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*Derrida and Flusser: On the Concept of Writing and the End of Linearity*<sup>1</sup>

“The end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book.”

J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

“How can we actually be sure that these great writers  
(including the author of the Holy Scripture) would not rather have  
spoken on tape or shot a film.”

V. Flusser, *Die Schrift*

In his essay *Falar e escrever* published in the Brazilian newspaper *Jornal do Comercio* on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1966 Vilém Flusser discusses some aspects of the relationship of the spoken and written word within Western culture in terms surprisingly akin to those put forward by Jacques Derrida at about the same time in his founding text on deconstructivism *Of Grammatology*. Both philosophers question the temporal precedence and consequent primacy of the spoken over the written word, developing from this a radical redefinition of the concept of writing involving a criticism of the idea of linear progressive history and the inevitable ethnocentrism that goes with it.

I would like to explore this unexpected subterranean correspondence and some of its subsequent ramifications using Derrida’s approach as a point of view from which to describe Flusser’s theory of writing focusing both on convergences and divergences. By joining two apparently quite dissimilar theoretical approaches – Derrida’s deconstructivism, widely discussed in academic circles across the USA, and the phenomenological work of Vilém Flusser, still a marginal phenomenon within the American cultural scene – I would like to show that Flusser’s approach not only shares quite a few of the philosophical tenets of Derrida’s work, but introduces also a series of original thought-provoking insights that could enrich the on-

going theoretical debate about the status of writing in an age of technological innovation and social change. Besides exploring the interconnectedness of Vilém Flusser's and Jacques Derrida's work with respect to the concept of writing, I am going to deal with two specific moments in time linked by common sources, analogous methods and shared aims: the cultural context of the mid-sixties that witnessed the attempt of concrete poetry to break away from linearity by using the page as a two-dimensional space for inscription, and the late eighties and early nineties characterized by the onset of a progressive migration of writing from the book to the screen, opening up a whole set of new possibilities for the writing practice itself.

Jacques Derrida dedicates a large section of chapter three of the first part in *Of Grammatology* to the work of the French anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan who in 1964-5 published two influential books on the evolution of technology, language and art under the common title of *Gesture and speech* (see Derrida 1976: 85ff.) Leroi-Gourhan's anthropological research, argues Derrida, has shown that the roots of phonetic writing are to be found in a previous, non-linear form of expression characterized by a multi-dimensional approach. This multi-dimensionality, linked to a time-concept of simultaneity, was translated by phonetic writing into an irreversible linear time-sequence. Although the historical model of the line nowadays claims universal validity it actually represents only a parenthesis in the history of humanity. Linearity does not imply the complete loss, but only the systematic removal of many-dimensional, symbolic thinking. The crisis of linearity we are witnessing at present is neither a simple return to a de-linearized time-conception, nor a regression to mythical thinking. On the contrary: It reveals the mythical dimension of linearity and the limited significance of the specific rationality that has been created by it. So far Derrida.

The aim of the notion of graphism developed by Leroi-Gourhan was to undo the evolutionary model postulating the precedence of figuration over graphism. Language was originally not restricted to speech or writing, but included all kinds of

graphic representation. In the beginning we come across abstract sets of lines and points arranged according to specific rhythmical patterns. Art is not separated from writing and has no representational function yet. The invention of writing, through the device of linearity, separated art from writing and completely subordinated graphic to phonetic representation leading to the loss of the multi-dimensional freedom of the image. The basic character of the 'mythogram' articulating the pluridimensional character of symbolic thought is its two-dimensional spatial structure, its star-like shape. Alphabetical writing is the last stage of a process of phonetic representation whose realization in speech could be accomplished only by reducing it into a single linear dimension.

Leroi-Gourhan's reinterpretation cleared the ground for Derrida's own radical notion of *archiécriture* which implies that writing is not the representation of speech and that one can not ultimately distinguish between speech and writing in their origins. The clear-cut opposition of these two moments, so Derrida, has to be reconsidered: writing is not derivative, artificial or secondary in relation to the primacy of speech. All signs, spoken or written, are already part of recognizable structures in a differential network, that is, instituted traces which do not stand in opposition to anything natural.

