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# Vilem Flusser, the 21st century and the interactive technologies

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**Abstract:** When Vilem Flusser developed his idea of the technical images, he could not foresee how far the technical development of producing images would go. The technical image has become an important part of the perception of the public, eventhough it still remains purely virtual. In the media the technical image is omnipresent and is also used as to manipulate society and its members in favor of political mainstreams or to create an atmosphere for or against something or somebody. A future ideal society, the telematic society, is created out of the generation of information by technical images.

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## 1. The image

According to Vilem Flusser "images are significant surfaces" (Flusser, 2000). They do show that there would be something out there in space and time, that this would have to be abstracted by the receiver of this message. Images always send messages and to decode the message it is necessary to "abstract surfaces out of space and time and project them back into space of time is what is known as 'imagination'. This is the precondition for the production and decoding of images. In other words: the ability to encode phenomena into two-dimensional symbols and to read those symbols" (Flusser, 2000). So the ability to understand the message of images is bound to human understanding and to a cultural technique of de- and encoding symbols. A symbol in itself is nothing but an avatar, a sign which is uploaded with a meaning, with some content. This content has to be renewed over and over again, otherwise it will lose its content and meaning and become completely meaningless and therefore it won't symbolize anything anymore (see Theis, 2008). The same goes with images. When we go back to what Flusser meant by his preconditions of the production and decoding of images, then we can see, that he mentions space and time as dimensions of some universe in which the human is living and whose centre he is. Immanuel Kant states, that space is a matter of the outer sense, while time would be a matter of the inner sense (Kant, 1974). This means, that space can be apprehended by the human in a way, that it can be touched and felt. The sense of touch that each human has makes this possible. Time on the other side, can not be touched, still it can be felt. If someone stops his or her movements completely, then it can still be felt that time would be passing by. The inner sense, of which Kant is always speaking, makes the human feeling that time is passing by eventhough the human himself does not contribute anything to that. So an image is always the combination of time and space, a snapshot

of a moment which has been captured in one way or the other, may it be analogue, digital or in whatever other way. This does not necessarily mean, that this has to be a figurative illustration. The images of the particle collisions at the LHC at the CERN in Geneva are also images, snapshots of the moment the particles collided with each other and set free new particles and energy, but they are not figurative demonstrations of these moments. They are more like abstract demonstrations, an image of the lane a particle takes. Physicists can read these images very well and gain new knowledge out of them, but this is only possible, because they are trained in decoding the messages these images transport towards them.

Flusser also states, that the world of images would be a magical one, where everything would be repeated and in which everything would participate in a significant context and this would be quite a difference to the historical world, where nothing would be repeated and "in which everything has its causes and will have consequences" and that this would have to be taken into consideration when decoding images (Flusser, 2000). Of course this is quite a bloomy way to speak about images, but it is true that images can be repeated and reproduced, while in the world of space and time it is impossible to reproduce the same action at the same time again. As time progresses continuously, this is an irreversible process.

Images are also mediators between the world and the human beings. The humans need images to make the world comprehensible, as it is not immediately accessible to them (Flusser, 2000). These images are supposed to be maps, but they turn into screens and cause the problem of idolatry: the image is worshipped by mankind and the message it transports is received uncritical. Images influence the world and world influences the images. The golden calf of imagination is praised and adored, the abstraction process of imagination continues and in the history of mankind there have been several stages upon the abstraction of images. Flusser embeds them in a cultural historical context. He finds five stages of abstraction:

A) The stage of "exact experience", in which the human being has the experience of nature in common with the animals.

B) The stage of "comprise and treatment", in which the human faces certain objects and uses and treats them with a purpose.

C) The stage of traditional images. They are based on the abstraction of an object and this being projected back into space and time. Traditional images are drawings and paintings, also sculptures are traditional images.

D) The stage of "apprehension and narration, the historical stage". This one is based on the invention of writing. Linear writing is the antagonist to the traditional image, as they are in a constant battle against each other. The episode of the linear history, starting from the bible heading towards the contemporary understanding of history as progress, is just an inbetween stage for Flusser, but it is quite an important one, because the stage of apprehension and narration divides the development in a pre-historic (before the invention of texts and writing) and a post-historic (after the invention of texts and writing) stage.

E) The stage of technical images, which is based on the ability of "calculation and computation", therefore based on apparatus and computers. Technical images are not based on the human ability of imagination, they are based on an automatism of an apparatus. An apparatus is recognized as a result of scientific theories and therefore technical images are indirect results of scientific texts, which are post-historic.

