

To JORDAN; 17pp including intro

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Vilém Flusser  
IN THE RESERVOIR OF IMAGES\*  
PHOTOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Translated from German by Joachim Neugroschel

The following ~~diagram~~ is suggested here: "History" is an unequivocal process pointing toward the future and issuing from images in order to make explicit that which is implicit in them; "history" is a narrative process that explains the contents of images, bringing out their hidden possibilities. And "photography" is an image that stops history short, damming its forward motion and thereby allowing it to be made recallable and revokable. Prior to the invention of the photograph and the other technological images that followed it, history was to be viewed as a branching current flowing toward a non-evident ocean--the "fullness of time." After those inventions, history became more comparable to a torrent plunging over an artificially inserted dam and stagnating in the reservoir of photographs and other technological images. According to this <sup>e</sup>schem~~a~~, our existential mood has changed since the introduction of photography. Earlier, we used to float down the river of history, swept along by its non-repeating events, its unique

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opportunities. But now we circle in the reservoir of technological images, into which the historical events tumble helter-skelter. We are the playthings of the surging and foaming images.

To clarify the suggested diagram, we have to elucidate the concept of history employed therein. "History" refers here to the period following "prehistory," with an intermediary period, namely "early history," binding them together. These two periods are quite distinct from one another: they are two different "times." Prehistory is a whirling time, whirling across the scene of the world, arranging the things of the world--even the human beings in the world. History is a rectilinear time, coming from the past, pointing toward the future, and sweeping along all things of the world--even human beings. In the whirling time of prehistory, everything kept repeating, like day and night and day, or like sowing and reaping and sowing; and this eternal recurrence was the "Last Judgment," to quote Hegel against himself: whenever something or someone left its or his appropriate place in the universal order, he was returned to the right place in the course of time and by means of time. In the rectilinear time of history, nothing was repeated, every new day was different from the previous day, and this irrevocability could be explained in causal terms: everything was the effect of a cause and the cause

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of effects. In short: prehistory was scenic, and history dramatic.

The gray zone between these two times--i.e., early history--allows us some insight into the emergence of history from prehistory. Understanding this development presumes a knowledge of archeology and paleo-ethnology, but we will not go into that. In the prehistoric world scene, people oriented themselves according to the images they formed from their existential distance. To say the same thing in reverse: the world was experienced as a scene because people oriented themselves in it by means of images. Indeed, the whirling time corresponds to the whirling motion of the eyes deciphering the image surface. However, images, like all mediations, are subject to an internal dialectics: they <sup>cover up</sup> present themselves to that which they are supposed to represent. As of a certain critical point, images reversed to gain a meaning that was the opposite of the original one. They no longer served as orientation charts for people--their creators--in the world. Instead, as people "forget" that they have created the images, the images begin forcing people to view the concretely experienced world as an orientation in the images. This idolatry, this transformation of images into their opposite, this image crisis, characterizes early history, and it can also be read in later documents, such as those of the pre-Socratics and the Jewish prophets.

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These images, which now alienated rather than transmitted, and this imagination, which had turned into hallucination, had to be opposed by new orientation codes.

That was why <sup>it?</sup> early history <sup>was invented</sup> ~~invented~~ writing--first <sup>was invented</sup> pictographs, hieroglyphics, which then somewhat circuitously led to the alphabet. Writing was meant to describe images and, through them, the world--that is, ~~narrate~~ <sup>to</sup> the meaning of images.

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This narrative--this explanation of the meaning of images--was supposed to make images transparent again <sup>to</sup> for the world.

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The result was a development that had not been foreseen in the invention of writing. Script projected its own linear structure, its lines, upon the world, just as images had once projected their own scenic structure, their surface upon it. Time stopped whirling, and it began to stream in an unambiguously linear direction. It was script that <sup>made</sup> ~~helped~~ prehistory give birth to history.

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We should not picture <sup>pre</sup> early history as a sharp cut between ~~pre~~ <sup>pre</sup> history and history. The first hints of a linear code, of "historical consciousness," must have occurred very early, perhaps as far back as the Paleolithic; and most people remained illiterate, living prehistorically, until and after the invention of printing. Rather, we should view

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<sup>pre</sup> prehistory as a gray zone, blurring on both sides, and in which image-thinking and script-thinking overlap in a complex manner, whereby literate historical thinking, in an

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arduous process involving countless setbacks, eventually wins out. The same applies to our individual consciousness: by and large, we experience the world prehistorically, in images, as a scene; and our critical, enlightened historical thinking forms only a thin "higher" level in our minds. In this sense, we continue to be prehistorical people.

