

Does Writing Have a Future?

Vilém Flusser

Introduction by Mark Poster

Translated by Nancy Ann Roth

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Introduction

Writing, in the sense of placing letters and other marks one after another, appears to have little or no future. Information is now more effectively transmitted by codes other than those of written signs. What was once written can now be conveyed more effectively on tapes, records, films, videotapes, videodisks, or computer disks, and a great deal that could not be written until now can be noted down in these new codes. Information coded by these means is easier to produce, to transmit, to receive, and to store than written texts. Future correspondence, science, politics, poetry, and philosophy will be pursued more effectively through the use of these codes than through the alphabet or Arabic numerals. It really looks as though written codes will be set aside, like Egyptian hieroglyphs or Indian knots. Only historians and other specialists will be obliged to learn reading and writing in the future.

Many people deny this, mainly out of laziness. They have already learned to write, and they are too old to learn the new codes. We surround this, our laziness, with an aura of grandeur and nobility. If we were to lose writing, we say, we would lose everything we owe to such people as Homer, Aristotle, and Goethe, to say nothing of the Holy Bible. Only how do we really know that these great writers, including the Author of the Bible, would not have preferred to speak into a microphone or to film?

But laziness doesn't explain everything. There are people, and I count myself among them, who believe that they could not live without writing. And this is not because they want to imitate Homer, for they know that no one can write as he did anymore, even a second

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Homer; rather they believe that writing is a necessity because their being is expressed in, and only in, the gesture of writing.

Of course, they could be wrong. But even assuming that they are right and that the production of video clips does not suit their being, their *forma mentis*, it would not prove that their form of being has become obsolete, that such people have become dinosaurs. It's true that not everything obsolete is necessarily expendable. What is called progress is not necessarily the same thing as improvement. Dinosaurs were very nice animals in their way, after all. And yet the insistence on writing is becoming questionable today.

The question is, What is distinctive about writing? What sets it apart from comparable gestures of the past and future—from painting, from pressing on computer keys? Is there anything specific at all that is shared by all kinds of gestures of writing—from the chiseling of Latin letters in marble to the brushing of Chinese ideograms on silk, the scratching of equations on boards, or the pounding on the keys of typewriters? What sort of life did people have before they began to write? And how would their lives look if they abandoned writing? All these and many more questions would obviously concern not only writing itself but also the reading of what is written.

These are simple questions only at first glance. A comprehensive book would be required just to grasp them all. But the crux of the matter is that such a book would be a book. Instead of what? That is the question.

Superscript

My intention in this book is to write about writing. It is, if you think about it, a project turned in on itself. It makes writing both the object (that one is facing) and the instrument one uses to deal with the object. Such an undertaking cannot be compared with thinking something over, in which ideas are directed against ideas. But this comparison shows how reflection is different from an attempt to write about writing. The particle *over* in the construct *to think something over* can be interpreted in two ways: on one hand, as the effort to let supplementary ideas follow after those that have already been thought to put them in order, and on the other hand, as the effort to let ideas run counter to those already thought to track them down. Neither strategy makes any sense when writing about writing. It can't be about putting the writing one is writing about in order because it is already in order. Written signs are arranged in lines, and each one already has a designated place in this one-dimensional order. And it can't be about tracking down writing, for written signs consist of nothing but tracks (Greek: *topoi*). Writing about writing is itself to be seen as thinking of a sort, that is, as an attempt to arrange those ideas that have already been thought about writing in an order, to track down these thoughts that have been thought and to write them down. That is the intention here.

Thinking and writing about writing should really be called *superscript*.¹ Regrettably, that word is already in use and means something else. But it doesn't matter: with permission, the word *superscript* will be used with the new meaning suggested. Aren't there people who would call such violence against language "creative"?

All writing is “right”: it is a gesture of setting up and ordering written signs. And written signs are, directly or indirectly, signs for ideas. So writing is a gesture that aligns and arranges ideas. Anyone who writes must first have thought. And written signs are the quotation marks of right thinking. On first encounter, a hidden motive appears behind writing: one writes to set one’s ideas on the right path. That is really the first impression one has in looking at written texts: exactly this order, this alignment. All writing is orderly, and that leads directly to the contemporary crisis in writing. For there is something mechanical about the ordering, the rows, and machines do this better than people do. One can leave writing, this ordering of signs, to machines. I do not mean the sort of machines we already know, for they still require a human being who, by pressing keys arranged on a keyboard, orders textual signs into lines according to rules. I mean grammar machines, artificial intelligences that take care of this order on their own. Such machines fundamentally perform not only a grammatical but also a thinking function, and as we consider the future of writing and of thinking as such, this might well give us pause for thought.

