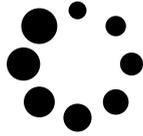


AN-ICON



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of Vilém Flusser's

concept of illusion

by Francesco Restuccia
Flusser
Illusion
Fiction
Fontcuberta
Idolatry
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AN-ICON
Studies in

Environmental
Images

Issue №2 Year 2022

→ Just an illusion? Between simulation,
emulation, and hyper-realism

Edited by Pietro Conte
and Lambert Wiesing

The polysemy of Vilém Flusser's concept of illusion



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<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/17655>

Abstract

Vilém Flusser uses the concept of illusion in a non-systematic way, resulting in two ostensible contradictions. First of all, he often uses the term illusion, while criticizing the metaphysic assumptions that it implies; secondly, he seems to both dispraise and value the illusionary nature of technical images. This article aims at clarifying Flusser's thoughts on illusion in the belief that they are not as conflicting as they might seem at first.

In fact, when Flusser deplors the risk of deception associated with technical images, he refers to the illusion of transparency. He does not oppose the concept of illusion to a supposed objective truth, on the contrary, he opposes the illusion of the objective nature of images to the awareness of their constructed and mediated character.

However, a rational demystification of illusions is not a viable option, since, according to Flusser, they are the result of a voluntary self-deception: we suppress our critical thinking because we cannot bear its complexity, we want images to “release us from the necessity for conceptual, explanatory thought.” This is why Flusser thinks that aware illusion – in other words: fiction – can help us overcome our “inertia of happiness” and develop a critical imagination.

Keywords

[Flusser](#)

[Illusion](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Fontcuberta](#)

[Idolatry](#)

[Self-deception](#)

To quote this essay: F. Restuccia, “The polysemy of Vilém Flusser's concept of illusion,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2 (2022): 52-66, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/17655>

Leafing through the pages of *Herbarium* (1982-1985) by Joan Fontcuberta one is immediately seduced by the beauty of these black and white analog photographs of exotic plants, whose geometric details remind one of Karl Blossfeldt's work. The whole series is presented as scientific documentation, including the botanical nomenclature of these newly discovered species. Only at a second glance one might notice that something is wrong: some details in the image, the strange pseudo-Latin names. What *appeared* to be plants *are actually* small assemblages of pieces of plastic, fragments and parts of animals found by the artist in the industrial outskirts of Barcelona. We have been victims of an illusion. These images, both hyper-realistic and extremely unlikely, aim to deceive us and at the same time to reveal the deception. Without any digital manipulation, Fontcuberta's work on the one hand invites us to reflect upon the supposed immediate and documentary character of photography, on the other hand it allows us to experience unprecedented and surprising configurations.

Fontcuberta had an important intellectual collaboration with a philosopher and media theorist who dedicated many of his writings to discussing the illusionary character of technical images: Vilém Flusser.¹ Although the term "illusion" appears only rarely in his writings and in a non-systematic way, Flusser was definitely fascinated by the ambiguity of this concept, which, as it emerges in *Herbarium*, can be conceived both as a form of deception, with dangerous and deplorable effects, and as a precious artistic and epistemic tool.² Often Flusser refers to illusive phenomena in a pejorative way; sometimes he tends to reject the metaphysical assumption – implied by the concept of illusion – that an objective truth can be found beyond

1 Flusser also wrote the introduction to the German edition of *Herbarium*: V. Flusser, "Einführung 'Herbarium' von Joan Fontcuberta," in *Standpunkte: Texte zur Fotografie* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1998): 113-116.

