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Vilém Flusser's *Does writing have a future?*

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Reading regimes, orality and code: Vilém Flusser's *Does writing have a future?*

Emmett Stinson

Flusser, V. (2011). *Does writing have a future?* (Trans. Nancy Ann Roth). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN0816670234, 208 pages, \$20 US.

The appearance of Vilém Flusser's *Does Writing Have a Future?* (2011) in English translation almost twenty-five years after its original publication is undoubtedly a seminal event for both media studies and scholarship on the future of the book, but—because of its very importance—the publication of Flusser's text also feels strangely belated. Although *Does Writing Have a Future?* was inaccessible to English-speaking scholars, many books and essays influenced by Flusser's *have* been available for years, and, as a result, the book no longer produces the shock that was surely intended upon its publication. Most of those reading it for the first time will inevitably find their reading shaped by the history of its reception—both explicit and implicit—over the last two decades. In this sense, the publication of *Does Writing Have a Future?* serves as an invitation to consider Flusser's influence, as much as it encourages a response to the text itself.

Although *Does Writing Have a Future?* is a complicated and often digressive text, its main argument can be more or less readily summarised: Flusser argues that writing—and the “alphabetic” paradigm presupposed by the hegemony of written texts as the central means of discourse—is being overtaken by a new regime of “codes” and the concomitant production of images (which is to say images and video that are made up of digital information). The future discursive dominance of images and codes, Flusser argues, will produce radical transformations in the way we conceive of history, politics, and even thought itself. The text then attempts to wrestle with the implications of these changes and to assess whether or not they can be seen to be positive developments.

It is worth noting from the outset that Flusser's argument relies on several presuppositions that are not unproblematic, the two most significant of which have already been pointed out by Friedrich Kittler in “The Perspective of Print” (2002). Kittler not only disputes Flusser's absolute distinction between images and writing, but also argues that Flusser invokes a monolithic conception of writing and reading as a linear practice, when, in fact, “the most widely used books—from the Bible to the telephone directory—are not read in a linear fashion at all” (p. 37). In his introduction to *Does Writing Have a Future?*, Mark Poster (2011) addresses Kittler's critique by admitting that “it serves as a cautionary role against overgeneralization” but “does not grapple with the basic issue of media specificity and its cultural implications” (p. xiii). But this response neither adequately accounts for Kittler's central point—that print was, at heart, a mathematicalisation of writing that enabled the transcendence of writing as such—or the larger problem of Flusser's oversimplification of the practice of reading.

Flusser ignores the existence of multiple reading regimes, thereby eliding the differences between the practice of immersive, linear reading with hypertextual reading,

which refers to a mode that employs the skimming, scanning and searching of a text in a non-immersive fashion. Since hypertextual forms of reading also occur in a wide array of printed texts—such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias and even contemporary newspapers—and not just the internet, one could argue that the essential contemporary shift is not from language to code, but a shift in reading regimes from a linear to a hypertextual paradigm. The increasing dominance of hypertextual reading is generally understood as a reflection of the needs of readers in neo-liberal economies, who are time-poor and require easy and fast access to information. It's worth noting that a shift in reading regimes could also be seen to generate many of the same effects that Flusser identifies with the ascendancy of code. For example, the shift towards hypertextual scanning as the dominant reading regime also implies a process of de-historicisation (since reading is no longer the rigid time-bound unfolding of a linear narrative), a shift away from self-reflexive, critical theorisation (since raw information becomes privileged over argumentation), and a tendency toward the de-politicisation of writing (since texts are assessed in terms of informational content that is presented as if it were ideologically neutral).

But such critiques inevitably subordinate the question of technology to a question of rhetoric. Richard Lanham has explicitly made this argument in *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (1993), when he argued that “When we ask how electronic technology affects us, then, we are inquiring, *in terms* of electronic technology, into the most profound division in Western culture” (p. 203). For Lanham and his ilk, the debate surrounding the effects of technology on the written word is simply a late instantiation of the division between classical philosophers and the sophist rhetoricians—who disagreed about whether the ideal medium for the transmission of thought was the written word (logic) or the spoken word (rhetoric). For Lanham, proponents of digital media like Marshall McLuhan—and, by extension, Flusser—are actually crypto-rhetoricians, since “electronic technology mean[s] the end of literacy and the return of orality” (p. 202).