Writing is about setting ideas in lines, for unwritten ideas, left to their own devices, run in circles. This circling of ideas, where any idea can turn back to the previous one, is called *mythical thinking* in certain contexts. Written signs are quotation marks signaling the onset of linear, directional thinking within mythical thinking. This directional thinking is called *logical thinking* for reasons still to be discussed. Written signs are quotation marks for logical thinking. This becomes clear if one looks more closely at quotation marks, that is, inverted commas. For example, ‘word’ is a word, but ‘sentence’ is not a sentence. Such a thing can only be written, for anyone who were to try to say it would be thinking in circles. In a broader, very important sense, all written signs are quotation marks.

But lines of writing not only direct ideas into rows, they direct those ideas toward a recipient. They run past their end point toward

a reader. Writing is motivated by an impulse not only to direct ideas but also to direct them toward another. Only when a piece of writing reaches another, a reader, does it achieve this underlying intention. Writing is not only a reflective, inwardly directed gesture but is also an expressive, outwardly directed (political) gesture. One who writes presses into his own interior and at the same time outward toward someone else. These contradictory pressures lend writing the tension that has made it capable of carrying and transmitting Western culture and of endowing this culture with such an explosive form.

In this first observation of writing, it is the rows, the linear flow of written signs, that make the strongest impression. They make writing seem to express a one-dimensional thinking and so, too, a one-dimensional feeling—desire, judgment, and conduct—a consciousness that was able, through writing, to emerge from the dizzying circles of preliterate consciousness. We know this writing consciousness because it is our own, and we have thought and read about it.

The present book is not the first “superscript.” A great deal has been written about writing, if under other titles. In these titles, writing consciousness has been given various names. It has been called “critical” or “progressive,” “numerate” or “narrative.” But there is a common denominator among all these names. Writing consciousness should be referred to as *historical consciousness*.

The matter is more radical than it seems, for it is not as if there were a historical consciousness capable of expressing itself in various codes, writing being one of them; rather writing, this linear alignment of signs, made historical consciousness possible in the first place. Only one who writes lines can think logically, calculate, criticize, pursue knowledge, philosophize—and conduct himself appropriately. Before that, one turned in circles. And the longer one writes lines, the more historically one can think and act. The gesture of writing produces historical consciousness, which becomes stronger and penetrates more deeply with more writing, in

turn making writing steadily stronger and denser. This feedback between those who write and historical consciousness lends that consciousness a rising tension that enables it to keep pushing forward. That is the dynamic of history.

It is therefore an error to suppose that there has always been history because things have always happened, to suppose that writing only recorded what had happened, to regard historical time as that period in history when people recorded events in writing. It is an error because before writing was invented, nothing happened; rather things merely occurred. For something to happen, it has to be noticed and conceived as an event (process) by some consciousness. In prehistory (the term is accurate) nothing could happen because there was no consciousness capable of conceiving events. Everything seemed to move in endless circles. Only with the invention of writing, with the rise of historical consciousness, did events become possible. When we speak of prehistoric events, we are writing supplementary history and committing anachronisms. Even more so when we speak of natural history, for then we are committing historicism. History is a function of writing and the consciousness that expresses itself in writing.

Writing, this ordering of written signs into rows, can be mechanized and automated. Machines write faster than human beings. And not only that: they can vary the rules for assembling signs (the rules of orthography) automatically. We can already see both the speed and the variability of writing in the new orthographic writing machines, word processors, however primitive they still are for now. And artificial intelligences will surely become more intelligent in the future. They will possess a historical consciousness far superior to ours. They will make better, faster, and more varied history than we ever did. History will become unimaginably more dynamic: more will happen; events will overtake one another and become more diverse. As far as we are concerned, all history can be confidently left to automated machines. Because all these mechanical and automated things make better history than we do,

we can concentrate on something else. On what? That is what the present essay means when it asks, does writing have a future?

This first chapter is called “Superscript” because it is the first and announces an intention to write about writing. For reasons of symmetry, the last chapter is called “Subscript.” This symmetry is in keeping with the intention of the work. It looks like an announcement that writing has been surpassed by more effective codes and that historical consciousness has been surpassed by something new that is still beyond our conceptual powers. But the chapter title “Superscript” is not meant in this way. On the contrary, the intention is that only he who has previously subscribed to everything that is hidden in writing—who is engaged in and who will eventually underwrite everything that will be lost with the loss of writing—only he has the right to write about writing. Only such a person has the right not only to write about writing but also to write past that into writing no more.