% Playing Against the Camera — A Deep Dive
% Reading notes on Vilém Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography (1983), prepared by Głos Statku
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Reading notes on Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (German original *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 1983; English translation by Anthony Mathews, Reaktion Books, 2000)

This is the extended companion to our short introductory piece, "Playing Against the Camera: Vilém Flusser on Photographs, Programs, and Freedom." If you haven't read the short version, you may want to start there – this document assumes the basic shape of the argument and goes further into each part of it.

These are our own reading notes, not a translation or authorized summary. We've tried to represent the argument accurately, but any distortion is ours, not the author's. Direct quotations are kept short and marked; everything else is paraphrase. Our reading covers the introductory note, all nine essays, and the short lexicon of basic concepts; the afterword by Hubertus von Amelunxen was used only for biographical context. We read the English translation, not the German original.

What kind of book this is

The book is short: an introductory note, nine brief essays, and a lexicon of basic concepts. The introductory note states the hypothesis on which everything rests: that human culture has had two fundamental turning points, the invention of linear writing in the middle of the second millennium BC and the invention of technical images, which we are currently experiencing, and that the structure of culture – and therefore of existence – is changing as a result. Flusser says openly that the aim is not to defend a thesis but to contribute, informed by philosophy, to the debate on photography. To preserve the hypothetical quality, he avoids quoting earlier work and offers no bibliography; the lexicon is presented as a set of working definitions, not as claims of general validity.

Two things follow for how to read it. First, photography here is a prototype, not the subject in a narrow sense: the book describes no individual photographs, reproduces none, and is not a history or an art criticism of photography. Photography stands in for a wider class of devices and a wider change. Second, the tone is compressed and often apocalyptic – the second essay ends with the claim that the universe of technical images is the fulfilment of

the ages and that only from that apocalyptic perspective does photography deserve the importance it has – and several essays close with a summary of their argument. We follow the essays in order below.

Images, texts, and the oscillation between them (essay 1)

Flusser starts from images. They are significant surfaces: they take phenomena that exist in space and time and reduce them to two dimensions, and the ability to do that – and to read the result back into space and time – is what he means by imagination. Because we scan an image with our gaze rather than reading it in a line, its meaning is ambiguous, and the time it produces is circular: elements can be revisited, "before" becomes "after". Within an image, elements give each other significance. He calls this the world of magic, in which things recur and everything participates in a context of mutual meaning, in contrast to the linear world of history, in which nothing repeats and everything has causes and consequences.

Images mediate between people and the world – and then come between them. They are meant to be maps and turn into screens. People stop decoding images and start projecting them into the world, living as a function of what they made. This reversal he calls idolatry; the underlying condition is a kind of forgetting, in which imagination turns into hallucination.

Writing, in Flusser's account, was invented to undo this. Linear writing pulls the elements of an image off the surface and arranges them in lines, converting the circular time of magic into the linear time of history, and the ability to read and write such lines gives rise to conceptual thought. Texts are therefore a metacode of images: they explain images, aiming to explain them away. But the relationship is dialectical. Images illustrate texts to make them comprehensible; magic creeps back into concepts. Christianity, fighting paganism, absorbed images; science, fighting ideology, absorbed ideology. In the long run, images become more conceptual and texts more imaginative – the hierarchy of codes is overturned "behind our backs".

Writing can also fail in the same way images do. When texts become so abstract that people can no longer reconstruct the images they refer to, life becomes a function of the texts: textolatry. Flusser's examples are Christianity, Marxism and – the provocative one – contemporary scientific discourse, whose equations nobody can picture, which he calls an "empty" universe. In his thesis, history in the strict sense is the progressive transcoding of images into concepts, so when texts become incomprehensible there is nothing left to explain, and history ends. That, he says, is where the nineteenth century had arrived.

Technical images were invented to make texts comprehensible again, by putting them under a magic spell.

