Technical Images and their Medium. How to Display Vilém Flusser’s Thinking

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REFERENCES

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How are we to re-think the relations between the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) and contemporary artists and visual arts, and his influence on them? The recent publication of several books by and about Flusser may help us to reconsider these links as a whole in a new light. First and foremost, the American publisher Univocal has brought out several writings by Flusser in English—Natural: Mind (2013), History of the Devil (2014), On Doubt (2014), and Into Immaterial Culture (2015)—coming from the archives held at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, a collection which still largely remains to be explored. In the Vilém Flusser bibliography from 1960 to 2000, i.e. “a total of 406 titles in German, 352 titles in Portuguese, 90 titles in English and 60 in French, among other languages”,1 “only thirty percent has been published and mainly in Portuguese and German”. Most of the writings available in English and French have been translated from the German. Likewise, although Flusser lived in France from 1973 on, his thinking is not well known here. In the meantime, the magazine Artforum1 has rediscovered the articles
he published over seven years (1986-1992) in “Curies’ Children”, the only column written
by a philosopher in that contemporary art magazine, which was founded in 1962.

2 But the major event is still Bodenlos – Vilém Flusser und die Künste, the exhibition at the
ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, 14 August-18 October 2015) in
Karlsruhe, and at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin (19 November 2015-10 January 2016),
accompanied by Flusserriana: An Intellectual Toolbox. This book is not so much the exhibition
catalogue as a selective dictionary with more than 200 entries, written in the three
languages (English, German and Portuguese) fluently used by Flusser, who in fact never
wrote in Czech, his mother tongue. This glossary covering the conceptual Flusserian
galaxy is the best critical tool available to us today for grasping the scope, complexity and
wealth of his thinking. Using a non-academic style, free from bibliographical references,
Flusser sidesteps the disciplines and coherence of any system. This eclecticism is not so
much the result of his writings (lectures and courses for students, contributions to the
non-specialized press) as of a precise strategy to avoid being confined and pigeonholed in
one field, albeit that of the ‘media studies’ with which he is frequently associated. Vilém
Flusser rarely in fact uses the word medium or the notion of medium; and his inclusion in
this discipline was a posthumous operation. In the manner in which his thinking is
transposed by writing, we can detect a Nietzschean tendency, as is suggested by Siegfried
Zielinski and Peter Weibel in their introduction to Flusserriana (“Nietzsche’s favored forms
of style and text: the short essay, autobiographical notes, thought-provoking aphorisms,
and specific games with fictional genres”). In other words, “nomadology instead of
ontology, was Flusser’s maxim”.3

3 His interest in contemporary artists and visual arts was also nomadic, episodic, scattered
and non-systematic, even if in Flusserriana it is suggested that Flusser likens the figure of
the artist to John Cage, Wolf Vostell and Joseph Beuys. “If there are parallels with the neo-
avant-garde, his interest in art was in reality dictated by what he called ‘communicology’,
an interdisciplinary approach which, according to Michael Hanke, hybridizes “physiology, sociology, gestalt and social psychology, game theory, cybernetics, information theory, art and literary criticism, logic, and economics”, and
studies “the process by which acquired information is stored, processed, and passed on”7.
“Communicology” focuses on the programme, a key notion which occupied the place that
progress had in the 19th century. Vilém Flusser broached works of art with a keen eye on
their capacity to inform the public, and not from the angle of art history, taste and
aesthetics. So he did not recognize any feature specific to art praxis in relation to other
technes, and was far more interested in artistic thinking than in the artefact in itself.

4 The fact remains that the relation between artwork and medium is anything but resolved,
because the artist has a dialectical relation with the trappings of communication. Artists
“should not comply with the programs, they must rewrite the programs”8 using works
and practices endowed with a subversive potential. These works appropriate a medium in
order to show how it works and deconstruct, from within, its dominant “techno-
imaginary”.9 Faced with the technical images which hallmark the post-historical (Nachgeschichte) consciousness, it is now suitable to play on the same turf, by developing a
“technical imagination” capable of deciphering them. This approach has to do with works
as much as exhibition arrangements. The exhibition is a form of inhibition which renders
spectators passive, as was pointed out by Flusser, who at the same time advocated the
exhibition’s end in relation to the São Paulo Biennal.10 To this effect, he suggested
turning the exhibition not into a “discursive medium” but into a “dialogic medium”,

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transmitting a coded message to several people instead of from one transmitter to one receiver: “In dialogued communication, the information results in a way from the process of communication”—meaning that it is created and not simply transmitted. In keeping with this, the ZKM did not exhibit any printed archival documents in display cabinets, as had already been done in the past by exhibitions dealing with the relations between thinkers and the visual sphere (Michel Foucault in 2002, Jean Baudrillard in 2004, Paul Virilio in 2006, Max Bense in 2010)—“Flusser’s thinking was not enclosed in glass boxes [or display cabinets]”.12 His thinking was reconstructed and exhibited through the works themselves, from the Brazilian painter Mira Schendel (in the 1960s) to the photographer Joan Fontcuberta (in the 1980s), by way of the zoosystematician Louis Bec, at the heart of the conception of his Vampyroteuthis infernalis. If the end result of Vilém Flusser’s interest in art praxis here goes beyond the intent and scope of this exhibition, two examples will help us to better understand the challenges.