2 As Carrillo Canán wrote, "Flusser has no explicit *theory on deception* but as with many critical thinkers, his theory is to a great extent a theory of deception." A.J.L. Carrillo Canán, "Deception and the 'magic' of 'technical images' according to Flusser," *Flusser Studies*, no. 4 (2008): 1-12, 1. Significantly, neither "illusion," "deception," nor "fiction" was chosen as one of the 235 entries that make up the glossary of *Flusseriana*. S. Zielinski, P. Weibel, D. Irrgang, eds., *Flusseriana: An Intellectual Toolbox* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015).

appearance; on other occasions he seems convinced that the art of illusion is the best tool for the creative training of our imagination. Therefore, it could be useful to try to put an order, as far as this is possible, to Flusser's thoughts on illusion, in the belief that they are not as conflicting as they might initially seem. First we will analyze the contexts where he deplors the risk of deception associated with any mediation, and with new media and technical images in particular; then we will consider his critiques of the concepts of illusion and especially of disillusion, focusing on his theory of a voluntary self-deception; finally we will see how Flusser approves of illusion when it is understood as a form of fiction.

Illusion as deception

The German word that Flusser uses the most when referring to the negative sense of illusion is “*Täuschung*,” which could be translated as “deception.” The verb “*täuschen*” literally means to exchange, to swap: by exchanging two different things, one mistakes one for another one. Being deceived is, first of all, taking something for something else, or conferring to one thing the value that we should only confer to something else. What are the two things that, according to Flusser, might dangerously be confused? The model and its copy, the signified and the signifier, the thing and the image. Deception is “a reversal [*Umkehrung*] of the vectors of significance,”³ or a “reversal of the function of the image:”⁴ images should represent the world and help us “to orientate” ourselves within it, but we end up forgetting about the world and living in function of the images we have created.⁵ Images “are supposed to be

3 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), trans. A. Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000): 37, 68.

4 *Ibid.*: 10.

5 On the concept of reversal as the key to understanding Flusser's conception of technical images see D. Irrgang, *Vom Umkehren der Bedeutungsvektoren: Prototypen des Technischen Bildes bei Vilém Flusser* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2017).

maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing [*vorstellen*] the world, they obscure [*verstellen*] it.”⁶

Flusser is not concerned by the deceptions that occur when we take an image of A for an image of B. As long as we truly know that something is an image, we also know that it is a human construction, that it needs to be interpreted and that this interpretation might be wrong. The real problem arises when images conceal their own nature.

Flusser’s main models for his (implicit) theory of deception are Plato’s concept of *eidolon* and the Jewish and early Christian conception of idolatry.⁷ In his interpretation, both Plato’s *eidola* and religious idols are images that should mediate and represent something else (ideas for Plato, God in the Jewish and Christian tradition), but instead of presenting themselves as such, they end up being taken for what they should refer to. Flusser rethinks the concept of idolatry in a secular way, conceiving it as that particular form of deception which occurs when we do not recognize the symbolic and cultural nature of an image. In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* idolatry is defined as “the inability to read off ideas from the elements of the image, despite the ability to read these elements themselves; hence: worship of images.”⁸ It is important to notice that idolatry is not only a perceptual deception, but has effects on human behavior: Flusser writes, metaphorically, that images are “worshiped” when they “have a hold over people as objects.”⁹

Sometimes, in order to identify this particular form of deception Flusser uses, instead of “idolatry,” the term “*hallucination*.”

6 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 10.

7 Ibid.: 11; V. Flusser, “The codified world” (1978), in *Writings*, trans. E. Eisel (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 35-41, 39. See also F. Restuccia, “Flusser against idolatry,” *Flusser Studies*, no. 26 (2018): 1-15 and F. Restuccia, *Il contrattacco delle immagini. Tecnica, media e idolatria a partire da Vilém Flusser* (Milan: Meltemi, 2021).

8 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 83. A similar “semiotic” definition of idolatry was proposed by Augustine: “Now, he is in bondage to a sign who uses, or pays homage to, any significant object without knowing what it signifies,” S. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson jr. (London: Pearson, 1958): III, IX, 13.

9 V. Flusser, “Design: obstacle for/to the removal of obstacles” (1993), in *The Shape of Things. A Philosophy of Design* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999): 58-61, 60.