The technical image (essay 2)

A technical image is an image produced by an apparatus; since apparatuses are products of applied scientific texts, technical images are indirect products of texts. Where traditional images abstract from the concrete world, technical images are abstractions of the third order: from texts, which abstract from traditional images, which abstract from the world. Traditional images signify phenomena; technical images signify concepts.

That is hard to see, because technical images look as if they need no decoding. The world seems to be their cause, as a finger is the cause of its print. Observers therefore see windows, not images, and when they criticize them at all they criticize the world they seem to show, not how the image was produced. Flusser calls this lack of criticism dangerous, because the objectivity of technical images is an illusion. With a painting, the encoding is plainly done "in the head" of the painter. With a camera, a machine-and-operator complex sits between world and image, and what happens inside it is a black box. Criticism of technical images has to be aimed at the inner workings of that box; until it can be, he says, we remain illiterate.

What can already be said is that technical images are magical, and that their magic differs from the old kind. Prehistoric magic ritualizes models called myths, communicated orally, whose author is a god outside the communication process. Present-day magic ritualizes models called programs, communicated in writing, whose authors – functionaries – are inside the process. Technical images displace texts: they free their receivers from having to think conceptually, replacing historical consciousness with a second-order magical consciousness.

Flusser then offers a small history of why they were invented. The printing press and universal education had made everyone a reader, and cheap texts produced cheap historical consciousness. Traditional images retreated into museums and galleries and became hermetic; science produced hermetic texts for specialists; the broad public lived on cheap texts. Culture was splitting into three, and technical images were meant to be a code valid for all of it – to bring images back into daily life, to make hermetic texts comprehensible, and to make visible the subliminal magic inside cheap texts. In practice they did none of this as intended. They displaced traditional images rather than re-introduced them, distorted scientific statements by translating them into pictures, and replaced old magic with programmed magic. The result was mass culture. His image for this is a dam: traditional

images, scientific texts and cheap texts all flow into technical images, are re-encoded and endlessly reproduced, and form a collective memory going round in circles.

The apparatus (essay 3)

Flusser takes the camera as the prototype of the apparatus. Starting from the Latin *apparare* – to prepare, to lie in wait – he asks what an apparatus is, and works through the candidate answers. Is it a tool? Tools extend the body and change the world. Is it a machine? Machines are tools driven by scientific theory, and with the Industrial Revolution they reversed the relation between tool and human: previously the human was the constant and the tool the variable, afterwards the human became the variable, working as a function of the machine, which produced the proletariat. Is the photographer then a proletarian, and are there photo-capitalists? Flusser says these questions are good but miss the point, because they come out of the industrial context, while apparatuses point to a post-industrial one.

In that context the basic category is no longer work but information. Apparatuses do not change the world; they change its meaning. The camera produces symbols according to a program, and every photograph realizes one of the possibilities in that program. The number of possibilities is large but finite, and each informative photograph exhausts the program by one. Photographs that repeat earlier ones are redundant and do not interest Flusser; he is concerned with the pursuit of unexplored possibilities, which he compares to playing chess. The camera is not a tool but a plaything, and the photographer is not *Homo faber* but *Homo ludens* – playing, however, against the camera, creeping into it to find its hidden moves. The photographer is a functionary, merged with the apparatus. The camera's competence exceeds the photographer's, and so it is a black box: the functionary controls the box through its exterior (input and output) and is controlled by it through the impenetrability of its interior. He calls this the world of Kafka.

Flusser adds several structural points. A camera is a "smart tool" – it does the work of imprinting the image automatically, so the human is left with the play. Behind the program that makes the camera take pictures and the one that lets the photographer play, there are further programs: of the photographic industry, the industrial complex, the socio-economic system. Every program needs a metaprogram, so the hierarchy is open at the top. Ownership becomes irrelevant, because nobody programs an apparatus for private purposes; what matters is who develops the program. What one pays for in a camera is the program, not the metal – hardware gets cheaper, software dearer – so value lies in the soft symbol and power moves from the owner of objects to the programmer and operator. Finally, he argues that all apparatuses, not just computers, are calculating machines and in this sense "artificial

intelligences", the camera included: thinking in numbers, flowing into hardware, and performing that kind of thinking better than the human operators.

