

Yiannis Mitrou

From Subject to Project:

Flusser, Lacan, and the AI Transformation of Being

Introduction

The status of the subject has undergone a profound transformation in contemporary theory, influenced by linguistic, psychoanalytic, and technological shifts. The classical model of the subject as a unified, autonomous, and self-transparent agent has been systematically challenged, notably by Jacques Lacan, who reconceptualized the subject as divided, constituted through language, and structured by the unconscious. Media philosopher Vilém Flusser extends this critique into the technological domain, arguing that human existence is increasingly shaped by technical apparatuses and programmed systems. Together, these perspectives displace the sovereign subject and raise the question of how subjectivity is constituted when both language and technology mediate experience. Flusser's concept of the shift from "subject" to "project" provides a framework for understanding this transformation. In his view, the human is no longer a stable center of agency but a *project* operating within *apparatuses* that delimit possible actions through programs. Lacan's concept of the subject of the unconscious further highlights the subject's internal division, emphasizing that desire, intention, and identity are structured by the Symbolic order and marked by a fundamental lack. Though emerging from distinct intellectual traditions, media philosophy and psychoanalysis, these approaches converge in their rejection of autonomy as a foundational category. This dual critique becomes especially urgent in the contemporary context of artificial intelligence and algorithmically generated images.

The proliferation of technical images, central to Flusser's analysis, has intensified with machine learning systems capable of producing images without direct human intervention. These images are not merely representations but operational outputs of complex computational processes, raising new questions about authorship, perception, and meaning. Their circulation within digital environments implicates them in the formation of subjectivity, at both conscious and unconscious levels. This paper argues that AI-generated images must be understood as sites where Flusserian and Lacanian frameworks intersect. They exemplify the logic of *apparatuses* and *programs*, structuring what can be seen, produced, and circulated. Simultaneously, they engage the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, participating in the formation of the subject of the unconscious.

and in the production of *jouissance*. Algorithmic images, therefore, do not simply mediate reality but actively contribute to the *reconfiguration of subjectivity*, as we have written by their *reprogramming* of the relations between the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real, thereby reshaping the dynamics of perception, desire, and agency. The introduction of a machinic gaze—distributed, algorithmic, and non-human—further complicates the distinction between subject and object, calling for a reconsideration of visibility and its relation to the unconscious. The interplay between linguistic constructs, such as the Symbolic order, and technical apparatuses—ranging from media devices to algorithmic programs—determines how individuals perceive, desire, and act.

The emergence of artificial intelligence signals a significant transformation in how subjectivity is constituted in contemporary theory. Subjectivity thus becomes a dynamic process shaped by overlapping and interacting structures, rather than a fixed and stable entity. Ultimately, this study situates the emergence of AI within the broader historical shift from subject to project—by which I mean the transformation of individual identity from a fixed, autonomous essence to an ongoing process shaped by external systems. Similarly, *contemporary subjectivity* refers to the way personal identity is constructed through the interplay of language and technology. For example, social media platforms employ algorithmic language to influence and shape user identities, illustrating how linguistic structures and technical systems intersect in producing subjectivity. In this light, contemporary subjectivity is produced at the intersection of linguistic structures and technical systems, as seen in the ways digital platforms mediate self-expression and perception.

In doing so, it seeks to contribute to ongoing debates in media theory, psychoanalysis, and visual culture. It achieves this by articulating a model of the subject, not as an autonomous agent, but as a *project*, dynamically constituted within a network of *apparatuses*. These apparatuses, governed by *programmed* regimes, shape subjectivity through overlapping systems of meaning (such as social narratives), code (symbolic systems), and desire (as understood through Lacanian psychoanalysis).

