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Playing Against the Program:
Interval and De-programming as Editing Practice

"Freedom is playing against the camera."[1]

Vilém Flusser

1. The Edit as Game

Shots want to connect. Not arbitrarily—by gaze, by movement, by the rhythm of speech, by the implied direction of a body about to exit frame. This desire for continuity is latent in the material itself, and reinforced by everything the editor has absorbed through years of watching: the grammar of continuity editing—those trained reflexes that close a gap so cleanly the gap remains unregistered.[2] As Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson have shown, this grammar is not a natural language of cinema but an institutionally maintained system of conventions**.** Working on a first feature film, the author noticed something about this desire. When one gives in to it, the film begins to flow; but within a trained continuity regime, what presents itself as flow is often the program's most efficient execution. The cut that feels inevitable is, in many cases, the cut the apparatus already anticipated.

The task, then, was the opposite: to make every join *produce* something rather than *conceal* something. Not a join that smooths continuity, but one that introduces what Flusser calls the *improbable*: a configuration not anticipated by the program, an image—or, in this case, a cut—whose information value lies precisely in its deviation from what the apparatus expected.[3] The redundant cut

[1] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 80. Throughout this article, all references to Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* are to the Mathews translation. It should be noted that the German *Programm* carries connotations of prescription and protocol—closer to a set of binding instructions than the English "program" typically suggests. This distinction becomes operative in sections 4 and 6, where de-programming is understood not as opting out of a neutral option-set but as working against a prescriptive structure that the apparatus enforces through habit and anticipation. On Flusser's writing as a movement between German, Portuguese, and English—and on what that movement does to terms like *Programm*, *Apparat*, and *Geste*—see Rainer Guldin, *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen: Vilém Flussers Werk* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005).

[2] The practice of continuity editing as a codified system—with its 180-degree rule, eyeline matches, and shot/reverse-shot patterns functioning as an interlocking set of conventions—is systematically described in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), esp. 194–213. Bordwell's account of how these devices produce apparent spatial and temporal continuity is useful precisely because it demonstrates the degree to which the "neutral" feel of continuity is a historically constructed, institutionally maintained convention—which is to say, in Flusserian terms, a program.

[3] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 70, 76. Flusser's distinction between redundant and informative images runs through "The Photographic Universe" (esp. p. 70: "The photographic universe and all apparatus-based universes robotize the human being and society") and is condensed in the formula of the final chapter: "Information contains within it the symbolic and the improbable" (p. 76). The editing cut is informative, in this precise sense, when it deviates

confirms the program; the informative cut surprises it. This is not an aesthetic preference for the strange over the smooth. It is a structural distinction: what the program anticipated is redundant, what exceeds its anticipation is informative, and only the informative makes the program visible as program. Flusser puts this most precisely: "Information contains within it the symbolic and the improbable."[4]

This is not an aesthetic preference. It is a problem of attention and discipline. The program of smooth editing is not external; it operates through the editor's own trained reflexes. To play against it, one must first notice it—feel the pull toward the automatic solution before giving in. This noticing is the elementary form of what Flusser calls playing against the program: not the choice of a different content within the menu, but a different relationship to the menu's self-evidence.

Reading Flusser after this experience—not before, not during—the author found language for what the editing table had already taught. The camera, Flusser argues, is the prototypical post-historical apparatus: a black box whose program is codified by its designers and executed by its functionaries.[5] The functionary need not be aware of this. Awareness is not the criterion. The criterion is whether one's decisions remain *inside* the space of what the apparatus already anticipated. De-programming begins as a practical injunction: hold the moment before the automatic solution arrives; sustain the interval long enough for the program to show itself as program rather than nature.

What follows is an account of that capacity: its structural basis in the cinematographic interval, its operational form as a set of editing micro-practices, and its theoretical ground in Flusser's distinction between functionary and player. The claim is specific: the editing table is a second-order site at which already-programmed material becomes retrospectively available for interruption, recombination, or refusal—and de-programming is the skill that makes this availability productive rather than accidental.

2. Program, Functionary, Player: Freedom as Mode-Shift

There is a moment in every editing session when the cut that feels right turns out to be the cut the program expected. The editor reaches for it with the confidence of craft; it arrives with the satisfaction of a solution found. And precisely this satisfaction is the datum. What feels like the editor's

from the continuity the program expected—not by being random, but by making the expectation itself visible as expectation.

[4] See footnote 3.

[5] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 21–27. See also Martha Schwendener, "Introduction," in Vilém Flusser, *Vilém Flusser: Artforum Essays* (New York: Metaflux Publishing, 2017), 18. Schwendener's argument—that Flusser understood the logic of the apparatus before its digital extremes became visible—is directly relevant here: the editing table is one site where that logic was already available for practical intervention, through artists working in contact with technical images.

own judgement—her taste, her sense of rhythm, her intuition about where the scene breathes—is, on inspection, indistinguishable from the program's anticipation. The trained reflex and the programmatic expectation have converged into a single impulse. This is not a failure of skill; it is skill's deepest achievement, and its deepest trap.