The gesture of photography (essay 4)

Watching someone with a camera, Flusser sees stalking – the old gesture of the hunter, but through a jungle of cultural objects rather than a savanna, each object obscuring the prey with the intention built into it. Photographers try to snap their prey free of cultural conditions. In theory those conditions appear "in negative" in the photograph, but in practice what appears are the categories of the camera, which filter them: everywhere in the world, things get photographed through the same categories.

The camera's categories are visible on its exterior: distances, angles, shutter speeds. They divide time and space into distinct areas, and the act of photography is a game of combining them. The photographer seems to choose freely, but the choice is limited to the program: the camera does the will of the photographer, but the photographer has to will what the camera can do. The same holds for the object. Only states of things can be photographed, so anything photographed must be translated into one. Setting the camera is a technical and conceptual act, so there is no naive, non-conceptual photography; a photograph is an image of concepts. Reality gets reversed along the way: for the photographer, the world is only a pretext, and neither world nor program is real – only the photograph is. The vector of significance runs from the world to the symbol rather than from symbol to world.

The structure of the act is quantum. At each threshold between categories the photographer hesitates and decides; Flusser calls this a new, atomized kind of doubt, in which the aim is not the perfect viewpoint but as many viewpoints as possible. The practice is hostile to ideology, which he defines as insistence on a single viewpoint taken to be perfect, but it is also fixed to a program. That makes it typical of post-industrial acts: programmed and post-ideological, so that "programming is post-ideological manipulation". Even the final decision, pressing the shutter, is one grain in a series – as is the American President's red button – so only a series of photographs can testify to an intention.

The photograph (essay 5)

Naive observers see photographs as the world itself, reflected onto a surface. Flusser's first move against this is to point out that photographs are black and white, or coloured, and the world isn't: black and white are limit cases, theoretical concepts of optics. A black-and-white photograph is a picture of a concept. Grey, he adds, is the colour of theory. He links this to earlier "manichaeisms": Aristotelian logic abstracts true and false from a world in which

nothing is entirely one or the other, and ideologies abstract good and bad. Colour photographs rest on chemical theory, which makes them more abstract, not less – and the more "genuine" their colours, the more they conceal their theoretical origin.

Decoding raises the question of where to stop, since every decoded layer exposes another and the end of decoding is the whole of culture. For the photograph Flusser proposes a limit: decode the encoding intentions at work in the photographer/camera complex, keeping the two apart in analysis though they cannot be separated in practice. The photographer's intentions are to encode concepts into images, using a camera, to show them to others as models for experience and action, and to make them lasting – to be remembered. The camera's intentions, expressed in its program, are to realize its capabilities in images, to use a photographer to do so, to distribute the images so that society acts as feedback for the camera's improvement, and to produce better images. Each photograph shows cooperation and conflict between the two. The critical question is how far photographers have subordinated the program to their intentions and how far the program has redirected theirs. Flusser's criterion for the best photographs is those in which the human wins; his observation about the photographic universe as a whole is that the programs are winning.

The distribution of photographs (essay 6)

Photographs are distributed by reproduction, which distinguishes them from older images tied to a place or an owner. Flusser frames this inside a general account of information: nature tends toward disorder (entropy), and culture – communication – is the human struggle against it, by creating information in dialogue and distributing it in discourse. There are four methods of discourse – theatre, army, science, radio, corresponding to responsibility, authority, progress and massification – and photographs use the last.

