



Vilém Flusser

writings

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The Codified World

The revolution in the world of communications whose witness and victim we are influences our lives more than we usually tend to recognize. We know, for example, the consequences that television, advertising, and film can have. What is meant here is much more radical. The present reflections will propose that the meaning of the world in general and of life in the world transforms itself under the pressure of this revolution in communications.

If we compare our situation with the one that existed before the Second World War, we are impressed by the relative colorlessness of the time before the war. Architecture and machinery, books and tools, clothes and food, all of these things were comparably colorless. Our environment is filled with color, which, day and night, in public and in private, sometimes loud and sometimes quiet, demands our attention. Our socks and pajamas, cans and bottles, displays and posters, books and maps, beverages and ice creams, films and television, everything is in Technicolor. With these things we are dealing not simply with an aesthetic phenomenon, but with a new “artistic style.” The red traffic light means “Stop!” and the obnoxious green of peas means “Buy me!” This explosion of colors means something. We are exposed to a constant stream of colors. We are programmed by colors. They are an aspect of the codified world in which we have to live.

Colors are the manner in which surfaces appear to us. Thus, if a significant number of the messages programmed for us appear in color, it means that surfaces have become important as carriers of messages. Walls, screens, paper surfaces, plastic, aluminum, glass, textiles, and so on have become important “media.” The situation before the war was relatively

gray, because at that time surfaces played a smaller role in communications. Lines dominated: letters and numbers, which were ordered in rows. The meaning of these symbols is, for the most part, independent of color: a red “A” and a black “A” signify the same sound, and, had it been printed in yellow, the present essay would not have another meaning. For this reason, the current explosion of colors points to an increase in the importance of two-dimensional codes. Or vice versa: one-dimensional codes like the alphabet now begin losing importance.

Premodern and Postmodern Images

The fact that humankind is being programmed by surfaces (images) should not be considered a revolutionary piece of news. On the contrary, it apparently signifies a return to a primitive origin. Before the invention of writing, images were a decisive means of communication. Because most codes are ephemeral, such as the spoken word, gestures, and song, we are dependent on images to decipher the meaning that man has given both his deeds and his suffering from the time of Lascaux to the time of Mesopotamian tiles. Moreover, surface codes, such as frescoes and mosaics, tapestries and church windows, played an important role even after the invention of writing. Only after the invention of printing did the alphabet truly begin to dominate. For this reason, the Middle Ages—including the Renaissance—appear so colorful to us in comparison to modernity. In this sense, our situation can be interpreted as a return to the Middle Ages, which is to say, a *retour avant la lettre*.

It would be unfortunate if we wanted to think of our situation as a return to illiteracy. The images that program us are not really the kind that dominated before the invention of printing. Television programs are different from Gothic church windows, and the surfaces of soup cans are different from surfaces of Renaissance paintings. In short, the difference is this: premodern images are the products of skilled handworkers (“works of art”), and postmodern images are the products of technology. One can recognize a scientific theory at work behind the programmed images, but the same is not necessarily true for the premodern images. Premodern man lived in a world of images, which meant the “world.” We live in a world of images, which theories regarding the “world” hope to symbolize. This is a revolutionary new situation.

Excursus on the Concept of Codes

In order to grasp this, the present reflection will attempt an excursus on the concept of codes. A code is a system of symbols. Its purpose is to make communication between people possible. Because symbols are

phenomena that replace (“stand for”) other symbols, communication is a substitute: it replaces the experience of “that which it intends.” People must make themselves understandable through codes, because they have lost direct contact with the meaning of symbols. Man is an “alienated” animal, who must create symbols and order them in codes if he wants to bridge the gap between himself and the “world.” He must attempt to “mediate.” He must attempt to give the “world” meaning.

Wherever one discovers codes, one can infer human presence. The circles that are constructed from stone and the bones of bears and that surround the skeletons of African anthropoids who died two million years ago allow us to recognize these anthropoids as men. For these circles are codes, the bones and stones are symbols, and the anthropoid was a man. For he was “alienated” (insane) enough to have given the world a meaning. Although we have lost the key to these codes—we do not know what these circles mean—we know that we are dealing with codes: we recognize the meaning-giving intention, the “artistic” in them.