The Flusser's theory of subject: radical unfixing of stability

The shift¹ *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* (from subject to project), as articulated by Vilém Flusser, marks a profound transformation in how we understand human existence as such in the age of technical systems, particularly with the rise of AI. It signals the erosion of the classical notion of the subject as a stable, autonomous center of consciousness, challenging the very foundations of what we consider the individual. Replacing it is a more dynamic, contingent, structured as no-linear system and mediated figure: the project. Yet when this transformation is read alongside the psychoanalytic

¹ Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1994).

theory of the subject, particularly Lacan's subject², an unexpected tension emerges. While both thinkers decenter the subject, they do so through different structures—one technological, the other symbolic—leading to distinct accounts of agency, freedom, and determination. For Flusser, the transition from subject to project is inseparable from the rise of apparatuses—technical systems such as cameras, computers, and media platforms that structure the production of images and information and increasingly driven by AI. The human being no longer stands outside these systems as an independent agent but operates within them, as a kind of functionary or player.

In this context, Lacanian subject, constituted by language and desire, finds itself increasingly enmeshed within programmed environments. What appears as free action is in fact the selection of possibilities already inscribed within a program. The “project” is therefore not the expression of pure autonomy but an ongoing negotiation with the constraints and affordances of technical systems. To live as a project is to be continuously reconfigured within a field of programmed possibilities. However, Flusser does not reduce human existence to total determination. The concept of the project retains a space for creativity: the capacity to generate new, improbable configurations within or against the program. Freedom, in this sense, is not the absence of structure but the ability to play with it—to exhaust, bend, or subvert the apparatus from within. The individual becomes less a sovereign subject and more a strategic operator, navigating systems whose logic they can never fully escape but can sometimes outmaneuver.

Vilém Flusser's philosophical project engages deeply with the concepts of projection (Entwurf) and subjectivity (Unterwürfigkeit). Projection (Entwurf) refers to the act of designing or envisioning possibilities, while subjectivity (Unterwürfigkeit) addresses the experience of being subjected or shaped by external forces, illustrating how individuals are both creators and products of their environments within Flusser's framework. Although his broader work, *Menschwerdung* (Anthropogenese)³ was envisioned as a tripartite essay, only the first segment, which examines the foundations of early childhood development and the existential conditions of becoming, reached completion. *Menschwerdung* was intended to synthesize Flusser's exploration of human existence through projection and subjectivity, making its incomplete status particularly noteworthy for understanding his philosophical trajectory.

On the same day, writing to his publisher Stefan Bollmann, Flusser underscored his aim to tackle “the problem of the incongruence between Projekt and Entwurf”⁴ as noted by Bollmann in

² Lacan's subject is the same as the subject of unconscious (barred subject) thus illustrating the fact that the subject is essentially divided. Lacan distinguishes the subject from the ego; while the ego is an imaginary construct of self-unity, the subject is split (barred) by its entry into language.

³ It's a philosophical exploration of the process by which humans shape their existence within technological and existential frameworks

⁴ “Das Problem der Inkongruenz zwischen Projekt und Entwurf”, p.281.

his afterword to *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt-Menschwerdung*. In this 1989 German text, Flusser often employs *Projektion/projizieren* (projection, as in a projected image or to project/draft) interchangeably with *Entwurf/entwerfen* (design or sketch; projection in the sense of a plan). However, Bollmann observes that Flusser recognized subtle distinctions between the terms in conversation. While the incomplete manuscript of *Menschwerdung* leaves the difference unresolved, there are hints that *Entwerfen* captures an existential, negatively entropic movement, whereas *Projektion* refers to the concrete realization of this upward motion. Flusser's engagement with the concept of *Entwurf* draws from Martin Heidegger, who understood it as "projection" or "projecting-open". Heidegger's notion of being "thrown into the world" or "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*)⁵ refers to the condition in which individuals find themselves existing in circumstances they did not choose, emphasizing a kind of existential given. In his philosophy, subjects respond to this situation by becoming "projects"—actively shaping their existence through intentional actions.

