

# The Technical Gesture in Online Images: A Contemporary Take on Agamben and Flusser

*Eva Dekkers - 24/05/2021*



**Table of contents:**

Introduction..... 2

Flusser’s Technical Image..... 2

Agamben’s Gesture..... 3

A Comparison and Contemporary Perspective..... 4

Conclusion..... 7

References..... 8

## **Introduction**

Online visual media contribute to shifts in our communicative expressions. This paper focuses on philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Vilém Flusser, using their concepts of Gesture and the Technical Image to reflect on the role of pictures in our communicative practices. A recalibration of the function of aesthetics, photography and technology seems necessary today, even if it is an endless endeavour. This paper specifically asks *if today's online communication through digital/technical images can be a new form of gesture?* For Agamben, gesture purely signifies the exhibition of mediality, without anything attached. Flusser explores how distribution channels encode meaning onto images, which is very relevant for today's social media platforms as well. Both philosophies spark more questions: How much did our communicative processes actually change with the arrival of digital, networked images? Should we be afraid of potential loss in our communicative practices since we have established a new online visual language? In order to get closer to answering these questions, a textual and critical analysis will be used on excerpts from Flusser's book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) and parts of Agamben's essay 'Notes on the Gesture' (1992). Not merely analysing and comparing Agamben and Flusser's theoretical concepts but also critically reflecting on and relating them to contemporary debates surrounding visual social media communication. Here we will use José van Dijck's take on networked and distributed digital photographs (2008) and John Durham Peters' philosophy of "Elemental Media" (2015). Looking at the debate through an optimistic contemporary window to conclude that there is a new realm of communicative gesture today that travels online as digital/technical images and even though in appearance seems different, in essence, encompasses the same.

## **Flusser's Technical Image**

Czech and Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser developed his interests in the direction of language, aesthetics and technology. His book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) departs from the hypothesis that there are two important turning points in culture; "the invention of linear writing" and the one we live by now which Flusser calls "the invention of technical images" (1983, 7). A technical image is by definition produced by an apparatus. Its nature might be mistaken for a window on reality due to the technology's assumed 'objectivity' but according to Flusser, this is an illusion. Technical images "are metacodes of texts", representing silent symbolic cultural codes even more than traditional images do (Flusser 1983, 15). Flusser argues that "technical images absorb the whole of history and

form a collective memory going endlessly round in circles” (1983, 19-20). His notion that photography has the power to create collective memory will be the main focus for this paper. Flusser explains it further by zooming out and looking at the whole of nature; “a system in which information disintegrates progressively according to the second law of thermodynamics” (Flusser 1983, 49). Humans fight against this with a tool called ‘mind’, manipulating information through communication, a process that results in culture. Flusser goes on defining it in a twofold manner. Firstly, information is created, secondly, it is stored by distributing the information into memories (Flusser 1983, 49). This distribution process takes place through reproduction, he writes:

by means of the massifying channels of gigantic, programmed distribution apparatuses [...] The distribution channels, the 'media', encode their latest significance. This encoding represents a struggle between the distribution apparatus and the photographer. By concealing this struggle, photographic criticism makes the 'media' totally invisible for the receiver of the photograph (Flusser 1983, 56).

Flusser stresses there is a lack of critical reflection, the receiver can be seen as under a ‘magic spell’. People are intoxicated by camera’s and “have become accustomed to visual pollution; it passes through our eyes and our consciousnesses without being noticed” (Flusser 1983, 66). Flusser enters even further in technophobia by arguing that, what he calls “the photographic universe”, programs society into fragmentation and robotises human beings (Flusser 1983, 70). In his eyes, humanity loses its freedom. We need to break free from the magic circle that photographs have shaped around us and according to Flusser, our lost freedom can only be regained through a philosophy of photography.

### **Agamben’s Gesture**

Italian Philosopher Giorgio Agamben, similarly observes a loss that is brought about by modernity but he simultaneously finds a redemptive value in images. The loss that he writes about is that of gesture, an abstract term that needs some clarification. Agamben’s ontological notion of gesture points to the mere exhibition of mediality, without attributions, opening up “the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human” (1992, 56). Gesture shows the human ability to communicate and take communion without being language itself, “so what is relayed to human beings in gestures is not the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of a pure and endless mediality” (Agamben 1992, 57-58). Gesture can also be seen

