



# **Communicology**

***Mutations in Human Relations?***

***Vilém Flusser***

Foreword by  
**N. Katherine Hayles**

Edited by  
**Rodrigo Maltez Novaes**

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# COMMUNICOLOGY

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Mutations in Human Relations?

VILÉM FLUSSER

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WITH A FOREWORD BY N. KATHERINE HAYLES

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## SYNOPSIS

••• Human communication is the art of accumulating acquired information. Since the general tendency of nature is toward loss of information, human communication is therefore an antinatural process (*artificial*). Of course, it does not *infringe* any laws of nature. It may be perfectly explained as a natural process. But if explained thus, it will not show its essence; it will escape understanding. One can see what communication is about only if one takes it to be a symbolic process. This requires the observer to assume an *intersubjective* point of view, one that admits that what is observed has a meaning. If observed thus, it may be seen that communication is a process that stores symbols in individual memories (*minds, spirits, souls*) and in collective memories (*civilizations, cultures*). From such a point of view, it does not matter whether the accent is put on the individual or on the collective information accumulators (whether *culture* is considered to be a product of *minds*, or the *mind* a product of *culture*). *Communication is seen as a tissue composed of individual memories that form a collective memory by exchanging symbols.*

Information is acquired by distribution within the tissue of communication. This method is called *discourse*. It distributes information stored in one memory among other memories. New information is created through the exchange of previously acquired information. This

method is called *dialogue*. It exchanges information stored in various memories aiming toward a synthesis, which becomes new information. The two methods imply each other: discourse presupposes dialogue, and dialogue presupposes discourse. Communication is satisfactory (it accumulates acquired information well) only if there is an equilibrium between the two methods. If one prevails over the other, human relations may be said to be in a *crisis*. At present dialogue is dominated by discourse to a degree rarely, if ever, attained in the past. *Human relations are in a crisis because all dialogues are dominated by omnipresent discourse.*

Several structures of discourse and dialogue may be distinguished: (1) theatrical discourse (such as schools), which tries to preserve information by making the receivers responsible for it; (2) pyramidal discourse (such as armies), which tries to preserve information by authoritarian methods; (3) tree discourse (such as the sciences), which tries to preserve information by branching it out in progressive specializations; (4) amphitheatrical discourse (such as broadcasting), which tries to preserve information by stereotypical massification; (5) circular dialogue, which tries to produce information by elitist synthetization; and (6) network dialogue (public opinion), which produces new information by vulgarization of acquired information. At present, mass-media amphitheaters and networked public opinion are being synchronized and tend to reinforce each other. *This synchronization of the radiation of stereotypical information, together with small talk about it, is an aspect of our crisis.*

This domination of radiated discourse over the situation, and the consequent degradation of dialogue, may be seen as the result of a revolution in communication techniques or as the result of a revolution in the type of symbols in which information is coded. Under the first perspective, it must be asked: Why do discursive structures like TV and the press dispose of such advanced technology, while the dialogical structures are generally archaic? Although there are many answers, they will not be satisfactory unless the second perspective is also taken into consideration. It will then be seen that our situation consists of two levels: a level of elitist communication and one of mass communication. The *upper* level programs the *lower* one by radiating information coded



in a new type of symbol, technical images. Specialists translate information coming out of the various dialogues of the scientific, technological, and other tree discourses into technical images and then broadcast them to the mass level of communication. *This mass culture, now turned universal, degrades the sophisticated technical images into an archaic small talk, and it is programmed to do so.*

Technical images (such as photographs and films, but also blueprints and road maps) are unlike traditional images, not so much because they are produced in a different way but because they mean something different. Traditional images may be said to mean *scenes*. Technical images mean something much more abstract, although many of them look as if they have the same meaning as traditional images. Their meaning is deceptive. It may be deciphered only if technical images are seen to be a late result not of traditional images but of linear texts. *If we are to understand our crisis, to understand how and why humanity is being programmed for passive reception, we must make an effort to decipher the technical images that program us.*

It will be seen that there are many types of codes in which the information within our memories and within the world around us is stored. But if we concentrate attention on the present crisis, we find that three types of codes are immediately concerned: codes that consist of images, those that consist of symbols ordered in lines, and those that consist of technical images. In the codified world around us, these three types of codes follow one from the other: linear texts come later than traditional images, and technical images later than texts. In our own memories, the three types of codes overlap. There is, at present, a discrepancy between the information stored in our memories and the information stored in the world around us, and this discrepancy is due to the conflict between the various codes within our program (the way we store information). *We are not suitably programmed for the situation we are in, and this is an aspect of our crisis.*

Each code requires a specific method for information manipulation and for deciphering the information coded. The method of codification and decodification of images can be called *imagination*, the one for codification and decodification of linear texts can be called *conception*, and the one for codification and decodification of technical images can

be called *technical imagination*. Imagination is the capacity to project supposedly real relations upon a surface (make images) and to reproject supposedly real relations from a surface (decipher images). Conception is the capacity to *explain* images by unrolling them into lines (describe them) and to reconstruct images from texts (read texts). Technical imagination is the capacity to project texts upon a surface (make images of concepts) and to reconstruct the texts from those images (see through the technical images). *We are programmed for imagination and conception, but not for technical imagination.*

