

Vilém Flusser

Our Images

(translated from the Portuguese by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes¹)

Our world has become *colorful*. The majority of surfaces that surround us are colorful. Walls covered with posters, buildings, shop windows, vegetable tins, underpants, umbrellas, magazines, photographs, films, and TV programs are all in resplendent *technicolor*. Such a modification of the world, if compared to the grayness of the past, cannot be explained merely aesthetically. The surfaces that surround us shine with color because above all they irradiate messages. The majority of the messages that inform us about the world and our situation within it is currently irradiated by the surfaces that surround us.

It is the surfaces and no longer the textual lines that primarily codify our world. In the recent past the codified world was dominated by the linear codes of text, and currently it is dominated by the *bi-dimensional* code of surfaces. Planes such as photographs, TV and cinema screens and shop windows have become the carriers of the information that program us. The dominant *media* are now the images and no longer the texts. A powerful *counter-revolution of images against text* is underway. However, it is necessary to discern that in this counter-revolution, it is a case of an entirely different type of image that never existed before. The images that program us are post-alphabetic and not pre-alphabetic, as are the images of the past.

Linear *writing* (for example the Latin alphabet or the Arabic ciphers) emerged as a revolution against images. It is possible to observe this *revolution* in specific Mesopotamian ceramic tiles. They show the image of a scene, for example of a victorious king. The image is composed of “pictograms” that signify the king and his enemies kneeling. Next to the image the same pictograms have been imprinted onto the clay once more, but this time they form lines. These lines are texts that signify the image next to it. The pictograms in the text no longer mean “king,” but mean “king in the image.” The text dissolves the bi-dimensionality of the image into a uni-dimensionality and thus modifies the meaning of

¹ From Vilém Flusser, *Post-History*, Flusser Archive Collection, edited by Siegfried Zielinski, Univocal Publishing, Minneapolis 2013, p. 91-98. <http://www.univocalpublishing.com/books/102-post-history-by-vilem-flusser>

the message. It starts to *explain* the image.

The text describes the image as it aligns the symbols contained in the image. It orders the symbols as if they were pebbles (“*calculi*”), and orders them in series just like a necklace (“*abacus*”). Texts are calculations, enumerations of the image’s message. They are *accounts and tales*².

Images must be explained or told, because as with every mediation between man and the world, they are subjected to an internal dialectic. They represent the world to man but simultaneously interpose themselves between man and the world (“*vorstellen*”). As far as they represent the world, they are like maps; instruments for orientation in the world. As far as they interpose themselves between man and the world, they are like screens, like coverings of the world. Writing was invented when the concealing and alienating function of images threatened to overshadow the orienting function. Or when images threatened to transform men into its instruments instead of serving as instruments for men.

The first scribes were *iconoclasts*. They sought to break and pierce the images that had become opaque, in order to turn them once again transparent for the world. So that the images could once again serve as maps, instead of being “worshipped.” The scribes’ revolutionary engagement is clearly seen in Plato and the prophets: they *demythologized* images.

The gesture to read and write texts happens at a level of consciousness that is *one step* removed from the level in which images are ciphered and deciphered. For image-consciousness the world is a *context of scenes*: it is experienced and known via bi-dimensional mediations or surfaces. For textual-consciousness the world is a *context of processes*: it is experienced and known via the mediation of lines. For the consciousness structured by images, reality is a *situation*: it imposes the relation between its elements. This consciousness is magical. For the consciousness structured by texts, reality is a *becoming*: it imposes the question of the event. This consciousness is *historical*. With the invention of writing, history begins.

However, writing did not eliminate images. The history of the West (of the only “historical culture” *sensu stricto*), may be seen as a dialectic between image and text. “Imagination” as the ability to decipher images and “conceptualization” as the ability to

² In Portuguese Flusser creates a play with the words “*contas*” and “*contos*.” *Contas* can be translated as both beads and accounts and *contos* as tales or loose- change, small coins. Both allude to small things that can be lined up and strung together but that also point to a climate of linear narrative. [TN]

decipher texts, are mutually superseded. Conception becomes progressively more imaginative and imagination more conceptual. Western society can be divided into two levels: the basic level, that of the illiterate that live magically (the serfs) and the level of the literate that live historically (the priesthood), or the level of images and the level of texts. And there is feedback between the two levels: images illustrate texts and texts describe images.

The invention of the *printing press* and the increase of general literacy through *compulsory schooling* dramatically modified this dialectic. Texts became cheap and accessible, first to the bourgeoisie and then the proletariat. Historical consciousness became accessible to Western society as a whole and was superimposed onto magical consciousness. Images were expelled from everyday life into the “*baux-art*” ghetto. Historical images, and above all the scientific ones, became unimaginable. Texts became “purely conceptual.” Thus texts betrayed the intention that created them: they no longer explained or demythologized images. They were no longer de-alienating and started to follow their own internal dynamic, which is the linearity of the discourse.

