

# The man who calculated models and synthesis

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*O mundo codificado.*

*Por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação*

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## ABSTRACT

The essays joined in this book are an attempt to comprehend how information processes are given to the world. According to Flusser, immaterial culture and phenomena like information result from codes. It seems to him that the codified condition of the world emerge as images on the electronic screens, data stored in hard disk drive, cartridges film, holograms and programs which could be only decodable and which should not be apprehended. The man from the codified world does not concern about things, but about the signs interpreted by the codes.

**Key words:** codes, design, post-history.

## RESUMO

O alvo primordial dos ensaios deste livro é a compreensão do modo como a informação se oferece ao mundo. Para isso, Flusser toma os códigos como matérias formatadoras da cultura imaterial e dos fenômenos como informação. O estatuto codificado do mundo se oferece assim sob forma de imagens eletrônicas em telas, dados armazenados em disco rígidos, rolos de filmes, hologramas, programas inapreensíveis e tão somente decodificáveis. O homem deste mundo não se ocupa das coisas, mas dos signos interpretados pelos códigos.

**Palavras-chave:** códigos, design, pós-história.

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If the formulation of questions is already a sign of hope, there is nothing to fear from the immaterial culture. At least this is what the questions which constitute Vilém Flusser's viewpoint makes us believe in his recently edited collected writings about the codified world. "Essay" is the world that puts a period to the book at the same time it invites us to retrospect, in order to recover some of the shortcuts where the experience of this intellectual has elaborated his hypothesis, sometimes baffling, concerning the communication revolution from the Gutenberg Galaxy (in Marshall McLuhan and Edmond Carpenter's understanding), to the design constellation (in Pete Lunenfeld's understanding).

The essays from this book are rigorously conducted from the hypothesis that does not hesitate to question theories or to point misconceptions about many of the concepts that have been pasteurized by the postmodern trend, especially the ones which lack of knowledge about the life of the codes and their spread in the immaterial culture. The codified world is, therefore, a reflection about a living substance: the codes and their cultural changes.

The appreciation of the object which was the target for Flusser's investigations on the essays – the conception of code as the material from a culture that denominates itself as immaterial – is an easy access to the universe of enquiries and formulations that intend to draw the culture character out of the determinist explanation's context.

In his first essay from the book, Flusser proposes reviewing the "nonsenses" that surround the conception of immaterial, thought as the opposite of material. The terms of this proposal aim for doubly misconceived attributes: the material as something immutable, eternal and, consequently, something impermeable to changes. The root of this reasoning is the conception of immaterial culture as ephemeral, transitory, timeless manifestation. The destroying counterpoint to this formulation is accurately remembered by the author: "the idea of changes in the states of matter (from solid to liquid, from liquid to gaseous – and vice versa) gave birth to a new image of the world (...), everything is energy, in other words, the possibility of casual, improbable accumulations, it is the capacity to formulate the material" (p.25). In this case, Flusser ponders: if the term immaterial presupposes the term energetic, the dynamic of codes transformations has developed, in fact, an immaterial culture. This is about a culture where the material receives its form (therefore, it is unformed) from a design operation and it can present itself as phenomenon or, simply, as information (p.28). So, the immaterial culture searches for the way the information presents itself to the world. This way offers the information as a model, avoiding confusions between the thing and the sign.

Evidently this is an articulation that orients the thought about the codified world statute in which the representations are models codified by immaterial information: electronic images on screens, data stored in hard disk, film cartridges, holograms, unintelligible programs but only decodable. The man from the codified world does not concern about things, but about the signs interpreted by the codes. He is a man without hands, a performer who feels, experiments and knows (p.58).

The ability to make questions is shown in the book as a sign of hope because this is how Flusser put himself in relation to the object of his investigations. When reflecting on the man's function as the creature who, in the codified world, give up acting with his hands and starts operating with models (immaterial information), the essayist discourses about a conception not less controversial from his thoughts: the human history would not progress in straight line but drawing circles: from nature to culture; from culture to garbage; from garbage to nature (p.60 and followings). In this ecological aim of organizing the flood of life systemically, the time is not historically interpreted, in other words, as a gear in direction to a determined place. The nonlinearly time drawing is post-history: a projection of everything at the same time conception by McLuhan. A time that does not elapses linearly, but throws itself on surroundings.

It is time to introduce the prime collection of ideas which constitutes the essays: the implications of a world organized and modified by codes. The definition of code only appears at the essay that has entitled the book (pp. 126-37): the code as a symbolic system and, therefore, conventional. However it takes to say that Flusser's argument credits to the code the ability to define positions, as well as the view of the world and of humanity itself: "wherever they find codes, something about the mankind can be deduced" (p.130). Parenthesis: in 1978's essay, according to the source quoted on page 218, the essayist defends the dialogic of language that the cultural codes introduce in culture, changing the communication into the elemental semiotic problem to the interactions mediated by signs. He recovers, in my point of view, a tradition of thoughts that, since the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, organizes the investigations of the cultural semiotic theorists, from Roman Jakobson to Iúri Lotman, passing through Mikhail Bakhtin work, evidently. Although they are not frequently remembered, they are precise interlocutors to whose implications Flusser constructs his potential arguments on each of the essays from this collected writings.

Among the implications examined by Flusser, the communication not only holds a privileged position on the reflection but it is also a privileged focus to measure the immaterial culture that is settled by the non-things, by environmental dynamic of post-history, by the programs and metaprograms which redesign the role of man in the world.

