How to Orientate Oneself in the World:
A General Outline of Flusser's Theory of Media*

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Abstract (E): The article attempts to give a general outline of Vilém Flusser's media theory. Illustrating and explaining the distinction between what Flusser calls "traditional images" and "technical images," we observe how to Flusser different media constitute different universes. The universe of the text, which constituted a different way of thinking, succeeded the universe of the traditional image. The influence of media on man's thinking are a main topic throughout the article. Concluding we will try to provide an outline of Flusser's view of new media (camera, computer) and the universe they create.

Abstract (F): Cet article veut fournir un aperçu général de la théorie des médias de Vilém Flusser. A partir de l'illustration et l'explication des différences entre ce que Flusser appelle des 'images traditionnelles' et des 'images techniques', nous observerons que, pour Flusser, des médias différents constituent également des univers différents. Quand l'univers de l'image traditionnelle a été remplacé par l'univers du texte, cette mutation a créé une autre manière de penser. L'influence des médias sur la pensée de l'homme est un des problèmes majeurs de cet article. Pour conclure, nous tenterons de donner un abrégé des idées de Flusser sur les nouveaux médias (la caméra, l'ordinateur) et l'univers qu'ils créent.

Keywords: Flusser, new media, coding, traditional image, text, photography, computer, theory of gestures

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Although nowadays the "most important German philosopher of the seventies and eighties" (Flusser 2002: 8) is widely acknowledged to be one of the founding fathers of media theory, his fame still does not reach much further than the borders of the discipline which he helped to shape. Many of his books are not yet available in translation and many of the uncountable essays he wrote during his lifetime are still to be published.

The objective of this essay is to provide the reader with a general introduction in Flusser's theoretical insights. Flusser's distinction between different media will serve as a guideline. We will attempt to analyse Flusser's concept of "traditional images." In doing so, we will inquire into Flusser's view on the origins of media. We will describe the specific characteristics of each medium and the possibilities it creates. We will illustrate the confrontation between the medium of traditional images and the new medium of text. This will allow us to make a comparative analysis between the "universe" of the medium of the traditional images and that of the medium of text - as Flusser seems to believe that each medium generates a new kind of universe. According to Flusser the medium of text has recently been replaced by new technical media (first photography, later followed by digital images). The final paragraphs will deal with this paradigm change from text to technical images and Flusser's suggestions for gaining control over these new media.
The world of traditional images

The dialectics of media

Flusser classifies the different media in three categories: traditional images, texts and technical images. Each of these media are created by man as an explanation of the world in order to facilitate his orientation in this world. Yet, each medium is possessed by the same sly dialectics: instead of representing the world, media present the world as it is perceived by them. In other words, one could state that media prevail upon that which is seen through them: media determine our vision upon the world and not the other way around. This happens when we forget what media are for. Instead of considering them as useful instruments that help us orientate ourselves in the world we come to see them as representations of the world. According to Flusser though, they are not representations at all. On the contrary, he argues, they are ways of bringing order in a world that is chaotic in its essence. Each medium has its own way of organizing and thereby gaining information. Subsequently, this information can be used to orientate oneself in the world. Flusser himself gives us a classical example of this process in his analysis of the meaning of an image at the beginning of his most famous book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Flusser 2000).

The traditional image

"Images," according to Flusser, "are mediations between the world and human beings. Human beings 'ex-ist', i.e. the world is not immediately accessible to them - and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible" (Flusser 2000: 9). Although the above sentence seems rather dull and its meaning rather obvious, it turns out not to be so. It even strikes one of Flusser's most original thoughts at a closer inquiry. Let us scrutinize the implications.

Man lives in a world that he does not understand. In order to decipher this world and to thereby manipulate it he uses media. These media can mediate between man and his world, making the world more intelligible. Traditional images like a painting or a drawing can, if used in their proper way, generate information about the world. Images make the world meaningful by elaborating upon it. Yet, by doing this, they donate their own interpretation of the world. They not just re-present the world, on the contrary: "instead of representing the world, they [the images] obscure it until human beings finally become a function of the images they create" (Flusser 2000: 10).