Interestingly, even some of those who are influenced by Flusser similarly omit any consideration of the essential difference between code and writing. Peter Sloterdijk's “Rules for the Human Zoo” (2009), for example, appears written in Flusser-ian mode, and Sloterdijk's central claim that books are “thick letters to friends” (p. 12) seems to be a response to Flusser's enquiry regarding “whether anyone has written a postal philosophy” (2011, p. 104). For Sloterdijk, like Flusser, the book, as a means of communication, is “no longer sufficient to form a telecommunicative bond between members of a modern mass society” and the result is that the foundations of contemporary society are “clearly post-literary, postepistolary, and thus posthumanistic” (Sloterdijk, 2009, p.14). Like Flusser, too, Sloterdijk, in the first volume of *Spheres* (2011), argues that the situation of being post-literary also entails a shift in modes of thinking since “intelligence is not a subject, but a milieu or resonance circle” and, in this sense, only “literate consciousness . . . is capable of abstraction” (p. 265).

But Sloterdijk's apparent “extension” of Flusser's argumentation also serves as a critique as well. As Sloterdijk notes in an interview called “Thick Books Will Survive” (2006), digitisation is not an end to the logic of alphabetisation but “a new form of alphabetisation I call hyper-alphabetisation . . . the old homo orthograficus is being phased out by a new homo typograficus, who not only learns to read and write, but also designs his own symbolic image to the outside world . . . the computer certainly isn't a rejection of Gutenberg, but an escalation of it: everyone in our part of the world learns to read, write, print and design.” Once again, this account views current changes as ones that are actually *internal* to writing rather than a transcendence of the written as such;

here, digital code is not essentially different from writing, but an exponential intensification of the alphabetic mode.

In this sense, while contemporary debates are absolutely inscribed by the issues that Flusser has raised, his argument about the difference between the ontological status of code and writing still remains a radical conception that cannot simply be reduced to the distinction between writing and orality. Flusser acknowledges that there are forms of writing that do approximate the status of code—known variously as “scripts” or “action schemata”—which, as in recipes for cooking or instructional manuals, offer sets of instructions in a fashion very similar to those of codes. But Flusser does account for these in the chapter, “Instructions,” wherein he argues that action schemata serve precisely as a kind of proto-code: “If a *program* is to be understood as writing directed not towards human beings but toward apparatuses, then people have been programming since writing was invented . . . For one wrote to human beings as though they were apparatuses” (p. 56). But while programming itself may be an older construct, as Flusser notes, the issue is not of the *existence* of code, but rather its dominance as a paradigm of communication, which then implies a “posthistorical” and “value-free” mode of thinking.

It is also essential to note that Flusser’s arguments regarding the ascension of code do not necessarily mean that writing will immediately cease, but rather that it will lose its significance. Flusser argues that the current state of writing—in an homage to Nietzsche’s concept of the “last men”—is best described as “the last writing,” which refers to a state of “text inflation” in which “more tides of writing will flow through the presses and technically advanced reproduction apparatuses and into the environment” (Flusser, 2011, p. 161). The result is that the sheer amount of writing available increases at precisely the moment it ceases to have any larger significance, but this moment, for Flusser, is one tinged with sadness, a point that he emphasises in noting that his book is not directed at those who will give up writing but rather those “people who write despite knowing that it makes no sense” (p. 161).

But, ultimately—as it has been increasingly commonplace to note—Flusser’s value as a thinker lies not in the systematic unfolding of his logic, but rather in the originality of insights. For this reason, like Walter Benjamin, he is often classified as a ‘speculative’ thinker. Much of the novelty of Flusser’s insights in *Does Writing Have a Future?* derives from the way that he is able to reconceptualise aspects of a print culture from the perspective of its own transcendence. In this manner, for example, he is able to describe the act of publishing a book by saying that the “writer is above all there for the publisher, to share with him the making of clenched fist from half-made text” in the hope “that the clenched fist will reach across informatic conditions and seize readers who will complete the text” (p. 45). Not only does this description wonderfully re-insert the intermediaries of a publishing house into the chain of reception, it also clearly explains why self-publishing is a practice essentially different from traditional publishing. Despite being a book about the end of traditional forms of media, *Does Writing Have a Future?* is most interesting precisely when dwelling upon such media—and in this sense it also serves as forerunner of more recent scholarship on media archaeologies.

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