Flusser gives this experience a name and a structure. The program, in his account, does not work by prohibition or by false consciousness; it works by *anticipation*. It structures the field of possible moves in advance, distributing probabilities so that some decisions are smooth and others expensive. In the photographic apparatus, the program is encoded in shutter speeds, aperture stops, focal lengths, colour balances—parameters that enumerate what the camera "can" see before any photographer presses any shutter. The photograph that results is not the photographer's free creation; it is a realisation of one of the possibilities the program already contained. The photographer, in Flusser's acid formulation, is a functionary: someone who *believes* they are playing freely while in fact executing what is already latent in the apparatus.[6]

The figure of the functionary is not a description of incompetent photographers. It applies with equal precision to the most technically accomplished: to the cinematographer who has mastered every parameter of light, to the editor who has internalised every convention of pacing and rhythm. Mastery of the program's possibilities is not the same as playing against the program. The artist who explores the full range of the apparatus's options is still, in Flusser's sense, a functionary: they remain *inside* the space of what is already programmed, however remote the corner they reach. Virtuosity within the program is not freedom from the program; it is the program's most accomplished self-execution.

The player, by contrast, does not simply choose differently within the menu. The player makes the menu visible as a menu. This is the crucial distinction—and it separates Flusser's account of freedom from every aesthetics of transgression. The program becomes visible only when one encounters resistance: when the expected move is not made, when automatic closure is withheld, when the apparatus is not given what it anticipates. At that moment, what had functioned as the neutral medium of expression suddenly appears as a specific structure with specific rules. The program, previously transparent, becomes legible.

This distinction—between executing the program and making it legible—is not, for Flusser, a local observation about cameras. It is the latest instance of a recurring structure that runs through the entire history of mediation. Images were created to orient human beings in the world, but they became opaque: people began to worship the images themselves rather than using them to navigate what the images depicted. This is what Flusser calls idolatry—the structural condition in which the

[6] Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, 26–27.

mediating surface replaces the reality it was meant to represent.[7] Writing was invented to break this spell, to "explain" images and restore critical distance; but texts in turn became opaque, and people began to worship texts—textolatry. Technical images—photographs, film, computed surfaces—were invented to make texts intelligible again; but technical images are now worshipped as transparent windows onto reality, when they are in fact programs. The functionary, in Flusser's deepest sense, is an idolater: someone who takes the program's output for unmediated reality, who cannot see the screen as screen because the screen has become the world. "Photographers wish to produce states of things that have never existed before," Flusser writes; "they pursue these states, not out there in the world, since for them the world is only a pretext for the states of things that are to be produced, but amongst the possibilities contained within the camera's program." The player is the one who interrupts this worship—not by smashing the idol, but by seeing it as an idol.

The scope of this claim is not an expansion beyond Flusser's framework; it is the framework's own architecture. Flusser treats the camera explicitly as a prototype for all apparatuses, and the photographic universe as a model for all apparatus-based universes: programs are nested within metaprograms, and "the hierarchy of programs is open at the top."[8] The transition from editing practice to the general structure of mediation and subjectivity that the present article undertakes in its final sections follows from this architecture. The editing table does not require a scale jump to reach the question of the programmed subject; the question is already present in the structure of every apparatus, and it surfaces wherever the program becomes legible.

Flusser is careful not to locate this visibility outside the apparatus. There is no Archimedean point from which the program can be surveyed in its entirety. The player does not transcend the program; they operate within it at a different register—one that takes the program's rule-character as its material rather than its medium. This is why Flusser's conception of freedom is so precise and, to conventional ears, so strange. It is not the grand freedom of the sovereign subject who stands outside determining conditions. It is the *micro*-freedom of the one who, at a specific moment, in a specific decision, introduces a gap into what would otherwise have been seamless execution.

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[7] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 7–10. Flusser's account of the transition from traditional images to writing to technical images is not a media history but a structural genealogy of opacity: each level of mediation, created to liberate from the previous one, itself becomes opaque and is worshipped as nature. The concept of idolatry (*Bilderanbetung*) and its counterpart textolatry are central to this argument. The photographer's relationship to the world—in which "the world is only a pretext for the states of things that are to be produced" (p. 36)—is the post-industrial form of this recurring opacity: the program has replaced the world so thoroughly that even the functionary's apparent creativity takes place entirely within the program's horizon.

[8] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 21, 28–29. "There are therefore two interweaving programs in the camera. […] Beyond these are further programs—that of the photographic industry that programmed the camera; that of the industrial complex that programmed the photographic industry; that of the socio-economic system that programmed the industrial complex; and so on. Of course, there can be no 'final' program of a 'final' apparatus since every program requires a metaprogram by which it is programmed. The hierarchy of programs is open at the top" (pp. 28–29). Flusser treats the camera as "a prototype of the apparatuses that have become so decisive for the present and the immediate future" (p. 21); the transition from specific apparatus to general structure of mediation is therefore methodologically central to his project, not an overextension of it.