Thus the universe of traditional images comes into being. A universe created by traditional images adapts all the characteristics of traditional images and presents them as qualities that genuinely belong to the outside world (cf. Flusser 2000: 10). By studying the characteristics of traditional images Flusser studies the features of the universe of those images. First of all traditional images, like all other media, have a specific structure. In order to gain information about the outside world a medium must arrange the world of things in a particular way. By doing so order is created and certain patterns can be distinguished. The way a medium assembles information and lays down its characteristics is induced by the code of the medium.

When we look at traditional images, Flusser argues, we see that they structure the world into a non-linear formation of things and events. Looking on a painting, a standard example of the classical image, there is no specific order in which we ought to view it. We can let our eyes dwell on the different things that are being represented without following any specific order. The order of our gazes is mediated, on the one hand, by the intention of the painter, but, on the other, is ours to decide. As Flusser puts it in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: "While wandering over the surface of the image, one's gaze takes in one element after another
and produces temporal relationships between them. It can return to an element of the image it has already seen, and 'before' can become 'after': the time of scanning is an eternal recurrence of the same process" (Flusser 2000: 8-9).

The above described manner of beholding is of major importance for the way one envisages the world. If the traditional image is the primary medium with which one visualises one's world, the structure of the traditional image (the code it inheres to), as described above, will have a determining influence on the conception of time and space. More specifically, we might assert that the inhabitant of the universe of traditional images tends to think of time as a non-linear concept, believing in - for example - the eternal recurrence of all things.

This is most likely to occur when one forgets the code of the traditional image and projects it straight onto the world, believing that the features of the code belong to the world itself rather than being dependent on the medium of traditional images.

**On the origin of media**
Although it is clear that to Flusser one medium succeeds another, pushing the other away - and, indeed, Flusser's media theory might well be described as a "cultural history of media" (Kloock & Spahr 2000: 78) - Flusser only rarely elaborates upon the origin of media as such. Nevertheless, the writer of this article believes this to be a very important element of Flusser's theory and even a crucial matter for any real understanding of his concept of media. When asked after the origin of media, one finds Flusser tackling the concepts of medium, human action and interaction - and the cleavage of object and subject along with it - in a highly original way.

**On the origin of the traditional image**
The origin of the traditional image is to be found in human action, that is, in the gestures human beings make whilst 'doing things'. With his hands man can grab things that are 'out there', in the world surrounding him. When he grabs a thing he brings it to a halt, he steadies its position in a previously ever moving world and is thus able to perceive it with his eyes - even if just for a moment. This "co-ordination of hand and eye, of acting and perceiving, of theory and praxis is a main theme of being" (Flusser 1999: 9).

When held still for a moment in the manner described, Flusser argues, things can become objects, thereby transforming the spectator into a subject. Evidently, this is a crucial matter. For along with the formation of an object comes the possibility of forming a mental image in one's mind. Such mental images will always have to be abstractions of the original object in the outside world. The capacity to have such mental images, Flusser believes, was acquired somewhat forty thousand years ago. The division between subject and object, as Flusser suggests it to be, lies even further back in time - some two million years ago.

The important thing about these mental images is that they can be used to modify or direct one's own behaviour (thus to orientate oneself in the world). Mental images for example can be useful in the hunt for game - one only needs to create a mental image of a deer and the place where the deer was seen to be able to know the right place for hunting next time. This, however, means that one is actively occupied with the images within. Such mental labour implies a withdrawal from the outside world to the inner regions of the mind, where the images are localised. In Flusser's own words: "[it concerns] a gesture by which the hands withdraw themselves, so to say, from the situation, to turn upon the inner of the subject, that now, touched in this way, generates a certain level of consciousness : the 'imaginative'" (Flusser 1999: 17).
Imagination is the faculty one needs to create traditional images, it is "the specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time (...). It is the precondition for the production and decoding of images." (Flusser 2000: 8) In another essay Flusser defines imagination somewhat more concretely as "the ability to reduce the world of states of affairs to scenes and vice versa: to decipher the scenes as substitutes for states of affairs." (Flusser 2002: 24)

