



Digital Culture & Education (DCE)

Publication details, including instructions for authors <http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/>

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Into the universe of technical images

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Online Publication Date: September 15, 2012

To cite this Article: Crouch, D. (2012). Back to the future: Vilém Flusser's *Into the universe of technical images*. *Digital Culture & Education*, 4:2, 203-207.

URL: http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/dce_r004_crouch.pdf

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Book Review:
Back to the future: Vilém Flusser's *Into the universe of technical images*

David Crouch

Flusser, V. (2011). *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Trans. Nancy Ann Roth). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 081667020X, 224 pages, \$20 US.

First published 1985 as *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, Vilém Flusser's *Into the Universe of Technical Images* has only now been translated into English. It is part of a triumvirate of theoretical texts – alongside *Does Writing Have a Future?* and *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* – all of which scrutinise technology, communication, the fate of writing, and the radical potential of mediated images.

Because this text – a sustained reflection on concepts of visual culture and its electronic mediations – was first published in the nascent techno-climes of the mid-eighties, it begs the question, or questions: why translate it? Why publish it in English, in the second decade of the twenty-first century? Does it matter that it was composed on a typewriter? What about it is still significant, even pertinent? Considering the massive developments that have occurred in digital imaging, visual technologies and electronic communications over the last twenty six years, one could be forgiven for wondering what relevance the work of a media theorist leading readers *Into the Universe of Technical Images* in 1985 could have today. Just four years before the text's publication, MS-DOS and the first IBM-PC were invented. In 1985 photographs were taken on the Minolta 7000, motion picture films were still coiled in rolls of celluloid, and the highest grossing picture at the cinema box office for that year was, somewhat fittingly, *Back to the Future*. This was a time in which the Commodore 64 was popular and the year in which the Atari ST and Amiga were released. Moreover, media theory and analysis – a field perhaps awakened by writers such as Flusser – is no longer a retarded, overlooked or stagnant area of research and critical thought. Since Flusser, indeed without Flusser in English, there has been much critical and theoretical engagement with the developing intricacies and indicia of digital culture.

However, the first response spurred by reading Flusser's *Into the Universe of Technical Images* is a sense of eerie prescience. While elements of the discussion developed throughout *Into the Universe of Technical Images* are sweepingly polemic, many of his allusions and speculations have clearly come to pass and have been made manifest realities in the years preceding its composition. He uses metaphors such as the 'web' and the 'net' to describe the nature of a future techno-imaged culture, long before the rise of the internet and web-based culture. At very least, this text offers a remarkable, in places prophetic, vision of what has come to pass. However, there are many conjectured futures in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* that have yet to transpire. This is not to say they will not, but only to suggest that many of Flusser's ideas still operate at the level of the speculative; this too sustains the vitality and relevance of his work. While the essay contains dire warnings about the repressive potential of a globally interconnected

dialogic culture of technical images, there are also deeply utopian yearnings in much of this text; through the idea of technical images as kinds of neuro-prostheses, Flusser frequently conjures a mediated future in which all are on par, all humans are contributors to a global society of leisure, invention and shared creativity. Yet he also indicates the fragility of the path to this future, suggesting its perils and potentials could easily swing toward dystopia, indeed, as ‘technical images presently function, they lead on their own to a fascistic society’ (p. 61). This is but one reason for taking up the work of Flusser as a contribution to thinking about the role of media and digital culture in society today.

Flusser breaks his essay into twenty slim pericopes that, aside from two bookend pieces, use infinite verbs as titles: ‘To Abstract’, ‘To Imagine’, ‘To Make Concrete’, ‘To Touch’, ‘To Envision’, ‘To Signify’, ‘To Interact’, ‘To Scatter’, ‘To Instruct’, ‘To Discuss’, ‘To Play’, ‘To Create’, ‘To Prepare’, ‘To Decide’, ‘To Govern’, ‘To Shrink’, ‘To Suffer’ and ‘To Celebrate’. Each of these chapters approaches the nub of a particular problem within the arc of Flusser’s discussion. The infinite form leaves the verbs unmarked. In German infinitives can also stand for nouns, giving the actions described an abstract quality. Mark Poster’s introduction to the translation suggests Flusser can be compared to Jean Baudrillard and Marshall McLuhan, while also making the argument that many of the other critical theorists from the 1970s onwards – such as Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard, Deleuze, Derrida and Habermas – either ignore media culture, or approach it only through other preoccupations such as critiques of capitalism or institutions of democracy. Flusser does not, however, have McLuhan’s celebratory tone or descend into Baudrillard’s despair. Contrarily, not only does Flusser project a potentially optimistic media culture and society, he also offers a way of critically seeing the material qualities of the codes lying behind the apparatuses of the media. Flusser highlights the necessarily occluded materiality of media, and draws attention to the existential impact this has upon human consciousness. Poster’s introduction is a useful frame, although the greater part of it moves away from a focus on Flusser’s work. Instead it largely points to lacunas in the thought of major theorists regarding the study of media. In light of this, Poster advocates ‘a turn to Flusser’, although he does this tentatively; the final paragraph of his introduction tellingly begins ‘Perhaps . . .’ (p. xxiv).