Imagination can dialectically reverse and become hallucination. Images resulting from this reversed imagination stop working as mediation and become opaque surfaces hiding the world. The semantic vectors invert and point towards their producer instead of pointing towards the world.¹⁰

It is important to notice that this sort of reversal can happen with any kind of mediation and not only with images. When we stop using texts and conceptual thinking to help us understand the world, and we start using the world in order to understand our texts, or forcing data to fit into our conceptual grid, then we are victims of another form of deception. In this case Flusser talks about *textolatry*, as opposed to idolatry, or *paranoia*, as opposed to hallucination.¹¹

This dangerous reversal of imagination happens when we do not recognize a medium, especially a visual one, as such. Therefore, the most illusionary images are those that appear transparent, concealing their status of images and presenting themselves as objective reality. According to Flusser, technical images – all images produced by apparatuses, starting with photography – are the most deceiving, in this sense, because their mechanical production seems to grant an automatic and almost natural process that avoids any human and cultural interference.¹² “But this ‘objectivity’ of the photograph is deceptive [*täuschend*],”¹³ because technology is a human product and is also culturally biased. The program that apparatuses use to code images was written by human beings and is an externalization of the visual schemata that they would use if they were drawing an image themselves. When we see

10 V. Flusser, “Iconoclastia,” *Cavalo azul*, no. 8 (1979): 78-84, 79, my translation; see also V. Flusser *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 10.

11 The choice of the last couple of words is due to their etymology: “hallucination,” which might be related to the Latin word *lux* (light), refers to visual thinking, whereas “paranoia,” which comes from the Greek word *nous* (intellect), refers to conceptual thinking. See V. Flusser, “Iconoclastia:” 79, and V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 10.

12 H. Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844) was one of the first to assert such a natural character of photography. See K. Walton, “Transparent pictures: on the nature of photographic realism,” *Critical Inquiry*, no. 11 (1984): 246-277, <https://www.doi.org/10.1086/448287>.

13 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 51.

a drawing or any other traditional image, though, we are aware that what we are looking at is someone's interpretation of the world, and not the world itself; but when we see a photograph, or a video, we assume that what we are looking at is a direct emanation of reality. "This lack of criticism of technical images is potentially dangerous [...] for the reason that the 'objectivity' of technical images is an illusion [*Täuschung*]." ¹⁴ The elements of a photograph appear to be "symptoms" of the world, instead of "symbols" that need to be "decoded."¹⁵ The only way to avoid idolatry, hallucination and deception is to recognize the symbols contained in an image and decode them, discovering the "programmed concepts" they represent, "so as to identify the true significance of the photograph."¹⁶

Based on what has been discussed so far, Flusser seems to maintain a sort of platonic dualism: images are just symbols and should not be confused with the real world. However, Flusser refuses this approach as "metaphysical" [...] in the worst sense of the word."¹⁷ The reason why he deplors the illusion of transparency of technical images is because, according to him, no such thing as an immediate reality can be found, not even beyond images. Even "the amorphous stew of phenomena ('the material world') is an illusion [*Täuschung*],"¹⁸ since it is only accessible through our nervous system and is therefore also a construction. In an interview with Florian Rötzer he declared:

The concept of simulation disturbs me. When something is simulated, that is, when it looks like something else, there must be something being simulated. In the term simulation or simulacrum lies a deep metaphysical belief that something can be simulated. I do not share

14 Ibid.: 15.

15 Ibid.; V. Flusser, "Für eine Theorie der Techno-Imagination, 1980 in *Standpunkte: Texte zur Fotografie*: 8-16, 8.

16 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 44.

17 Ibid.: 62.

18 V. Flusser, "Form and material," in *Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*: 22-29, 22.

this belief [...]. In my opinion in the word simulation hides what is left of a belief in the absolute.¹⁹

Flusser is not afraid that the real world could be replaced with a simulation: on the one hand because our technologies do not allow us to build virtual worlds as defined as the experience of the world built by our nervous system, on the other hand because if this ever happened, then it would not make sense to distinguish these experiences as belonging to different levels of reality.²⁰ Moreover our lifeworld and our simulations are already intertwined, since the experiences we have in the former affect those we have in the latter and vice versa. The real illusion is the possibility of accessing a pure, immediate reality.

If all is construction, then why is Flusser concerned? Because if we assumed that images – and generally our whole experience of the world – are immediate and pure, then we would accept them acritically. We would start unconsciously absorbing interpretations of reality without questioning them, and our imagination would slowly become lethargic.

