

Vilém Flusser's Media Theory Between History and Geography

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ABSTRACT

The Czech-Brazilian thinker Vilém Flusser became worldwide known in the eighties for his Philosophy of Photography and thereafter for his more general philosophy of media, as displayed in his books *Post-History* and *Into the Universe of Techno-images*, among others. Still in the beginning of the nineties he foresaw many of technical resources and devices quite usual today, such as digital networks and social media. The philosophical background of Flusser's media theory is his approach on what he called "post-history", i.e., his description of contemporary society, depicting a world dominated by apparatuses, operated by post-human beings termed functionaries, which among other things produce technical images that rules over our daily routine in shape of pictures, movies, tele-vision, digital images etc. What is less known is that Flusser's theory on post-history can be understood in many ways as a consequence of his over thirty years stay in Brazil, where he developed also some fascinating thoughts on the behavior of its naturals, based on one hand in a supposed lack of historical consciousness in their fundamental attitude facing life and the future. This attitude implies, on the other hand, an willingness to play games and a kind of creativity which express themselves not only in the arts but also in news forms of sociability.

Key-words: past-history; phenomenology of the Brazilian; techno-images; apparatuses; functionaries

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Flusser's media theory laid in his approach on what he called "post-history", i.e., his description of contemporary society, depicting, as we shall see, an world dominated by apparatuses, operated by post-human beings termed functionaries, which among other things produce technical images that rules over our daily routine in shape of pictures, movies, television, digital images etc.

The background of this quite acknowledged media philosophy began in the second half of the sixties, when Vilém Flusser had published two more general philosophical books - Language and Reality and The History of the Devil - as well as a set of short articles on several aspects of Brazil's society and culture, which appeared in the newspaper Estado de São Paulo and some Brazilian journals of Philosophy and cultural issues. Part of this last material was republished in 1967, in the book, termed by its author *Da religiosidade* (On the Religious Feeling), featuring besides the essay that gives title to the book, articles on existential matters, Brazilian and Czech literature (Guimarães Rosa, concrete poetry from São Paulo and Kafka, among others), and texts, whose content indeed points out to what was going to be, a decade thereafter, Flusser's media philosophy itself.

Among this last group of essays is the one termed "On the functionary", whose goal is to indicate that the growing mechanization and automatization in all branches of human activities in the most industrialized countries tend to transform societies in huge machineries, called by Flusser "apparatuses", which demand labour both to operate and to manage them, being the managers more specialized than the mere operators, although both lose gradually their quality of human beings to become what the philosopher calls "functionaries". According to Flusser,

in this new type [of situation/rd] the center is occupied by the apparatus and the horizon is constituted by functionaries that function in benefit of the apparatus. I am reluctant to designate the functionary with the word 'man', since it is about a new type of being that is arising (2002, p. 84).

Taking into account that the described situation refers mostly to the developed countries, Flusser claims that a place like Brazil, whose industrialization was just beginning when he wrote this essay, could have a kind of distance from this process, so that Brazilian philosophy could take advantage of its geographical displacement in order to propose a relevant reflection on the process of dis-humanization brought by the dominance of the apparatuses:

we are, in Brazil, in a privileged situation. We are “underdeveloped”. Progress, whose aspects pointing to the apparatus and the functionary I sought to sketch, is here delayed. We are in a transcendent situation merely in virtue of the geographical position we occupy. It is not the most elegant transcendence, but serves as a starting point. We can therefore contribute, maybe relevantly, to the elaboration of a philosophy that formulates values and points ways to the progress (FLUSSER, 2002, p. 89).

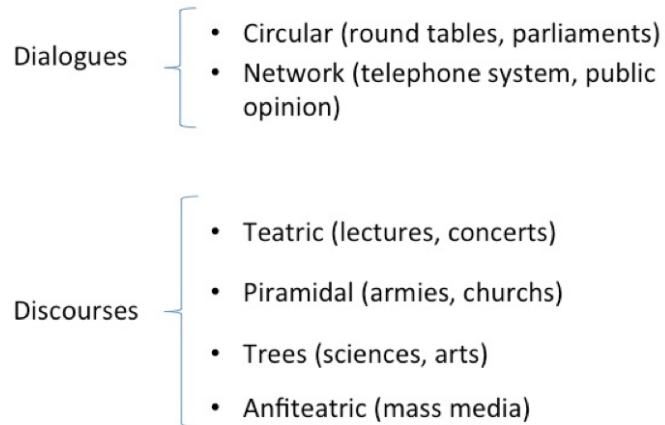
When Flusser returned to Europe, in the beginning of the seventies, having settled in South of France, he continued to develop the conceptual family he started to conceive in the Brazilian period, adding concepts like “program”, “technical images”, and a luminous typology of communication. This conceptual family, associated to the situation already described by Flusser in the text on the functionary, is now linked to his idea of “post-history”, developed in the homonymous book, written in the end of the decade of 1970 and published for the first time in 1983². This work, among other critical approaches to several aspects of life in advanced Western societies, encloses a severe criticism of modern communication’s systems, specially the mass media, understood as an apparatus in the aforementioned sense.

