

# WHAT HAPPENED TO INTERACTIVITY?

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*I surely remember a time when 'interactivity' was one of the new key words, whereas it has almost disappeared from art jargon, just as quickly as it had been put up there.<sup>1</sup>*

He is right. That term, so popular ten years ago, has not only vanished from the scene. Nobody even seems to have noticed its silent disappearance. How come?

In order to attempt an answer to this question, I will use some theoretical considerations by the Prague-born Brazilian communications philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920–1991). Flusser pointed out that technical images (photographs, films, videos etc.) refer to texts. He argued that when writing was invented, it served to critique images. These images referred to the three-dimensional world. Writing, however, brought about history, science and politics as its consequence. But its content was the images it had torn apart and arranged into lines, in order to allow for causal one-to-one relations between those formerly pictorial elements. This is how critical thinking became possible in the first place. When finally technical images were invented, it was to render texts easier, imaginable and comprehensible. Technical images, however, are based on scientific theories and ideological beliefs. They are projections based on texts; they illustrate texts and systems of thought brought about by writing. Technical images mean texts.

Vilém Flusser used a phenomenological method to recognise what he called an apparatus-operator complex as the motivating force behind all contemporary social and technological change. In this context, an apparatus is a machine that transforms texts into technical images and/or distributes them. Examples for this kind of apparatuses are the camera, the public relations agency, the film industry, the television station or the museum of media art. The apparatus is based on technical and political programs. In other words, it is highly ideological and always biased. There is no value-free technology—especially not when it comes to the production of images as meaningful surfaces.

*The critic has to examine the structure of the apparatus and to decipher how the type of construction of the apparatus changes the reality to be depicted in the image. How for instance Kodak manipulates reality differently from Agfa. The structure of the apparatus is not politically and aesthetically neutral. It mirrors fundamental ideologies, and it has economic, social, psychological and aesthetic parameters that need to be deciphered by the critic.<sup>2</sup>*

However, it would be a misunderstanding to think that the apparatus is on a political mission. Apparatuses have no intention; they follow no aim. They are machines driven by the rules that constitute them, by their own inertia. Their goals are written down in their programs. Like any other system, they tend toward self-preservation.

Arts that make use of technically complex machines, of apparatuses, rather than of simple tools are called media art. Modern art was based on the notion of aesthetic deviation and progression. Its main topic was a self-referential discourse. Media artists have tried to violate the rules passed on to them. However, media artists have yet another reason (in addition to the general contemporary attitude) to transgress the rules of the trade: They creatively abuse the camera, the microphone, the editing suite, the CGI software etc., in defiance of the laws and intentions inscribed into and embodied by the very apparatus. They do so, because they believe they can only be free; they can only put the apparatus to artistic use, if they make it work against its own program, against the inert apparatus itself, and against the text whose materialisation the apparatus is. “The camera has been programmed to produce photographs, and every photograph is the realisation of one of the virtualities contained in that program.”<sup>3</sup>

However, “photographers try to defend themselves against the absurd and the value-free inertia endemic to apparatuses.”<sup>4</sup> Actually any media artist must necessarily struggle with the program materialised in the apparatus.

*We need a photo criticism in the sense of a critique of photographic apparatuses and photographic distribution apparatuses. It has to uncover the apparatuses behind the apparatuses that program apparatuses. Through photographs, it has to critique the entire apparatus culture and all its totalitarian tendencies, including the apparatuses that program us. In doing so, we will discover a type of photographer who fights directly against the photo camera and the media—and, through them, totalitarianism.<sup>5</sup>*

This kind of photographer would be a critic and an artist at the same time—a media artist. What can he do in a situation like this? The answer given for more than thirty years now has been—the artist must use the programs frozen in the apparatuses against the intention of their authors. He or she must abuse them purposefully.

Our present situation is characterised by a massive superiority of a discursive, pyramidal (in tendency fascist) structure of modern public institutions like political parties, the church or administration, as well as a system of amphitheatrical discursive mass media, broadcasting discourses that program

our behaviour. The apparatus-operator complex produces these discourses. With the technological support of communication channels that send messages but do not receive them, they rain down on us continually.