As an object, the photograph is a flyer, nearly worthless; negatives are prototypes from which any number of copies are made, and the concept of the original loses its meaning. Value lies in the information, not the thing, which Flusser takes as a mark of the post-industrial: ownership matters less than the control of programs, and he calls the resulting power structure neo-imperialism. At the same time, huge apparatuses of distribution have grown up around photographs, and they channel them. Information can be classified as indicative (truth), imperative (goodness) or optative (beauty), and the channels separate photographs into scientific, political-commercial and artistic ones. A photograph can slip between channels – his example is a moon-landing picture moving from an astronomy journal to a consulate, a cigarette advertisement and an exhibition – and each time its significance changes, so the channel does the decisive encoding.

Photographers know this and encode for particular channels, trying to smuggle in content the channel's program doesn't foresee; channels know it and sometimes publish the smuggled content anyway, to enrich themselves. Every distributed photograph is the trace of that struggle. Standard photography criticism, Flusser says, ignores this: by asking "Is photography art?" it accepts the channels' own classification, and so helps keep the channels invisible. He calls that a *trahison des clercs* – the intellectuals siding with the apparatus.

The reception of photographs (essay 7)

Almost everybody now has a camera, as almost everybody has learned to write; but writing implies reading, and taking snapshots doesn't imply decoding photographs. Cameras are bought because advertising programmed the purchase, and each new model is more automatic; apparatuses improve by feeding on social feedback. The camera is structurally complex but functionally simple – the opposite of chess – so anybody can produce an excellent photograph without understanding anything about how.

Flusser distinguishes the snapshot-taker from the photographer in his sense. The photographer, like the chess player, seeks new moves and information. The snapshot-taker enjoys the complexity of the plaything and wants it to be simpler and more automatic, producing redundant images; amateur clubs he calls "post-industrial opium dens". Albums become camera memories: they record the camera's possibilities realized, not a human being's experience or knowledge. He says documentary photography has the same limitation – new scenes from the same old perspective. His paradox is that the more people take snapshots, the harder photographs become to decode, since everyone assumes they already know what a photograph is.

His long example is a newspaper photograph of the war in Lebanon. We cut it out, send it to a friend or crumple it, and believe we are reacting actively; in fact these are ritual acts. The picture produces magical relationships between its elements – tanks are evil, children good, Beirut in flames is hell – and the article next to it doesn't explain the picture but directs understanding towards the newspaper's own program and confirms the image, consisting in effect of instructions on how to see it. The reversal of the old relationship between texts and images – texts used to explain images, now photographs illustrate articles – is, he says, typically post-industrial, and makes historical action impossible. Illiteracy takes on a new role: the illiterate are no longer excluded from culture but participate in it through images. A toothbrush poster works the same way, with its text acting as a caption, summoning the power of "tooth-decay" so that buying the brush becomes a sacrifice.

Flusser insists this is not the magic of earlier peoples. Functionaries in a post-industrial society act ritually in bad faith: they have learned to write, so they know better, and they suppress that knowledge in order to function – to buy toothbrushes, have opinions, fill in forms. Critical awareness can be woken, but it can be put under a spell too. He faults the Frankfurt School for a "second-order paganism" which finds malicious superhuman powers (capitalism) behind the images, instead of seeing that the programming proceeds mindlessly. His summary: photographs form a magic circle around us, and what's needed is to break it.

The photographic universe (essay 8)

Living in the photographic universe, we stop noticing most photographs; they are redundant. Even the constant turnover of new ones is familiar – one redundant image displacing another – and what would be informative would be standstill. The gaudiness of modern colour is similar: the world was grey in the nineteenth century, and now it shouts to deaf ears, and the colours work as programmed signals (red at a traffic light) that trigger action without engaging consciousness.

Beneath the surface, he argues, the photographic universe is grainy, composed of quanta, and calculable – as is everything produced by apparatuses, even film or television images, which appear to flow but rest on points. This is because apparatuses simulate Cartesian thought: clear and distinct elements combined like beads on an abacus, each signifying a point in the extended world. For Descartes, omniscience would have required every point to have a concept, and that failed. For apparatuses it succeeds, because within their own universes a concept of the program corresponds to every element. The price is a reversal of the vector of significance: concepts no longer signify the world; the universe signifies the program.