When one wants to make an (external) image, one has to abstract certain elements from the outside world and subsequently represent them onto a surface. In order to be able to do this, one needs to follow a certain code, i.e. the code of traditional images. A code is defined by Flusser as "a sign system arranged in a regular pattern." (Flusser 2000: 83) Every medium has its own system of signs, whereby a sign is understood as "a phenomenon that signifies another" (Flusser 2002: 84) - for example, a drawn line which signifies a woman's face. Thus, by means of a code it becomes possible to re-present a four dimensional event from the outside world onto something else, e.g. a two dimensional surface.

What is being generated by means of a code is information. Information is an essential term in Flusser's media theory. It is the discovery (or the bringing) of order in an essentially chaotic universe. Evidently, this order can only be attained by arranging things (into shapes, into images,...), that is, by encoding them. The image is, as every other medium, a way of bringing order into the world of things. In this process meaning is discovered. This meaning might later be conceived of as 'the' meaning of the world.

At this stage we can state the following conclusion: a traditional image is the outcome of the application of a specific code and can be read by anyone who has any familiarity with that code. The making of an image - mental as well as external - suggests a certain measure of abstraction which allows us to represent a four dimensional event from the outside world of time and space onto a two dimensional surface. Thus there is a reduction from four to two dimensions, the last being the surface on to which the image is presented. On a two dimensional surface the event is represented as a 'state of affairs', a scene. If one forgets the code of the traditional image and projects this code onto the world, one comes to envisage the world itself as a state of affairs.

The initial use of such traditional images was made clear by Flusser in a beautiful essay called Krise der Linearität. The creation of mental images, he argues, had the purpose of being useful for hunting. Man made an image of the animal he wanted to shoot or the places where a successful hunt was considered most likely. This was thought to come in quite useful for the next hunt. Thus, by means of these images prehistoric men found orientation in an alien world. The image was not thought of as representing the world as it really is. Flusser meditates upon the artistic hunter in the following words: "Let us take as an example the oldest of the images known to us (that of a pony in Pêche-Merle). It concerns representation being held in rock faces. The maker of the image stepped away from a pony, looked at it and transmitted what he briefly saw to the memory of the wall. And he did this in such a way that others would recognise what they saw. And he did all these immense complex things so as to be able to use what he saw as an orientation for future actions - like the hunt for ponies."

(Flusser 1988: 10)

Entr'acte : Flusser's outlines for a general theory of gestures
The grabbing of the hand, upon which we elaborated above, is what Flusser calls gesturing. Flusser believes that not only the origin of images, but the origin of every medium and every pattern of significance that can be translated in a code, is to be found in a pattern of gesturing specific to the medium or code concerned. Gestures, as it were, are the first and most basic code.
In his book *Geste, Versuch einer Phonomenologie* Flusser defines gestures as "(…) a movement of the body or tool connected with it, for which there is no sufficient causal explanation." (Flusser 1994: 8) The only way to give a sufficient causal explanation of a gesture is by using the ontologically problematic term 'intention'. (Ontologically problematic since it refers to the inner drive of a subject, which is something that can never be verified.) Crucial to the nature of a gesture is that it is not - as for example the biological working of our bodies is - a mere physiological phenomenon. Gestures indicate a *symbolic* and therefore meaningful action. A symbol is understood as "a sign consciously or unconsciously agreed upon." (Flusser 2000: 85)