In a similar way Flusser sets out in his essay on the ontological difference of speaking and writing by pointing out that in Western tradition speaking has generally been considered the primary, natural form of articulation and writing a secondary, artificial form of expression. Flusser does not deduce from this first fundamental dichotomy any other – inside/outside, form/content, original/artificial – as Derrida does in *Of Grammatology*.

The hypothesis of a temporal precedence of spoken over written language, argues Flusser, can be questioned both from a historical and epistemological point of view. There is no historical proof available that spoken language was used before writing. On the contrary, there is anthropological evidence of primitive pictures which could be interpreted as a rudimentary form of writing. Flusser, who uses a very broad concept of writing, incorporating letters, numbers, logical signs as well

as symbols, could be referring here indirectly to Leroi-Gourhan's concept of graphism that Derrida, as already shown, has heavily drawn on in *Of Grammatology*. Early forms of writing are not phonetic, that is, they are not representations of sounds. Alphabets are a more recent phenomenon. Furthermore other forms of writing which are independent of spoken language have been developed in different cultural contexts.

If spoken language is not prior to written language how then can the difference between the two be explained? Flusser answers this question with a phenomenological analysis of the two activities setting out from their reverse, their source and goal, that is, silence. We can speak more or less loudly and use silence to highlight single words or phrases. When we write, however, we can use silence to structure our thoughts by introducing pauses between sentences, words and letters. Speaking and writing are related to each other without one having precedence over the other. As any other symbolic system they are expression of an inner silent language, the way painting or dancing or acting would be. In our culture, though, the fundamental asymmetry of the two basically complementary activities has become a relation of unilateral dependence. Flusser attempts no historical explanation at this stage. He speaks of a historical accident specific for Western civilization. Writing without any connection to spoken language is indeed possible, as ideograms, hieroglyphs, as well as logical and mathematical symbols show.

Flusser's argumentation relies on the duality of space and time. Speaking has to do with sounds, with music. It has a beginning and an end. It unfolds along a temporal line. Writing on the other hand has to do with images, with painting. It takes place on the empty space of the page. By reducing the pictorial side of writing to the simple one-dimensional logic of the line, so Flusser, who again summons up one of Leroi-Gourhan's main points, a whole complex multilayered world has been lost. This can be experienced when dealing with oriental languages that in this respect are infinitely more sophisticated. The subordination of the written to the spoken word, then, as Flusser puts it, has crippled our intellectual faculties and limited our creative potential. Leroi-Gourhan similarly speaks of a narrowing down of

perception. A criticism of linear writing should go beyond the temporal aspect by rediscovering the forgotten spatial dimension of writing, most of all, the two-dimensional field of the page. If we succeed in freeing ourselves from the constraints of linearity, which are a consequence of the predominance of the spoken over the written word, a completely new way of thinking would be possible.

What is the theoretical background of Flusser's reflection about the nature of linear writing? What are his sources? When writing his essay Flusser was translating with the help of Anatol Rosenfeld *Galáxias – Galaxies* – by the Brazilian writer Haroldo de Campos, who belonged to the group of Brazilian concrete poets *Noigandres*. The book was published in Stuttgart in March 1966, thanks to the help of Max Bense, a key figure in this context operating, as Haroldo de Campos himself, on the fields of mathematics, cybernetics, information theory and literature. Bense was not only one of the leading theoreticians of the international movement of concrete poetry, but also an inspiring influence for the net-literature of the early nineties.

*Galaxies* is a book without beginning or end, a mosaic consisting of torrential verbal forms and conventions. On each page one stable component has been placed, a word or a concept, around which other more ephemeral and unstable linguistic elements are freely floating. The linear structure has thus been consistently and successfully disarranged and the page turned into an open space on which distinct elements are called to interact like colors, lines and geometrical figures on a canvas. In a short portrait dedicated to the artist and friend (Flusser 1992: 151-8), Flusser stresses Haroldo de Campos' attempt at combining information theory and ideogramatic writing, as well as his interest in the study of oriental languages and the work of Marshall McLuhan whom he met in the USA in 1967.