Texts, as all other mediation, including images, obey an internal dialectic. They represent the world and conceal the world, they are instruments to orient but form opaque walls in libraries. They de-alienate and alienate man. Man may forget the orienting function of texts, which is their intended aim, and may start to act in function of them. This inversion of the relation “text-man,” such “textolatry,” characterizes our history in its last stages. Political ideologies are examples of this type of madness. Thus historical consciousness gradually lost the ground that supports it, the contact that the texts establish with the world of concrete experiences. And this contact happens only when texts explain images, when they have imaginable messages. The 19th century is therefore the stage for the *crisis of historicity*.

That was when photographs were invented, with their several variations; films, videos, holograms, etc. In sum: *technical images*. They are instruments for turning the messages of texts imaginable. Texts were originally aimed against images, in order to turn them transparent for our concrete lived experience, with the aim of freeing humanity from hallucinatory madness. Technical images have a similar aim: they drive against texts with the aim to turn them transparent for our concrete lived experience, in order to free humanity from conceptual madness. The gesture to codify and decipher technical images

takes place at a level that is *one step* away from the level of writing and *two steps* away from the level of traditional images. This is the level of post-historical consciousness. This is a level that is still difficult to sustain. It is far too new in order for us to occupy it, unless for fleeting moments. We tend to constantly fallback into the level of historicity. We are, in relation to technical images, the same as the illiterate are in relation to texts.

Technical images are essentially different from traditional images. Traditional images are produced by *men* and technical images by *apparatus*. The painter places *symbols* onto a surface in order to mean a particular scene. Apparatus are black boxes that are programmed to devour *symptoms* of scenes and to spew out these symptoms in the form of images. Apparatus *transcode* symptoms into images. The apparatus' program derives from texts: for example from chemical and optical equations. So that apparatus transcode symptoms into images in function of texts. They are boxes that devour history and spew out post-history.

Technical images *pretend* that they are not symbolic like traditional images are. They pretend that they are symptomatic, "objective." The difference between a symbol and a symptom is that the symbol means something to whoever has knowledge of the consensus of such a meaning, while the symptom is causally linked to its meaning. The word "dog" symbolizes and the tracks on the ground symptomatize the animal. This pretension of technical images of being symptomatic or objective is fraudulent. In reality, apparatus *transcode symptoms into symbols*, and they do it in function of particular programs. The message of technical images must be deciphered, and such decoding is even more arduous than that of traditional images: the message is even more "masked."

The transcoding process done by apparatus may be observed with relative clarity in the case of *television*. This is a giant transcoding apparatus that irradiates images amphitheatrically. The individual TV apparatus are slots for their *output*, through which images are thrown into the private space. The apparatus as a whole also disposes of a slot for *input*, through which it devours symptoms and texts. The symptoms come in the form of tapes, covered with impressions caused by scenes, for example, videotapes. The texts come in two different forms. In the form of reports, scripts etc. that "describe" scenes, and in the form of programming, that in its turn is founded upon texts of scientific theories and ideologies. That is: the apparatus nourishes itself with symptoms and history on several levels. All of this serves as raw material for the apparatus. Inside the box that is

the TV apparatus, this material is translated into images and irradiated. It is transcoded from symptom and history into post-history.

It is not that history has stopped “developing.” On the contrary: *it turns faster* than before, because it is being sucked into the apparatus. Events precipitate themselves toward the apparatus with accelerated speed, because they are being sucked and partially provoked by the apparatus. All of history, politics, art, science and technique are thus motivated by the apparatus, in order to be transcoded into their opposite: into a televised program. The apparatus has become the aim of history. It has become a dam for linearly progressive time. *The fullness of times*. History transcoded into program becomes eternally repetitive.

Hence, technical images, as opposed to traditional images, do not mean scenes, but events. But they are, all the same, images. Whomever they program, lives and experiences reality *magically*, as a context of situations (“*Sachverhalte*”). However, such magic is not a return to pre-historicity. It is not based on faith, but on programs. “Program” is “prescription:” writing is prior to it. It is post-historical magic, and history serves it as pretext. Whoever is programmed by technical images lives and knows reality as a programmed context.

Certainly: it is possible to transcend such a form of existence through the deciphering of technical images. But this demands a step back from technical images toward programing, not a step forward toward conceptualization that is characteristic of texts. It demands *a fourth step*. Historical critique, that which searches for the motives behind the technical images, will not emancipate man from them. So that the current counter-revolution of technical images can be overcome only due to a new faculty, to be developed, and that may be called “technical imagination:” the capacity to decipher technical images. This capacity is associated to formal thought; such as it is being established through informatics, cybernetics, and game theory. If we do not manage to take this step toward “nothingness” (“absent structure”), we will never emancipate ourselves from thoughts and actions that are programmed by technical images.