This micro-freedom has an irreducibly temporal character. It lasts only as long as the program's self-evidence is suspended. The moment the gap is closed—by the editor who relents and makes the expected cut, by the viewer who resolves the ambiguity into the nearest available meaning—the program resumes. Freedom, in this account, is not a state; it is an event: the event of the program becoming, briefly, something other than nature. The question, then, is how to produce that event reliably, and how to sustain it long enough for it to have consequences.

A clarification is necessary before proceeding. This article does not claim that the editing table is identical with the camera-apparatus Flusser describes. The camera is the prototypical apparatus because its program is hidden inside its mechanism; the editor, by contrast, handles material that has *already* passed through the camera's program. The editing table is therefore a derivative or retrospective apparatus-condition: its privilege comes not from containing the program but from encountering the program's effects as manipulable material. The editor does not look through the apparatus at the world; she handles the world's images as detachable, reorientable fragments whose order is not given but chosen. The program of continuity is not, at the editing table, invisible: it is something the editor must either execute or refuse. And this forced confrontation with the program as choice is what makes the editing table one of the sites where the program becomes especially available to reflective intervention.

3. The Interval as Minimal Operator

A pause is not a model. A pause presupposes that meaning already exists and is then temporarily withheld—the message intact, merely delayed. The interval is a different structure entirely. It is the zone in which the identity of A and B is not immediately given: where continuity is demanded but not yet supplied, where meaning presses without yet closing, where the program does not disappear but becomes *readable*. The interval is the minimal site at which what normally functions as the transparent medium of expression shows itself as rule. It is not a crack in the apparatus; it is the apparatus's legibility threshold.

I use *interval* here as an analytic term—not a concept excavated directly from Flusser, but a term proposed for what happens at the editing table when the program's self-evidence is interrupted. The definition can be made precise: an interval is a structural gap in which the immediate identity of adjacent elements is absent, and in which parameters become available whose systematic variation modifies what counts as continuity. What matters here is not the duration of the gap—even a dissolve of only three frames is structurally an interval, while a held shot of thirty seconds may not be—but the *availability of parameters*. An interval is the operational site of the program: where the program's constraints become controllable rather than automatic, where what runs as nature can

be made to run as choice. This is what distinguishes the interval from mere gap, break, or hiatus. The interval is not simply absent connection; it is the condition for a different kind of connection—one made rather than found, produced rather than assumed.

The interval can be treated as the material of editing rather than as a problem to be concealed: not a gap to be solved by a match but the zone in which one shot is discharged and transformed into the next. This is less a historical observation than an operational claim: the work of the apparatus becomes legible precisely where continuity is not yet secured, where the program must show its hand to close the gap at all. It is worth noting why the editing table is particularly suited to a Flusserian reading in this retrospective sense.[9] The camera's program is hidden inside its mechanism; at the editing table, that program's effects lie open as material—as already-programmed footage whose programmatic character the editor can either reproduce or interrupt. The editing table does not contain the black box; it handles the black box's outputs.

From the editing table, three types of interval are practically distinguishable. The distinction is not taxonomic—not a classification of cinematic experiences, but an identification of operational pressure-points useful for tracking where different programmatic defaults become visible as defaults. Each type makes different variables available for modification, and each therefore affords a different mode of playing against the program.

The *temporal interval* is the most familiar: the gap produced by duration held beyond the program's expectation. A shot sustained a half-second past the point where continuity grammar demands a cut, a silence extended beyond the comfort zone of narrative pacing, a pause after a line of dialogue that convention would fill immediately with a reaction. In the temporal interval, the program reveals itself as *pressure toward closure*: the editor feels the pull to cut, to explain, to move forward. That feeling *is* the program—not an instruction to follow but a datum about what the program expects. To hold against it is to hold the program visible; to yield is to let it resume its transparency.

The *register interval* arises when the mode of address—the status of the image as document, reconstruction, testimony, fiction—becomes unstable. When what we are watching wavers between "this happened" and "this is constructed," attribution slows and the automatism of trust is disrupted. This is not a question of deception; it is a structural condition in which the image's claim to the real becomes momentarily legible as a claim rather than a given. The program of readability—

[9] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 32. On the broader question of how sequence, inscription, and linearity function as programmatic structures, see also Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), esp. 6–15, where the crisis of linear coding is treated as a structural condition rather than a historical accident. The editing table—which handles sequential material while permitting non-linear recombination—occupies precisely this threshold between linear inscription and image-logic.

which normally assigns a status to every image before the viewer is aware of doing so—here becomes visible as the operation it has always been.

The *agentive interval* is the most philosophically consequential. It emerges when the production of continuity is no longer attributable to a subjective intention: when meaning appears to arise not from a person's decision but from the relation of elements, the trajectory of a camera movement, the logic of a spatial configuration that no character seems to have chosen. The program of subjectivity—the deep assumption that sense is produced by a speaking subject who organises and intends—here becomes visible as program. The apparatus ceases to be a neutral channel and appears as a participant.