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But in another sense, we can talk about the simply breathtaking success of history as an enlightening process. The code that carries history, the "alphanumeric<sup>al</sup> code--that is, the alphabet enriched with numbers--has produced science and technology, thereby revolutionizing our knowledge, experience, and values. We now exist very differently in the world. In this context, our different existence can be grasped as follows: we now live in an unimaginable world, of which we can form no image whatsoever. All the images offered us by science, all the so-called "scientific world-images," never orient us, they lead us astray; and all the images offered us by art, all the "aesthetic models," never allow us to understand the world--they miss the mark because they are not aimed at <sup>scientific and technological</sup> (the revolution in the world.) The simply breathtaking success of history has placed us, as still prehistoric human beings, into a world that overtaxes our imaginations. Science and technology have soared beyond our fantasies. Yet we cannot endure a situation in which we

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can just barely orient ourselves, and only conceptually at that, but no longer evaluatively--a situation that we can describe, albeit just barely, but not imagine. This state of affairs <sup>is responsible for</sup> ~~can be perceived~~ in phenomena like Nazism, nuclear weapons, or the population explosion.

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We would therefore need to mobilize a new kind of imagination, one that allows us to make a completely new kind of image--namely, images of the concepts we utilize to just barely orient ourselves in the world. These would no longer be images of the world, they would be images of the "description" of the world or images of "history." These new images would have to take more or less the same position in regard to history that the prehistoric images took in regard to the world. The prehistoric images were made from an existential detachment from the world, and the new ones are to be made from an existential detachment from history. The first of these new images is the photo. Hence, ~~we~~ <sup>it is</sup> submit <sup>ed</sup> that the photographer's position in regard to history is roughly that of the Paleolithic cave artist in regard to hunting wild horses. Let us now delve into this assertion.

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At first glance, the matter looks like this: both the photographer and the cave artist step back from horses in order to form an image of them, and both have the goal of orienting themselves in regard to the "horse," of evaluating it ethically and aesthetically, that is, say, eating it or <sup>devouring</sup>

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experiencing it. At first glance, the only discernible difference between the cave artist and the photographer is the latter's camera. But if we then look at the camera, we realize that the photographer has by no means stepped back from a horse, although he may think so in his "early-historical underdevelopment." Actually, he has stepped back from photons, which were reflected from a surface of an object called a "horse"; and he forms an image by capturing these photons on molecules that have been specifically programmed to this end. He makes an image not of a horse, of the world, but of a scientific explanation, and he does so thanks to a technology based on explanation. A look at the camera reveals a further difference. It is not the photographer who forms the image, for a self-timer could do the job in his stead; the real former of the image is the camera designer, and he or she is not even present. This person--or this artificial intelligence--is not even present, for he or she has stepped back not from the horse or the world, but from an explanation of the world, from history, in order to form an image of them. Ergo: the photo is not the image of a horse, it is the image of an historical explanation of the horse. It is a new kind of image, and its goal is to render imaginable a world that is understood just barely and the horse that is understood as a swarm of particles. However, our consciousness is so

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retarded that we receive the horse photo as if it had been painted on the wall of a Paleolithic cave.

Still, we are beginning to master these new images (albeit with somewhat unpleasant methods), just as people in early history learned how to read and write. The theme of this essay is one of these unpleasant methods of learning: we are starting to push history in the direction of the new brand of images. But before discussing this new direction, let us recall another method of learning, for it can more effectively clarify the results of these new historical activities.

Horses, you see, do not have to be photographed as recounted above. They can also be photographed more or less as follows. First, you describe the horse as clearly and lucidly as possible. It would be best to use the code of topological analysis. Then you digitize this description, feeding it into a computer. The computer is programmed to process particles on its monitor in terms of this description, so that dots, lines, and surfaces become visible. Something like a wire netting of a described horse surface appears. This mesh can be projected according to the rules of descriptive geometry, in various perspectives and various dimensions; it can be coated with various "skins"; it can be lit up from various sides and in various colors; and it can be given any aspects of a body--say,



mass, the ability to cast shadows, internal tension, etc. The ultimate outcome is the photo of a horse that, in phenomenal terms, differs in no way from the one produced by the previously described method. Except that in regard to this second photo, it is obvious even to "retards", that what is shown is not an image of a horse of the world but an image of a description of the world, of history in the sense meant here; for not only the photographer, the subject of the world, but also the horse, an object of the world, has become unnecessary for making an image.

