

**“THE CODIFIED WORLD”
[“O mundo codificado”]
Vilém Flusser**

Review

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

FLUSSER, Vilém. *O mundo codificado: por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação* [*The codified world: for a philosophy of design and communication*]. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007.

The work is an essay in which the author discusses the chaos in which we find ourselves today, raising the possibility of a future balance between man and his environment which would arise from the emergence of a new sense of reality.

Flusser begins his text seeking to recover the original concept of "matter" as a transitory fulfillment of timeless forms in order to discuss the dialectical relationship between matter¹ and form². When a form or meaning is presented in an energetic³ and not in a solid or liquid state, it is often inappropriately qualified as immaterial. He criticizes the use of the term "immaterial culture" when referring to the contemporary culture of information, preferring to call it "energetic culture". The author also rescues the meaning of the concept of "informing" as to give forms to matter. For him, forms are not discovered but meanings, inventions of models.

The shaping process consists of four steps: appropriation, conversion, application and use. The history of humanity is a "history of manufacturing" and it can be classified into four periods: the period of hands, the period of tools, the period of machines (which begins in the Industrial Revolution approximately 200 years ago), and the period of electronic devices.

¹ Stemming from concrete and transitory nature.

² Involving the intellect and whose meaning is timeless.

³ Or abstract.

The manufactured object comes from the subjectivity of its creator and in order for him to be able to conceive it, he must withdraw into himself, distance himself from the world of things, and enter the world of abstraction so he can access his imagination. Then he must describe this object, find a way to communicate his idea. It will be necessary to codify the information into symbols⁴, then diffuse it and also store it in some memory. Human communication is an artificial process. It proposes to store acquired information and therefore behaves in a way contrary to entropy. In nature, there are other processes that are also negentropic. One example is the complexity reached by living beings. Relationships are influenced by culture. After we learn a code, we incorporate it as second nature, and we tend to forget its artificiality and the "first nature" of the world.

We have two types of media to transmit codes or messages: the linear one, in which the thought is expressed in text⁵, and the one which involved the surface, in which the thought is made through the image. Both writing and images are mediations between the world and the human being; they are information. They become real as they determine our lives, but progressively move us away from immediate experience. Civilization in its beginnings relied on the image to communicate. It can be embraced in its entirety instantly, allowing, as it is deciphered, spatial associations and multiplication of meanings. The image goes from sign to meaning. It belongs to the animated world. However, this is also a world of myth. Although it has the purpose of giving meaning, it leads to idolatry and traps man in hallucination. Our external world is an inanimate world. It needs an engine, which is our will. For something to move, there must be a cause. Otherwise, friction, an entropic force that is constantly active, cancels the movement and leads to inertia. Therein lies a void between theory and observation. With the development of abstraction, man has increasingly made use of writing to communicate his ideas. The written line relates the symbol to its meaning, represents and alphabetically describes the three-dimensional world in a series of sequences in form of a process. It was instrumental in promoting a historical consciousness and in protecting the individual from the hallucinatory imagination.

⁴ Which represent the meaning of things.

⁵ In other words, in lines.

However, it imposes a structure when dealing with a linear code and therefore temporality is required for its apprehension. Moreover, it comes from an abstraction that alienates the subject.

In the West from the nineteenth century on, men became replaceable and began to be subjugated by machines, simulations of the organs of the human body that, nevertheless, do not have the capacity to give meaning to things. Men became more and more artificial, and their relationship vis-à-vis the tool as a variable element was inverted, completely modifying the existence imprisoned by culture. The image⁶ became scarce amidst increasing abstraction, all the way up until the arrival of electronic devices. With the technological advances this picture was inverted, mainly in the context of mass culture, where the image recovered its importance through digital media.

Cinema introduced movement within movement. Although in terms of image projection it can be regarded as a surface media, it gives spatiality to information through sound. Just like a written text, the film requires an interval of time for it to be apprehended. Perhaps this is because we still don't know how to explore this language in the fullest of its resources.

We are still conditioned by the linear character of a narrative. It is necessary that the "thought-in-surface" incorporate the "thought-in-line". Only then will we be moving towards a new mental structure. Perhaps film, in the future, will be a much more independent media, partially able to be manipulated and reversed, subject to the reader's desire to act on the narrative and choose its role.

The way the world is structured depends on how we codify it. For the author, we can divide the world into two parts: the "world of facts" contains the "kingdom of immediate experience. The "world of fiction" encompasses the "kingdom of images" and the "kingdom of concepts". The type of fiction determines a structure of different codes. Conceptual codes relate to facts in an objective and conscious way. They are clearer and more noticeable but require

⁶ Surface.

erudition, because they are part of an elite culture. On the other hand, the imagery is subjective and unconscious, richer in message and can be apprehended in an intuitive way. They require, however, grasping of their techniques for the elaboration of messages. The human being, in trying to describe the world, needed to quantify it and, in order to achieve this goal, fragmented the world and developed a numerical code that would allow attaching a specific number to all things inserted in it. Since the numbers were translated into tones and colors, the calculation found a way to project from itself worlds noticeable to the senses. This media was essentially incorporated by mass culture.