(see Flusser, 2000, Flusser, 2008)

This process of abstraction is narrowed down from the four-dimensional time and space down to the zero dimension. That means, at exact experience the human had to

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deal with time and space as well, as the four dimensions, in the stage of comprise and treatment time has lost its importance and therefore only space with its three dimensions is important. The next stage of this abstraction process is the two dimensional plot where the traditional image is spanning, which is narrowed down to the linear, the one dimension of a text and this again is reduced completely to the zero dimension of the technical image. Technical images are assembled by pixels and therefore can not be understood anymore, they can only be computed, calculated or rendered. (Flusser, 2000).

## 2. The technical image

The technical image is produced by an apparatus. Therefore it is necessary that there is a human, who knows how to handle the apparatus that produces this technical image. While traditional images are pre-historical, technical images are post-historical. So post-historical processes require the existence of an apparatus and a functionary, who can "produce" the technical image. Examples for technical images are photos, moving images, videos, static curves, diagrams, microfilms, diapositives, traffic signs, as well as blueprints, curves in statistics and drafts (Flusser, 1998). All of them need a technical construction or system to be produced. This apparatus is dictating someone's life, eventhough the functionary is not the slave of the apparatus. They require each other to be functioning, to be working. An apparatus can not work on its own, it needs some kind of human input, may it be through a programme or an algorithm, while the functionary requires the apparatus to be able to produce a technical image.

According to Flusser, photos do not reflect the item photographed abruptly. They are not images of an outer nature, they are only mediated by an apparatus or a program of an apparatus. This can not be seen in the final result, but the production way of the technical image can be understood that way. Technical images are not any closer to nature than traditional images, they are even further away from it. For example: an artist has a model straight in front of him and paints a picture from his perspective, from the way he sees the model. Therefore he abstracts the model somehow, by the nature of his own imagination. The photographer takes photos of this model, but to produce images of this model he needs a photocamera for that, an apparatus. These photos are technical images, because the imagination of the photographer is influenced by the technical possibilities of the photocamera and not by then skills of the artist and his imagination. Of course a photographer as an artist needs skills as well, but everyone who has basic technical knowledge about a photocamera can take simple pictures. The basic difference between a photographer and a picture taker is, that the photographer wants to do a piece of art, a photo, a technical image, which should reflect a situation, while the picture taker is eagerly trying to hold on to every moment of his situation by taking as many photos as possible (see Flusser, 2000).

Technical images can only be understood, if the texts, which are their real background, can be decoded as well. This kind of understanding is only possible on a technical, calculation based level. The text behind them has to be understood, which provides the technique from which then the technical image arises. So the more developed the technique is, the more difficult the technical image is to be understood. Therefore it is impossible to understand technical images like traditional images. Traditional images have a two-dimensional alignment and can be carried away by hand, depending on the dimensions and if the carrier would be strong enough, although Flusser states, that cave drawings are not traditional images, they would be artefacts as they could not be carried away (Flusser, 2005), while technical images can

be two-dimensional, but you still need to carry the apparatus to carry the technical image as well, which makes them zero dimensional. A technical image can not be forked and held onto, while a traditional image can. The technical image is the lowest abstraction level of reality (Flusser, 2008).

## 3. Society, the media and the technical image

Society is a community of individuals (Elias, 1987), where each individual person has different ideas, values and imaginations. The term "society" is an abstract term, which describes this community, whereas Ferdinand Toennies differenciates between 'society' and 'community' (Toennies, 2001). An individual is part of a community, when it orientates itself much more to the large association than to one's self interest. Society on the other side is characterized by the action of the individuals out of their own interest and secondary relationships are more emphasized than familiar or community ties. The following part has to be seen under this aspect.

Today's society is in the process of transformation from a knowledge economy towards an information society (see Stehr, 1994, Spinner 1994). Knowledge is supposed to be power, but it is becoming more and more important to know where the important is media literacy and technical images. As it was shown before, Flusser sees the development of society as a process of abstraction of the image towards the zero dimension, the universe of the technical images. It goes along with the importance of the ability to cope with the old and new media, the technique of media literacy. The German education scholar Dieter Baacke defined media literacy being based on four columns:

A) Media critique, which should develop a critical attitude towards the media and form citizens who question the content of the message transmitted.

B) Media knowledge, which is necessary to know about the background of today's media systems and the concentration of the media in a few hands, either of physical or juridical persons.

C) Media usage, means the usage of the media actively to broadcast one's own messages or how to use the media wisely and extract the necessary information without running into nowhere by using it excessively without finding the information that was needed.

D) Media design, which is characterized by innovative changes and developments within media systems and creative aesthetical variations, which go further than the everyday communication routines. (Baacke, 2007)

So when we take a closer look at the four columns and put them into relation with the terms of society and technical image, it is obvious, that there is a close connection between all of them. In today's media society, technical images are found everywhere. They appear in newspapers, books, on television, on the internet, simply everywhere. With the technical possibility of computer programs they can be manipulated that easily, that the original image deformed that strongly, that the original theme of the image can not be recognized anymore. Reality, which is supposed to be shown by that photo, is extremely contorted.