*Communication is only possible if dialogues and discourses are in a balance. If, however, as in the present situation, a form of discourse dominates that stops dialogues from taking place, then the structure of society threatens to decompose into an amorphous mass.<sup>6</sup>*

The media artist must try to turn the discursive structures of media technologies into dialogical channels that allow a responsible feedback. He or she must change discursive apparatuses into dialogical, responsive media systems.

*Our dialogues go on as archaically as before the Industrial Revolution, and with the exception of the telephone they still take place the way they did at the time of the Roman Empire, while the discourses raining down on us make use of the latest achievements of science. If there is any hope to prevent the totalitarian danger of massification by means of programming discourses, it lies in the possibility of opening up the technical media to dialogue.<sup>7</sup>*

“The apparatus-operator complex devours texts, to spit them out again as techno-images.”<sup>8</sup> Flusser asks how this complex changes our interaction with the world when it transforms texts, such as history, into techno-images, such as television programs, and thus impedes our perception of texts: “If... every historical action feeds the apparatus-operator complex, then history literally proceeds toward its end.”<sup>9</sup>

Flusser's version of the (once very popular) term end of history was that everything that happens today aims at becoming a TV program. If the apparatus transforms linear texts into technical images, it also processes historical thinking into images that lack the linear, vectorial progression of verbal causality and finality.

*Thus, the complex of apparatus-operator... becomes a dam of history. It becomes what once was called utopia, the fullness of time, the Kingdom of the Lord, the communist society etc. It is the goal of history to become a television programme. The apparatus-operator complex becomes a memory of history, preserved history. In movies, you can see Caesar or the landing on the moon over and over.<sup>10</sup>*

Images are now always at hand. They surround us in eternal circles, and they have been stripped of their historical meaning. Events turn into scenarios. They freeze into technical images that are constantly being reproduced by an inert apparatus for its eternal self-sustaining circuit.

*The reason that technical images function this way is that they work like dams; they are surfaces which arrest flux... Technical images... suck all of history into their surfaces, and they come to constitute an eternally rotating memory of society. Nothing can withstand the centripetal attraction of technical images: no artistic, scientific or political act that does not aim at a technical image, no daily common action that does not wish to be photographed or filmed or videotaped. Everything desires to flow into this eternal memory, and to become eternally reproducible there. Every event aims at reaching the television or cinema screen or at becoming a photograph... The result is that every event or action loses its proper historical character.*<sup>11</sup>

If we do not succeed in critiquing techno-imagination and the apparatuses that produce it, “history in the strict sense of that term will come to an end, and we may easily imagine what will follow: the eternal return of life in an apparatus that progresses by its own inertia.”<sup>12</sup> The apparatus’ pictorial diarrhoea will then make sure we will drown in a messy flood of kitschy aesthetic pictorial shit.

If Flusser is right, if dialogical media technologies, texts, history and traditional images are swallowed by the apparatus, and spat out as discursive technical images—where would there be space for interactivity, for a dialogue with the apparatus and its program?

The apparatus has replaced the concept of historically progressing dialogical participation with a discursive stream of images for reception and absorption only. Its capacity to devour images, texts, dialogue and poisonous art and to digest it into aesthetic shit, has turned out to be more powerful than the concept of deviant, progressive, non-conformist (media) art. That apparatus function is simply incompatible with the idea of interactivity. Art is an unworldly concept in the world of apparatus culture.

One can seriously ask whether Saddam Hussein would have been hanged at all in a world without discursive broadcast apparatuses. The technical image looks at first glance as if it had a historical meaning. However, it is not a representation but a projection. It is designed to program our behaviour, and distributed in a one-way, discursive broadcast, top down.