To define "program" Flusser removes the human involvement and describes a pure game of chance, like throwing dice: each throw is unpredictable, but over time every combination is realized. If an atomic war is among the possibilities in an apparatus's program, it will happen by chance, though necessarily, some day. The photographic universe is one such realization, and it programs society, with necessity but case by case through chance, to act as a magic feedback loop for the game – reprogramming people into dice, game pieces, functionaries. Experience, knowledge, evaluation and action break into bits; this is the world of robots, and he thinks the camera will prove the ancestor of apparatuses that robotize everything from public acts to private feelings.

Criticism of apparatuses, he says, tempts toward one familiar form: look at the human intention behind them. On that view the apparatus was meant to free people from work but was captured by capitalists, and criticism consists of unmasking interests – Kodak's shareholders, the American industrial and military complex. Flusser rejects this as an industrial-era reflex. It misses the essential thing, automaticity. Apparatuses were invented to function without human involvement, and that has succeeded: their programs grow richer and faster, human decisions become mere functional decisions, and nobody owns them. They function as ends in themselves, to maintain and improve themselves. Flusser answers the objection that this makes them superhuman Titans: they are Titans only in the sense that they were built to be, and in fact subhuman – bloodless, rigid simulations of thought that make human decisions superfluous. The aim of his criticism is to expose this uncontrollable functionality in order to get a hold over it. People who struggle against the automatic programming – experimental photographers, critics who try to see the game, anyone making room for human intention – are routinely assimilated by the apparatuses, which enrich their programs with those attempts.

Why a philosophy of photography is necessary (essay 9)

The closing essay condenses everything into four basic concepts: image, apparatus, program, information. A photograph is an image created and distributed by apparatuses according to a program, an image whose ostensible function is to inform. Each concept carries others: image contains magic, apparatus contains automation and play, program contains chance and necessity, information contains the symbolic and the improbable. The resulting definition, Flusser says, has the advantage of being unacceptable: it rules out the human being as a free agent, and so provokes the contradiction that philosophy needs.

All four concepts rest on the eternal recurrence of the same, which means that the thinking they require is functional rather than causal. Flusser argues we already think this way in cosmology, biology, linguistics and cybernetics, and his hypothesis is that we do so because we have been programmed by the photographic universe to think in photographic categories. He compares this to the eighteenth-century machine: people first took themselves as the model for machines and then took machines as the model for themselves, and a philosophy of the machine would have been a criticism of mechanization. A philosophy of photography is in the same position with respect to functionalism. But the situation is new, because a photograph is not a tool; it is a plaything, a model of a new type, and what is changing is not classical alienation but the basic structures of existence.

The central question is freedom in this new context. Classical philosophy asked how there could be freedom if everything has causes; the new question is how there can be freedom if everything rests on chance and leads necessarily to nothing. His answer comes from photographers, whom he treats as people of the apparatus future in miniature: programmed, playing with symbols, creating things without value, and yet not feeling their activity as absurd. Questioned philosophically, they provide four answers: one can outwit the camera's rigidity; one can smuggle intentions into its program that it didn't predict; one can force it to produce the unpredictable and informative; and one can show contempt for the camera and its products and turn interest to information. "Freedom is playing against the camera," as he puts it. In spontaneous speech photographers say something different – that they make art, or knowledge, or political images – and so the post-industrial revolution has escaped their consciousness, with the exception of experimental photographers, who know they are playing against the camera but not that they are addressing freedom in the context of apparatuses in general. A philosophy of photography is needed to raise that practice to consciousness. Flusser's last sentence calls it the only form of revolution left open to us.

Reading Flusser next to other work in our corpus

These are our connections, not Flusser's, and they are offered as questions.