These three interval types share a common structure: in each, a parameter that normally functions transparently becomes available for modification. Duration, register-stability, agentive attribution—each is a variable whose default value the program maintains without anyone's explicit decision. The interval is the site at which the default becomes a choice. And it is precisely because the default is the program's deepest resting state—the setting it returns to automatically—that the choice to deviate from it constitutes the minimal gesture of play.

4. De-programming: The Skill of Sustained Legibility

Flusser's formula *playing against the program* names a strategy: the deliberate introduction of improbability into the apparatus's field of anticipated moves. De-programming, as the term is used here, names the *skill* that makes this strategy reproducible—not a single breakthrough but a trainable, transmissible capacity for sustaining the interval. Playing against the program is what happens; de-programming is how it is done, and how it can be taught.

Specifically: de-programming is the capacity to sustain an interval's legibility—to hold the moment at which the program has become visible long enough for a reorientation to occur, rather than allowing the automatic closure to reassert itself immediately. The word *skill* is chosen deliberately. Skills are learnable, improvable, transmissible, and recognisable. They do not require extraordinary subjects; they require practice and attention. And they can fail: the editor who intends to hold the interval but relents at the last second, giving the viewer the expected cut after all, has not played against the program. She has replayed it with a brief hesitation—which is to say that the program has reasserted itself, incorporating the hesitation into its own rhythm.

The difficulty is structural. The program does not operate only in the apparatus and in the viewer's trained expectations. It operates in the editor herself. The desire for smooth continuity, for legible cause-and-effect, for the satisfaction of a well-timed cut—these are not externally imposed constraints. They are the deposit of a lifetime of watching; they are, precisely, what skilled

editing has come to feel like. To de-program is therefore not to overcome an external obstacle but to produce a micro-gap in one's own automatism—to become, for the duration of the interval, a stranger to one's own expertise.

Two modes are distinguishable, and the distinction between them is not hierarchical but operational. In the mode of flow, the program functions successfully: gaps are sealed, ambiguity is resolved, the viewer is carried without friction. Flow is not the enemy. Without it there is no communication, no cinema, no shared experience of narrative time. But flow has a cost: it produces the experience of an unbroken, self-identical subjectivity for whom things are transparently meaningful—a subject who, crucially, does not notice herself being produced. The program does not only organise images; it organises the spectator who organises images. This is one of Flusser's most consequential insights about the apparatus, and it applies to the editor no less than to the viewer.

In the mode of arrest, the program fails, slightly and deliberately. The cut comes late, the attribution is withheld, the subject's place is taken by a movement that no one seems to have initiated. This is not breakdown; it is the interval working as interval—*structured absence* rather than accidental gap. The arrest lasts only as long as it can be held before the drive toward closure reasserts itself. De-programming is the name for the capacity to keep the arrest open a little longer than the program expects: long enough for the viewer to notice that they were about to close something—long enough for the rule to become visible as rule rather than dissolving back into nature.

The minimal protocol of de-programming can be articulated in three movements. These correspond to moments in the editing process—identifiable points of practical decision rather than philosophical attitudes imposed from outside.

(1) *Recognising the pressure.* The program announces itself as a feeling: that the cut should go here, that this shot has lasted long enough, that the viewer needs the reaction, the context, the explanation. This pressure is the signal—not a reason to act but a datum about what the program expects. To recognise it as such is already a form of de-programming: the beginning of the gap between the program's demand and the editor's response.

(2) *Holding the interval.* Against the pressure, the editor holds—not indefinitely, but long enough to let the expectation accumulate and the rule become visible. This is *delay closure*: not refusal of meaning but refusal of *premature* meaning. The interval is not comfortable. Its discomfort is not a side effect; it is the mechanism. The discomfort *is* the program pressing for resolution, and therefore *is* the program becoming visible. To hold the interval is to hold the program legible.

(3) *Returning differently.* De-programming does not culminate in sustained arrest. The interval resolves—must resolve—but the resolution is no longer automatic. The question is how: does the connection restore the expected continuity, or does it carry the trace of the suspended interval forward? The distinction is between *repair* and *reorientation*. Repair closes the gap and restores

transparency; reorientation makes the connection differently—leaves something of the interval's legibility sedimented in what follows.

This three-movement account is descriptive-analytic, not prescriptive. Its point is to make the structure of de-programming visible as a skill with identifiable moments, rather than as a mysterious capacity granted to exceptional sensibilities. Every editor experiences all three movements in every session. What varies is whether the third movement completes the cycle automatically—restoring the program's default—or whether it introduces a slight asymmetry: a trace of the rule that was, for a moment, visible as rule.

