforms, they have captured all the addressees in their nets. This society of control is far grimmer that any ever imagined but yet no one noticed because it acts in bright light and full colors. Why aren't we freaking out about the surveillance cameras, the customized ads, data collection, history searches and analyses of behavioral patterns? If we remember the promising Apple ad of 1984 that ensured us that it wouldn't be 1984, it was a bluish tinted grey, just like it must have been in 1948, like Orwell's book made us feel, like the colors of death of Godard's *Histoire(s)*. Today why worry that our liberties are truncated daily when we live in "techno" colors. Such is the power of the image despite the many texts that have been published, the many pages of documents that have been released for so little change apart the restrained liberty of those who dared: these "unspectacular revolutionaries" Flusser was mentioning have been turned into spectacle and *de facto* neutralized. This consensus to produce a consensus is what today's engaged envisioners – all the photographers, film people, video people, computer people – are trying to bring about. By reconstructing the role of images in society, they want to bring about a general reconstruction of all broadcasting. Then the global totalitarian apparatus could be avoided, and instruction would be directed dialogically against the apparatus – in other words, not programmed democracy but democratic programming. Only this must happen rather quickly, or the capacities of the apparatuses as a whole will surpass the capacities of the society as a whole.

(Excerpts from the doctoral thesis *Image as articulation of thought*, 2018)

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