Automatism. Our notes on Leandro Costa's reading of Simondon (The Golem Problem) turn on the claim that a closed, fully deterministic automaton is an impoverished technical object, and that real technical progress preserves a margin of indeterminacy. Flusser's photographer – seeking the improbable, informative image that the program didn't predict – is looking for something comparable, but the parallel holds only on the human side. Flusser places the openness in the operator's play against a closed program – by his own account the program is finite, and each informative photograph exhausts one of its possibilities. Simondon, as Costa reads him, places it in the design of the object, a margin a good design can keep open. And where Simondon's margin can be kept, Flusser's openness is something the apparatus keeps absorbing.

Tools and conviviality. Illich's convivial tools, as discussed in our earlier pieces on Illich and on Vetter's matrix, are not limited to hand tools: in *Tools for Conviviality* the term is broad and covers institutions too. So Flusser's claim that apparatuses are not tools does not by itself put them outside Illich's frame. The sharper link is between Illich's radical monopoly and manipulative tools and Flusser's point that what matters is who writes the program, not who owns the apparatus. That suggests a test: run Vetter's matrix on an apparatus – a

programmed, black-boxed, self-improving system – and see whether it can be made convivial at all, or whether the category fails to apply.

Viability and nested control. Fletcher and Vu Khan's use of Beer's Viable System Model (our notes) asks whether each nested level of a system is viable and steerable. Flusser describes a similar nesting – programs inside programs, a "super-black-box made up of black boxes" – but concludes that steerability has already been lost. Open-endedness upward is not the difference, since Beer's recursion is open upward too. The difference is that the VSM closes every level with an S5 (policy and identity), whereas Flusser's hierarchy has no S5, because nobody programs it. Setting the two side by side sharpens a question neither answers alone: at what point does a hierarchy of programs without an S5 stop being viable and start being merely self-maintaining?

Our own position. A project produced partly with AI systems is not a neutral reader of a book that calls every apparatus an artificial intelligence and warns about the people who work inside them. We don't think that disqualifies the summary, but it's the context in which it should be read.

Where we'd push back

Several points seem to us open, and we flag them as such rather than resolving them.

First, the book's own epistemic status. It describes itself as a hypothesis, and most of its large claims – the end of history in the nineteenth century, the nature of all apparatuses, the programming of society – are asserted rather than argued, with no sources to check them against. Readers who want evidence will not find it here and will have to supply it from elsewhere.

Second, determinism. The description of apparatuses as chance-combination games that necessarily realize every possibility is a powerful figure, but it describes an idealized program with human involvement bracketed out. Real photographic and distribution systems involve institutions, regulation, labour and contest, and Flusser's own earlier sections describe exactly that struggle. How far the idealized model describes the real thing is a question the book raises more than it settles.

Third, the model of freedom. "Playing against the camera" is formulated for experimental photographers, a small group, and the ordinary snapshot-taker is described mostly as a dependent of the apparatus. That is a strong and rather severe judgement about everyday picture-making, and one that sits uneasily with the book's own democratizing observation

that everyone now photographs. It also leaves open whether freedom of this kind is available to many people or only to a few.

Fourth, time. The book belongs to 1983. It anticipates electromagnetic images and a "pure information society" but predates smartphones, platforms and generative image systems. Applying its categories to those requires judgement, and we have not tried to do that here beyond the cross-references above.

A note on dates and evidence

This is a speculative philosophical essay collection from 1983, not an empirical study. Its historical claims (the two turning points, the nineteenth-century division of culture, the end of history) are interpretive framings offered as a hypothesis, and its examples – the Lebanon photograph, the toothbrush poster, the moon-landing picture – are illustrations, not data. The lexicon definitions are the author's own working hypotheses and should not be read as standard usage of those terms. We read the English translation, in which some terms (apparatus, program, functionary) carry nuances that we have not been able to check against the German. Read this as a careful reading of an argument, not as an assessment of whether it is correct.

This document is a companion to a short introductory piece on the same book. Comments, corrections, and suggestions for what to read next belong there: https://petroskowo.pl/2026/10/25/playing-against-the-camera/.

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