5. Three Micro-Operations of the Editing Table

If de-programming is a skill, it must have concrete forms—not just a structure but a set of gestures through which the structure is realised. The word *gesture* is used here in Flusser's precise sense: a movement that expresses a freedom, for which no satisfactory causal explanation can be given—an enacted rather than automatic response.[10] What follows are three editing micro-operations—three gestures of de-programming—in which playing against the program can be practised, recognised, and transmitted. They are not aesthetic principles and not stylistic preferences; they are minimal technical gestures whose effect is to produce and sustain the interval. In each case the operative question is not "what does this express?" but "does this make the program legible?" This last question is what distinguishes the Flusserian reading from any aesthetic of deliberate roughness—a distinction the article returns to in section 6.

5.1 Refusing the Automatic Suture

Here "suture" names not a theoretical doctrine but the program's demand for seamlessness: the expectation, encoded across a century of convention, that every join should be invisible—that the cut should complete itself before the viewer registers that a cut has occurred. The suture does not deceive; it anticipates. It is the program operating at its most efficient: resolving the gap before the gap becomes an experience of discontinuity.

The automatic suture is the editor's default—not because editors are lazy but because the program, across a century of cinematic convention, has trained both producers and viewers to expect

[10] Flusser develops the concept of the gesture (*Geste*) as a movement that expresses a freedom—for which no satisfactory causal explanation can be given—in *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), esp. 1–12. In "The Gesture of Filming," Flusser approaches cinema not from the filmmaker's perspective but from the spectator's, noting that film's manipulation of temporal perception makes the montaged version of events preferable to lived history (*Gestures*, 78–88). The present article reverses this entry-point: it examines the gesture not of watching but of assembling—the editor's gesture at the site where temporal manipulation becomes a practical operation. See also Polona Tratnik, "Art as Acting Against the Program of the Apparatus," *Flusser Studies* 22 (2016), which examines the artist's gesture as resistance to programmability.

it. The cut that matches perfectly feels *right* before it feels anything else. This rightness is the program's signature: the convergence of technical competence with perceptual expectation into something that no longer feels like a choice. It feels like what cinema *is*. That feeling is a particularly deep form of functionary behaviour—executing the program so smoothly that execution and nature become indistinguishable.

In the author's debut feature, a sequence of scenes inside a minivan builds, through art-house convention, a gradual establishment of characters. To break this program, the last segment was cut uncleanly—the moment where the camera operator lowers the camera without switching it off was left in, and the next image, a television programme title card, arrived without preparation, displacing the viewer from the continuity the preceding scenes had trained them to expect. The result was a suture that partially failed: not a broken join but a join that held just enough legibility for the viewer to sense that something had been withheld. The gap did not announce itself; it registered.

Refusing the automatic suture does not mean making bad cuts. It means making cuts that are slightly more than they need to be—that do their work and also leave a small residue of work undone. This residue is the interval. It is tiny; it lasts perhaps a fraction of a second in conscious experience. But its effect is structural: the program, for that fraction, becomes legible as rule rather than as the nature of cinema.

5.2 Delaying Attribution

Attribution is the operation by which the image is assigned a source, a status, and a claim: *this is documentary; this is reconstruction; this is the character's point of view; this is objective narration.* Attribution is one of the most basic automatisms of spectatorship: it occurs before interpretation and before evaluation. It is the program operating at the level of ontological classification—deciding what kind of thing the image is before deciding what the thing means. The viewer who is uncertain about the status of an image—who cannot decide whether what they see is document or fiction, testimony or performance—is not confused; they are experiencing the program visibly running. The distinction is important: what is at stake is not cognitive opacity but the temporary visibility of classification as operation.

This connects directly to Flusser's concern with the technical image as a surface that encodes concepts while appearing to reproduce reality. The program of attribution is the mechanism by which the technical image's encoded character is concealed: it is the operation that makes the image appear to be a window rather than a program. To delay attribution is therefore to hold open, for a moment, the very gap that Flusser's philosophy of photography is designed to expose.

The program prefers speed. It resolves attribution as quickly as possible because sustained uncertainty is expensive: it demands attention that the program would rather allocate to narrative

forward motion. Delaying attribution is therefore the operation of keeping the uncertainty alive past the point where the program would normally have closed it—of making the classification arrive as an arrival rather than as an assumption that was already there.

In the same film, a computer game sequence appears for the first and only time, nearly at the midpoint. For almost a minute, the viewer cannot attribute what is on screen: the medium itself is foreign to the film's established register, and nothing in the preceding hour has prepared the spectator for this surface. Only in the following scene, when the protagonist and her two daughters are seen playing the game, does attribution arrive. Those seconds were the interval: the zone in which the program's operation of classification was briefly visible as operation, not as the self-evident nature of the image.

This is not a trick and not a mannerism. Delaying attribution is a technical choice with a structural consequence: it keeps the image's claim to the real in view as a claim rather than letting it settle into the invisibility of the assumed. The program does not disappear; it arrives, as it always will, eventually. But its arrival is experienced—for those who notice—as an arrival.