According to Flusser, the main purpose of mass culture is programming people through what he calls technical images. Despite their similarities to traditional images - made by human hand -, they are images produced by

² Vilém, Flusser, Pós-história. Vinte instantâneos e um modo de usar. São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1983. Translation by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes: Post-History. Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013.

apparatuses (like cameras, for instance), which introduce a high level of potential delusion and mystification, constituting therefore the main form of ideology in the post-historical situation. An important difference between this new scheme and the previous - developed still in Brazil - concerns the position of the functionaries. While in the aforementioned essay, from the sixties, "functionary" means the people in charge to run the apparatuses, in Flusser's writings after the end of the seventies, all human beings are potentially functionaries, since they not only operate the apparatuses, but are programmed to keep functioning the huge economic and political system, which is becoming more and more a kind of mega-apparatus.

As for the aforementioned typology of communication, according to Flusser, human communication can be divided into two basic methods: discourse and dialogues. While the former is the most efficient way to spread knowledge of things ultimately already known, the latter is the best method to produce new information. As claimed by him, there are four types of discourse and two kinds of dialogue (see diagram below). According to this typology, discourses can be theatric (as lectures and concerts), pyramidal (as armies and churches), trees (as sciences and arts) and amphitheatric (as the mass media). Otherwise, dialogues can be circular (as a round tables) or networked (as the telephone system and the public opinion).



Flusser suggests that the most democratic system would be composed by theatric discourses and circular dialogues, since they presuppose whole responsibility for the transmitted content and the fact that the emitter of the message faces its receptor, turns it immediately into raw material to produce new knowledge, mediated by the reciprocity of participants in a fair and creative conversation (Cf. FLUSSER, 1998, p. 35 et seq.). Flusser claims that the actual - bad - state of things is based on the fact that the typical communication of the post-historical situation is a set, in which amphitheatric discourses predominate over very weakened networked dialogues, in which people receive passively contents displayed in the dis-course of mass culture, commenting those matters in an unfruitful and un-creatively way, a posteriori, in networked dialogues: “The amphitheater de-mands that the irradiated information be transformed dialogically into an amorphous soup, into ‘public opinion’, in order to serve as feedback for the emitting apparatus” (FLUSSER, 2013, p. 57).

Flusser’s theory suggests that an adequate example of this perverse sym-biosis of amphitheatric discourse and networked dialogue is precisely the industry of entertainment. According to him, it prevents the possibility of having authentic experiences, in order to benefit people's tendency to get satisfied with

mere sensations. To Flusser, this makes the self useless, occasioning the submissive acceptance of all contents, whose ultimate goal is to manipulate the public, to transform human beings in functionaries, programming them by technical images. As Flusser states,

Entertainment is the accumulation of sensations to be eliminated undigested. (...) There is neither intestine nor the necessity of an intestine. What are left are mouths to swallow the sensation and anuses to eliminate it. Mass society is a society of channels that are more primitive than worms: in worms there are digestive functions (2013, p.110).

As I suggested before, Flusser's media theory can be seen, at least partially, as a consequence of his over thirty years stay in Brazil, when, besides the aforementioned books of the sixties, he developed also some thoughts on the behavior of its inhabitants, based on one hand in a supposed lack of historical consciousness in their fundamental attitude facing life and the future. On the other hand, this attitude implies a willingness to play games and a kind of creativity which express themselves not only in the arts but also in friendly forms of sociability. These ideas were exposed mainly in his book *Phenomenology of the Brazilian*, written in the beginning of the seventies, which discusses also the critique of mass media and its reception by Brazilian Intellectuals:

Brazilian thinkers in general (specially the leftists) tend to distinguish, in Brazil two types of culture: the one of the elite and the one of the mass. This distinction, a product of western categories, does not coincide with the aforementioned differentiation between culture of elite and folklore, but states approximately: there is a culture which pours itself through wide and accessible communicative channels (as radio, television, movie, cheap magazine) and this is the culture of the mass. And there is another that pours itself through narrower channels and more difficult access (such as theatre, concert, expensive books); and this is the culture of the elite. The mass culture is manipulated and programmed by the elite and contributes to the alienation of the mass and the elite culture contributes to the separation between mass and elite (FLUSSER, 1998, p.132-3).