The topic of this essay is a different learning method of the new kind of images. We learn to stop driving history away from images and "forward"; instead, we have to do the very opposite: drive history in the direction of the new kind of images. As we have tried to demonstrate, history commenced as a description, a narrative, an elucidation of images, and was driven so far that it was pushed into the unimaginable. And now we are starting not only to drive history toward images, but to whip it along in that direction; and today, history is galloping--to remain with the image of the horse. Now initially, this latter statement can be interpreted in a very banal way: politicians talk more and more about being filmed, people marry in order to be photographed, and terrorists throw bombs in order to get on TV. In other words, the historical

plot is readjusted and geared to being recorded. Even such a banal reading is informative, but we have to go into it more deeply.

So far, we have always acted on the conviction that history never repeats itself, and that we therefore have to seize the day--"carpe diem"--but that events leave traces and are stored in some memory or other. This conviction impels us to distinguish between "making history" (political commitment) and "writing history" (historiography). Once we began exercising a new imagination and producing photos and other technological images, we abandoned that conviction in favor of a different one. Now--just the reverse--we are convinced that we act in order to leave traces, in order to be immortal in some way. We no longer believe that our actions are motivated by political commitment in order to be somehow recorded, registered subsequently and secondarily; quite the opposite: we believe that our actions aim at being stored in human and artificial memories. Thus, we no longer believe that historians follow the course of history; on the contrary, we believe that the course of history aims at historiography--no longer the writing of history, but images of history.

This has caused a radical change in the "making of history." If we now make history in terms of images, if we, say, land on the moon in order to photograph this event,

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then we are no longer standing in the flux of events, steering them from the inside; rather, we are above the flux, reaching in from the outside, in order to program this flux in terms of an image. Now we behave not like actors, "dodos," but like movie producers, "stage producers," and history, for us, is no longer a drama but a show, a spectacle--that is, something meant to be viewed. Indeed, when watching history, we are seated--in a state of rest, as it were; and we dispose of buttons that can call up individual events, repeat them, make them freeze (still pictures) or move them forwards or backwards (moving pictures). To sum all this up: we now make history not because we are swept along by linear historical time, but because we wish to orient ourselves in the world by using images of history.

We have probably not yet even begun to fully account for this existential upheaval. As I have said, being equipped with an underdeveloped consciousness, we are unable to keep pace with the incipient cultural revolution. Most of the time, we live "prehistorically," experiencing the world as a scene. In some very few enlightened moments, we live "historically," committing ourselves in terms of history and experiencing the world dramatically. And it is only in very rare and fleeting moments that a bit of mental exertion empowers us to live "post-historically,"

experiencing the world as a show that we have programmed, as our projection. This makes it so difficult for us to understand the situation. Things become a little easier if we go back to the two aforementioned photos of horses--one from a camera, the other from a computer--and ponder the difference between them. The camera photo of a horse can be "posed," staged, somewhat like photos of weddings, moon landings, and summit conferences; in this way, they correspond to the "post-historical" consciousness. From the viewpoint of the "historical" consciousness, such a photo adulterates history; but from the other viewpoint, it gives history a meaning: namely, to be "photographed." The computer photo of the horse is not ~~only~~ "posed," it is "produced" by calculations, and only this photo can be said to be "staged"--namely, translated from a description into a "scene." Thus, it turns out that all "posed," "staged" pictures, photos, films, TV images have to be regarded as technologically imperfect approximations of synthetic computer images. They stem from the conviction that history is something that must be staged in order to have any meaning. The point of all these images is the creation by the "post-historical" consciousness, and all "historical" criticism misses the mark; it is only when all these images resort to computer technologies that we will realize we are now driving history not in order to keep driving it

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aimlessly forward, but in order to drive it into memories so that it may be given a meaning there and be called up at will.

For some time now, historical events have been hurtling by, helter-skelter, because they are plunging like cataracts over the artificial dam of the new image technologies into the reservoir of images. If we allow ourselves to be swept along by this waterfall, we experience it as a brutal, murderous, and absurd event. But if we sit in an armchair, as we now mostly do, watching this waterfall and letting the images swirl around us, then we experience all this as a sensational show, which runs through our consciousness, barely leaving a trace, yet is stored somewhere in some memory, waiting to be called up at any time. What we do now, as passive playthings of the images, is a rather pitiful making. But once we have learned how to manipulate and process the surges of images, a new, worthier, and more upright form of existence can arise from them. Instead of "political" commitment, it can turn into a commitment to the memories of others amid universal cooperation.

The theme of "photography and history" is one of the most perilous and yet most thrilling challenges now facing us. We should not disguise, gloss over, or trivialize this topic with conventional categories; rather, we must try and confront it. The things said in this essay are nothing but

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a ~~timid step toward the~~ now-necessary readjustment to the  
photo, to a new imagination, and to history.