To Flusser every medium has its own language of gestures. In this manner he speaks of the gesture of photography, the gesture of filming (technical images), the gesture of painting (traditional images) and so on. The core of every meaningful human action - or set of human actions - is to be the gestures that underlie it. Every important instrument and medium has its own specific set of gestures. In a long appendix to *Gesten* that can be read as a manifesto for an interdisciplinary theory of gestures, Flusser writes: "(…) no longer does the language, as it used to do, hold the model-character for the decipherment of all gestures (as for example one used to talk about 'the language of dance' or 'the language of mime'), but on the contrary the general theory of gestures must be the model for the decipherment of the gestures of language." (Flusser 1994: 223) Flusser's theory of gestures constitutes the core of his theory of media. At the same time it is his highly original answer to the semiological investigations made by philosophers of his generation.

**A clash of media: from image to text**

**The universe of traditional images**
As all media traditional images have a particular code and therefore create their own *universe*. This universe results from the application of the code of traditional images and more specifically from the abilities needed to read and use this code: *imagination*.

The universe which is fashioned by a certain medium adapts all the characteristics of that medium and transmits these to the outside world. This way the illusion is created that this is how reality itself is truly structured. In case the universe is formed by traditional images we refer to it as a 'magical' universe - magic is here understood as "a form of existence corresponding to the eternal recurrence of the same." (Flusser 2000: 84) Another more elaborate description given by Flusser is: "The image shows states of affairs, scenes, and the eye has to discover the relations. More elegantly put, the image synchronises information, and the gaze diachronises the image. Therefore the gaze that is trained by the contact with images sees states of affairs everywhere: everything is tied into reversible relations, and time circles within these in eternal recurrence - just like the eye. That is the magical world view." (Flusser 1997: 256) As is the case with traditional images, space and time in this universe are organised in a non-linear way. In a magical universe it is always possible to return to a certain event. The inhabitant of the universe of traditional images believes to live in "a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context." (Flusser 2000: 9)

However, there is something peculiar the matter with the status of the image in this universe. In order to be able to transmit the characteristics of traditional images onto the world one must have 'forgotten' the initial intent of the image. "Essentially this is a question of 'amnesia'. People forget they created the images in order to orientate themselves into the world." (Flusser 2000: 10) The original purpose, according to Flusser, was to establish a means to *orientate* oneself in the world. Instead of using the image as a means of orientation
the inhabitant of the universe of traditional images comes to think of the image as a faithful representation of the world as such. This is precisely what the image is not. When this mistake occurs images can no longer be of any use. For instead of serving as a useful means of orientation, we are led to believe that the image is a description of the ontological status of the world. What happens is that "instead of representing the world," as the inhabitant of the universe believes it to be the case, "they obscure it until human beings' lives become a function of the images they create. Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, onto the world 'out there', which meanwhile itself becomes like an image - a context of scenes, of states of things." (Flusser 2000: 10)

This extreme domination of images in man's conception of his world is called 'idolatry' by Flusser. According to him, "in the course of the second millennium before Christ, when the alienation of human beings from their images reached critical proportions" (Flusser 2000: 10), people tried to tear down the images in order to see what is really behind them. They attempted to explain and destroy the images that clouded their vision of the world so they could redevelop a genuine comprehension of the world again. This lead to the invention of written text: "linear writing - for example the Latin alphabet or Arabic numbers - was invented as a revolution against images." (Flusser 1997: 74)

This particular aspect of Flusser's media theory differs from Marshall McLuhan's. While McLuhan believes that the invention of a new medium always brings forth a certain unawareness about that medium and (especially) its consequences for our consciousness (cf. McLuhan 2001: 7-21), Flusser states that men only become unconscious of a medium after a while. Instead of McLuhan's view that media have an immediate effect on men's unconsciousness, Flusser believes that newly invented media are very consciously used and thus without any danger. It is only after some time that the anamnesis about a medium appears and from that moment on, the use of the medium becomes dangerous and peoples' lives become a function of the medium. In McLuhan's opinion, it is only after a while that people begin to realise that a new medium has exercised a fundamental influence on their consciousness. But by then it is already too late. McLuhan urges us to become conscious of our use of media, whereas Flusser urges us to stay aware of our use of media and what they are made for.