We should then try to avoid surrendering to the illusion of transparency, train our imagination and learn to decode the images we are surrounded by. But how can we do this? Is a rationalistic debunking the only way out of deception?

Illusion as self-deception

In the essay *Filmerzeugung und Filmverbrauch* Flusser rethinks the movie theater as a modern version of²¹ Plato's cave. People sit in a dark space looking at images

19 V. Flusser, *Zwiesgespräche* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1996): 230-231, my translation. See J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), trans. S. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Flusser considered Baudrillard a friend and often quotes him in his final years, although mostly polemically.

20 V. Flusser, "Vom Virtuellen," in F. Rötzer, P. Weibel, eds., *Cyberspace. Zum medialen Gesamtkunstwerk* (München: Boer, 2002): 65-71; V. Flusser, *Kommunikologie weiter denken* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008): 75-77.

21 V. Flusser, "Filmerzeugung und Filmverbrauch," in *Lob der Oberflächigkeit. Für eine Phänomenologie der Medien* (Bensheim-Düsseldorf: Bollman Verlag, 1993): 153-166.

projected on the wall in front of them, ignoring the world outside the “cave.” What does Flusser’s interpretation of the myth teach us? That people *want* to stay in the cave, they are not chained, they do not desire to be freed. Their illusion is voluntary.

According to Flusser commercial cinema still has some degree of idolatry: people contemplate those images acritically, as pure entertainment, without questioning the message that is being passed. Therefore they are “programmed” by the technical images to think and act in a certain way: the same people who leave the movie theater, writes Flusser, will form a line to enter the supermarket. They are victims of a double illusion: on the one hand they see the lights projected on the screen as a world taking shape in front of their eyes, on the other hand they end up believing that the people, the feelings, the values they perceived somehow exist and have a life of their own, that they are not the creation of a team of artists and technicians. However, neither of the two forms of illusion is a complete deception. Any film spectator knows how a film is made: they know the impression of movement is produced by the rapid sequence of the frames, they know the events portrayed have been written, designed and reproduced, but they choose to believe in them. “Moviegoers are believers not in good faith, but in bad faith [*böse Glaubens*]: they know better, but don’t want to know. This is not magic, but something new.”²²

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, written around three years later, Flusser further develops his conception of a voluntary illusion, or belief in bad faith. Even though people nowadays act as if they were under the magic spell of technical images – they see a commercial and buy the product, they watch a video and change their political opinion – yet they do not believe in those images in the same way as people belonging to traditional magic cultures believed in their images. While the latter did not develop their critical consciousness (their conceptual

22 Ibid.: 163, my translation.

thinking), which can only be trained through literacy,²³ the former do have it, but end up suppressing it.

Both Native Americans and functionaries believe in the reality of images, but functionaries do this out of bad faith. After all, they have learned to write at school and consequently should know better. Functionaries have a historical consciousness and critical awareness but they suppress these. They know that the war in Lebanon is not a clash between good and evil but that specific causes have specific consequences there. They know that the toothbrush is not a sacred object but a product of Western history. But they have to suppress their superior knowledge of this.²⁴

The main sources for Flusser's conception of a belief in bad faith might be Johan Huizinga and Marcel Mauss.²⁵ However, these authors developed the idea of a voluntary belief, or a partially aware illusion, in order to describe traditional magical thinking and not only the contemporary experience of technical images.²⁶ By trying to prove that any magic ritual has a playful dimension, just as any game has a ritual dimension, Huizinga affirms that no illusion is ever a complete deception: it is always combined with some degree of simulation.

As far as I know, ethnologists and anthropologists concur in the opinion that the mental attitude in which the great religious feasts of savages are celebrated and witnessed is not one of complete illusion. There is an underlying consciousness of things "not being real." [...] A certain element of "makebelieve" is operative in all

23 V. Flusser, "Line and surface" (1973), in *Writings*: 21-34; V. Flusser, *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (Göttingen: Imatrix, 1987).

