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Seeing A Distance: Harun Farocki's Operational Images

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

by

Ian Dolton-Thornton

Thesis Committee: Associate Professor Rhea Anastas, Chair
Associate Professor Liz Glynn
Professor Monica Majoli
Professor Amanda Ross-Ho

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Master of Fine Arts in Art

University of California, Irvine, 2021

Associate Professor Rhea Anastas, Chair

Beginning in 2000, Harun Farocki's work and writing theorized the operational image, an image produced as part of an operation, rather than for educational, aesthetic or rhetorical ends. My thesis uses the concept's antecedent in Roland Barthes' influential *Mythologies* to consider how Farocki's approach differs from other methods of politically inflected analysis of culture and representation. I argue that Farocki's work differs in its emphasis of mediating connections as a constitutive aspect of reality, rather than an obstacle to such. I develop this argument through a reading of Farocki's accounts of film and video editing, which emphasize both his working processes and the autonomy of his subjects and materials. I discuss how Farocki's method of "soft montage" allows for critical commentary while preserving his materials' independence.

SEEING A DISTANCE: HARUN FAROCKI'S OPERATIONAL IMAGES

In January 2019, I visited the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power Plant #1, Los Angeles' first hydroelectric plant built in 1911. Plant #1 sits slightly up a canyon from the ruins of the infamous St. Francis Dam, which broke in 1928, killing over 400 people and ending William Mulholland's career. The tour guide led us into the plant's second-story control room. Inside, a dense congregation of tall machines crowded the carpeting. Windows revealed the floor of the plant's interior. Across from the windows was a large control panel, lines and labels indicating the various locks and inflows leading to the plant. Below each switch was a light indicating its state, on or off, open or closed.

An engineer explained to our group that this wasn't a control panel, but instead a mimic board. A mimic board allows for an overview of a system's parts and states. When the engineer in the plant's control room receives a phone call that water has been sent through a lock upstream, they will toggle the appropriate switch. This switch updates the panel's lights, which represent the plant's upstream and downstream components. This board in the raised control room was not a control. Here in the center of the power plant was a picture.

In the 2000 work *Eye/Machine*, the German filmmaker Harun Farocki named a type of image in the world, one which he often drew into his own works: operational images.[1] These are "pictures . . . made neither to entertain nor to inform . . . images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation" ("Phantom Images" 17). They are images produced as part of an activity, not intended for viewing outside of their functional situation. Farocki used this kind

1. Farocki also used the term "operative images", for instance in "Phantom Images".

of image from a range of contexts in his works. A robot guides itself through office halls, forming a picture by identifying the walls and corners it must navigate. A camera checks hot steel plates for flaws as they speed by. A missile monitors surroundings on the flight towards its target. A computer processes video from a car, recognizing the shapes of curbs, buildings and traffic signs. A satellite identifies the location and layout of airports. An unmanned drone surveys enemy territory.

The operational image presents a sort of immediate reality. An operational image has a relative independence from symbolization and the needs of a discourse. The image is not concerned with persuading or enchanting any audience, but instead involved with working on the world. The operational image aims to affect what it depicts. This image is a true representation of what occurred because it is through the image, via its operation, that it occurred. Rather than only a representation, the operational image seems to be the thing itself.

In 2004, Farocki wrote that several years after conceptualizing operational images, he recalled the term's precedent in Roland Barthes' early work *Mythologies* ("Phantom Images" 17). In this work, Barthes analyzes common cultural objects of 1950s France: wine, plastic, magazine covers. He examines the ideological significance hooked onto these objects. These associated meanings are the mythologies of his title. Barthes explains his method in "Myth Today", the second section of *Mythologies*. Here he models a general semiology of myth: the meaning of the mythologized sign (the sign and signifier of, for example, French wine) becomes itself the form for a further mythological concept (Frenchness, blood, morality, decor) (224-6). These clumps of meaning accrete onto objects of perception.

Mythologies performs “an ideological critique of the language of so-called mass culture” (ix). This is not an uncovering of a concealed true meaning within everyday culture. Barthes argues that such mythology “hides nothing and flaunts nothing” (240). Instead, it “transforms history into nature”. The mythological concepts no longer seem contingent or historical. They appear therefore unchangeable. Their origin in human activity disappears into naturalized solidity. Held apart from activity, “*myth is depoliticized speech*” (255).

Against this, Barthes identifies “at least one type of speech which is the opposite of myth: that which *remains* political.” (258) This language remains close to its origins as part of human activity. This is the passage from *Mythologies* which Farocki identifies as Barthes’ influence on his own works (“Phantom Images” 17). Barthes explains:

> If I am a woodcutter and I am led to name the tree which I am felling, whatever the form of my sentence, I “speak the tree,” I do not speak about it . . . my language is operational, transitively linked to its object . . . (258)

For Barthes, language like this remains political because it represents an object only to the extent one is “going to transform it”. It is “a language thanks to which I *act the object*”. A political language does something. The language comes from action on the world. This action, and therefore transformation, keeps it politically open.