In fact, the human being has three worlds: that of nature, that of culture and that of garbage. Design at the base of any culture aims to deceive this nature through technique. The one who produces it can "see" the acting forces in a comprehensive⁷ way, and he or she is able to anticipate niches of possible demands that the transformations point out. This perception allows one to invent new functional objects. Unfortunately, designers have not shown any moral concern with these products, particularly as they turn into trash, after losing their function. The increasing complexity of objects has begun to require the participation of an entire team for their manufacture. As the result cannot be attributed to a single author, the feeling of responsibility has been lost once and for all. It can be considered that the Second World War is a serious example arising from this fact.

According to Flusser, both the elite and the masses were alienated: the elite, with their abstraction, distanced themselves from reality, while mass culture hid the fictional character of the image. The ideal scenario would be the union of the two media, which would provide visual thought with a greater capacity to elaborate concepts, preserving the sensorial representation of facts. The synthesis of both might result in a new civilization.

All things that made up the world are being replaced by "non-things." The information is also changing. They are decodable and therefore "unapprehensible", and gradually gain in importance, replacing the

⁷ Flusser defines this look as the "soul's second eye".

object in our field of interest. Things are shrinking and "non-things" are multiplying, making the environment progressively impalpable. Software is worth more and hardware less and less. Instead of producers we are becoming employees. The new man no longer needs hands, but fingers to type, to decide and to choose. He doesn't want to have it, he wants to experience it.

Digital technology has brought a new image, electronically synthesized, resulting from a non-dimensional or "quantum" code that differs from the previous one, representative of the world. It is now fed by text and is, therefore, a product of history. According to the author, the goal of the human being in the past was to "formalize the existing world"; today he aims to "manufacture the designed forms to create alternative worlds".

Flusser points out to two basic traditions: Western and Eastern. The first one develops from a linear thought, from a codified logic, and advances science with the intention of controlling nature. The Eastern tradition, on the other hand, understands man as a being that emerges from the world to experience it. It has an aesthetic approach to the world and is based on an experience where both man and the world merge into one.

It is necessary to recognize that Western science has been advanced thanks to a distanced approach provided by theory⁸. A synthesis that brings together Western and Eastern perspectives seems to be emerging, providing the replacement of alphanumeric codes by new, hybrid ones, such as digital computer codes. Thus, the symbiotic relationship between man and tool can be reversed. It is possible that, in the future, factories will become learning places, because they will increasingly depend on human beings to extract something from their technological tools, which in turn will require increasing theoretical learning on the part of those in charge of them. There are hopes that a new existential feeling may arise in response to this phenomenon, that it will manifest itself with the awareness of the ephemerality of all creation and of our responsibilities in relation to the survival of the planet. Perhaps it is possible to re-establish a balance between human intellectual maturity and nature.

⁸ Or by reason.

As a pessimistic alternative, we can imagine a future in which the incorporation of conceptual thinking into imagery is unsuccessful. This would provoke a deterioration of the human species as a result of a growing depoliticization of the consumer society, the totalitarianism of mass media, and generalized alienation.

There is, however, the possibility that visual thought can positively incorporate conceptual thought and thus promote a more elaborate type of communication, with which man consciously assumes a formalistic position that establishes a new sense of reality.

The act of counting aims to achieve a synthesis. The act of writing does not. Today, we are living through a cultural revolution: from subjects of only one world, we are transforming ourselves into projects of several worlds. Perhaps we need to learn how to count...

Flusser's constant presence is felt throughout the work. The open, well-structured and fluid text invites us to reflect on important challenges facing humanity. With a lot of vivacity and inspiration, he transmits his doubts and questions, writes assumptions and apocalyptic predictions, as if he wanted to shake the reader before offering him some relief. Only then does he suggest any possibilities to exit. In a slightly debauched and sarcastic tone, Flusser clearly develops his way of thinking, of seeing, and tells us his interpretations, questions and doubts, establishing complex reasoning and creating small traps and provocation. Fatalist and hopeful at the same time, the author perhaps reveals a certain impatience and disappointment. After all, these difficulties related to the contemporary world were created by us.

When formulating a question, the author develops a thought free from censorship imposed by the limits of logic. After allowing the flow of ideas to manifest, he reorganizes and defines the contours in an articulated and coherent way. We feel within the process of birth and configuration of the work, experiencing the process of intellectual creation together with the writer. We have the impression

that Flusser writes not only to share his ideas, but that for him the act of writing is a way to lure and shape thought.

The author sees contemporary civilization as a probable result of a spiraling process that goes from image to concept and then back to image. Gathering density and lightness, he develops his work with an analogous path. Words constantly evoke images of his thoughts. Even if he does substantiate his ideas by making reference to other authors, he – nonetheless – reveals great erudition and some deep knowledge of philosophy, between the lines.

Monique Allain, 2009.