Flusser builds upon and extends this idea, placing it within the context of telematic society, where technology mediates human experience. He contrasts *abstraction*—the process of breaking the world down into discrete, isolated points of data—with *concretation* which, in Flusser's terms, means transforming these abstract data points into meaningful, tangible forms. This transformation occurs through technological apparatuses that gather and organize the points into dialogical networks, projecting them back into the world as objects. For example, in a telematic society, platforms like social media collect individual user interactions (points), arrange them into networks (dialogical structures), and present them as curated content (objects) that shape collective discourse and public opinion. Flusser's concept of "projection" involves actively imagining and generating new possibilities, rather than simply accepting abstract ideas or fixed realities. This constructive approach stands in contrast to Jean Baudrillard's notion of "simulation"⁶ which refers to the passive reproduction of reality and often signals cultural stagnation or decline. Baudrillard, recognized for his theories on hyperreality and simulation, argued that technological projections tend to lead society toward entropy—a state of disorder and pessimism. Flusser, however, sees projections as "the new concretions of possibilities"⁷, meaning they are tangible manifestations of alternative futures that counter pessimistic views.

Siegfried Zielinski (2010), a leading media theorist, emphasized in his International Flusser Lecture "Entwerfen und Entbergen. Aspekte einer Genealogie der Projektion" (Projecting and Unconcealing. Aspects of a Genealogy of Projection), that the essence of Flusserian projection lies

⁵ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes that we are thrown into the world and starts his analysis of *Dasein* from out of its thrownness into the world. In this short article, what Heidegger means by *Dasein*'s thrownness is briefly introduced and explained.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Autonomedia : Semiotext[e], 1983)

⁷ Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt*, "die neuen sind Konkretisationen von Möglichkeiten", p.25.

in opening up a numerical space of possibility, thereby fostering creativity and innovation rather than mere repetition or decline. In the work of Vilém Flusser, psychoanalytic problematics are not directly adopted but are rearticulated through the concept of the program, which becomes the key structuring principle of subjectivity in technical societies.⁸ While thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan locate the determining conditions of the subject within an internal unconscious—structured by repression⁹ and language¹⁰—Flusser displaces this determining instance onto external apparatuses governed by programs. The result is not the disappearance of the unconscious, but its transformation into a technical form. The program, in Flusser's sense, defines a finite yet complex field of possibilities within which all actions, images, and expressions are generated.¹¹ Apparatuses—such as cameras, computers, and digital platforms—operate according to such programs, preselecting what can be produced and how it can appear. The human subject no longer stands outside this structure but functions within it as an operator, navigating a space of predefined options. In this respect, the program assumes a role structurally analogous to the unconscious: it conditions action without being fully accessible to awareness, and it organizes the production of meaning beyond the subject's intentional control.

This analogy resonates with Friedrich Kittler's argument that media systems determine what can be said, stored, and transmitted.¹² However, the analogy also reveals a fundamental shift. In psychoanalysis, the unconscious is characterized by repression, conflict, and the return of the repressed; it manifests through symptoms that require interpretation. In Flusser, by contrast, the program operates not through repression but through selection and limitation.¹³ What is excluded does not return as a symptom but simply remains unproducible within the system. The opacity of the unconscious is thus replaced by the operational closure of the program, whose limits define the horizon of the possible rather than concealing hidden meanings.

This transformation also reconfigures the role of desire. For Jacques Lacan, desire emerges from lack and is structured by the symbolic order, introducing instability and excess into subjectivity. In Flusser, the emphasis shifts from desire to possibility: human activity is less the expression of unconscious drives than the exploration of combinatory options within a programmed

⁸ Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1994).

⁹ Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious" (1915), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957).