Continuing and amending arguments developed in his early work *Toward a Philosophy of Photography, Into the Universe of Technical Images* sets forth an argument about images and develops ideas concerning the prominence of the visual in contemporary culture. In doing so, Flusser raises ‘the prospect of a future society that synthesizes electronic images’ (p. 3). Flusser suggests that technical images such as photography, film, and crucially, digital images, have produced a radically different way of seeing, and that this ‘universe’ is changing the way humans experience the world. On the cusp of this future, Flusser writes of it as a utopia – ‘we live in a utopia that is appearing’ and ‘all previous utopias’ will ‘pale in comparison to it’ – he imagines a ‘fabulous society’ where ‘scientific, political and artistic categories will hardly be recognisable’ and ‘even our state of mind, our existential mood, will take on a new and strange coloration’ (p. 3). *Into the Universe of Technical Images* is not, however, a celebratory speculation about a future utopia of mediated image. It is more accurately – and Flusser makes this clear – a critique of his present. He suggests the developments he is identifying could lead to two divergent futures, one which ‘moves toward a centrally programmed, totalitarian society of image receivers and image administrators’ or another ‘toward a dialogic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors’ (p. 4). Either way, there is apparently no doubt that this future society will be dominated by images and it is this which leads Flusser to begin the task of grasping for the state of mind bred in a universe of technical images, his search for the ‘consciousness of a pure information society’ (p. 4).

Technical images make it possible to ‘grasp the ungraspable and visualise the invisible’ (p. 16). They are produced through apparatuses which ‘consolidate particles around us’. The invisible bits of information, electronic abstract impulses that fingers, hands and eyes find unattainable are captured and computed by apparatuses which ‘have no trouble with particles’ (p. 16). Instead, these apparatuses can be programmed to shape photons and electrons, splinters of information and code into images. In this way, Flusser argues, the universe of the technical image, shored-up by the apparatus of electronic media, has the potential to bring about a cultural revolution, a revolution that is technical rather than political. How many technical or scientific developments, for example, have been made possible by visualising abstractions on a digital screen? This is what Flusser calls ‘the power to envision’. However, he goes on to suggest that the table that he is sitting at while writing this text is itself a swarm of particles, implying that anything is a construct of particles if examined closely enough. If this is the case, what is different about technical images? The difference is that in the process of making the table it was not the abstract particles which were directly shaped and manipulated into table form, while in the case of, say, the making of a television image, they were. The concrete television image is fashioned from particles, abstractions. Thus the ‘power to envision’ refers to ‘the capacity to step from the particle universe back into the concrete’ (p. 34), and thus Flusser argues that this ability arose with the invention of technical images. This is a level of consciousness that surpasses the search for linear coherence, explanation and calculation, and instead becomes ‘a new visionary, superficial mode of thinking’ (p. 38). At the acute edge of abstraction, ‘envisioners’ (p. 37) may be able to use technical images to assert the concrete. With an imperative tone, Flusser insists ‘we must abandon such categories as true-false, real-artificial . . . in favor of such categories as ‘concrete-abstract’(p. 38), an argument that perhaps foreshadows the turn to materiality that has recently become a feature of critical media studies.

This new state of incipient imagistic revolution may have its dark side; as Flusser somewhat hyperbolically writes, ‘perception theory, ethics and aesthetics, and even our very sense of being alive are in crisis’ (p. 38). The universe of technical image may result in the ‘suicidal view of Western society’ (p. 39), an illusory world in constant decay, an emptiness, ‘the yawning nothingness of nirvana’ (p. 38). However, Flusser appears to believe in the bequest of the technical image: the ‘visionary power that we are beginning to use’ that ‘makes us capable of calculating and computing the whirring nothingness around us’ (p. 39). Through abstract networks of computation, human beings become the loci of codes, atolls in a flow of information. Flusser writes that ‘all ethics, all ontology, all epistemology will be excluded from pictures, and it will become meaningless to ask whether something is good or bad, real or artificial, true or false, or even what it means’ (p. 128). All that will be left is information and experience.

The mutation in human perception and experience that Flusser describes has its roots in a shift from text to image. When this shift occurs the idea of a one-dimensional, historical progression of time is given over to a two-dimensional focus on ‘surface, context, scene’ (p. 5). Flusser argues that a linear mode of writing, which made the concept of history possible, is threatened by the digital spatiality of the image. Due in part to this rupture of the linear, he argues that technical imaged based society is not a return to a prehistory of rituals myths and cave paintings, but rather the emergence of something new, ‘inherently different’, something ‘posthistorical’ and ‘without dimension’ (p. 6). From the traditional to the technical universe, images change: where they were once ‘observations of objects’ they now become ‘computations of concepts’ (p. 10). For writing and history, Flusser proposes that this means an end. In fact he goes so far as to suggest text as a kind of evolutionary accident or by-water, an interruption in a much longer ‘history’ of images. Writing, linearity itself, is supposedly ‘decaying

spontaneously' (p. 15). In this there must be some melancholy for a man who repeatedly used the phrase *scribere necesse est, vivere non est* – 'Writing is necessary, living is not'.