Not just interactivity, media art too, has fallen prey to the apparatus it had originally started out to provoke and put into question. Ironically, by doing so, it has provided even more and more interesting fodder to the Moloch, and it took its creators a long time to realise that. They have underestimated the irresistible suction capacity of the apparatus maelstrom and the enormous dams it has erected. “Nothing can withstand the centripetal attraction of technical images: no artistic, scientific or political act.”<sup>13</sup>



*Actions committed to history and against the apparatus, like monks burning themselves to death or students being killed in riots, are even better pretexts for TV programs than are deliberate scripts made by TV programmers. It may look as if the trend, in which writing is becoming subservient to image making, planning to irrationality, and reason to magic, is increasingly automatic and autonomous of individual decisions.*<sup>14</sup>

“It is equally right to say that man functions in function of the apparatus as it is to say that the apparatus functions in function of man.”<sup>15</sup> Both exist only through their relationship to each other. Media artists, too, have against their will become operators of the apparatus. Technical images like “photographs did not originate in their search for truth, goodness, and beauty, and these values are not unattainable ideas that stand above them. Photographs originate in apparatuses and are distributed through apparatuses whose intention is to preserve themselves and multiply. The true, the good, and the beautiful are pretexts in the service of this intention.”<sup>16</sup> Self-sustaining inertia as a driving force lets down all the apostles of conspiracy theories. It reminds us of the situation inside the spaceship in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, when HAL, a computer gone mad, is striving solely for self-preservation at the cost of human life on board, while his human counterparts are still trying to understand, to project meaning into its absurd messages.

In the case of the apparatus and the technical images it spits out, the programers, the creators of the messages have long ago disembarked. The meaning of images is the program that made them. There is in fact more to the picture than meets the eye. But it is not the objects in the picture—there is nobody who speaks to us through them. Actually, there have never been any speakers in the true sense at all. The image carries no meaning beyond whatever has constituted the apparatus itself. Elvis had left the building long before the concert had even begun.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Melentje Pandilovski, email to Andreas Ströhl, 27 July 2006

<sup>2</sup> Vilém Flusser, ‘Wie sind Fotografien zu entziffern?’, in Erika Kiffel ed., *Internationales Fotosymposium 1981 Schloß Mickeln bei Düsseldorf. Ist Fotografie Kunst?—Gehört Fotografie ins Museum? München: Steidl Verlag, 1982: 15*

<sup>3</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Göttingen: European Photography, 1984: 18

<sup>4</sup> Vilém Flusser, ‘Criteria—Crisis—Criticism’, in Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, Andreas Ströhl ed., Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 48

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*: 49f

<sup>6</sup> Vilém Flusser, ‘Gespräch, Gerede, Kitsch. Zum Problem des Unvollkommenen Informationskonsums’, in Vilém Flusser, *Nachgeschichte. Eine Korrigierte Geschichtsschreibung*, Stefan Bollmann/Edith Flusser eds, Bensheim/Düsseldorf: Bollmann Verlag, 1993: 232

<sup>7</sup> Vilém Flusser, ‘Dialogische Medien’, in Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie*, Stefan Bollmann/Edith Flusser eds, Mannheim: Bollmann Verlag, 1996: 286f

<sup>8</sup> Flusser, *Kommunikologie*, op. cit: 151

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*: 153

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: 152

<sup>11</sup> Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, op.cit: 14

<sup>12</sup> Flusser, *Writings*, op.cit: 69

<sup>13</sup> Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, op. cit: 14

<sup>14</sup> Flusser, *Writings*, op.cit: 69

<sup>15</sup> Flusser, ‘Wie sind Fotografien zu entziffern?’, op. cit: 15

<sup>16</sup> Flusser, *Writings*, op.cit: 47

THE SYMPOSIUM AND EXHIBITION PROJECT *THE IDEOLOGY OF THE IMAGINARY IN THE 21ST CENTURY*, CURATED BY MELENTJE PANDILOVSKI AND PRESENTED BY THE EXPERIMENTAL ART FOUNDATION IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE 2007 ADELAIDE FILM FESTIVAL, WAS HELD 1–2 MARCH. EXPLORING CROSS ISSUES OF ART, CULTURE AND NEW MEDIA, THE SPEAKERS WERE EDDO STERN, TANIA FRAGA, LEV MANOVICH, ANNA MUNSTER, MELENTJE PANDILOVSKI, PAUL MAJKUT, FRIEDRICH KIRSCHNER, HÉLÈNE FRICHOT AND ANDREAS STRÖHL, WHOSE PAPER IS REPRODUCED HERE.