Each of the three methods of codification gives a specific meaning to symbols, and therefore to the world and to life within it. To each corresponds a specific level of existence, of consciousness, and of action. The level corresponding to imagination can be called *magical existence*. On that level, the world is experienced as a context of scenes, time as a circle of eternal recurrence, and life as a search of a *just* place in the world. The level corresponding to conception can be called *historical existence*. On that level, the world is experienced as a process of becoming, time as a sequence of unique and irrevocable instances, and life as a search for progressive perfection. The level corresponding to technical imagination has not yet been attained, and although it begins to condense, it is difficult to formulate it. But it will no doubt be a radically new form of existence, and life will have a radically new meaning if it is ever consolidated. *Unless we attain the level of consciousness corresponding to technical images, we shall not decipher the programs of which we are the receivers.*

The obvious way to render technical imagination conscious is to observe how technical images are produced and how they are received (even if they are not being appropriately deciphered during reception). The first thing we see is that technical images are produced by complexes that can be called *apparatus-operator*. Those complexes (for example, photo camera–photographer or TV broadcasting system–television operator) establish a new form of relation between tool and human: no longer the tool serves the human, or the human serves the tool, but both function for each other. Therefore, *classical* categories cannot be applied to this new situation: an apparatus is a new type of tool and requires a new type of political thinking, and an operator is a new type

of human and requires a new type of anthropological thinking. *Unless we give up traditional categories, we shall not understand the problems posed by the apparatus-operator complex, which is central in our situation.*

The *apparatus-operator* complex is the place where linear texts are being translated into technical images (for instance, film scripts into moving pictures). It may be said that they are the place where history in the strict sense of that term is being translated into programs to be radiated. Those places suck in history and vomit programs. From the point of view of history, they are the *end of history*, the *plenitude of times*, and it is in their direction that history has tended ever since it started. From the point of view of the receivers of the programs (for instance, the cinema-going public), they are the place where history *repeats itself* and may be contemplated. *The fact that every commitment to history will be sucked in by an apparatus-operator complex, even if it is committed against that complex, is an aspect of our crisis.*

The climate of mass culture is pseudo-magical because the inability to decipher technical image programs is not a technical difficulty (technical images are not *mysterious*) but a refusal to decipher them on the part of the receivers (they are believed with *bad faith*). The explanation is that people fear to *see through* the programs they are fed: they prefer semiconscious reception to the responsibility of full awareness. And this fear is justified: The conscious use of technical imagination would undoubtedly imply the abandonment of experiences, values, and knowledge cherished for countless generations. It implies a leap just as radical as was the one that resulted, four thousand years ago, in historical existence. *People prefer to be programmed for pseudo-magic, to the challenge of questioning the fundamental categories of historical, conceptual reason.*

Technical imagination is a step back from linear thinking. It is thus fundamentally the abandoning of the *objective* point of view, which is the place where linear thinking stands. This implies not only that the traditional distinction between science, politics, and the arts will become meaningless for technical imagination but also that *intersubjectivity* will become a new criterion for the validity of knowledge and action. The abstract and empty concepts of *time* and *space* will be substituted

by technical images of *space-time*, which will not be measurable by absolute and deliberate scales but by scales that are relative to existence and given by existence. This implies that *proximity* and *interest*, coupled with *intersubjectivity*, will become the measures of knowledge, value, and action, and this again implies the abandoning of *humanistic* values. *Whatever the new human will be, he will not be Christian or Marxist but something dreadful, as is everything that is new.*

Although we cannot imagine an existence in technical imagination, this overcoming of history and reason by the capacity to give meanings to history and reason, we may be certain that our situation has only two possible issues: it will either stifle technical imagination and lead to an omnipresent *apparatus-operator* complex, in which the whole of humanity will become a mass of operators; or it will explode through the conscious application of technical imagination. *Either totalitarian masification or technical imagination will penetrate the masses and render it aware of the possibilities dormant in our situation.*

Even now, we can vaguely distinguish those possibilities, and they are gigantic. We possess, even now, all the tools and all the methods to transform human society into a *true cosmic democracy*, namely, a dialogue that will result in a quantity and quality of new information, compared to which the whole of human past communication must seem like a hesitant introduction. A mutation of human relations is technically, economically, and even politically possible, which would, if become real, result in human existence of unimaginable and inconceivable wealth of knowledge, experience, and evaluation. But of course, to say this is to speak nonsense. This possibility can become real only if there is sufficient technical imagination to realize it, and if there is such technical imagination, it is not a possibility but only a chimera. We have therefore to be content with the following statement: *Our crisis will result either in a perfectly imaginable totalitarian apparatus or in a totally unimaginable explosion of technical imagination.*

If communication is defined as the art of accumulating acquired information, there is, sotto voce, a second connotation. Commitment to communication becomes a commitment to the *mind* and to *culture*, to memory, to the immemorial, and against death and oblivion. And this again implies that any commitment to communication is one to

immortality in the memory of others. *Fundamentally, we are in a crisis because to commit oneself to communication in our situation is to commit oneself either to a totalitarian apparatus or to a dreadful explosion.*

Now, this may not be a *valid reading* of our situation. This book will not submit its reading as if it were so. In fact, it is the belief of this writer that there are countless points of view with regard to any concrete situation, that this is what makes it *concrete*, and that each point of view opens a specific vision. The book intends to present a single point of view with regard to our crisis: the point of view of the codes that program us. From such a point of view, this is what can be seen: *the decadence of linear codes and historical reason, the danger of a fall into second-degree illiteracy and massification, and the possibility of a yet unimaginable new form of human communication.*

If read in such a spirit, as an effort to contribute to a dialogue concerning the mutation of human relations we witness, and as an effort to provoke further dialogue, this book will have attained its purpose. *In this sense, this book is itself a manifestation of the effort to master technical imagination and contribute to the mutation of human relations.*

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