

## On the Notion of Code Convergence in Vilém Flusser's Work

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**Abstract:** In the course of the 1970s and 1980s Vilém Flusser formulated the theoretical vision of a general convergence of different diverging aspects of modern society. According to him, this was made possible thanks to the latest technological developments: the invention of technical images, through photography and film, as well as the creation of new calculated digital images emerging from computer monitors. This notion of a final fusion is based on Flusser's own daily translation and retranslation practice and the theoretical vision he associated with this.

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Ah love! Could thou and I with fate conspire,  
to grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,  
would not we shatter it to bits — and then,  
remold it nearer to the heart's desire?  
Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rutalyat of Omar Khayyam*

In my talk I would like to focus on the notion of code convergence in Vilém Flusser's work. Even if he used the terms medium and mediation throughout his oeuvre he never developed a media theory proper, probably also to distance himself from the likes of Marshall McLuhan. Instead of media, Flusser speaks of discursive and dialogical communication structures — theaters, pyramids, trees, amphitheaters, circles and nets — and of codes, images, texts and technical images. His vision of a final fusion in the digitally calculated technical sounding images, as he developed it in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* first published in German in 1985 can, therefore, strictly speaking, not be described in terms of multimediality only: a significant theoretical difference that would have to be explored further.

The idea of a final fusion, a synthesis of the different codes, the senses associated with them and the body parts that go with this is slowly developed in a series of texts in the course of the 1980s. Already in *Mutation in Human Relations?* however, written between 1977 and 1978, Flusser develops a loose narrative moving from one communication structure to another and envisaging a sort of final convergence which he calls synchronization. Each step is motivated by a structural weakness which the following structure is supposed to do away with, creating, however, a new problem calling for further changes. This dialectics of mediation is also at work in the code progression described in the works of the 1980s. The move from theater to pyramid to tree to amphitheatre, furthermore, adumbrates the later passage from image to text to technical image described in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*.

A first version of the notion of final synthesis can be found in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* first published in German in 1983, but subsequently translated into English and republished in 1984. In this text Flusser develops a history of media based on a series of processes of translation and retranslation. Flusser defines three interconnected codes each defining a specific universe — images, texts and technical images — and develops a history of media evolution based on a series of processes of translation and retranslation. In a *Lexicon of basic concepts* at the end of the book, translating is defined as a “move from code to code”, a “jump from one universe into another.” (Flusser, 1984:61) The first step in this evolutionary process based on an alternation of images and texts consists in the creation of significant surfaces whose function is to make the world imaginable by abstracting it. These surfaces were meant to be mediations between man and world, but tended to hide the world by slowly absorbing and substituting it. “The world becomes image-like (...). This reversal of the function of images may be called ‘idolatry’ (...).” (Flusser, 1984:7) To counteract this tendency, texts were invented. Their aim was to break up the hallucinatory relationship of man to image and to criticize imagination by recalling its original intention.

“Some men (...) attempted to destroy the screen in order to open the way to the world again. Their method was to tear the image elements out from the surface and to align them. They invented linear writing. In doing so, they transcoded the circular time of magic into the linear time of history.” (Flusser, 1984:7)

History, thus, can be defined as the “progressive translation of ideas into concepts” (Flusser, 1984:60), of images into texts.

The dialectics of mediation at work in the passage from the first to the second step of evolution, however, leads to a second impasse.

“The purpose of writing is to mediate between man and his images, to explain them. In doing so, texts interpose themselves between man and image: they hide the world from man instead of making it transparent for him. (...) Texts grow unimaginable, and man lives as a function of his texts. A ‘textolatry’ occurs, which is just as hallucinatory as idolatry.” (Flusser, 1984:9)

The same way the pre-historic phase of images was overtaken by a historical phase of texts, post-history takes over from history and by inventing technical images attempts to make texts imaginable again. By doing this, post-history bends the progressive linear development of translation from images into texts back to its origins and beyond. Flusser describes it as a “re-translation of concepts into ideas” (Flusser, 1984: 61), that is, of texts into technical images. Technical images differ from traditional images in that the two are the results of dissimilar processes of translation. Traditional images have real situations as their source; technical images, on the other hand, start out from texts, which in turn have been written in order to break up images through translation.