5.3 Redistributing Agency

The deepest program of narrative cinema is the program of subjectivity. Actions are performed by characters, decisions are made by persons, meanings are produced by speaking subjects who express themselves through a transparent apparatus. Flusser's critique of the apparatus as black box is a critique of precisely this transparency: the apparatus is not neutral; it distributes probabilities, anticipates decisions, produces subjects as much as it transmits them. His point is not merely that apparatuses frame perception but that they reorganise the very conditions under which a perceiving and deciding subject can appear as self-grounding—the transparency of subject-centred meaning is precisely the effect the apparatus secures by concealing its own probabilistic structuring.[11] But this critique is usually made *about* cinema from the outside—as an observation by the theorist who has seen through the mechanism. The question for editing practice is whether the same critique can be made *within* cinema from the inside, through the handling of material rather than the interpretation of finished images.[12]

[11] Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 46–52.

[12] Harun Farocki's work constitutes the most sustained cinematic engagement with the problem of programming the visible. His film-essays and installations make the technical image's program legible from within filmmaking practice—but from an essayistic, analytical position that stands at some distance from narrative assembly. The present article differs in scope: it concerns de-programming as it operates inside narrative editing, in the felt pressure to cut, to suture, to maintain continuity. The two practices share a Flusserian framework but occupy different positions within the apparatus. On the Flusser–Farocki dialogue, see Priscila Arantes and Sergio Nesteriuk, "Programming the Visible: Conversations between Vilém Flusser and Harun Farocki," *Flusser Studies* 21 (2016), 45–55.

Redistributing agency is the editing operation by which continuity is produced not by subjective intention but by the movement of elements through the apparatus. Consider a concrete assembly scenario: across three cuts, a camera's slow pan connects an empty corridor to a window to a street below; off-screen sound—footsteps, a door closing—creates spatial coherence that no character anchors; the editing rhythm generates a forward logic that belongs to the sequence's own momentum rather than to any speaking subject's design. In such moments, the apparatus ceases to be transparent and becomes visible as the producer of meaning it has always been. The *agentive interval* opens. What was apparently the result of human intention reveals itself as apparatus-trajectory—and in revealing this, makes visible the program's claim that continuity requires a subject to produce it.

The practical gesture is simpler than the theoretical account suggests. It is the choice, at a specific moment of assembly, to let the connection be made by something other than human agency—by the logic of space, by the continuity of sound, by the repetition of a visual motif—and to resist the instinct to anchor that connection in a subjective look or a motivated action. The editor who makes this choice is not denying human intentionality; she is redistributing it, allowing the apparatus to step forward from behind the convention of transparency.

In each of these three operations, what is at stake is the same: the production of a small, sustainable interval in which the program's rule-character becomes legible. None of these operations destroys the program. They are not anti-cinema—they work with the grammar of cinema, not against it from the outside. They are minimal deviations from automatic execution: the introduction of improbability into a highly probable sequence of moves. This is exactly what Flusser means by the player's gesture—not the invention of a new game, but the production of an unexpected move within an old one.

6. Against the Aesthetic Reading: Why This Is Flusser

There is an obvious objection to everything argued above. All three micro-operations can be—and routinely are—absorbed into an aesthetic of deliberate roughness, of visible seam, of conspicuous technique. In this reading, the refused suture is a stylistic signature; delaying attribution is an art-cinema mannerism; redistributing agency is the mark of an auteur's distinctive gaze. This absorption is precisely what Flusser's framework is designed to prevent—and it is the point at which the Flusserian analysis diverges most sharply from aesthetic criticism.

An aesthetic reading of the refused suture asks: what does it *express*? What is the filmmaker's intention, the film's meaning, the viewer's experience? The Flusserian reading asks instead: what does it *operate*? Does it make the program legible, or does it substitute one automated convention

for another—the convention of rough editing for the convention of smooth editing? The question of expression is not irrelevant, but it is secondary. A refused suture that makes the program visible has played against it. A refused suture that signals "experimental" or "artistic" as efficiently as a smooth cut signals "professional" has only changed the program being serviced.

This is a genuinely difficult test, and its difficulty is not rhetorical. The program is enormously adaptive. It absorbs novelty quickly: gestures that once functioned as interruptions have, in many contemporary contexts, become stylistic conventions—absorbed into music videos, advertisements, and prestige television. The player who found a gap in the program finds, returning to the same place, that the program has closed around it. The apparatus learns. What was interval becomes suture; what was improbable becomes expected; what was play becomes function. This is not a failure of the player's original insight—it is the program's constitutive response to any successful act of playing against it.

What prevents this absorption from making playing against the program permanently impossible is that the program's adaptation is always *specific*. It absorbs specific gestures, not the structural condition that generates them. The interval is not a gesture; it is a condition—the condition of any site where the program's self-evidence is thin enough for a parameter to become visible. The three micro-operations described above are not fixed techniques but instantiations of the interval in specific material conditions. The skill of de-programming is not the skill of performing Technique X; it is the skill of identifying, in whatever material one is handling at whatever moment, where the program's self-evidence is thinnest. And pressing there.