The invention of text and the textual universe
Text was invented by taking the different elements of an image (sometimes called pixels by Flusser) and placing them one after another in a linear formation. The pixels were taken apart and laid out into a horizontal line. These pixels no longer form an image; rather, they are a text that tries to explain the image the pixels were originally taken from. Flusser formulates his idea by means of a humorous wordgame: "One lifts the separate elements of the image (pixels) from the surface of the image and threads them together. The 'lifting from' can be called a 'counting' [Zahlen], the 'threading together' a 'narrating' [Erzählen], and the thereby thread-together pixels can be called 'pictograms'." (Flusser 1997: 256)

This has important consequences for the nature of texts. First of all, texts are not abstractions from reality, as images are, but rather abstractions from images: "texts are a development of images and their symbols signify nothing immediately concrete, but images." (Flusser 2002: 25) As stated in Towards a Philosophy of Photography: "texts do not signify the world; they signify the images they tear up. Hence, to decode texts means to discover the images signified by them." (Flusser 2000: 11) This means that texts have a higher degree of abstraction than images, since they are abstractions from abstractions, that is, abstractions in the second order - images being abstractions of the first order.
Evidently, the text (writing) introduces a new code, different from the code of traditional image. This new code can be called the linear code. "Texts are one step further away from concrete experience than images are and 'conceiving' ['Konzipieren'] is a symptom of a bigger alienation than 'imagining' is." (Flusser 2002: 25) In order to be able to write and read text one must possess the ability of conceptual thinking - itself a more abstract faculty than imagination - which can be defined as "abstracting lines from surfaces, i.e. decoding them." (Flusser 2000: 11) Conceptualisation is defined as "a specific ability to create texts and to decode them." (Flusser 2000: 83)

The new code of writing does not only bring with it a new form of consciousness (conceptual thinking), but it also produces a new universe that is radically different from the one the traditional image created. Time is no longer looked upon as the eternal recurrence of all things, but instead it is perceived linearly. Like text, time goes from a beginning towards an end and therefore it is no longer magical but historical. As Flusser describes it: "the linear code (…) has a new experience of time as its effect, that of a linear time, a stream of irrevocable progressions, of dramatic irrecurrence, of project: shorter, of history." (Flusser 2002: 25-26) The linear code, we might conclude, brings forth historical consciousness. Another result of the textual universe is that instead of states of affairs (a feature of the traditional image), the inhabitant of the universe of writing sees all the events in the world as (historical) processes following their course. Causality is also a concept invented in the universe of text.

Flusser calls the idolization of texts 'textolatry'. This occurs when, like images once, texts become incomprehensible to their readers. Notable examples of textolatry were Christianity and Marxism. Both doctrines strongly depend on the concept of historical (linear) time and as such they are involved in a constant struggle against magical time that comes with the images that are still employed. In general we may say that during history, according to Flusser, there has been a dialectical struggle between images and writing: "Texts admittedly explain images in order to explain them away, but images also illustrate texts in order to make them comprehensible." (Flusser 2000: 11) During this process it was unavoidable that, while trying to explain images, magical thought was secretly infused into conceptual thought. The most important result of this process was the birth of scientific text: "the greatest imagination is to be found in the scientific text. Thus, behind one's back, the hierarchy of codes is overturned." (Flusser 2000: 12) When text becomes incomprehensible a new medium must be invented in order to explain the texts again.

The universe of technical images

The invention of photography: introducing technical images
Photography was invented during the nineteenth century at the moment when textolatry was becoming extreme. The images the camera makes, however, are not traditional images. On the contrary these images are of a whole new order, produced in a totally different way and signifying something very different from the traditional images. Technical images, to go short, inhere in a different code.