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

¹¹ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

¹² Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹³ In his philosophy of photography and media, Vilém Flusser focuses on how apparatuses, as technical devices, shape our perception of reality and alter our understanding of information. He describes the production of technical images as a process of selection from possibilities, constrained by the limitations inherent in the apparatus itself. This framework forms the core of his media theory, showing how human interaction with these devices transforms our relationship to information.

environment. This shift takes on a further dimension if one considers Flusser's own, still underexamined, engagement with Freud—an engagement attested by the presence of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* in the bibliography of *Das XX. Jahrhundert*.¹⁴ Freud's 1920 text is significant here precisely because it does not simply describe the unconscious as a site of repressed content awaiting interpretation; it posits a drive operating *beyond* the pleasure principle altogether—the compulsion to repeat—which subordinates the search for satisfaction to a more archaic tendency toward the reduction of tension and, ultimately, toward the inorganic. This notion of an automatism that exceeds purposive, pleasure-oriented behavior offers a striking parallel to Flusser's account of the apparatus.

When Flusser describes the photographer's engagement with the camera as a form of "play" against the apparatus—an attempt to exhaust its combinatorial possibilities rather than to satisfy a need or communicate a content—he is describing an activity that, like Freud's repetition compulsion, is not governed by pleasure or intention but by the compulsive working-through of a finite structure until its possibilities are used up. Just as the death drive operates beneath and against conscious will, compelling the subject to repeat rather than simply to seek gratification, Flusser's program compels the operator into a combinatorial repetition whose end lies not in satisfaction but in the automatic realization of the apparatus's inherent potential. Read this way, the post-historical condition Flusser describes—in which human action folds into cyclical, combinatorial variation rather than progressive, purposive history—can be understood as a technical restaging of what Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, called the compulsion to repeat: an automatism that undoes any principle of pleasure, mastery, or accumulated meaning. The subject, in this sense, does not interpret symptoms but generates output. Meaning is not deciphered but produced—and, following the Freudian resonance above, produced not toward satisfaction but toward the exhaustion of a program, an activity closer to compulsive repetition than to desire.

The Program as External Unconscious

In the work of Vilém Flusser, the concept of the *program* emerges as a decisive category for understanding subjectivity under contemporary technical conditions.¹⁵ While Flusser does not explicitly engage psychoanalysis as a primary framework, his account of apparatuses and programs can be

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955); Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920). Both titles appear in Flusser's bibliography for *Das XX. Jahrhundert*, suggesting a more direct, and still largely unexplored, line of engagement with Freudian theory than the general structural analogy with "the unconscious" alone would suggest.

¹⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1994)

read as a transformation—if not a displacement—of the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious. What psychoanalysis situates as an internal, opaque, and conflictual structure, Flusser relocates into external, operational systems that structure the field of the visible and the sayable. In this sense, the program can be interpreted as a form of *external unconscious*: a system that condition human action and meaning without being fully accessible to conscious control. Essentially describes how human thought and action are increasingly structured by technical apparatuses.

Classical psychoanalysis, beginning with Sigmund Freud and reformulated by Jacques Lacan, is grounded in a model of depth.¹⁶ The Freudian unconscious is conceived as an internal domain in which repressed content persists and returns in disguised forms—symptoms, dreams, slips of the language. For Freud, repression constitutes the mechanism through which certain thoughts are excluded from consciousness, only to re-emerge indirectly.¹⁷ Lacan radicalizes this account by arguing that the unconscious is structured like a language: it is not simply a repository of hidden content, but a system of signifiers that produces the subject as divided, decentered, and fundamentally lacking.¹⁸ In both cases, the subject is not master of itself; it is shaped by processes that exceed its awareness. Flusser shares this fundamental decentering of the subject but relocates its structural cause. Rather than an unconscious structured by language, Flusser describes a world structured by *apparatuses*—technical systems such as cameras, computers, and media platforms—that operate according to programs.¹⁹