The triad *program* / *functionary* / *player* is not, in this article, an external theoretical frame applied to an independent practice. It is a *criterion*—the standard by which the claim to be playing against the program is either validated or exposed as its simulation. An operation that does not make the program legible is not playing against it, whatever its aesthetic credentials, however refined its technique. This criterion is severe, and its application is humbling. Much of what passes for experimental editing is functionary behaviour dressed in the program of experimentation—which is, as programs go, one of the most demanding and least forgiving. The program of experimentation anticipates the viewer who wants to be surprised, organises their surprise in advance, and delivers it on schedule.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is a precise account of what is difficult—and what is difficult is not technical but attentional. The difficulty is noticing when one's own practice has become automatic: when the gesture that once produced an interval has been reabsorbed into the program and now reproduces it. This noticing is itself a form of de-programming. It should be added that this noticing is not without cost. The program rewards its functionaries with fluency, efficiency, and professional legibility; it makes de-programming expensive—felt as delay, as difficulty, as the

refusal of the path of least resistance. The player's position within the apparatus is structurally precarious: the program does not merely tolerate functionaries, it produces them, and it has little use for those who play against it except as raw material for its next adaptation.

7. Freedom as Puncture

If freedom is playing against the camera, then freedom begins where the program becomes legible enough for play to start. The entire argument of this article has been an attempt to specify that condition: not as a philosophical abstraction but as a structural location—the interval—and a learnable practice—de-programming. The chain runs as follows: the program structures the field of cinematographic possibility and makes its structure feel like nature; the interval is the minimal site at which this naturalisation falters; de-programming is the skill of sustaining that faltering long enough for a reorientation to occur; and playing against the program is the name for this operation when performed deliberately, with the program's visibility as its aim rather than its accident.

Flusser's "human paradox" is the condition of beings who are themselves programmatic—whose habits of attention, automatisms of interpretation, and desire for closure are not external impositions but internal conditions of functioning. There is no view from outside the program; there is only the program's occasional capacity to become legible to itself. Freedom, in this framework, is not the grand freedom of the sovereign subject who transcends determining conditions. It is the micro-freedom of the moment when what functions as nature reveals itself as rule—when the editor, the viewer, the functionary, registers the structure they are executing rather than simply executing it. This registration does not change the structure. But it changes the one who registers it.

The claim that follows—that de-programming, at its limit, exposes the subject itself as a programmatic effect—is not an extrapolation beyond Flusser's text. It is a consequence Flusser himself draws. "We discover something really astounding," he writes: "there is nothing within us, there is no consistent core, no 'self,' no 'I,' only a swarm of pointlike recombinant virtualities in a constant state of flux."[13] This is not a mystical utterance; it is the endpoint of Flusser's analysis of the apparatus. If programs produce subjects as much as subjects execute programs, then the subject who finally sees the program also sees, in the same gesture, that the seer is itself a programmatic configuration. The editing table makes this visible in miniature.

[13] Vilém Flusser, "Wondering About Science," in *Artforum Essays*, 151–152. The full passage reads: "We begin to ask questions about ourselves, to wonder about ourselves, to 'analyse' what is 'within us.' And we discover something really astounding: there is nothing within us, there is no consistent core, no 'self,' no 'I,' only a swarm of pointlike recombinant virtualities in a constant state of flux." See also "On Being Subject to Objects," in *Artforum Essays*, 326: "He is no longer a subject in any meaningful sense of that term."

And here the Flusserian account reaches its sharpest edge. The editor who holds the interval long enough discovers not only the program of the apparatus—the conventions of continuity, the grammar of the cut—but also the program of her own attention. Her desire for closure, her sense of what feels right, her trained instinct for when a shot has lasted long enough: these are not external to the program. They *are* the program, operating at the level of subjectivity. At the furthest reach of de-programming, the distinction between the program "out there" in the apparatus and the program "in here" in the trained subject becomes unstable. This instability is not a fusion of two substances; it is the exposure of a continuity that the apparatus had already instituted between external program and internalised habit—a continuity normally invisible precisely because it functions as the subject's own competence. What was taken for the observer's own judgement reveals itself as the program's self-evidence operating at the level of the one who observes. The idolatry Flusser describes in relation to technical images—taking the program's output for unmediated reality—turns out to operate not only on the image but on the one who looks at the image. Flusser's later formulations on the loss of the self as sovereign centre make this reversal explicit. The deepest program is not the one that organises images; it is the one that organises the subject who believes herself to be freely organising images.

The editing table is one of the few sites where this registration can be repeated, refined, and transmitted. The editor works at the intersection of the apparatus's program and the material's resistance to it—at the seam where the program's anticipations meet the footage's intractability. She has tools—temporal, structural, attentive—for producing intervals in which the program's self-evidence falters. The skills described in this article are not extraordinary; they are available to every editor willing to sustain the discomfort of the interval a little longer than the program prefers.