as a gag or replacement of words. Agamben starts by arguing that we are losing the subconscious, naturalness of expressing something through gestures thanks to modernity, because our bodies cannot handle the overload of stimulus. The body defends itself from shock by giving up any attempt to physically respond. “The more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable” (Agamben 1992, 52). Agamben also positions gesture beside the research of Gilles de la Tourette, who was the first to capture and break up bodily movement and spasms into single photographic shots. He further on makes the argument that there are no images but only gestures. Tying into Gilles Deleuze’s work, he writes that every image is animated by an antinomic polarity; “on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture [...] on the other hand, they preserve the dynamis intact” (Agamben 1992, 54). There seems to be a predicament in Agamben’s writings, on the one side, images as products of modernity that exterminate gesture, on the other, images as new embodiments of gesture that can have a healing effect on society. He briefly mentions a series of photographs by Eadweard Muybridge that captured the movement of a horse and was a precursor for cinema<sup>1</sup>. The fact that we lost our gesture through modernity, ignites a wish to redeem it. Agamben stresses that “cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture” (1992, 55). He sees moving images as a way to redeem the shock-like experience of the modern human body. He also points out that “the duty of the director is to introduce into this dream [of gesture] the element of awakening” (Agamben 1992, 55). Because representing something is the most misleading thing on our quest to understand gesture.

### **A Comparison and Contemporary Perspective**

Both Flusser and Agamben recognise and address a large cultural shift, for Flusser it originates in the invention of the technical image, for Agamben it can be observed through the use of technical images. Indeed, the media landscape accelerated rapidly and is now saturated with visual representations—like memes—that can be difficult to distinguish, their encoded messages travel online while being constantly de/re-constructed. It is nearly impossible to see the borders or creators of our media landscape. From a philosophical perspective, one where the conscious light of the intellect is key, it is understandable that

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<sup>1</sup> In June 1878, Muybridge conducted the famous experiment taking many photographs in succession of a horse running down a white wall. This was the first time that the exact movement of the horse was captured and revealed that artists had painted it wrongly for all those years. His photographic experiments could be turned into what we now know as GIF’s and paved the way towards modern cinema (Phippen 2016).

today's world seems polluted and full of distractions. We might get astray from the true spiritual path towards pure knowledge and enlightenment thanks to modernity's fixation on images. In other simple terms, one could also argue that images just started replacing words and "photographs are turning into the new currency for social interaction" (van Dijck 2008, 6). Professor José van Dijck addresses how technical change and digitisation affects photography in terms of offering instant communication and new forms of bonding. She also places this in relation to cognitive science and socio-cultural transformations. The shift that Agamben and Flusser link to camera technology, she sees in a larger "cultural condition that may be characterized by terms like manipulability, individuality, communicability, versatility, and distributedness" (van Dijck 2008, 15). She recognizes this affected the nature of photographs, which are now tools used to build personal identity. We could also call this a means of encoding personal meaning or messages into images. This is something Agamben and Flusser both address in different ways. Agamben notes how gesture, pure mediality, can be corrupted by representation in a sense of someone, especially in a higher power, producing or acting something while a true gesture only supports. Flusser stresses that distribution apparatuses as well as distribution channels—today also including social media platforms—"impregnate the photograph with the decisive significance for its reception" (1983, 54). In other words, meaning is always encoded, also by the context in which the image is shown. Especially today's online visual communicative practices reinforce the argument that "the framing of a picture is never fixed", van Dijck elaborates:

each re-materialization comes with its own illocutionary meaning attached, and each reframing may render the 'original' purpose unrecognisable. So even if taken with a communicative use in mind, a picture may end up as a persistent object of (collective) cultural memory (van Dijck 2008, 17).

If the repurposing of images transforms their meaning until they become shapeshifting unrecognisable vehicles in the realm of visual non-verbal language, it could be argued that they thereby regain characteristics of being gestures. Agamben also sees images as a response to modernity. He believed cinema was born from a wish to regain gestures. An example can be found in Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*<sup>2</sup> (1936). The factory sequence shows how movements become automated and repetitive, simultaneously Chaplin's gestures are

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<sup>2</sup> *Modern Times* was Charlie Chaplin's last silent film produced between 1934 and 1936, in which he portrays and critiques the mechanical age. His critique "is rooted in a history of industrial sabotage" (Stephens 2011).

exaggerated and captured with a technical apparatus, the film camera, in order to be redeemed. Agamben even writes that the moving image can be a gesture in itself if it is a pure form of mediality. He most likely means it should purely reflect its quintessence; the mere capacity to communicate without the representation and distraction of a message. This could also hold for today's networked digital photographs when the private image becomes public and loses its individual message through the collective repurposing and recontextualising of images in a shared communicative culture.