24 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 63.

25 V. Flusser, *Post-History* (1983), trans. R. Maltez Novaes (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013): 99-106; V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 27; *Kommunikologie weiter denken*: 245.

26 The notion of "voluntary illusion" [*illusion volontaire*] can already be found in Paul Souriau, *L'imagination de l'artiste* (Paris: Librairie Hachette et cie, 1901), while the concept of *aware illusion* [*bewußte Selbsttäuschung*] was first developed by Konrad Lange, *Die Bewußte Selbsttäuschung als Kern des künstlerischen Genusses* (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit & Comp., 1895).

primitive religions. Whether one is sorcerer or sorcerized one is always knower and dupe at once. But one chooses to be the dupe.²⁷

In a similar way, a few years before, Mauss wrote that any magical performance reveals the collective will to believe in it, both on the part of the spectators and the magician:

We are in no doubt that magical facts need constant encouragement and that even the sincerest delusions of the magician have always been self-imposed to some degree.²⁸

Yet, one should be able to distinguish between this sort of sincere self-delusion that we can find in the experience of traditional magic, from the “belief in bad faith” that Flusser identifies in the experience of technical images. On the one hand the “underlying consciousness of things ‘not being real’” is still a blurry intuition, on the other hand the critical consciousness reached by educated people is fully developed and can only coexist with illusion if it is partially suppressed.

Why do we systematically suppress our critical and conceptual thinking and choose to be deluded? Flusser thinks that this human behavior is not only a result of our tendency to conform. The reason why we need to partially suppress our critical consciousness in order to function within society is that, at this level of complexity, conceptual thinking is no longer efficient. The point is not that people do not understand rational explanations; it is that they do not want to hear them. Commenting on how, during the 1982 Lebanon War, people formed their opinions based on videos and photos, rather than on theoretical analyses, Flusser writes:

27 J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938), trans. R.F.C. Hull (London-Boston-Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949): 22-23.

28 M. Mauss, *General Theory of Magic* (1902), trans. R. Brain (London-New York: Routledge, 2001): 118.

We are by now sick and tired of explanations and prefer to stick to the photograph that releases us from the necessity for conceptual, explanatory thought and absolves us from the bother of going into the causes and consequences of the war in Lebanon: In the image we see with our own eyes what the war looks like. The text simply consists of instructions as to how we are to see.²⁹

We suppress our conceptual thinking because of the cognitive comfort provided by technical apparatuses that calculate and build images for us. Flusser calls the state of numbness generated by this comfort the *inertia of happiness*: “It is this inertia of happiness that stands in the way of a changeover.”³⁰

This theory forces us to reconsider the rationalistic approach that one could at first read into Flusser’s critique of deception. If our illusion is somehow self-imposed and the suppression of our critical consciousness is a reaction to the heaviness, the complexity and the abstractness of conceptual thinking, which expresses the need to expand the visual, sensory and emotional dimension of existence, we cannot simply debunk our self-delusion by rational means. The only way to overcome the negative aspects of deception is within the image world, therefore through a creative use of illusion.

Illusion as fiction

When the term “illusion” is used by Flusser with a positive connotation it has the meaning of construction or fiction. In the posthumous book *The Surprising Phenomenon of Human Communication*, where he defines the structure of communication as the infrastructure of human reality, Flusser writes that the act of communicating produces the illusion of immortality. We know, due to the suffering of our bodies, that it is an illusion: “Despite our individual and collective memories, we remain mortals. Nevertheless,

29 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 62.

30 V. Flusser, *Kommunikologie weiter denken*: 210. “Es ist diese Trägheit des Glücks, die einer Umschaltung entgegensteht.”

this illusion is, still, our own reality, our ontological dignity.”³¹ In this case illusion is a different name for sense-making, the attribution of meaning, which according to Flusser is what makes us humans.

