

Imagination and Techno-Imagination – Preliminary Remarks Towards a Theory of Imagination as Media Practice¹

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I. Introduction

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a crucial period for media theory. Everybody could anticipate that innovations regarding digital media would happen. However, the landscape of media theory was dominated by topics that concerned traditional mass media.

This provoked speculations about the connection between digital media and our ability to imagine their cultural implications in the future. To answer the question, how views on traditional media had to be changed in order to get an idea of what is possible with digital media, another question was raised, which is still of interest today. Does the interaction with traditional forms of media lead to constraints on our ability to imagine new forms of media? Is imagination itself shaped by the use of traditional media?

This question not only relates to narrative forms of imaginations of new media in factual or fictional discourses like technology assessment or science fiction. In addition to that, it focusses on the practical relation between imagination and media. As such, this perspective is of particular interest if we try to understand the processes how new media are imagined in a culture.²

II. On imagination as a cultural technique

First of all, it is important to be aware of the philosophical meaning of the term »imagination«. »Imagination« – in German: »Einbildungskraft« – is a term for an individual cognitive ability to connect sensual perception (»Anschauung«) with abstract concepts (»Begriffe«). This notion is developed e.g. in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

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² This paper constitutes only a short working paper. A detailed study on the relation between imagination and media is currently in progress (together with Jens Schröter). This extensive work will include a discussion of the available literature.

However, the question is, where do the schemata for the concepts come from. This question cannot be answered at the subjective level but implies the problem of using signs in a community.³ To regard imagination as a semiotic problem at the collective level transforms the notion of »Einbildungskraft« and leads to the notion of imagination as an epistemological framework, called the »imaginary« (»das Imaginäre«) or »socio-technical imaginary«.⁴

Obviously, it is interesting to ask how these two sides of imagination are interrelated. Literary theory provides us with a prominent answer. Back in 1991, Wolfgang Iser argued in his seminal book *The Fictive and the Imaginary* that reading works of fiction is a manifestation of the processes by which the faculty of imagination and the social imaginary are coupled.⁵

According to Iser, the imagination actualizes through the reception of fictional literature the imaginary of the given sociocultural context in an »act of reading«.⁶ Thus, when talking about imagination we have to focus on the process of »imagining« itself. Reading is a practice of imagining which can be acquired as a cultural technique. Therefore, Iser not only created an important contribution to literary theory. His work can be understood as a theory which is able to describe imagination as a cultural technique.⁷ This is where media theory comes in.⁸

III. »Technoimagination«

About the same time, the idea is brought into play that the act of imagining changes in relation to the media being used. A prominent example is Vilém Flusser's notion of »techno-imagination« (»Technoimagination«).⁹

Flusser considers imagination as an ability to form reflexive judgments. Imagination is a way of creating distance from the world.¹⁰ According to Flusser, this ability is connected to media on a practical level. Flusser does not call this practical level »act« or »practice« but the »gesture« of a medium.¹¹

Building on this idea, he develops a historical argument. Everything begins with the connection of imagination to the picture. The gesture of picture-making includes the reflexive component of distance to the world. The picture gives us an image of the world. But it also steps between us and the world. It stimulates our ability to build models of the world with our imagination.¹²

³ cf. Eco 1999.

⁴ cf. Jasanoff 2015.

⁵ cf. Iser 1993.

⁶ cf. Iser 1994.

⁷ For an overview of the research on »cultural techniques« in German media studies see Winthrop-Young 2014.

⁸ Iser was focused on literature and did not provide a media theory. But he was aware of the fact that his ideas implied a relation to media theory, cf. Iser 1993, pp. 400.

⁹ cf. Flusser 1998, pp. 209-222, pp. 262-269. cf. Flusser 2002 for selected writings in English.

¹⁰ cf. Flusser 1990.

¹¹ cf. Flusser 1990; Flusser 1997.

¹² cf. Flusser 1990, pp. 115-119.