These programs define the range of possible outputs: they delimit what can be produced, how it can appear, and under what conditions it circulates. The human being no longer stands outside these systems as an autonomous subject but functions within them as an operator or “functionary.” What appears as free action is, in fact, the selection among possibilities already inscribed within the program.²⁰ At this point, the analogy with the unconscious becomes clear. Like the unconscious, the program operates behind the back of the subject. It structures action without being fully transparent; it conditions expression without being explicitly thematized. Users of technical systems rarely grasp the full logic of the apparatuses they employ. They act within a field that is already organized, pre-structured, and constrained. In this sense, the program functions as a determining instance that is neither fully visible nor entirely controllable, much like the unconscious in psychoanalysis. However, the analogy must be handled carefully, as the differences are as significant as the similarities. The Freudian-Lacanian unconscious is defined by repression, conflict, and return. It is dynamic, unstable, and driven by desire. What is excluded from consciousness does not

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious” (1915), in Standard Edition, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan *Écrits I* (Paris : Seuil, 1966).

¹⁹ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 24–32.

²⁰ Ibid.

disappear; it returns in distorted forms, demanding interpretation. The symptom, in this framework, is meaningful: it is a coded expression of unconscious truth.²¹

The task of psychoanalysis is therefore interpretive—it seeks to decode the symptom and reveal the underlying structure of desire. The program, by contrast, operates not through repression but through *selection and limitation*. It does not conceal content that later returns; rather, it defines in advance what can and cannot be produced. What lies outside the program does not return as a symptom—it remains simply unactualized, excluded from the field of possibility. The logic here is not one of hidden meaning but of operational constraint. The program does not speak in riddles; it calculates, organizes, and generates outputs according to its internal rules.²² This shift from repression to selection entails a broader transformation from a hermeneutic to a combinatory model of meaning. In psychoanalysis, meaning is something to be interpreted: it lies beneath the surface, encoded in symbolic formations.

In Flusser, meaning is something to be generated: it emerges from the recombination of elements within a programmed system.²³ The subject does not uncover hidden truths but produces configurations. The emphasis moves from interpretation to operation, from deciphering to generating. A corresponding shift occurs in the status of desire. For Lacan, desire is constitutively linked to lack; it is never fully satisfied and continually displaces itself across signifiers.²⁴ This introduces a fundamental instability into subjectivity: the subject is always divided by the structures that constitute it. In Flusser, desire recedes as a central category and is replaced by the notion of *possibility*—a field of combinatory options defined by the program. Human activity becomes less a matter of expressing unconscious drives and more a matter of navigating available configurations. This shift from desire to possibility suggests that human agency is increasingly defined by external structures rather than internal drives, fundamentally altering how we conceive of autonomy and creativity. For example, whereas Lacan's theory emphasizes the internal division of the subject rooted in language and unconscious processes, Flusser's account highlights how technical systems and programs shape the field of action, positioning the subject as an operator within a network of possibilities. This perspective underscores the significance of external frameworks in guiding behavior and meaning, inviting us to reconsider the nature of subjectivity in contemporary society.

Interpreting this shift as a complete removal of the unconscious is inaccurate. Rather than disappearing, the unconscious is externalized and reconfigured. The opacity that psychoanalysis attributes to the psyche is transferred to the technical system. Programs are, in principle, knowable, yet in practice they remain too complex and layered to be fully grasped by users. This practical

²¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious" (1915), in Standard Edition, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957).

²² Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

²³ *Idid*.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan *Écrits* (Paris : Seuil, 1966), p. 83

opacity mirrors the functional opacity of the unconscious.²⁵ The notion of an “external unconscious” thus captures a historical transformation in the locus of determination. Where psychoanalysis situates the determining structure within the subject, Flusser situates it in the environment. The subject becomes the site at which programs are enacted rather than the origin from which meanings emerge.²⁶