Flusser ties into this argument with his notion of collective memory but takes a very different, more pessimistic stance. As mentioned earlier, he believes collective memory is formed because "technical images absorb the whole of history" (Flusser 1983, 19-20). The photographic universe, in his eyes, probably also seems an industry that limits imagination. The danger he detects lies in the invisibility of this visual, apparatus dominated culture and stems from a fear of losing freedom. Most likely, 'freedom' points to an awareness of this very photographic universe as opposed to being enslaved by it. Flusser wants to awaken us, speaking to our polluted collective memory (aka culture) to redeem what seems lost by means of critical reflection. However, Flusser's technophobia and fear of the invisibility of our photographic universe should also be critically reflected on. John Durham Peters' philosophy of 'Elemental Media' (2015) boils the concept of media down to its extreme ontological essence, reflecting on the invention of media apparatuses on a much wider evolutionary scale. He argues that media as a concept "was connected to nature long before it was connected to technology" (Peters, 2015, 46). This perspective allows him to step back from fearing the 'new' age of technical images and instead reflect on the human inclination to shape environments through communicative technologies (media). Peters departs from the belief that nature, media and humans, are ultimately the same and places our inherently communicative wish in relation to contemporary media technologies. "Media are our infrastructures of being, the habitats and materials through which we act and are" (Peters, 2015, 15). New technologies, like the camera and the internet, emerge from a place where expression and existence merge. Peters sees media as extensions of our nervous system; hence media technologies are entangled with or consequence of our bodily communications that correspondingly shape our environment. Flusser in some way also adopted this view and looked at nature as a system in which humans capture information in collective memory, which results in culture. Peters describes this process as: "Media lift us out of time by providing a symbolic world that can store and process data, in the widest sense of that word" (2015, 50). Though, where Flusser still sees technical images in the role of conditioning us

and society, Peters argues that “we are conditioned by conditions we condition” (2015, 51). In other words, we shape tools (like media apparatuses) that in turn shape us. A never-ending circle. From this point of view, technical images are just another way for us to create shared memory, not very different from the technology of writing on paper. In a sense, all our new technological inventions try to capture something we think we might lose. Apparatuses like the camera, emerge from a fear of loss, not from actual loss. Memory, media and culture are so closely entangled that fearing ‘new’ media technologies seems senseless. Van Dijck points out that, “the tendency to fuse photography with daily experience and communication is part of a broader cultural transformation that involves individualization and intensification of experience” (2008, 7). It is an ongoing transformation that signifies the inherent need to take commune. This brings us back to gesture as the essence and ability to communicate, gesture perhaps only changed in the face of technical images and will most likely continue to take different forms as time passes.

### **Conclusion:**

Flusser and Agamben both refer to a loss brought about by modernity and identify a negative (invisible) power vested in visual media because of its inclination to encode meaning into images. Flusser speaks about visual pollution and robotised people within the ‘photographic universe’. He asks for analysis of the modern “restructuring of experience, knowledge, evaluation and action” (1983, 71). Agamben values the ‘old’ pure form of endless mediality in ‘gesture’ but also recognises a redemptive value in images as a response to modernity. The combined theories of Agamben and Flusser offer the perfect foundation for an inquiry into how their concepts of Gesture and the Technical image relate to the contemporary media landscape. The intrinsic nature of media is communication that results in culture through the capturing of information in memory. New forms of this phenomenon will continue to occur. Today’s social media platforms are saturated with images and Professor José Van Dijck looks at how the function of images changed from merely a tool to conceal memory into communication devices through which we share experiences. At the same time, she sees how memory makes a reappearance in the networked and distributed digital photograph in a collective sense. In other words, “Our ‘live pictures’ and ‘pictures of life’ may become ‘pictures for life’—even if unintentionally” (2008, 17-18). Technical images are part of our communicative evolution and now we found ways of expressing ourselves through them online. John Durham Peters enforces this argument with his philosophy of ‘Elemental Media’ because we create media apparatuses consequentially from how we communicate, we shape

images (and many other forms of media) as we are shaped by them. In Peters' eyes, nature and media are the same thing, elemental in the sense that we are like fish in the media water. This holds very true for online media environments especially when images are continuously de/reconstructed until unrecognisable. They become mere vehicles for non-verbal language, thereby regaining characteristics of Agamben's gesture. Therefore, we could answer this paper's initial research question; *if today's online communication through digital/technical images can be a new form of gesture*, with a clear yes. Gesture changed through the technological apparatuses we use but not in terms of loss. There is a new realm of communicative gesture today that travels online, in intangible forms and shapes. The many images that circulate today, mostly do not have an end goal and are mere expressions of mediality. A fixed meaning is not the main focus anymore, rather images showcase an ability to communicate and take commune. In this sense, they even fit perfectly under the term gesture. Even though Flusser and Agamben saw a new technological wave with potential negative effects, their writings can also apply to an optimistic view like the one exhibited in this paper. Their texts should be re-read in order to spark new thoughts. The one we will end with here is that we found a way of communicating through technical gestures embodied in online images.

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