De-programming lasts a moment. But the moment changes the one it happens to: not by content, not by persuasion, but by register. The viewer who catches the program in the act of stitching continuity has had a different experience than the viewer who found the film smooth and satisfying—not better, not more enlightened, but differently placed with respect to what they have been watching. These differences are small. They do not add up to revolution, do not accumulate into a politics of cinema, do not constitute a theory of emancipation. But they constitute, in Flusser's precise sense, the possibility of play: of something other than the program's self-execution occurring in the space the program intended for its own continuation.

Freedom is playing against the camera. By extension, "the camera" here names not only the photographic apparatus but the whole ensemble of conventions, trained reflexes, perceptual automatisms, and editorial grammars that constitute the program of cinematic legibility. To play against it is not to destroy it but to *puncture* it: to introduce, at a specific moment, in a specific interval, the experience of its rule-character. That puncture is brief. The program heals—as

programs do, as the film continues and the next image arrives. But for the moment of the puncture, something other than the program has occurred.

Flusser's own texts do not end with argument. They end at the point where argument, having completed its work, opens onto what argument cannot resolve—what he calls, in different contexts, folly, wonder, or the unspeakable.[14] The present article arrives, from the side of editing practice, at the same threshold. What that something is, this article cannot say—and the inability is not accidental. If the program organises not only images but the subject who interprets them, then the moment of de-programming is also the moment in which the interpreter's own coherence wavers. The interval, sustained long enough, points beyond what the language of skill and practice can describe: toward a condition in which the one who registers the program and the program that is being registered are no longer fully distinguishable. This article has described de-programming as a skill, and it is one. But the skill, at its limit, discloses something that is not a skill—a site where the program's legibility and the observer's identity meet and, for an instant, cannot be told apart. What remains in that instant is not the player's achievement. It is the interval itself—without anyone, for the length of a breath, on either side of it.

One consequence of treating de-programming as a teachable skill is that it raises a final question: what happens when the program no longer merely anticipates editing decisions but proposes to perform them?

Conclusion: The Next Interval

The argument made here stays within a specific technical horizon: the editing table as it has existed for most of a century—the human editor, the assembly of shots, the felt pressure of the program. That horizon is contracting. Editing software now offers automated cut-point suggestion, assembly from transcript, AI-generated continuity decisions. The program, in these tools, has migrated one level deeper into the apparatus: it no longer only anticipates the editor's choices; in increasingly many workflows, it offers to make them. The functionary who once executed the program's possibilities with her own hands now has at hand a functionary who will execute them instead—and with greater statistical consistency.

[14] See Flusser, "On Branches and Sticks," in *Artforum Essays*, 316: "Which obliges us to conclude that absolute freedom is synonymous with total alienation. Therefore, this paper wants to be read as a paean to absolute freedom, to total alienation. Or, to put it into historical perspective: a paean to folly." And "Wondering About Science," in *Artforum Essays*, 162: "None of these answers is satisfactory: none quells our wondering. But then maybe nothing will—which is why it is called 'wonder.'" Flusser's practice of ending argumentative texts at a point where the analysis opens onto what it cannot resolve is not a lapse of rigour but a structural feature of his method.

This is not a new problem for Flusser's framework; it is the problem the framework was built to describe.[15] As Martha Schwendener has argued, Flusser understood the logic of the apparatus before its digital extremes became visible—and the editing table is one of the sites where that logic was already available for practical intervention. What AI-driven editing compresses is not simply labour but the interval itself—the gap between felt editorial pressure and the decision that responds to it. When the program's suggestion arrives pre-formed, the space in which the editor might have recognised the pressure, held against it, and returned differently has been abbreviated to a binary: accept or reject. To refuse the algorithm's cut is still, in the precise Flusserian sense, playing against the program. But the interval in which that refusal takes shape has been dramatically narrowed.

The question this opens—which the article cannot answer—is whether de-programming remains teachable: whether the skill of sustaining the interval survives in editors who learn their craft alongside automated suggestion. Teaching editing has always meant teaching the feeling of the program: making the trainee aware of the pull toward the automatic solution before they surrender to it. Whether that transmission holds when the automatic decision is no longer internal—a trained reflex—but external—an algorithmic offer—is, for the author, the next open problem.

It is, in a precise sense, *the next interval.*

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[15] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 31–32. Flusser argues that "apparatuses are scientific black boxes that carry out this type of thinking better than human beings" (p. 32), and that the tendency of the apparatus is toward a fully automated universe in which the human being would be functionally redundant—not eliminated but no longer necessary for the program's execution. AI-driven editing tools realise this tendency at the level of post-production. See also *Flusser Studies* 41 (May 2026), a special issue on Vilém Flusser and Artificial Intelligence, ed. Baruch Gottlieb and Marc Lenot.

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