Later codes, such as cave drawings, can be deciphered with less effort—because we use similar codes. For example, we know that the drawings in Lascaux and Altamira signify hunting scenes. Symbols that consist of two-dimensional codes, as is the case in Lascaux, signify the “world” in that they reduce the four-dimensional situations of time and space to scenes. In that they “imagine” them. Taken literally, “imagination” means: the ability to reduce the world of situations to scenes. And vice versa: to decipher the scenes as substitutes for situations, to make “maps” and to read them—including the “maps” that designate desired situations, for example, a future hunt (Lascaux) or gadgets to be built (blueprints).

The scenic character of codes gives rise to a specific way of life of societies that they program. One can call it the “magical form of being.” An image is a surface whose meaning is suspended in a moment: It “synchronizes” the situations that it represents as a scene. But, after this moment of suspension, the eye has to wander around the image, to receive its meaning as it is. It has to “diachronize synchronicity.” For example: It is clear from the first moment that this scene signifies a situation of the type “walking.” But, only after the diachronization of synchronicity does one realize that what is meant are the sun, and two people and a dog going for a walk.



From Image to Line

For people programmed by images, time flows through the world the way the eye wanders across the image: it diachronizes, it orders things into positions. It is the time of the return from day to night to day, of sowing to reaping to sowing, of birth to death to rebirth, and magic is the technique that is called for in this experience of time. It orders all things in the manner in which they relate to each other within the cycle of time. The world, the world of images, the “imaginary world” thus codified, possesses the same form of being as that of our ancestors who were programmed and cultivated for untold centuries: for them, the “world” consisted of a bunch of “scenes” that demanded magical attunement.

And then we came to an eruption, a revolution with such violent consequences that we are still breathless when we consider the event that took place six thousand years ago. One can illustrate this event according to the manner it appears on “wedge-shaped” Mesopotamian tiles.



The invention of writing consisted not so very much in the invention of new symbols, but rather in the unrolling of the image into rows (“lines”). We say that with this event prehistory ends and history in the true sense begins. But we are not conscious of the fact that with this event we mean the step that was taken outside of the image and into the yawning void, making it possible to roll the image out into a line.

The line that stands on the right side of the image in the illustration rips the things from the scene, to arrange them anew, that is, to count them, to calculate them. It rolls the scene out and transforms it into a story. It “explains” the scene in that it enumerates each individual symbol clearly and distinctly (*clara et distincta perceptio*). For this reason, the line (the “text”) does not directly mean the situation, but rather the scene of the image, which for its part means the “concrete situation.” Texts are a development from images, and their symbols do not directly signify something concrete, but rather images. They are “concepts” that signify “ideas.” For example, ☼ in the illustration does not directly signify the concrete experience of the “sun,” but rather ☼ in the image, which for its part signifies “sun.” Texts are one step further away from concrete experience than images, and “conceptualizing” is an additional symptom of being one step further away than “imagining.”

If one wants to decipher (“read”) a text, one must let the eye glide along the line. Not until the end of the line does one receive the message, and then one must attempt to bring it together, to synthesize it. Linear codes demand a synchronization of their diachronicity. They demand progressive reception. And the result is a new experience of time, that is, linear time, a stream of unstoppable progress, of dramatic unrepeatability, of framing: in short, history. With the invention of writing, history begins, not because writing keeps a firm hold on processes, but because it transforms scenes into processes: it generates historical consciousness.

This consciousness was not immediately victorious over the magical. It overcame it slowly and with great effort. The dialectic between surface and line, between image and concept began as a battle, and it was not until later that texts sucked up images. Greek philosophy and Jewish prophecy are battle cries against images on behalf of texts: Plato, for example, despised image making and the prophets inveighed against idolatry. Not until many centuries later did texts (Homer and the Bible) begin to program society, and, throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, historical consciousness remained the distinguishing mark of a small literary elite. The masses continued to be programmed by images, although these images were gradually infected by texts. They petrified, so to speak, in a magical consciousness, remained “pagan.”