When illusion is conceived in this constructive way, Flusser replaces the term “*täuschen*” (deceive) with the term “*vortäuschen*,” which could be translated as “simulate,” “feign.”³² In *Shape of Things* he defines the verb “to design” as “to concoct something, to simulate [*vortäuschen*], to draft, to sketch, to fashion, to have designs on something.”³³ A simulation – this constructive form of illusion – is not about producing a copy [*Abbild*], it is about shaping a model [*Vorbild*].³⁴

In “*Filmerzeugung und Filmverbrauch*” Flusser affirms that not only does the sequence of frames produce the illusion of movement, but the very frames are illusions, as they recreate the impression of three dimensional spaces through the two-dimensional disposition of colors. In this context “illusion” is not meant in a negative sense: Flusser is fascinated by the capacity of technical images to evoke meaningful and visual experiences from non-meaningful and often non-visual elements, such as the bits of information for digital photography.³⁵ Technical images have an illusionistic effect in that they evoke an impression by means of calculation.

The point-projection perspective designed by renaissance painters, the *trompe-l'œil* designed by baroque architects, the tricks designed by stage magicians produce emotional effects using rational techniques. Experimental photographers and programmers work in the same way, but

31 V. Flusser, *The Surprising Phenomenon of Human Communication* (1975), trans. R. Maltez Novaes, D. Naves (Metaflux, 2016): 154.

32 V. Flusser, “Gärten,” in *Dinge und Undinge. Phänomenologische Skizzen* (München-Wien: Carl Hanser, 1993): 46-52, 51.

33 V. Flusser, “About the word design,” in *Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*: 17.

34 V. Flusser, “Abbild – Vorbild oder: was heißt darstellen?,” in *Lob der Oberflächlichkeit* (Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1993): 293-317.

35 Even in the case of analog photography, according to Flusser, the image could be reduced to computable elements, such as the exposure time, the focal aperture, and the ISO setting.

with more efficient tools: they can program an apparatus that will translate an alphanumeric input into a visual output.

According to Flusser, this allows for the first time for an experimental approach to image making and therefore an element of control over the visual world: a synthesis between conceptual-critical thinking and visual-emotional thinking. The word “experimental” is used in a literal sense: technical images can be used for experiments. One can insert a certain input, see what the outcome is, and consequently change the input in order to achieve a different result.

If one writes the equation of a Mandelbrot fractal in a computer in order to visualize it on the screen, one may be surprised by the outcome and therefore learn from it. The complexity of that geometrical figure where the totality is infinitely repeated in the parts could not be perfectly foreseen.

One sits in front of a keyboard, taking one dot element after another out of the memory, to fit it into an image on the screen, to compute it. This step-by-step process of extraction can be automated so that it can proceed very quickly. The images appear on the screen one after another in breathtaking speed. One can follow this sequence of images, just as if the imagination had become self-sufficient; or as if it had traveled from inside (let's say from the cranium) to outside (into the computer); or as if one could observe one's own dreams from the outside. In fact, some of the appearing images can be surprising: they are unexpected images.³⁶

The idea of an experimental character of technical images could be better understood by taking into consideration Flusser's notion of *science fiction*, where he further develops the relationship between conceptual and emotional thinking. With this expression Flusser not only refers to the literary genre, to which, moreover, he

36 V. Flusser, “A new imagination,” in *Writings*: 110-116, 114. For a closer analysis of this essay and for a discussion about the idea of surprising images and the externalization of imagination, see L. Wiesing, *Artificial Presence* (2005), trans. N.F. Schott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010): 98-101. See also V. Flusser, “Ein neuer Platonismus?,” *kulturRRevolution*, no. 19 (1988): 6.

contributed with many charming short stories,³⁷ but also reflects about the deep inner connection between science as fiction and fiction as science: something that has been called a “speculative fiction.”³⁸ Any scientific knowledge is based on the development of models and simulations that are, strictly speaking, illusions. When fiction is enhanced with the experimental exactness provided by technical images, it becomes a powerful tool to create surprising models that will allow us to think of what we are not yet able to conceive.