Then the alphabet evolves. From Flusser's perspective, the alphabet was invented to further differentiate the possibilities of our imagination. It is a discrete classification system because only one single character can be selected and aligned at a time. The alphabet can be used to analyze pictures.¹³ Writing divides the complexity of the picture into linear sequences.

As Hartmut Winkler explains in his reconstruction of the notion of »linearity« in media theory, for Flusser pictures are not characterized by a clear sequence (e.g. of actions) but the »gesture of writing«¹⁴ brings in linearity which is analytical in nature. In addition to that, the spatiality of the line in written language establishes a schema that corresponds to time. Hence, as Winkler notes, writing is a projection of the sequence of time onto the line (thus onto an axis of space).¹⁵

The final stage of media evolution is the computer. Computers and their algorithms belong to the world of the linear/one-dimensional. Programs and algorithms are a form of writing. The architecture of computers demands the execution of programs in linear sequences.¹⁶ But Flusser calls numbers and algorithms »zero-dimensional«. While on the level of basic computer operations programs are organized linearly, the imagination associated with them does no longer follow this logic. It is no longer the old form of imagination which was created within the culture of writing. Representations in digital media are not temporal representations of the world but projections of various realities, connecting imagination in digital media with computational practices of simulation, design, and synthesis, thus challenging traditional forms of historical thinking.¹⁷

Now we can grasp Flusser's main argument. The practices of imagining are affected by these so-called »gestures« of a medium. For example, in human perception the gesture of writing leads to schemata that privilege the imagination of a linear history. Within the culture of writing condensed codes are created on the level of the individual ability to imagine something. These schemata allow only certain aspects of the social imaginary to become real while suppressing others.

IV. Conclusions

What can we learn from these older ideas? Flusser, and in a way Iser as well, remind us that our imagination is actualized through an act of imagining. But this very act of imagining can be regarded as something related to the media being used. Imagination can be seen as a form of »media practice«¹⁸ – may it be realized in an »act of reading« or through the »gesture of writing«.

Although Flusser's ideas are quite speculative, three aspects can be helpful for a discussion of the relation between imagination and media in general:

¹³ cf. Flusser 1990, pp. 119-121.

¹⁴ cf. Flusser 1997, pp. 32-40.

¹⁵ cf. Winkler 2008, pp. 78.

¹⁶ cf. Winkler 2008, pp. 78.

¹⁷ cf. Flusser 1990, 121-125.

¹⁸ cf. Couldry 2004; Couldry 2012, pp. 33-58.

1. Flusser's ideas illustrate how media theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s thought about digital media. Notions like »techno-imagination« speak from the historical depth of media theory. They are a way of thinking about a digital society and the future of digital media long before many of those technologies were actually used or even invented. Flusser's essayistic theory was an attempt to imagine the things to come and to point out the limits of this endeavor.
2. According to Flusser, imagination is realized as a practice in media. Imagination *is* a form of media practice. Thus, different types of media have to be regarded as constraints for our imagination. But if this is the case, then the problem concerns media theory as well. Media theory is a specific form of »doing theory«, in academic contexts first and foremost in the form of reading and writing. One of the main problems for Flusser was finding a way to describe these new forms of imagination (»neue Einbildungskraft«), which are associated with digital media and their cultural implications, although he still had to use writing.
3. This leads to other than textual forms of thinking about new media, e.g. to experiments in media art. Theories concerning the states of affairs of a medium are always correlated with the state of the development of that medium. As Simone Natale has argued, it makes a crucial difference if we talk about media in their conceptual stage, their realized state or their vanishing state.¹⁹ When it comes to newly evolving media, artistic practices are of particular theoretical importance. They allow the production of new (re-)configurations between imagination and media.

What are the consequences? I think one consequence is a yet rather vague, but nevertheless interesting idea. In order to grasp the relation between imagination and media theoretically, we are asked to methodologically follow the transformations of the processes of »imagining« during the actual uses of media. Maybe this opens the door for a discussion of the relation between imagination and media, which is informed by practice theory.

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¹⁹ cf. Natale 2014.

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