In the same short text Flusser points to another aspect which we also come across in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*: Campos, argues Flusser, has broken up the Gutenberg-*Galaxy* – the play on words is intentional here – by introducing non-linearity in his writing, using oriental ideograms as a model. He was inspired by the presence of the numerous Japanese immigrants in Brazil and the work of Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, whose influence on the poet are well document-

ed.(see De Campos 2000) Derrida refers in the parallel passage also to the work of Mallarmé whose poetics together with that of Pound were “the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition.” (Derrida 1976: 92)

A third important point in common, after the two already mentioned, has to do with Flusser’s and Derrida’s debt to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976: 72f.) Derrida refers to Heidegger’s criticism of the linear time concept as he developed it in the final part of *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger 1993: 378f), a text Flusser knew well and had already read in the early fifties. *Das vulgäre Verständnis der Geschichte* – The vulgar concept of history – as Heidegger calls it, interprets time as a movement stemming from the present and extending into the future. This perception of time dominates Western philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel and is closely linked to the concept of linear writing and the sequential progression of the spoken word. It could be argued that it is the very consequence of the linear orientation of phonetic language itself.

Flusser deals with this connection in his text *Die Schrift* published in 1987. The hectic pace of present day alphabetical writing, writes Flusser, allows an insight into the structure of our thinking which is basically a forward movement unfolding in time along textual lines (see Flusser 1992a: 23) It is the continuous acceleration of the writing process, moving from stylus, to pen, to printing press, to word processor, that has made the sheer madness of an unending historical progress visible. The crisis of linear writing is, thus, also the crisis of our perception of time.

Electronic text processing represents a major shift in the development of the printed book leading to a redefinition of writing and a disruption of linearity akin to the formal conception envisaged by the concrete poets of the sixties. What traces of this reorientation can be found in the texts of Derrida and Flusser? In *Hypertext*, published in 1992, George P. Landow analyses what he describes as the convergence of contemporary critical theory and technology. The possibilities of hypertext, literally overcoming the closed space of the page-bound text by linking single words or sentences with other often far away text segments or images, realize some

of the visionary statements of Derrida's early work. One possible answer to the reductionism of linear writing suggested by Derrida is "the inclusion of visual elements in writing as a means of escaping the constraints of linearity." This "new pictographic writing" (Landow 1992: 43) has to a large extent been made possible by the technical facilities of hypertext. In some of his books Derrida has also explicitly played with the conventions of the page and gone against some of the traditional typographic rules.

Similarly, Flusser has tried out a few possible answers. By persistently translating all his texts from Portuguese, to German, to English, to French and back, circling around the initial idea and by deliberately using a contradictory line of argumentation, a syncopated style, as he calls it, Flusser has attempted to break down the inherent linearity of alphabetical writing (see Flusser 1992a: 48). *Die Schrift* was published in two versions one on a floppy-disk attached to the book. The intention was to establish a dialogue with possible readers who were invited to elaborate the digitalized text sending back their results to the author. In *Vampyrotheutis infernalis* (Flusser 1993) dedicated to an imaginary species of octopus living at the bottom of the ocean, phantasmagorical images created on the computer screen by Louis Bec were included. They were not conceived as simple illustrations to the text. Their ambiguous status on the border of artistic creation and classificatory zoology was supposed to enter in a dialogue with the ambiguity of the text suspended between philosophy, fiction and biology. The collection of essays *Angenommen – Suppose that* – (Flusser 2000) was conceived as a series of futuristic scenarios addressed to video-artists. In his last book *From Subject to Project* (Flusser 1994), finally, Flusser tried to incorporate the world of images into his text by retranslating his philosophical concepts into the gestures and the images they were born from.

To conclude I would like to discuss the changes that the technological advances of the 70s and 80s had on Flusser's vision of writing and linearity. Flusser dedicated *Die Schrift* to his friend Abraham Moles, "the discoverer and researcher of *Nachschrift*." (Flusser 1992a: 4) Moles became professor at the University of Strasbourg in the early sixties founding the 'Institute of social psychology of communi-

cation.’ As Max Bense he worked on the border of information theory, mathematics and poetry, attempting what he called a transversal analysis unifying the different sectors. Like Flusser he criticized the restrictive character of linear thinking exploring alternative means of expression. This explains the allusion to the concept of *Nachschrift*, that is, that which comes after writing. As Flusser has pointed out, *Nachgeschichte* (post-history) is not the end of all history, but only the end of a particular concept of linear historical progression. The same holds true for the concept of *Nachschrift*. The question then is: What is the nature of *Nachschrift* and in which way is it related to *Nachgeschichte*?