This is, according to Flusser, the greatest potentiality of virtual simulations: they allow us to experience – emotionally, visually, haptically – what until now we were only able to calculate; and at the same time they allow us to calculate and control experiences that until now we could only vaguely imagine. Flusser believes that virtual environments, and in general all technical images, should not be used to reproduce what already exists for recreational purposes,³⁹ but should “bring to virtuality” alternative worlds. Thanks to simulated environments, for example, we could be able to experience a world where all living creatures are sulfur-based instead of carbon-based – a world that,

37 Most of Flusser’s philosophical science fiction short stories can be found in the following publications: V. Flusser, *Ficções Filosóficas* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1998); V. Flusser, *Angenommen: Eine Szenenfolge* (Göttingen: European Photography, 2000); V. Flusser, L. Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A treatise with a Report by the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste* (1987), trans. V.A. Pakis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). See also Flusser’s essays on fiction: V. Flusser, “Da ficção,” *O diário* (August 26, 1966); V. Flusser, “Science fiction” (1988), trans. W. Hanff, *Flusser Studies*, no. 20 (2015): 1-3, where Flusser writes about a *fantasia essata* (exacting fantasy), which he attributes to Leonardo da Vinci.

38 J. Torres, “Homo Fictor: em busca de uma ficção filosófica,” *Santa Barbara Portuguese Studies* 2, no. 4 (2020): 1-12, 7. Much has been published on Flusser’s theory of fiction, and science fiction in particular. See G. Salvi Philipson, “Flusser para além do ensaio: de outros modos possíveis de habitar a intersecção entre ficção e filosofia,” *Flusser Studies*, no. 25 (2018): 1-17; the sixth chapter of A. Finger, R. Guldin, G. Bernardo Krause, *Vilém Flusser. An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011): 109-129; P. Bozzi, “Rhapsody in blue: Vilém Flusser und der vampyroteuthis infernalis,” *Flusser Studies*, no. 1 (2005): 1-20; G. Bernardo Krause, “On philosophical fiction,” in R. Guldin, ed., *Das Spiel mit der Übersetzung. Figuren der Mehrsprachigkeit im Werk Vilém Flussers* (Tübingen-Basel: Francke, 2004): 119-128.

39 Flusser is extremely skeptical about the documentary function of technical images, not only because of their illusionary character (technical images can be easily manipulated), but because he questions the neutrality of any sort of documentation. Any document presents a point of view, with a system of ethical and political implications, as it were objective. See F. Restuccia, “La realtà sta nella fotografia. Autenticazioni delle immagini della guerra del Libano,” *Carte semiotiche*, no. 4 (2016): 160-170.

without any technical help, we can anticipate, but not fully conceive.⁴⁰

Rethinking illusion as an aware and voluntary simulation allows Flusser to avoid the rationalistic approach to debunking. He realizes that visual interfaces (and even more, haptic and immersive ones) allow for experiencers to overcome their *inertia of happiness* and take part in the model making process. However, this is only possible if technical images and virtual environments are open to a strong interactive participation.⁴¹ This way, by turning the coding process into a playful interaction, it will be possible to bridge the gap between critical and visual thinking, between the elite of programmers and the mass of consumers.

40 V. Flusser, "Vom Virtuellen:" 70-71; V. Flusser, *Kommunikologie weiter denken*: 78. Recently Andrea Pinotti identified this approach as part of a post-human trend in VR (try to experience the world beyond the limits of the human body and mind, for example by flying as an eagle) as opposed to a humanitarian trend (VR as an empathy machine meant to move the experiencer about social issues). The main limit of the post-human approach is that it will only allow perceiving a non-human world as a human being would perceive it. A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine* (Torino: Einaudi, 2021): 201; see also A. Pinotti, "What is it like to be a hawk? Inter-specific empathy in the age of immersive virtual environments," in Y. Hadjinicolaou, ed., *Visual Engagements. Image Practices and Falconry* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2020): 30-47. The best example of this post-human approach in Flusser is definitely his *Vampyrotheutis infernalis*.

41 On the (post-)political implications of Flusser's theory of participation, see M. Menon, *Vilém Flusser e la "Rivoluzione dell'Informazione": Comunicazione, Etica, Politica* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2022): 172-178.

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AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON.
The project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" – Department of Excellence at the State University of Milan.