Differently from the scheme just presented and taking into account what Flusser thinks to be the difference from alienation in Brazil and in Western hyper-developed countries, he argues that the plain distinction between higher and mass culture, focusing on a possibly authentic popular culture as its mere appendix, does not correspond to Brazilian cultural reality. He proposes, alternatively,

to distinguish among three types of Brazilian Culture. A basic non-historical cultural level, that has a structural similarity with cultures of the Paleolithic and Maia types. An intermediary level, para-historical, that has structural similarity with the western culture of the elite, that includes as well as the aforementioned “elite culture” as the “mass culture”. And a superior non-historical level, that has an incomparable structure and that is the level of the true Brazilian culture, in the sense of the “culture of the new man” (FLUSSER, 1998, p.133).

The proposal that the true Brazilian culture points to the possibility of a re-newed human being is linked to the refrain of the Phenomenology of the Brazilian, according to which, if Brazil could manage to overcome some of its chronic difficulties in economy, society and politics, it could provide a new model of sociability, which would express itself mainly through its cultural manifestations. Another interesting feature of Flusser’s point is that, despite the arrogance of the Brazilian white elite, the creativity and outreach in the country’s culture lies in phenomena associated with its African heritage, in a way that pervades the social environment, turning the daily life into an aesthetic experience:

The rhythmic walk of girls and young women, the dancer steps of boys in the street (...), the steady beating in matchboxes and with spoons, the use of typewriters as if they were drums, the transformation of hammers in atabaque [a kind of Afro-Brazilian drums/rd], the grace of gestures of dudes playing football, up to the elegance of movements in the street quarrels — all this is a manifestation of a deep culture (FLUSSER, 1998, p. 136 et seq).

According to this concept of the African element constituting the most important component for the mentioned Brazil’s “deep culture”, Flusser points to

the central question, whether a strong popular culture can effectively neutralize the aforementioned perverse effects of mass culture. Flusser's answer to this question, at least concerning what he calls the Brazilian "basis culture", is positive, as he explains in this passage, in which he also compares the impact of mass culture in Brazil with the one in more industrialized countries:

So strong and powerful is this culture, that it resists against all attempts of trivialization on the part of the media, with its alienating commodification; and on the contrary, it inoculates in all these manifestations a shot of authenticity, absent in Europe and in the United States. Under this viewpoint, Brazil is much more cult than these countries. The vulgarization, trivialization and kitsch that mark European and American life are in large extent avoided, although there is also something of it as a price that the country pays for the "progress". The increase of this phenomenon nowadays is disquieting (1998, p. 139 et seq.).

Throughout the *Phenomenology of the Brazilian* there are many examples of cultural phenomena in Brazil that seems to counteract the manipulation by the mass media, but one of the most eloquent is the so called "Brazilian popular music", which since the beginning of the twentieth century presented a strong alternative to Brazil's elite music - according to Flusser, an alienated and worthless imitation of its European Model: "The bourgeois alienation closed its ears to the fact that in the basic culture has arisen a music that achieved a synthesis of Portuguese melody and harmony with African rhythm and instrumentation" (FLUSSER, 1998, p. 147). When Flusser analyses Brazil's popular music, he evaluates most positively the style worldwide known as "Bossa Nova", which, according to him, synthesizes not only in its melody and harmony but also in its lyrics old and new elements coming from many different cultural origins:

A second one seeks to take as a basis the North-American "contestation" music and the Russian public declamation, injecting this basis in the basic popular music, for instance, from carnival and "choros", incorporating in this effort also the Brazilian poetry. The result, worldwide known under several titles (for instance, "bossa nova") is changing the behavior of Brazilian elite, establishing a first true channel between elite

and mass and has the effect of a bomb in the Occident (1998, p. 148).

Coming to the end of my exposition, and retaking its title, I would like to stress that Flusser's forced geographical displacement, as he, running away from the nazi's persecution, went to Brazil, lead him to construct a philosophy wholly connected to cultural differences, in which not only spatial but also - and perhaps mainly - temporal matters are determinant. This occurred already when, besides Flusser's metaphysical and existential concerns, his thoughts about the media were being posited for the first time. This tendency was accentuated, however, when he posited his famous media philosophy, since its theoretical basis - the proposal of his conception of post-history -, was, at least partially, a consequence of his experience in a very different country, situated in a continent quite distant from his Central-European homeland.

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