Vilém Flusser is careful to preserve a minimal concept of freedom within this framework. Freedom does not consist in escaping the program—an impossibility—but in *playing against it*²⁷. This involves exploring the limits of the system, producing improbable combinations, and revealing the structure of the program itself. Such acts remain internal to the system while pushing its boundaries. This conception of freedom can be contrasted with the psychoanalytic notion of traversal. Both Flusser and Lacan reject the idea of a fully autonomous subject, yet they locate transformation differently: for Lacan, in relation to desire and the symbolic. For Flusser, in relation to the program. The broader implication of Flusser’s analysis is that contemporary subjectivity is increasingly shaped by technical conditions that function analogously to unconscious structures. Media systems, algorithms, and digital platforms do not merely mediate experience; they actively configure it. They determine what is visible, communicable, and meaningful. In this light, Flusser’s concept of the program can be seen as a critical bridge between psychoanalysis and media theory. It preserves the insight that the subject is not self-transparent while relocating the site of opacity from the psyche to the technical environment.

To be a subject today is not only to be divided by language—that is, our identities are shaped and fractured by the ways we communicate—but also to be programmed by systems such as social media algorithms or bureaucratic structures, whose rules one can navigate, but never fully transcend. This means that while we may try to express ourselves freely, both the language we use and the systems we interact with—like digital platforms or institutional processes—actively structure our possibilities for action and meaning. Thinkers like Jacques Lacan argue that language inherently divides the self, while Vilém Flusser suggests that technical systems further shape our subjectivity by defining what we can do and how we can do it. As a result, contemporary identity is formed through an ongoing interplay between internal linguistic divisions and external programmed constraints, inviting us to critically reflect on how these forces influence our autonomy and creativity.

²⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

²⁶ Vilém Flusser, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1994).

²⁷ Vilém Flusser’s concept of “playing against the apparatus” (or “playing against the program”) is defining the issue of freedom as not simply owning the technology. It arises mainly through outwitting the technology by recognizing the game, cheating, and challenging the apparatus’s programmed limitations.

Technical Images: Algorithmic Mediation and Identity Formation

*Technical images*²⁸ represent a stark departure from traditional mirrors, mediating self-recognition not through simple physical reflection, but through complex and often opaque networks of algorithms and protocols.²⁹ Unlike the seemingly direct representation offered by a conventional mirror, technical images function within inherently biased digital systems, where *code*³⁰ subtly structures not only what is seen, but also how it is valorized, interpreted, and ultimately, believed.³¹ This active mediation influences the very conditions under which individuals come to perceive themselves, and perhaps more importantly, are allowed to be perceived by others, often reinforcing existing social hierarchies.³² Recognition and self-understanding are thus patterned by digital operators driven by code designed with specific, often commercially-motivated goals, fundamentally reshaping *subjectivity* through algorithmic control.³³

The power of technical images lies not in passive mirroring, but in their active curation of the gaze. They selectively amplify certain voices and perspectives while simultaneously silencing others,³⁴ effectively scripting the terms of relationality within digital spaces.³⁵ This curation unfolds through algorithms that rank, filter, and recommend content, often privileging engagement metrics and virality over authenticity or criticality. As a result, the distinction between authentic, spontaneous desire and the programmed responses shaped by the platform's inherent biases becomes increasingly blurred, potentially leading to a form of algorithmic conformity where individuals unconsciously adapt their behavior to maximize visibility and validation. With the proliferation of digital interfaces and social platforms, the boundary between individual subjectivity and these controlling *technical systems* becomes not just permeable but actively eroded. Identity is no longer secured solely by the illusion of stable recognition; it's continuously and often unconsciously recalibrated through dynamic feedback loops—mechanisms of visibility, ranking, and algorithmic suggestion that may prioritize platform goals over individual well-being. These ongoing processes reinforce and reshape the subject's sense of self in real time, deeply entangling personal identity with

²⁸ Vilen Flusser, *Into the universe of technical images*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

²⁹ Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (MIT Press, 2011)

³⁰ According to Flusser the technical images are not representations of reality. These are surfaces that encode complex, abstract, and often magical information.

³¹ O'Neil, Cathy, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. (Crown, 2016)

³² Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018

³³ Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

³⁴ Couldry, Nick, and Joseph Turow. "Advertising, big data, and the clearance of public space: lessons from early media research." *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 1717-1734.