Technical images are an attempt to explain texts and are themselves an application of texts. Certain scientific texts on chemistry and optics were converted into practical use, which finally led to the invention of photography. The photographic image, as all technical images, is therefore not to be seen as a simple abstraction from reality, but rather as an abstraction from scientific texts. This implies that technical images belong to an even higher degree of abstraction than texts. Technical images are an abstraction of the third order, reducing the one dimensional elements of text to the 'zero dimensional' elements of photography.
The above goes against what one usually tends to think of as photographic images. Such images appear to be like a fingerprint, a direct adaptation of reality. They give us the impression of being a mere window, completely transparent. In any case one would not expect the photographic image to signify scientific texts. Although the technical image (e.g. a photograph) seems to be an objective reproduction of reality, it is not. It is the outcome of a very thorough abstraction and the only reason why it can maintain the air of objectivity is because its code is a very specific one.

Although technical images are very different from traditional images since they are an abstraction of texts and not of reality, they are still images and therefore share some features with traditional images. For example, technical images are "surfaces that translate everything into states of things; like all images, they have a magical effect; and they entice those receiving them to project this encoded magic onto the world out there." (Flusser 2000: 16) Technical images "liberate their receivers by magic from the necessity of thinking conceptually, at the same time replacing historical consciousness with a second-order magical consciousness and replacing the ability to think conceptually with a second-order imagination." (Flusser 2000: 17) These are some of the characteristics of 'the universe of technical images'. The implications which the new code that constitutes the universe of technical images brings with it, are far wider than one could possibly imagine. Before we continue a more thorough analysis on the dominant elements of today's universe, we will try to trace the code of the technical image from its origin to its actual development in the nineteenth century.

**The code of technical images**

Technical images - and especially digital images - seem to be ubiquitous in today's world. Although the code these images work by, which Flusser calls the code of mathematical thinking, seems to be a fairly recent discovery, it was already present in Ancient Greece in the philosophy of the atomists (cf. Flusser 1988: 20-24). The atomists asserted that everything is built of little atoms that can be combined in an infinite number of ways. However, the atomists never succeeded in turning their philosophy into the common worldview.

The mathematical code had to wait until early modernity before finally coming to real development. At that time, different thinkers such as Descartes, Newton and Leibniz began to develop modern mathematics and also to bring aspects of those mathematics into practice. Due to its practical application mathematics began to receive more and more attention - and the mathematical code along with it. What was understood by these modern mathematicians is that "in order to get the world in one's grasp, to comprehend the world, one must not look at the world nor describe it, one must calculate it" (Flusser 2002: 203).

Although photography played a leading part in the rise of the mathematical code, the real breakthrough of mathematical thinking came with the invention of the computer. For a camera can be perceived in two ways. On the one hand, as an application of scientific texts, as was done above; on the other hand, as "a primitive computer" that concerns itself with "the processing of data." (Flusser 1989: 26) Mathematical thinking expresses itself in the computer as computation. Numbers are treated as 'point-symbols' (Flusser 1988: 24). Flusser comes to the conclusion that "for some time (…) the mathematical thinking has begun to break loose from the alphanumeric code, making itself independent to turn against the linear way of thinking" (Flusser 1988: 23-24).

The effect of this mathematical way of thinking that is supported by the medium of the computer was described by Flusser at the beginning of one of his most famous essays, *Digitaler Schein*; he writes: "in front of our unbelieving eyes alternative worlds start to
emerge from the computer: lines composed out of point-elements, surfaces, soon also bodies and movable bodies. These worlds are coloured and can sound, in the near future they will probably also be touchable, smellable and tastable.” (Flusser 2002: 202). To sum it up, mathematical thinking brings forth alternative worlds that freely begin to mingle with what was previously understood as reality.