The invention of printing cheapened manuscripts and allowed a rising middle class to push through to the historical consciousness of the elite. And the industrial revolution, which tore the “pagan” villagers from their magical existence, in order to crowd the masses around machines, programmed this mass with linear codes thanks to elementary schools and the press. In the so-called developed countries, historical consciousness became widespread during the nineteenth century. On the other hand, it is just becoming so for the rest of humankind, because it is only now that the alphabet is actually beginning to function as a universal code. If one considers scientific thinking as the highest expression of historical consciousness—because it raises the logical and procedural thinking of the linear text up to the level of method—then one can say: the victory of texts over images—of science over magic—is an event of our most recent history and far from being counted as conclusive.

From Text to Techno-Code

In case the first section of these demonstrations is correct, it is important, on the contrary, to be clear about the disappearance of historical consciousness. To the extent that surface codes dominate, that images replace alphabetical texts, this is the end of an experience of time made

conceivable by categories of history, that is, as irreversible, progressive, and dramatic. The codified world in which we live no longer signifies processes, or becoming. It does not tell any stories, and living in this world does not mean acting. The fact that it does not mean this any longer is called a “crisis of values”; for we are still generally programmed by texts, and thus for history, for science, for a political program, for “art.” We “read” the world, for example, as logical and mathematical. But the new generation, which is programmed by techno-images, does not share our “values.” And we still do not know for what meaning the techno-images that surround us are being programmed.

Our ignorance about the new codes is not surprising. After the invention of printing, centuries passed before writers learned that writing means storytelling. At first they only documented and described scenes. It will take just as long before we comprehend the virtualities of techno-codes, before we learn what photography, filming, videomaking, or analog programming signifies. Meanwhile, we are still telling TV stories. But these stories already partake of the posthistorical climate. It will take a long time before we achieve a posthistorical consciousness; but we recognize that we are close to taking the next decisive step, either stepping back from texts or all the way past them. This is a step that reminds us of the risky adventure of the Mesopotamian tiles.

Writing is a step away from images, because it allows images to dissolve into concepts. With this step, the “belief in images,” that is, magic, became lost, and a new level of consciousness was reached that led much later to science and technology. The techno-codes are a further step away from texts, because they allow us to make images out of concepts. A photograph is not the image of the facts at hand, as was the case with the traditional image, but rather the image of a series of concepts, which the photographer has come up with in the scene that signifies the facts at hand. Not only can the camera not exist without texts (for example, chemical formulas), but also the photographer must first imagine, then understand, to be able to “techno-imagine.” With this step backwards out of the text and into the techno-image, a new degree of alienation has been reached: the “belief in texts”—in explanations, in theories, in ideologies—is lost, because texts are now recognized as “mediations,” just as images were once upon a time.

That is what we mean by “crisis of values”: that we step out of the linear world of explanations and into the techno-imaginary world of “models.” The revolutionary originality of techno-images is not that they move themselves, that they are “audiovisual,” that they shine in light of the cath-

ode ray, and so on, but that they are “models,” the image of a concept of a scene. That is a “crisis,” because the reaching beyond texts disempowers old programs, such as politics, philosophy, and science, but does not replace them with new programs.

There are no parallels in the past that allow us to learn how to use techno-codes, for example, when they manifest themselves as an explosion of colors. But we have to learn it; otherwise we are condemned to endure a meaningless existence in a techno-imaginary codified world that has become meaningless. The decline and fall of the alphabet points to the end of history in the narrow sense of the word. The present reflection hopes to raise the question concerning the commencement of the new.

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“Until now there has been a dismal lack of translation of Vilém Flusser’s work here in the United States, which makes Andreas Ströhl’s carefully compiled collection all the more important. Flusser is the perfect theorist to read after postmodernity because in his work there is a forward-looking gesture addressing our current situation, that of a transitional period between epochs.”

—*Rain Taxi*

“This collection is a must-read introduction into the connected and networked world of one of the most original and prophetic thinkers of the past century.”

—*Leonardo*

The first English-language anthology of Flusser’s work, this volume displays the extraordinary range and subtlety of his intellect. A number of the essays collected here introduce and elaborate his theory of communication, influenced by thinkers as diverse as Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl, and Thomas Kuhn. While taking dystopian, posthuman visions of communication technologies into account, Flusser celebrates their liberatory and humanizing aspects. Taken together, these essays confirm Flusser’s importance and prescience within contemporary philosophy.

Vilém Flusser (1920–1991) was born in Prague and taught philosophy in Brazil.

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