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Lecture 2 – Crisis in Alphabetic Culture

One of the possible ways through which we may approach Western history, is to consider it as a dialectic between images and texts. Here is how this history would be told in such a case: It starts during the first half of the second millennium b.C. with the invention of the alphabet. Alphabetic texts had the purpose of explaining images, in order to emancipate humanity from the oppression of idolatry and magic. Typical examples of these texts are the books of Moses and of the Prophets – in fact every alphabetic text acts structurally in function of the destruction of images. These, however, resist the attack aimed at them by texts. As texts progressively explain images, these in turn progressively illustrate texts. A typical example of such a quarrel is Classical Greece of the fifth century b.C. when images began to signify poetic and dramatic texts, and when Platonic philosophy began to explicitly attack images. During the course of this dialectic, Christianity emerged as an attempt of synthesis between text and image. The Holy texts explain idolatrous magic and are in their turn illustrated by images. Typical examples of such an attempt of synthesis are illuminated manuscripts, but also Romanesque capitals [of columns] and Gothic stained glass windows that illustrate particular passages from texts. With the invention of typography the dialectic image/text was disturbed. Texts, therefore impelled by their linear dynamic, started to progress without references to images, and tended towards becoming unimaginable. A typical example is a text of modern science. As for images, these started to be expelled from daily life and to be enclosed in glorified ghettos of the type: museum. Thus, alphabetic culture *sensu stricto* was initiated, together with its correlate, art in the modern sense of the term. This divorce between text and image (between conceptual and imagistic thought), resulted in a crisis of culture: unimaginable concepts tend to be empty, and non-conceptual imagination tends to be hallucinatory. In order to overcome this crisis of Western culture, a new type of image emerged, of which the first variety is photography. With this new type of images, alphabetic culture initiated its slow decadence: the dialectic that propels Western culture will extinguish itself. Note that under this focus, Western culture is supported by three points: the invention of the alphabet, the invention of typography, and the invention of photography. I shall seek now to deepen this model a little.

From the socio-political point of view, the dialectic image/text manifests itself as a struggle between the literates and the illiterates, with the literate making up the dominant class. The literate (scribes, priests, monks, scientists, technocrats), seek to manipulate the illiterate (serfs, pagans, villains, profanes, laymen), in function of texts, and the illiterate react in function of images. During this class struggle the dominant texts penetrate the dominated images in order to be transcoded into images. Example: the Cult of Mary. And dominated images are absorbed by dominant texts in order to be transcoded into texts. Example: pagan feasts transcoded into Church feasts. The literates live with historical consciousness and act historically: they are the bearers of Western history. The

illiterates live with magical consciousness and suffer the historic acts: they are the supporting bases of Western history. With the invention of typography, the literate class is amplified in two stages. First it includes the bourgeoisie and after, with the introduction of compulsory schooling, the proletariat. This quantitative amplification of historical consciousness is followed by a qualitative impoverishment. The cheapening of texts results in a shallow historical consciousness, and the subsequent inflation of texts, in a devaluation of historical consciousness into ideology. Finally, with the invention of photography, there emerges a new dominant class, with a new consciousness: that of image programmers.

From the epistemological point of view, the dialectic image/text manifests itself as a struggle between concept and idea. Text may be considered as an alignment of clear and distinct elements (be them ciphers or letters). These elements were pulled out from confusing and indistinct contexts in order to be aligned: in the case of ciphers the context was the image and in the one of letters it was spoken language. The Latin word "*legere*", as the German "*lesen*", means to pullout from a confusing context in order to distinctly align. Effectively, it is the conception of a confusing context. Texts conceive images (ideas), as they tell the content of images: they are accounts and tales.¹ They are "calculations": they align stones, like the Abacus. The purpose of Western history, as alphabetic culture, is to conceive ideas, to count, to calculate, in sum: to transcode the mind as a whole into alignments of clear and distinct elements. This purpose is progressively realised: image after image, idea after idea, is transcoded into text, "described". After the invention of typography, the tide of texts accelerates and assumes calculating methods elaborated *ad hoc*: modern science. At the end of the 18th century, a culminating moment of alphabetic culture, absolute knowledge, in the sense of a total calculability of the world and the mind, seemed to be within reach. Also at this culminating point, texts began to invert against themselves, in order to calculate their own structure (the critique of science as a critique of discursive reason). This inversion of the intention of texts (of no longer being a critique of ideas, but a critique of the critique of ideas), results in the computation of calculated elements. Instead of destroying images (explaining them), texts now began to build images (to compute them). The first image thus computed from clear and distinct concepts is photography. Which generates the emergence a new type of post-textual knowledge: models.