Flusser’s history of media evolution as translation and retranslation has its origin in his vision of translation which he developed in the 1960s. Flusser’s writing practice consisted in translating each text into another language rather than just rewriting it in the same language. This text was in turn translated into another language. Flusser used four different languages altogether: German, Portuguese, English and French. These processes of multiple successive translations were generally ended by retranslating the last version into the language of first text, thus turning a straight line into a circle. This final text, a palimpsest of sorts, in a way, contained all other previous texts the same way that the technical image contains texts containing images. The following description of a translation process holds true also for the code progression described above. When we translate an English text into a French one, or an image into a text, one code feeds on the other: the French text, the meta-code, or the target language, swallows the English one, the object-code, or the source text.

“In the case of retranslation the original relationship of the two codes is reversed: the object-code becomes now a meta-code. In other words: after the French code has swallowed part of the (...) English one, he is in turn swallowed by the English code, (...) so to speak with the English in his belly.” (Flusser, 1996:343)

Technical images are transcodings of texts that have ingested images. This is the first aspect of Flusser's idea of code convergence. But there is more to it.

In *Into the Universe of technical Images* — first published in German in 1985 as *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* — Flusser amplifies his early concept of code convergence by adding numbers and sounds. In the chapter *Chamber Music* Flusser uses “to compose” and “to compute” as synonyms, bringing the world of music, mathematics and technical images together.

“The world of music is a composed universe. (...) We don't need to wait for electronic music to recognize this quality about music. The universe of music is as calculated and computed as that of technical images.” (Flusser 2011:164)

Contrary to music, the universe of technical images is a two-dimensional universe of surfaces, but like the musical universe and contrary to that of traditional images

“It is a pure universe, free of any semantic dimension. Technical images are pure art in the same sense that music alone once was. (...) Since the beginning of computing, technical images have rushed spontaneously to sound, and from sound spontaneously to images, binding them.” (Flusser 2011: 164–5)

Flusser does not explain the reason for this reciprocal tendency of images and sounds to fuse into one, but defines this inclination as a characteristic of both pretechnical images and pretechnical music. The technical image is “the first instance of music becoming an image and an image becoming music.” (Flusser 2011: 165)

This synthesizing fusion, however, is not to be understood as a simple juxtaposition of the visual and the acoustic. What Flusser intends is a complete reciprocal penetration and fusion of the two codes creating something radically new, unheard-of and unseen so far. This is made possible by computing which breaks down sound and sight into small bits and reassembles them again into a new coherent form.

An example that aptly sums up Flusser's position — but unfortunately without the acoustic dimension — can be found in the work of Nancy Burson to whom Flusser dedicated a short essay published in 1987. Flusser starts out with one of his favorite quotations, two verses from the *Rubaiyat* of the Persian poet Omar-i-Chajjam: “We shatter it to bits, and then remold it nearer to the heart's desire.” (Flusser 1998:146) “Expressed in less poetic terms”, continues Flusser, “we calculate the world in order to compute it.” (Flusser 1998:146) [my translation RG] Flusser uses the English word ‘bits’ in a double sense: in the general sense of bits and pieces and in the more restricted sense of binary digit, the basic units of information theory. We shatter the world to bits in order to recreate it according to our own wishes. We project new composite realities. Nancy Burson does the same. She creates chimeras through photography. Her chimeras, however, are not like the traditional ones from Greek mythology: a lion with the head of a goat arising from its back and a tail ending in a snake's head. Her pictures are not assembled like a collage, through simple juxtaposition. The mythical chimera was composed from different heterogeneous elements. If Bellerophon instead of fighting it, so again Flusser, would have kicked it up its backside the lion's head would have tumbled on the right and the snake

tail on the left. This would not be possible with Burson's chimeras. Her portraits of politicians — combining Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini into a single face —, and her ironical composite female beauties — a cocktail mixed out of Audrey Hepburn, Bette Davis, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren and Marilyn Monroe — are based on computer programs that work according to a specific algorithm. "These new 'authentic' chimeras", writes Flusser, "are self-contained independent phenomena." (Flusser 1998:146) [my translation RG]

Neither the concept of the audio-visual nor the existence of *electronic intermixers* that translate images into sounds nor sounds into images, correspond to the new level of integration that has become possible with the invention of calculated technical images.

"In a sounding image, the image does not mix with music; rather both are raised to a new level (...) Contemporary approaches to making music pictorial and pictures musical have had a long preparation. They can be seen, for example, in so-called abstract painting and in the scores of newer musical compositions. (...) so-called computer art is moving toward sounding images and visible sound." (Flusser 2011:165–6)

As Flusser points out, this trend can be detected in all synthetic images "even those that present themselves as scientific or political documents rather than art." (Flusser 2011:166) This anticipates the third and last aspect of the notion of convergence I am discussing here. I will come to it shortly.