There are ambiguities here, largely produced by the span of years and technical development between now and the time of the essay's composition; for example, Flusser's argument suggesting the waning of linear textual forms of exchange, in favour of dialogic imagistic interaction, was made before, for example, the advent of the e-reader and similar text-based digital devices. Flusser writes, 'all texts, even mine, must appear on a piece of paper' (p. 27). Would Flusser consider digitally produced text as image? A text as an image created from a technical deployment of certain codes? Are digital texts – which undeniably, but perhaps self-consciously, retain their linearity – part of his imagistic future? What of networking programs, which at one level imply the advent of the very abstractedly networked society that Flusser envisioned, but at another are still, perhaps increasingly, beholden to the written word, formats such as Twitter and telephonic text messaging? There is also the matter of non-linear texts, such as a complete volume of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, which are perhaps most often first approached in the same way as one first boards Geoff Ryman's train in 253, non-sequentially. And there are texts that are designed to be used in a non-linear fashion – Flusser himself cites a number of these, such as the Bible and the street and telephone directory – texts which are now available as searchable electronic databases that have no physical textual presence, nor book-like format, produced through electronic apparatus, and linked to other programs providing digitally mediated locative images. However, Flusser does write: 'Images of our time are infected with texts; they visualize texts' (p. 13). Text itself seems far from on the wane but ever more imbricated with image. Perhaps text has been worn-out by its relations with technical images, corrupted into the contractions and codes of ideograms, pictographs, cyberjargon, webspeak, texting and tagging, but it persists nonetheless. And what of the continued, if crippled, production and consumption of literary works? If not on paper, at least linear narratives are still enjoyed on one or other kind of reading apparatus. Texts appear to infect images evermore, and this more nuanced relationship is not adequately addressed by Flusser's conception of a clean break between text and image.

And where does this leave writing? If images 'visualise' texts, collage them and construct them, then writing either provides the pre-textual foundation of a techno-imaged form of societal control or the means for critiquing it. Reading and writing are yet to be anything but crucial to contemporary society. Thus far, the apparatus that supports the universe of technical images appears also to support the dissemination of texts, and a world still spilling over with words.

While Flusser's text strives toward clarity, the very terms of his title seem to elude the reader. And this is clearly not a matter of translation. While there are pains taken, and pages devoted to defining terms such as 'technical images' and 'telematic society', this nomenclature still seems to revolve around what are essentially half-formed concepts. This is not to imply that these ideas and hypotheses are not suggestive, which they certainly are; the text is pregnant with all manner of ideas with the potential to spawn new ways of thinking about visual media and informatics in contemporary culture. However, the breadth of Flusser's thinking may be his undoing; the term 'technical image' may itself breakdown by being ascribed to so many mediums and formats, such that any meaningful reflection upon them becomes part of a reductive project attempting to sum up the saturating nature of contemporary techno-image culture. In the same vein, Flusser's titular use of the word 'universe' (originally *Universum*) is odd. The implication that there is a single surface space upon which a culture of technical images is played out also seems reductive. In fact, Flusser's commentary itself seems to take in the possibilities of other realities, suggesting the term 'multiverse' might be more

appropriate. Poster's claim that Flusser's work might have something to say about the idea of 'global culture' (p. xxiv) is also not entirely convincing. While Flusser writes of a kind of imagistic global exchange, aimed at producing information, his aestheticisation of being perhaps elides the political realities of such a trajectory. The utopia, freedom and democracy that Flusser imagines is apparently to be realised through dialogue, through a dialogic net of informational images which make abstractions concrete, and absurdity meaningful. Yet, this will not come about if the apparatuses of the technical image are restricted, monopolised, commercialised or ideologically disciplined.

Layering ideas about media materiality, storage, code, visual theory and the dialogic movement of information, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* is a useful tool both for students of media culture and lay readers interested in the impact and potential that the apparatus of the digital exert upon everyday life. In terms of its use as a tool for education in a digital age, what Flusser's book might offer beyond all else is a vision; a vision and a warning. Flusser, who writes 'all prediction damages the future' (p. 159), uncovers the materiality of media and suggests that society has the potential to move toward a complete freedom of exchange and that the mediated interaction of the electronic era will herald a cultural revolution. Technical images are the absurd means by which to embrace and make meaning from an absurd existence. However, the reverse side of this sunny existential expectation is a kind of fascism, whereby invention and creativity are stifled in a void of empty gestures. Those using the digital to find new way of educating would be aided by Flusser; *Into the Universe of Technical Images* provides a means of navigating what is still to come, a partial map for plotting a path through the thickness and thickets of a new techno-social reality. And soon, as Flusser himself puts it, 'there will be nothing more we can say to one another, so now is the moment to talk it over' (p. 86).

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