In 1972, Vilém Flusser was in charge of the Communication section of the São Paulo Biennial, and, by way of the art critic René Berger, he met Fred Forest. At that same moment, this latter had embarked on the purchase of 150 sq.cm. of the daily newspaper Le Monde, had the empty insert published, and invited readers to appropriate that space for themselves. For Fred Forest, Vilém Flusser wrote, “The mass media are not his medium, but his object”.13 Two years later, Fred Forest undertook a series of experiments with video, a less traditional medium than newspapers, and developed the habit of filming his exchanges with Flusser with his Portapack (Les Gestes du professeur). Without that link between the sociological artist and the philosopher, the decipherment of the gestures that formed one of Flusser’s most successful phenomenological analyses would have taken a quite different form. Their exchanges about technical images were nothing less than a dialogue designed to put technical images to the test. Between Flusser, gesticulating as he made comments about his gestures, and Forest, moving the camera as he photographed the “professor’s gestures”, there was a sparkling brilliance, with effects that were neither deliberate not conscious: “My hands responded to the gestures of the camera, and the alteration of their movements subtly changed my words and thoughts. And Forest moved not only in response to my movements, but also to the thoughts that I was verbally uttering.”14 Forest filmed a philosopher in action, but makes philosophy with a camera, too. This material was addressed to a public invited to react, as it was being filmed itself. The tape thus produced was made available for other forms of appropriation and commentary, in a succession of meta-dialogues. This fruitful collaboration was based on one and the same hunch: video was not a mere recording tool, but a major epistemological instrument taking part in the actual creation of the discourse, with all its restrictions (for example, the length of the tape, which in those days was 20 minutes). According to Flusser, “video has virtual properties which are absent in other media: it is an audio-visual and space-time continuum. It is involved in the phenomenon which it shows. It can be immediately projected without having to be ‘edited’. It is open to the dialogic process. It summarizes certain aspects of the printed word, and film; and the lecture”.15

This is exactly what comes about in the video Schlagworte Schlagbilder. Ein Gespräch mit Vilém Flusser (1986, 12 minutes), in which the young film-maker Harun Farocki, sitting in a Berlin café, suggested to Flusser that he should focus on the relation between front page words and pictures of the daily newspaper Bild-Zeitung. The two media dealt with by Fred Forest in a distinct way, newspaper and video, were this time dovetailed together by
Harun Farocki. With two pairs of glasses on his forehead, Flusser delivered a semantic analysis which went beyond the common idea which holds that the image illustrates the text or the text clarifies the image. Here, quite to the contrary, the text is a function of the image as much as the image is a function of the text: two intersecting dimensions which can no longer be told apart. As Farocki suggested, in the case of the daily paper, this conceptual overlap also worked at the graphic level. The crime report is constructed by the press by accentuating its visual power, with the article’s title also functioning as imagery, for example through the chromatic reversal of the letters—white on a black ground when night is involved ("Die Blutnacht"/ "The Bloody Night"). Flusser emphasized the visual capture of the page in its entirety: the linearity of the writing was impeded by obstacles, in the same way that the framed images were criss-crossed by interferences (another image or a stage direction), or else spilled over into the space earmarked for words. In the photograph of a corpse, for example, the arm which is outside the frame touches the title of the article, or the slogan, to borrow the video’s title. This graphic penetration remains on the boundary between two and three dimensions, between the two-dimensional flattening and the illusion of volume. This montage gives rise to an intentionally chaotic situation, the purpose of which is to muddle our analytical capacity and our critical spirit. According to Flusser, this facilitates consensus and the “absorption of the message with a reduced level of consciousness”, by making us incapable of deciphering and properly distinguishing the iconic, textual message. Decisive in this respect is the role of the photographic shot, which is to say of the technological images which shape reality in a novel way. It is no coincidence that, as Farocki points out, on the first page we see photographs instead of drawings. For its part, the video merely adds an additional layer to their analysis of the relation between word and image. As Flusser observed, this latter is at once included in the wider, and no less problematic, frame of the video recording this exchange, and turns it into a narrative by zooming in on the two people in conversation, or on the cover of Bild-Zeitung. This filmed interview confronts us with a twofold visual level: the logo-iconic reading of the daily paper spread out in front of the spectator by Flusser and Farocki, and the reading of the moving images of the video, a “televisuality” for which the spectator becomes the sole responsible party.

According to Christa Blümlinger, there resided between Flusser and Farocki a “powerful elective affinity” which went beyond a mere collaboration. The theoretician and the artist shared the same forma mentis—a bit like in the recording of Vilém Flusser’s gestures by Fred Forest. What the writing, the shift from one language to another and “the pensive power of the technical images” thus all represented for the former was the same as the montage for the latter. In a description of Vilém Flusser’s book Ins Universum der technischen Bilder [Into the Universe of Technical Images], referred to at the beginning of the video, Harun Farocki writes: “The ideas are turned into knots, and each time he overlaps these knots with a load, a different speed, coming from a different direction. His way of proceeding is intensive, not extensive, he does not conquer foreign territories, but explores a space defined by many different paths”.4 Vilém Flusser believed that philosophy was no longer practiced in writing, but via the image […] he knew that it was only images that could bring logic and the imagination closely together in one metalanguage.”5 Such is the example of a metalanguage in the time of the telematic society for which Vilém Flusser thus laid the foundations by writing his texts on a portable Olympia AEG typewriter.
NOTES

4. “In fact, Vilém Flusser did not like the term ‘media’ at all—which is why it is a mistake to refer to him as a media philosopher”: Onetto Muñoz, Breno. “Media”, *Flusseriana*, op. cit., p. 272; “Vilém Flusser placed no particular value on the concept of media in his writings, and he explicitly did not refer to himself as a media philosopher”, Krtilová, Kateřina. “Media Philosophy”, *Ibid.*, p. 274
5. *Flusseriana*, p. 8 and p. 7
9. The term is used by: Weibel, Peter and Zielinsky, Siegfried. “Introduction”, *Flusseriana*, op. cit., p. 9 (“after World War II the neo-avant-garde [...] outdid each other in criticizing and deconstructing the techno-imaginary, which was in the process of establishing itself on a massive scale”).