The technical images finally manage to get rid of their earlier representative character of images and to become pure art, the same way music always was: immaterial and with-out an object to refer to.

"But only synthesized images are really conceived musically and made musical with visualizing power. It will be pointless to try to distinguish between music and so-called visual arts because everyone will be a composer, will make images. The universe of technical images can be seen as a universe of musical vision. (...) Once they have both become electronic, visual and acoustic technologies will no longer be separable." (Flusser 2011:165)

Unfortunately the English translation does not quite reproduce the idea Flusser is trying to express here. For 'conceive' and 'vision' Flusser uses 'einbilden' and 'Einbildungskraft', linking thus the word image, 'Bild' to the new technical possibility of computation, 'Einbildung', and calling this new form of technical imagination 'Einbildungskraft' in order to separate it from earlier forms of imagination. In the German original, stressing the two-way thrust of his argumentation, moving from image to sound and back, he writes: "erst bei synthetischen Bildern wird tatsächlich *musikalisch eingebildet* und mit *Einbildungskraft musiziert*." Another play on words takes place with the use of 'synthesis', 'synthetic', 'synthesize' and 'synthesized', in German 'Synthese' 'synthetisch' 'synthetisieren' and 'synthetisiert', linking the early vision of a final synthesis through multiple translation to the new vision of synthetic sounding technical images.

Flusser ends his description with a reference to German Romanticism, however, with a rationalist twist. The new general convergence is not about mysticism, but the collective

projection of a world that is completely man-made and therefore concrete: an utterly fictitious world in which to live with complete self-consciousness.

“I think this new aspect can be grasped at its tip in the dreamlike quality of the emerging image world. It is a dream world in which the dreamers seem exceptionally alert, however, for to press the buttons that produce pictures, the dreamer needs to calculate and compute clear and distinct concepts. It is a dream world, then, that does not lie below waking consciousness but above it, conscious and consciously constructed, a hyperconscious dream world. It will therefore be pointless to try to interpret dreams: they will mean nothing beyond themselves, and they will be tangible — a world of pure art, of play for its own sake. ‘*Ludus imaginis*’ (...) as *ludus tonalis* (...) and the emerging consciousness of the power to imagine as that of *homo ludens*.” (Flusser 2011:166)

The same way that music does not refer to any specific object, technical images are concrete dreams that do not refer to any reality but to themselves. I would now like to conclude with the third aspect of the notion of convergence.

In *The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs* published in Leonardo in 1986 Flusser sums up his idea of an encompassing cultural convergence directly stemming from technological evolution: the meeting and fusion of the natural sciences and the humanities, art and science, imagination and precision. In the following passage Flusser, furthermore, links this evolution to the work of Leonardo da Vinci and the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as it appears in the music of Richard Wagner.

“Ever since the fifteenth century occidental civilization has suffered from the divorce into two cultures: science and its techniques — the ‘true’ and the ‘good for something’ — on the one hand; the arts — beauty — on the other. This is a pernicious distinction. Every scientific proposition and every technical gadget has an aesthetic quality, just as every work of art has an epistemological and political quality. More significantly, there is no basic distinction between scientific and artistic research: both are fictions in the quest of truth (scientific hypotheses being fictions). Electromagnetized images do away with this divorce because they are the result of science and are at the service of the imagination. They are what Leonardo da Vinci used to call ‘*fantasia essata*.’ A synthetic image of a fractal equation is both a work of art and a model for knowledge. Thus the new photo not only does away with the traditional classification of the various arts (it is painting, music, literature, dance and theatre all rolled into one), but it also does away with the distinction between the ‘two cultures’ (it is both art and science). It renders possible a total art Wagner never dreamt of.” (Flusser 1986:331)

To sum it up: The global encompassing convergence Flusser is envisaging is a synthesis of several diverging aspects. Not only mathematics and music merge, also the West and the East, art and science — that were separated in the Renaissance — are joined again, science, art and politics — that were divided in the course of a more and more

positivistic and factual 19th century — finally join hands again, the senses and the codes come together, the eye, the ear and the fingertips, the visual, the acoustic and the tactile creating a multilingual, multi-mediatic and multi-discursive *Gesamtkunstwerk*. All borders disappear, all simple dualisms are abolished: the border between dream and reality, the separation between the artist and his audience, as well as that between art and life.

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