To explain this term I will have to turn to Flusser’s evolutionary model which recounts in part Leroi-Gourhan’s and Derrida’s interpretation, moving from the two-dimensional mythogram to one-dimensional writing and beyond, into a new era marked by the crisis of writing due to the development of new technological means like photography and film. But here the similarities end. According to Flusser alphabetical writing was invented for two main reasons: First of all “one writes alphabetically and not ideographically in order to be able to think iconoclastically.” (Flusser 1992a: 34) To write means to tear images apart so as to break away from mythical thinking. The second reason which is only the other side of the same coin is to create “a linear discourse (...) to allow consistent argumentation instead of the circular mythical muttering.” (Flusser 1992a: 38) The magical circles of pictorial thinking are straightened into the one-dimensional lines of the text. Or to put it another way: pre-history (*Vor-Geschichte*) is turned into history (*Geschichte*). With the invention of photography and film a new stage has been reached. Techno-images are different from traditional images as they are based on texts. In the present stage of *Nachgeschichte* textual lines are translated back into surfaces.

Flusser shares with Derrida the idea that linear history represents only a parenthesis in the general history of humanity and that its end does not imply a simple return to the world of myth. In fact the new images, the techno-images, are placed on a higher level incorporating the two previous stages. “(...) the present civilization does not look like the result of a linear development from image to concept,



but rather like the result of a sort of spiral from image through concept to image.” (Flusser 2002: 31) In the era of *Nachgeschichte* texts are then retranslated into techno-images. This, however, is only one side of the complex process that has led to the crisis of linear writing. Although numbers obey other rules they have been integrated from the beginning into the alphabetic code. Letters are signs for spoken sounds, but numbers are basically signs for ideas and in this sense much closer to the world of images. Numbers, and here Flusser picks up the distinction we already met with in the essay *Falar e escrever* of the mid-sixties, belong to the world of painting, letters on the other hand to the world of music. For centuries letters have forced numbers into straight lines. Flusser speaks of a hidden dialectics between word and image, *logos* and *eidos*, which has led in scientific texts to the creation of a linear flow of letters arranged in lines enclosing numerical islands standing out in the text like images. With the onset of scientific research in the early modern period numbers have started leaving the alpha-numerical code. This evolution culminates in the creation of new worlds by computation. Computers can not only calculate, but through calculation they can project imaginary worlds. In this way the era of *Nachgeschichte* is characterized both by the emancipation of images and numbers from the world of letters and by their cooperation in the invention of another reality.

*Nachschrift* and *Nachgeschichte* come after writing and history and go back to the beginning without rejoining the mythical world of images and circular magical thinking. They represent a further loop on the evolutionary spiral. With *Nachgeschichte* as with *Nachschrift* a parenthesis in human history is closed and a new world of possibilities opens up. Flusser has not dedicated any chapter of *Die Schrift* to the concept of *Nachschrift*. The problem being that this “position cannot be conceptualized: it must be imagined with the kind of imagination that is now being formed.” One “can only be suggestive.” (Flusser 2002: 33-4)

In the epilogue, as a sort of post-scriptum, placed outside the argumentative body of the book itself, as was already the initial dedication, Flusser sketches a possible future of writing after writing that again makes use of the evolutionary model.

“There are basically only two ways out of writing: back to the image or forward to numbers. Back to imagination or forward to calculation. But our analysis shows that the two directions actually merge surreptitiously behind our back: numbers can be computed into images. One can try to break away from literal thinking into imagined calculations. If we were successful calculatory and imaginative thinking would be absorbed into textual thinking. The writer would have swallowed and digested the mathematician and image-maker, and have lifted himself onto a new level of thinking. This has not been achieved in the present text.” (Flusser 1992a: 159) According to Flusser the main danger of *Nachgeschichte* is a simple return to idolatry, that is, the uncritical worship of images. *Nachschrift* then could be at the same time a way out of the crisis of linear writing and an answer to the cultural impasse created by *Nachgeschichte* itself: still another loop on the evolutionary spiral projecting us into a yet unknown future.

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