

## On the Death of Politics

by *Vilém Flusser*



The term “revolution,” originally a metaphor transferred from astronomical to political discourse, signifies the point on a line at which the line turns in a new direction. In this original sense, a circle consists of many such points, and the circling celestial bodies describe permanent revolutions. However, courses here in this world are sooner perceived to be roughly linear, rather like the course of a river. The current of political history, for example, seems to flow forwards, namely from the past towards the future. In such a current, revolutions are seldom aspects of the course, points around which the line winds. For this reason, the transition of the term “revolution” from astronomy to politics results in a shaky metaphor. There is, however, one point on the line of political history for which celestial mechanics is applicable, namely the end point. At this point, the line stops flowing forwards, events begin to shift and circulate, and to resemble heavenly conditions. In light of the Romanian revolution, this lecture submits the hypothesis that we are on our way to reaching this point.

In order for politics—that is, a life in public—to exist at all, one has to be able to distinguish between public and private. A distinction of this kind has been possible ever since there have been villages. Only in the village (polis), and not previously with hunting and gathering nomads, did people step out from their private spaces into the village square in order to exchange information they had developed within that private space. For this reason, history and politics are fundamentally synonymous: there can be no private histories precisely because a private language is a square circle. Everything prior to villages is prehistorical, because it is pre-political. Should a distinction between private and public become impossible, should the private house and village square become blurred, then politics and thus history will have come to

an end. The pre-village condition of the circulation of myth, of the eternal repetition of the same, would thus be reproduced. Romania suggests such a return to permanent revolution. To a post-historical prehistory.

One can discuss the historic oscillation between private and public, between economics and politics, from the perspective of various discourses. For example, communicologically. Then history looks something like this: information is acquired in public space, stored and processed in private space, reworked into new information so as to be published, that is, exhibited in public space and, for its part, collected anew. Such a communicological interpretation of history as feedback between privatization and publication appears to have a negatively entropic tone: against the second law of thermodynamics, but also against Mendel’s Laws, history is a process, thanks to which the sum of information continually increases by means of the progressive reprocessing of acquired information. This makes political engagement plausible; it is directed against the stubbornness of nature. Recently, however, it has become clear that the negatively entropic aspect of history is only on the surface. All information developed historically is condemned to lapse into entropy. Ecological movements (such as the German Greens) demonstrate that one becomes aware of the absurd in every political engagement. Consider the following example.

A pot displayed at the market is fetched home, stored there, compared with others already in storage, from which a new, better, more beautiful pot is fashioned, displayed on the market, then fetched home, and this is what we call historical progress. People become committed to this, that is, to something always better and more beautiful, occasionally at the risk of their own lives. Nevertheless all pots, all potters, and all pot consumers will necessarily crumble into ashes, and in case they do

not disinform themselves quickly enough, they will contaminate the area as waste and refuse. According to this, history is nothing but a negatively entropic epicycle on the entropic track, and political engagement ultimately results in producing disinformation (waste) and not information (culture). This is just as true for so-called immaterial information as for material information, which is not difficult to prove.

However, the approaching death of politics is not only a function of ecological awareness. For example, it is not only a function of the fact that historical materialism, the clearest commitment to political progress, threatened to transform areas under its control into muck hills and radioactive waste. The death of politics has yet another explanation, quite simply the fact that there is neither a public space in which to publish, nor even a private space in which to be private. One can neither politicize the economy (the goal of the Left) nor privatize politics (the goal of the Right)—thus neither nationalization nor perestroika—because, owing to the communications “revolution,” above all of electromagnetic media, no one can speak of publication and privatization. There is no longer a public sphere, ever since politicians, uninvited, pushed their way into kitchens in order to make their speeches, and since then the kitchen itself is no longer a private sphere, but rather is carried away into the media storm. Politics is on its deathbed, history is perishing, and Romania is the first symptom of post-history.

Since town drummers no longer summon people to gather in the marketplace, but rather newspapers and letters are delivered straight to the house, insightful people should have, in fact, foreseen the death of politics. Since then, the outflow from the private into the public sphere (political engagement) began to become absurd. One can become better informed by staying home, and one can better inform others by beaming news directly into their houses rather than by publishing. But even today, with “broadcasted” [*rundgefunkteten*] images and sounds and with “reversible cables,” there are still people who obstinately persist in the political. In this regard, the events in Romania allow the last scales to fall from our eyes: they clearly show that political categories are wide of the mark. Romania is not a republic, but rather a mass reacting to broadcasts, and the same will be true increasingly for all media-controlled situations.

