

## Technical Image

### Opaque Apparatus of Programmed Significance

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*For this is about opaque apparatuses, not transparent machines.*

—Vilém Flusser

With the concept of the technical image, Flusser indicates a historical shift in the structure of Western society.<sup>1</sup> Technical images, as found in photographs, films, videos, computer terminals, and television screens, designate images produced by an apparatus designed to create programmed information. Contrary to traditional images which carry significance through representation as seen in paintings, technical images are surfaces that operate according to “inverted vectors of meaning.”<sup>2</sup> The meaning of a technical image is not found in what the image signifies but in what it projects. In other words, technical images are less about the representation of the world and more about modeling the subject’s relation to and vision of reality. As such, technical images are “instructional programs” designed to inculcate significance, shape behavior, and direct subjects on how to make sense of the world.<sup>3</sup> The surfaces of technical images move away from a mimetic representation of the real to inscribe concepts as connotative, as opposed to denotative, forms of signification. However, traditional images and technical images are not entirely disconnected from one another. Together they shape the posthistorical phase of humanity, a phase in which humans’ relationship to reality is increasingly conditioned and modulated by embedded codification. This codification is produced by apparatuses that calculate probability. These apparatuses are opaque because they no longer require the knowledge of their operation by the subject that handles them. In other words: traditional images are “observations of objects,” while technical images are “computation of concepts.”<sup>4</sup>

*Into the Universe of Technical Images*, first published in 1985, opens a path toward critically understanding the meaning and impact of technical images in shaping the production and distribution of signification on a large scale. For Flusser, technical images carry their information on a surface that is easily replicable because it is first and foremost produced by an automated apparatus.<sup>5</sup> Understood as “a machine that

elaborated information,”<sup>6</sup> an apparatus is conceived as the core element constitutive of both technical and cultural revolution. Flusser offers two paradigms from which to investigate the impact of technical images on signification: the first questions value and information together; the second addresses the relationship between intention and programming.<sup>7</sup> For Flusser, technical images can only be criticized on the basis of their program.<sup>8</sup> The cultural critique of technical images requires the development of new criteria to unpack the programming significance of their production. These new criteria must respond to an imperative in which technical images are understood as projections that are programmed to appear as objective depiction of the real.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the cultural critique of the technical image is anchored in “defiance of common sense,” which tends to read technical images as mirrors of reality.<sup>10</sup> Witnessing a cultural revolution in the dynamic encounter between subject and object,<sup>11</sup> Flusser aims to address the postindustrial society of immaterial information by moving away from the body or content of distributed images, to focus on the technical apparatus as producing programmable surfacelike images.<sup>12</sup> Flusser focuses on the photograph as a post-industrial object designed by technicians who “apply scientific statement to the environment.”<sup>13</sup> For him, the technicians of opaque apparatuses as seen in the photographic apparatus influence the meaning of life by the proliferation of programmed vision. For Flusser, the twentieth century is marked by the advent of a posthistorical phase where technical images perform an analogic power that is slowly overcoming the rational dimension of writing that pretends to translate reality in a causal fashion.<sup>14</sup> The posthistorical designates the emergence of a new form of imagination that is no longer anchored in representation but in projection sustained by the proliferation of computational and automated apparatuses. Technical images are therefore the instruments for a new consciousness detached from the historical grounding of society. They break away from the theology of writing central to Western cultures because they function as “metacode of text.”<sup>15</sup> As a dominant form of relating to reality, technical images are now moving away from an historical understanding of the real anchored in writing to a posthistorical relation to events. In this new epoch of societal consciousness, technical images “translate historical events into repeatable projections.”<sup>16</sup>

The emerging culture of immaterial information designates a drastic shift in the formation of subjectivity. In the society of pure information, the subject is conditioned to absorb and consume technical images without paying attention. Flusser’s understanding of apparatus is fundamental to building a praxis of media theory grounded on the effects and impact of posthistorical objects on both the psychic and collective functions. For Flusser, not only do objects “tend to become worthless supports of information,”<sup>17</sup> but apparatuses themselves tend to shift away from human intention. In this statement we sense the political commitment of Flusser’s philosophy: human agency is no longer about creating and elaborating representation but deviating and emancipating humans from the projections produced by opaque apparatuses of vision. Agency is finding a margin of action left in the face of the imposition of information by apparatuses of programmed significance.<sup>18</sup> Technical images don’t signify meaning but are instructional programs that operate on “an entirely different

level of consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, there is an urgent necessity to cultivate an active reception of technical images, one that re-invents the programmed images that are directing consciousness in postindustrial society. In other words, to defy “the mutation of our experiences, perceptions, values, and modes of behavior”<sup>20</sup> that are imposed by instructional programs, the subject needs to invent new fields of possibilities, from which a more collective and less programmable image of history can emerge.

## Notes

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- 2 Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 50.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 10.
- 5 Flusser, “The Photograph as a Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs,” *Leonardo* 19, no. 4 (1986): 329–32, 330.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Flusser, *Technical Images*, 49.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Flusser, “Post-Industrial Object,” 329.
- 12 Ibid., 330.
- 13 Flusser, *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl, trans. Erik Eisel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 128.
- 14 Yves Citton, *Médiarchie* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), 224.
- 15 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. A. Mathews (London: Reaktion Books), 15.
- 16 Flusser, *Technical Images*, 58.
- 17 Flusser, “Post-Industrial Object,” 330.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Flusser, *Technical Images*, 13.
- 20 Ibid., 5.