Vilem Flusser discusses the distribution of the technical image, and the image in general, that way, that he sees the media as a discursive matter (Flusser, 1997). His idea of a discourse is, that there is only one sender and lots of recipients, who are passive, while the broadcaster is active. So for Flusser a discourse is a broadcasting process. The term is not used in the original way, where a discourse would describe

some kind of dialogue between two equal partners. For Flusser a discourse is just a one way communication. In this context, the technical images influence and manipulate society, who has no chance to escape from this flood of images. They go overboard and by the gaining power of newsagencies like Reuters or Associated Press, independent forms of broadcasting sink without a trace. The concentration of power over images goes that far, that Reuters tried to make politics in the year 2010. They manipulated photos of the assault Israeli soldiers did on the Turkish transport ship 'Mavi Marmara', which transported helping goods to the Palestinian zone. It was not the first time that Reuters was accused of manipulating photos in favor of Israel (EPI, 2010). This is just one example, but it shows that technical images are present in society everywhere and an apparatus is not only needed to generate them, an apparatus is also necessary to transmit and manipulate them. Society's reception of technical images has become normal, they are widely accepted as THE kind of images. So when taking Flusser's model of abstraction into account, society has already reached the highest stage of abstraction: the universe of technical images.

## 4. The telematic society

As in the previous chapter mentioned, society changes from a knowledge economy to an information society, which is also caused by the overboarding flood of technical images. This information society in its most ideal form is what Flusser considers as the telematic society (Flusser, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005, 2008). In this society, information is generated through a dialogical form of communication and not in the broadcasting way. In general there are three versions of society, according to Flusser's model:

A) today's society, in which dialogues and discourses are keeping balance

B) an authoritarian society, in which discourses dominate. The lack of dialogues generates the lack of information as well. Discourses are not fed by dialogues and information anymore.

C) a future, revolutionary society, where dialogues dominate. They constantly generate information and this flood of information sweeps over the discourses, which break by then. Therefore there are no authorities in a telematic society and directs itself in a cybernetic way because of it webwise structure.

The development of a telematic society goes hand in hand with the development of the abstraction process of the image. Flusser states that the images become more and more mobile, while the receivers become more and more immobile, more and more static (Flusser, 2005). The amount of spare time which the human has in industrialized countries is becoming more and therefore the extent of the irrigation with technical images is becoming more as well. These images are programmed to keep the ability of critique to a minimum (Flusser, ibid.). There are two ways of transporting these images: the way of broadcasting, like radio or television, and the weblike transport, like a telephone for example.  Flusser's idea of a telematic society deals with a weblike structure. There is no concentration of knowledge in certain points. Knowledge's locations are widely spread and open for manipulation from all members of this web (Flusser, 2008). It can be compared to a neuronal net, where information is processed and distributed quickly from each neuron to each neuron in a very short amount of time. The historic aspect of knowledge storage is becoming unimportant. Flusser describes it the following way: "Society falls apart in piles of bodies, in a 'lonely mass', and human attachments, the human webs dissolve. The individual, in front of a computer terminal sitting, back to back sitting young Californians have no social

awareness. They belong to no family and do not identify themselves with any people or class. If someone observes this diffusion in a non-ideological way, in a phenomenological one, then a new rising of a new social web can be noticed. The strings, which combine this 'new humans' with the senders of the technical images, will be seen. It will be recognized, that they are not 'a-social', but very strongly socialized people, even when they are socialized in a new way. They are that strongly socialized, that we have to fear about their individuality, despite of their ostentible isolation" (Flusser, 2008). Flusser describes here a, by then, advantgarde of Californian computer freaks, which had detached itself from the common networks and created a group and network of its own. Today there are several groups like that. When we think of the various interest groups in social networks like Facebook or MySpace, or the community of the World of Warcraft players. By the time Flusser wrote about this, the internet was still a network which was used by universities only.

Flusser considers the telematic society as a society without any copyright, open source and open access to knowledge everywhere (Flusser, 2008). The projected goal is to generate new knowledge all the time, but for that the access to existing knowledge has to be free of charge and free for everybody. This kind of society is quite utopic, because the human nature longs for private property as well, not only for common goods. So it is like a communist dream, where in theory a socialist society is the pre-stage to the ideal communist society, in which everything belongs to everybody and no disparity between the individual members exists (see Engels, 1986). That way, a telematic society is more or less a communist society. The communication in telematic networks is characterized by the following points: non-centralistic, changeability, immateriality, transsubjectivity, equality, timelessness and dislocation (Flusser, 2008). The commercialization process of today's internet has somehow introduced this communicative points, eventhough some stronger concentration tendencies can be found. There are dominating enterprises on the internet as well, so a real equality does not exist, but this is only a reflection of society: fraternite, egalite, liberte are phrases of utopia.

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