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The artificial aspect of communication figures as fundamental premise of the explored complex. If in the first moment, the artificial attribute comes in opposition to the natural one, it is necessary to remember that the flusserian conception insists on what it is forgotten when the learning of the code becomes natural: the mediation founded on conventionality. When we say that a corporal gesture is natural, we forget its second nature. Considering that the human nature operates in the direction of forgetting the artifice of communication, the communication theory must work to measure it through the interpretation (pp.91-2). It is not the phenomenon that is interpreted, but its representation in order to find meanings. The artificial aspect can also be found bounded to a trick: the human ability to store acquired information to share them and to create new information (p.93). As this sharing happens in diverse circumstances, the dialogical communication becomes the primordial instance to know the codes in transformation.

Considering that the codes construct structures from which the communication can be measured as representation in the immaterial culture, Flusser examines at least four structures: the line, the surface, models and algorithms. While the lines are structures implemented thanks to the invention of the alphabetical code consecrated by the writing, the surfaces are scenic and bidimensional structures projected by images on screen or wall. These structures imply different forms of representation and, consequently, different forms of thought, reading and dialogue. Thus, the conceptual thought which starts from the image to the synthesis it is in opposition to the new imagination in which image is a mediation not anymore explained by a linear thought. It is an argument that seeks for a probabilistic and interpretative basis from the combination of models. From the semiotic point of view, Flusser seems to claim for a cognitive process that is not dominated by signs anymore, as the alphanumeric codes, but for one that opens itself to the possibility of being represented by continuous codes, as the process of a new imagination centralized on technical images. Here the structures are modeling operations of immaterial culture. It is not the concrete actions of men in direction to an end or place, but a combinatory process that, as in a game, tries shots and “the possibility of combining different histories” (p.123). Instead of discourses and conceptions, the thought creates models – center of the argument in defense of post-history at a civilization stage that is consequence of communication revolution deflagrated by electricity and by the technological communication medium.

Curiously, the post-history codified world is an “avant la lettre” regress (p.128) to medieval period equally organized by the continuity of surface codes (frescoes, stained glass windows, inscriptions, mosaics). The invention of writing modifies the cultural scenery with the supremacy of linear codes of

discrete signs that organizes a historical time. Flusser's argument is that the continuous codes of the surface's bidimensionality are programs that design civilization of models. Evidently, the roughness of the argument doesn't allow the thought to fall to destruction of a *modus operandi* so the other can settle down and found, as mythical Adam, the new civilization, completely separated from the former thing. Maybe this is the great threat to the post-history conception we have been discussing here.

The argument that understands the codified world as post-historical dimension affirms that the culture founded on linear writing that orients the historical time and, therefore, the predominance of discrete signs, constitutes the former text without which no model could be culturally designed (any relationship with ideas of Iuri Lotman about the texts of culture is pure chance). In this sense, "the electronic codes are steps back to the texts, since they allow images to be comprehended. A photograph is not an image of a circumstance (as well as the traditional image), but it is an image of a series of concepts that the photographer has in relation to a scene. The camera cannot exist without texts (for example, the chemical theories), and the photographer also needs to imagine in the first place, then to conceive, and finally, «to imagine technically»" (p.136). The revolution of codified world is not the medium (lens, cathode ray tubes, electromagnetic waves, etc.) but "the fact that they are «models», that is, they mean concepts. A TV program is not a scene of a circumstance, but it is a «model», or an image of a concept, of a scene" (p.136).

In post-historical times, the writing and the texts which have been charged to develop in the culture did not accomplish the function of linear narrative only. The translation of scenes to concepts evidences another procedure: "the transcoding of bidimensional codes into one dimension" (p.140). When he advances his analysis of this metalinguistic process, Flusser seems optimistic in relation to the future of writing: "the culture as a giant text transcoder into images" (p.146). These texts work as programs to the models construction which have been charged to operate synthesis. Writing is, therefore, the projection of programs, operative models with further metatextual spreads.

It is time to return to the argument that defends the artificial aspect of communication in virtue to the organizing force of code on his capacity to inform, recode and transcode sign systems in programs construction. These operations here related are not mere juxtaposition of effects, but they point to a world arrangement from another form of mediation: the calculation. It is, to the structures configured from models, as important as the line and surface to define linear and bidimensional structures.

The examination of structure modeled by calculations develops in the context of a critical reflection about image: iconoclasy *versus* new imagination (pp 160-177). The radical criticism it results does not want to subject itself to

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the writing. If it aims to the radicalism, it cannot regulate itself to the linear code; it must assume the claim for another one. That is, “an appropriate code to this type of analysis, that means, the numeric code, has been available for long time” (p.169). Exactly the code that has been incorporated to the alphabetical code. However, Flusser apprehends a contradiction on the alphanumeric codification: “the gesture of numeric notation is a movement very different from the movement made on linear writing. It is not a smooth movement, but uninterrupted, a gesture of choice” (p.169). Out of the alphabetical context, the numerical code is calculation and, consequently, the capacity of stocking memory for future projections. Here is how it configures the new imagination in which image results from calculations of probabilities free from logical and casual explanations: states of matter possibilities as it has been initially discussed.

The orbit traced by the communicational structures examined on Flusser’s essays are oriented by a radical criticism to the writing (in lines) as the privileged form of producing thoughts about the world, as also by a criticism of images which gravitates around the same discrete basis. What the immaterial culture – founded in calculated models and in the process of synthesis – experiments is the configuration of world by a perspective of design. So we penetrate in the final part of the book reviewed here. However, it is not about observing cultural procedures, but to work on the operational knowledge of men. It is communication design if it presents to us as an interpretative basis and, consequently, philosophical to achieve the design not as a way to overcome death (in Occident) and life (in Orient), but “a new existential feeling” – a “daring, adventurous” hypothesis we leave to our interpretation.