From the cultural point of view (in the broadest sense of the term), the dialectic image/text manifests itself as a struggle between discursive reason and irrationality. Texts are articulations of rationality, in the sense that "reason" means the piecing of the mind into clear and distinct rations. Images, in their turn, are articulations of the imagination, in the sense that "to imagine," means to incorporate into the mind's vision. During the course of the larger part of Western history, this mutual negation between discursive reason and imagination, had a highly positive result: images became ever more rational, and texts ever more imaginative. There is nothing more rational than the images of the Enlightenment, nothing more imaginative than the texts of modern science. During the age of lights, such culminating point in our history (a point when

¹ In Portuguese Flusser creates a play with the words "contas" and "contos." Contas can be translated as both beads and accounts and contos as tales or loose-change, small coins. Both allude to small things that can be lined up and strung together but that also point to a climate of linear narrative.

reason was irrationally divinised), the triumph of alphabetic culture seemed to be within reach: man and society, apt to live reasonably in full delight of its imaginative capabilities. However, a rational attitude involves a critical attitude, not only in relation to imagination and the other mental faculties, but also in relation to rationality itself. The further discursive reason develops, the more it becomes critical of itself. Until it self-destructs. This suicide of reason, whose ultimate victims are the ones of my generation, results in the emergence of a new post-rational and antirational irrationalism, which is supported by discursive reason. And a new imagination emerges, supported by the concepts of reason in order to negate them. Photography is the first product of such new irrationalism.

From the existential point of view, the dialectic image/text manifests itself as the struggle between doubt and trust. Text may be considered as the result of a methodical doubt in relation to the imagined: it decomposes the imagined into pixels and aligns such pixels methodically. Before the invention of typography, texts methodically doubt pretextual images: the Bible, for example, is a text that doubts the images of paganism. If Socrates was accused of lack of piety, he was so because he opposed texts to images, and the Romans considered Judeo-Christianity as the ill-omened form of impiety. After the invention of the printing press, scientific texts started to doubt the pre-scientific ones, because they considered them to be infiltrated by images. Bruno corresponds to Socrates in this stage of our history, and the Judeo-Christians considered the Enlightenment as the ill-omened form of impiety. The Enlightenment, and somewhat anachronistically, the Russian revolution, believed in the definitive victory of doubt over faith, of texts over images. However, despite Descartes, doubt is perfectly capable of doubting itself, and self-critical texts started, from the 19th century, to enlighten Enlightenment itself. The result is a curious type of second-degree trust, a curious type of faith in a distrust of doubt, which articulates itself through second-degree images, and which we may observe on television screens. This second-degree trust, such bad faith, existentially illustrates the victory of second-degree images over texts.

Now I retake the model of Western culture that I proposed to you at the beginning of this lecture: the dialectic between text and image, having as focal points the invention of the alphabet, of typography and of photography. According to this model, Western culture develops its dynamics within the phase between the alphabet and typography, between the first half of the second millennium b.C. and the 15th century. In its second phase, generally referred to as "The Modern Age", our culture would have reached, at least apparently, its maturity. Texts triumphed over images, society as a whole became literate, the world and man became calculable, individual and social life became reasonable, and methodical doubt destroyed all beliefs. The exact sciences started to dominate the cultural scene, and its consequence, technique, with its industrial revolution, allowed our culture to dominate the whole globe. For an observer from the age of lights, from the age of the American and French revolutions, alphabetic mentality seems to have triumphed, and the establishment of the Humanist paradise seems to be only a question of time. However, to us, the post-modern observers, the Modern Age is already the bearer of the germ of the decadence of our culture. The crisis of alphabetic culture already announces itself to us in the invention of typography, because as it eliminates images from daily life, typography liberates texts to invest against themselves and to self-

destruct. And the crisis of alphabetic culture shatters the surface with the invention of photography, in order to currently flood the scene in the form of technical images and the emergence of the new computing and programming mentality.

In the next lecture I shall deal with the emergence of this new post-alphabetic mentality, and in the fourth and last lecture I shall seek to project a vision of the utopian situation that is opening up for this new mentality. However, I cannot end these reflections without considering the impact that the decadence of alphabetic culture, of Western culture, is having on us. Certainly: our culture does not deserve to be wept for. It has committed crimes unequalled in the history of humanity, of which the enslavement of Africans and Auschwitz are only but a few examples. We must bury Cesar, and not praise him. Having said this, we must know what we are burying. In fact, the so-called values of the West, which are the values of Judeo-Christianity, of Humanism and of the Enlightenment. If the realisations of the West are, in their majority, regrettable, and if they threaten the survival of humanity as a whole (such as the thermo-nuclear armament and the pollution of the world), the values, these yes, are admirable. The challenge that we must take on seems to me to be this: how to pass from alphabetic culture to the new culture, without sacrificing these values as a whole?

What I have proposed to you in this lecture was a model of Western culture. On their own, models have no validity, and must be erased after being used. By the way, to say this is already a manifestation of the new mentality, which proposes and uses models without trusting them. So that you must erase my model, just as all preceding models, be them so sacred as the Judeo-Christian or Marxist ones. But models have validity, as long as they provoke new models. It is you therefore, who will or will not confer value to the model I have proposed.