³⁵ Van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, (Oxford University Press, 2013).

technological mediation, raising profound questions about autonomy and the future of self-determination in an age increasingly defined by algorithmic governance.

Conclusion

Vilém Flusser's thought marks a decisive shift in how we understand subjectivity, technology, and reality itself. In contrast to classical phenomenology—exemplified by thinkers like Edmund Husserl—Flusser no longer centers analysis on consciousness as the origin of meaning. Instead, he redirects attention to the technical systems that mediate and, increasingly, produce our experience of the world. This departure from consciousness finds an echo in Lacan's deconstruction of the autonomous subject.

A useful comparison can be made with Martin Heidegger. In "The Question Concerning Technology: And Other Essays"³⁶, Heidegger argues that technology is not merely a tool but a mode of revealing (*Aletheia*): it shapes how reality discloses itself to human beings. The danger, for Heidegger, lies in the reduction of the world to "standing reserve," where everything—including humans—becomes a resource to be used. Despite this critique, Heidegger still assumes that there is a depth to reality that is being revealed, however problematically. Flusser moves beyond this framework. For him, the issue is no longer how reality is revealed, but how it is programmed. In a world dominated by what he calls "technical images" (photography, screens, digital media), reality is not simply disclosed but actively generated through apparatuses—structured systems governed by codes and rules. These apparatuses determine not only what can be seen, but also what can be thought and communicated. Like Lacan, for Flusser, language and code shape the perception of reality, and not the other way around.

This leads to a transformation of the human subject, which we can link to the concept of the Lacanian subject, divided and constructed through the Symbolic. The traditional notion of a stable, reflective subject gives way to what Flusser describes as a "functionary" or operator. Instead of expressing an inner self, individuals operate within the constraints of technical systems, producing outputs—images, posts, data—that conform to the possibilities predefined by those systems. Subjectivity is thus replaced by projection: the self is no longer something discovered inwardly, but something constructed outwardly through mediated representations. This construction can be considered as a process that affects the Imaginary and the Symbolic, as described in Lacan's psychoanalysis.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology: And Other Essays*, (Perennial, 2011).

Contemporary platforms such as Instagram provide a clear example of this dynamic. Users often believe they are expressing their individuality, yet their activity is structured by algorithms, filters, and interface designs that shape visibility and desire. What appears as free expression is, in fact, a form of participation in a programmed environment. Identity becomes a curated profile; lived experience is transformed into content; reality itself takes the form of a continuous feed of images. In a Lacanian framework, this could be interpreted as an attempt to construct a coherent identity (an Imaginary Ego) through the mediation of the Symbolic and desire.

Artificial intelligence intensifies this condition. With systems like ChatGPT or image generators, the human role shifts further from creator to operator. The act of creation is reduced to the formulation of prompts, while the system generates output based on probabilistic models. Here, meaning is no longer tied to lived experience but emerges from the interaction between user input and algorithmic processing. The human does not express but activates a program.

Despite the apparent determinism of this framework, Flusser does not entirely abandon the possibility of freedom. Instead, he redefines it. Freedom does not lie in escaping technical systems — something that is impossible—but in playfully confronting them: exploring their limits, subverting their rules, and revealing their structures. In this sense, creativity becomes a form of critical engagement with the apparatus. The possibility of criticism and resistance, even within pre-defined frameworks, reflects the subjective break that Lacan emphasizes.

In summary, while Heidegger reveals how technology alters our relation to being, Flusser shows how media systems construct reality itself. In the age of digital images and artificial intelligence, we do not simply perceive the world—we participate in its ongoing production. The transition from subjectivity to projection captures this transformation: from an inward, reflective self to an outward, system-dependent generator of images and possibilities, a transformation that Lacan would see as a continuous struggle to appropriate the Real through the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

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