It will be clear that mathematical thinking also constitutes its own universe, which Flusser calls the "universe of technical images" (cf. Flusser 1999). This universe has its own characteristics that differ widely from those of the universe of text. The idea of causality, of cause and effect and along with it the classical idea of linear time and history, which were all brought forth by the text, are now all rejected. In order to understand how Flusser sees today's universe, one must comprehend his view of contemporary society as ruled by apparatuses.

The universe of technical images as programmed by apparatuses
The code of the camera and the computer is ruled by yet another common factor: both are apparatuses. An apparatus, Flusser argues, works with a programme that allows it to make pictures or to compute data - in case of the camera, photographs. One creates new information when one succeeds in finding an application or a possibility of the apparatus' programme that has not yet been tried out. "The number of such possibilities is large, but it is nevertheless finite" (Flusser 2000: 26). Thus, if one wishes to define programmes one might say: "Programmes are toys that, if one plays them long enough, by necessity realise all their combination-possibilities by coincidence, even the most unlikely" (Flusser 1997: 24). If one succeeds in mastering the code and finding new possibilities of the programme, one becomes free. Freedom is here not understood as something independent from apparatuses, but as the ability to rule the apparatuses instead of letting the apparatuses rule us. This notion of freedom is very important for Flusser's theory. It means that in a world that is always mediated by different media, one can still be free, namely if one knows how to operate the media that dominate one's world; that is, if one uses media to successfully orientate oneself in the world.

The above defined programme differentiates the apparatuses from other media which Flusser describes as tools. If one wants to use an apparatus one does not have to be familiar with the code they inhere to. The apparatuses act like 'black boxes' and therefore it is very easy to forget their code, projecting it onto the world. And thus, once again, human beings become a function of the programme of the medium. There lies the danger Flusser describes in the apparatuses of the computer and the camera. In order to be able to produce traditional images, one must comprehend the code they inhere to. This is not the case with new media. As these media are omnipresent nowadays, one is confronted with the hazard of becoming a function of the apparatuses.

Conclusion: our situation
It is Flusser's conviction that today's society must be understood as a gigantic complex of apparatuses, all equiped with their own programmes, "apparatuses that, on the one hand, assume gigantic size, threatening to disappear from our field of vision (like the apparatus of management), and, on the other, shrivel up, becoming microscopic in size so as to totally escape our grasp (like the chips in electronic apparatuses)" (Flusser 2000: 21; cf. Flusser 1997: 68-73). Human beings are no longer at the centre of society. Apparatuses and their programmes are at the centre, while human beings are merely the connecting channels between the different apparatuses (cf. Flusser 1997: 88).

At this stage we can start to perceive exactly what the characteristics of the universe of technical images are. This programmed society is no longer historical, for history was left behind along with the medium of writing. Instead, we now live in a post-historical time,
where there is no longer any room for the concept of "causality": "the key word in the
programmatic worldview is 'coincidence'" (Flusser 1997: 24). Living in this post-historical
era means living "in a world of absurd coincidence; in a world that has coincidentally realised
some possibilities out of an innumerable yet limited set of possibilities. Time and space can
no longer be conceived as separate entities" (Flusser 1997: 195).

Along with this revolution of technical images we can detect a shift in the intellectual elite.
The reigning elite of this world are no longer the literati but the functionaries who master the
new code of the programme and succeed in playing with it (cf. Flusser 1997: 47 - a view also
shared by Kittler 2000). The 'point-symbols' and computers allow us to create alternative,
digital worlds that surround us more and more and which can no longer be understood in the
opposition true/false. The dichotomy true/false has become meaningless in the 'bottomless'

Nevertheless, Flusser offers us a way out. In order to re-establish our freedom in the
programmed world we must free ourselves from being mere functions of apparatuses. This
can be achieved by learning the code of contemporary technical images: "We can only come
to master such a life when we have such great control over the rules of play that we can
change them." (Flusser 1997: 85) We must learn the new code and become able to
programme with the modern apparatuses. If we succeed in doing so, Flusser believes, it may
become possible to really play with the programme - instead of letting the programme play
with us.

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