The communications structure of historical societies, the oscillation between private and public, gave rise to dividing society into peoples, stations, classes or unions, and “history” is really the public collision of such groups. The new communications structure, the broadcasting of

information by way of channels, leads to an amorphous mass of pulverized granules, whereby these grains of sand accumulate into dunes in the wind of sensations, only to be scattered again into solitariness, boredom, and probability. This decline of historical structures such as the family or the party and this uniformizing of solitudes, that is, this post-political and thus post-historical behaviour, are already clearly apparent in the various fascisms of the first half of the century. Yet, at that time, the uniformizing broadcasters, which were also made uniform themselves, had no television, but only radio, film, and newsprint at their disposal. That is to say, the murderous and bestial uniformization of the period was not yet able to erase the given reality through alternative realities. The demagogues of the time still had to lie, while contemporary programmers are already able to formulate desired facts through the given reality, in order to cover it up. This ontological violence of television calls for careful consideration.

Goebbels, the first information theoretician of post-politics, had to reach for redundancies in order to bestow plausibility to the lie within the given reality. That, for example, the Jews are our misfortune, had to be repeated daily for years in order to become almost believable. The television images of corpses in Timisoara, on the other hand, are instantly convincing, for they are neither truth nor lie. They are intentionally formulated, programmed facts that take the place of the given reality, and in such a way that doubts can be raised about that reality, but not about themselves. Images of this sort are not as good as real, but rather better than real. Only this ontological magic of television images, which are becoming ever more technically refined, can eradicate the last remains of political awareness together with its roots, in order to make room for a new, still nameless awareness, or a new unconsciousness: a post-ontological awareness, relativizing every reality, a loss of faith, an existence in the abyss.

The television, this executioner and gravedigger of politics, this underminer of faith in the reality of things, can nonetheless be “played down.” Television is a broad form of dissemination [*eine breite Ausstreuung*] (broadcasting\*) and only as such is it uniformizing. Closely disseminated television images [*eng ausgestreute Fernsehbilder*] (narrowcasting,\* for example, closed circuits\*) can on the contrary lead to creative dialogues, especially when such images are coupled with computers. The concept of a future telematic society is based upon such a narrow diffusion [*enge Streuung*] of networked images. Thus, the decline of reality in Romania is not the only possibility after the death of politics, rather, the

telematic alternative is also possible. This argument runs roughly as follows: wherever uniformized, fascistic conditions already prevailed before the death of politics, television will be centrally connected, and it will broadcast [*broadcasten*], thus transforming people into granules that will pile up and disperse in the storm of programmed emotions. But wherever so-called “democratic,” and thus roughly dialogic, conditions prevail before the death of politics, telematic networks are at least conceivable. What is proceeding in contemporary Eastern Europe, and under somewhat different circumstances in the Third World, should not necessarily make us worried. We can certainly mourn the granulation taking place over there, but we do not need to fear it. This is an argument on shaky ground.

Television images are magical, not only because they pile up key elements for alternative facts, but also because they can be received simultaneously everywhere: not only space, but also time is conquered. Under their control, there can be no spatially and temporally remote areas, and such distinctions (for example the term “underdeveloped”) are pre-televisionary, which means still historical. What happened in Romania one year ago happened everywhere simultaneously. And when in Eastern Europe the last remains of political awareness give way to a brutal, post-historical, uniformized magic, then *de te fabula narratur*.<sup>1</sup> This is the reason why we are gathering here today.

The death of politics is no reason to despair. I wish to bury it and not to praise it. In its stead could appear almost immediately a new, networked intersubjectivity, which we could call “telematics.” The *mise en scène* that we have seen played out in Romania is only one among various post-historical possibilities. And to this let me add the following thought: in my talk, our contemporary situation was only articulated from a communicological standpoint, and even then only in cursory sketches. There could be other, less eschatological standpoints. Nevertheless, we are used to interpreting the concept of “freedom” above all in a political way. Indeed, we cannot mourn the death of politics, as it became visible in Romania, but it is nonetheless sad. May the following discussion help air this atmosphere.

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*Translated by Michael Darroch, University of Windsor, 2008.*

#### NOTES

- 1 “Of you the tale is told.” Cf. Karl Marx, Preface to *Das Capital*—trans.

\* Terms in English in the original—trans.