Political language has a proximity to human action which preserves unsettledness in language. This unsettledness is the precondition, if not substance, of political change. Barthes makes a corresponding distinction between a language object speaking things and a

metalanguage speaking *of* them (256). The directness of the former more easily shows the human act which has produced it, “a political trace . . . of the human act”.

This unsettledness is political but not necessarily partisan. Neither is myth, although Barthes says “[s]tatistically, myth is on the right.” (262) Left-wing myth in comparison has only a few objects, “political notions” it grasps (260). This is because “the Left always defines itself in relation to the oppressed”, whose speech “can only be poor, monotonous, immediate” (261). The only language of the oppressed is of their actions, their work on the world. This barren speech is unable to provide forms for mythological elaboration. The Left defines itself by the spare reality of this poor language. In its immediacy, “speech of the oppressed is real, like that of the woodcutter”.

The openness of political language is its closeness, via activity, to what it speaks. For Barthes, the “one language which is not mythical [is] the language of man as a producer” (259). The speech of the poor bears the necessity of work. In its constitutive relation to work, it is therefore tied to action on the world. This bare speech forecloses the thick settling of mythology. Production’s daily work makes reality. The language of production is the language of reality.

The “oppressed *makes* the world [in] active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it” in myth (262). Several pages earlier, Barthes writes that revolution “*makes* the world” (259). Revolution generates a fully political speech and excludes myth, abolishes it. There is an elision here. How does the non-mythical immediacy of the woodcutter relate to the totalizing speech of revolution? If operational language is the speech of the poor, it provides a basis for revolution’s non-mythical speech. But what is the political valence of that worldly work as it exists now? As Barthes asks: “is reality always political?” (256)

“Myth Today” responds to a different conjuncture than our own. Barthes wrote it in 1957, already noting that demystification was “showing signs of wear” (xii). The events of 1968, in France and elsewhere, wore the terms further. Barthes prefaces the 1970 edition that “*ideological criticism*, precisely when the need for it was brutally obvious (May 1968), has become or at least ought to have become more sophisticated” (ix). Barthes’ own work evolved past *Mythologies*’ approach.

However, “Myth Today” is still useful to read now. This is not just for its disciplinary importance or its influence on a particular writer or artist. *Mythologies* articulates a political understanding of culture which persists. This early Barthes’ text offers a succinct account of how immediacy, cultural meaning and reality are understood to connect. Barthes’ account insists on the political stakes of these links.

Ideologically thick meaning overwrites the world. It stabilizes the order of things. Immediacy is closeness to reality. Both are political. For the transitive language of the woodcutter’s action, “between the tree and myself, there is nothing but my labor” (258). In work, nothing else separates the actor and their object. Metalanguage, including myth, is farther from its object. It can still show this origin in activity, but “much less easily” (256). Operational language is a mediation, but the “second-order language” where “myth settles” remediates what the transitive speaks (259). They both represent, but the operational is more immediate to its object, closer to reality. Language acts on real things, metalanguage acts on language. Myth fades reality from the language object. This reality is its political quality.

Barthes writes that myth “hides nothing” (240). Still, this speech is depoliticized precisely in its distance from reality. The myth itself may not conceal, but its chain of linked

associations carries us away from the world. It takes us away from the the world's transformability. Myth distances us from its human origins, its operational language.

Farocki first identifies operational images in the 2000 video *Eye/Machine.* He finds this quality in the images produced by the United States military during the 1991 war against Iraq. He specifically considers what were then called intelligent technologies, a kind of automated warfare. A warhead processes a stream of aerial photographs. The machine marks these images with green and then red lines as it identifies and confirms what it sees. The missile seems to steer itself. The rocket flies to its target, guided by these images.

Despite their operational directness, Farocki maintained these images convey something else as well. He reflected on the *Eye/Machine* trilogy in the 2004 text "Phantom Images". He noted a mystification to "technical representations which maintain that *they only* represent the operative principle of a process" (15). His distinguishing emphasis: the mystification is not a false claim to non-symbolic operationality. The images really do work. It is rather in the images' apparent full sufficiency. They exclude other records and accounts. These operational images appear as the only real representations. In their immediacy, there is no gap in our information. There is not another perspective to see the objects from. These images somehow coincide with the objects themselves. "Bombs with cameras in them offer no room for an independent observer" (15).

What does the fullness of these images conceal? People — those who operate their machines and those at, for instance, the end of the missiles' flight path. In these Gulf War images, there are no human figures (15). These images of the war are produced by the military's

operations, and circulate with their permission. Farocki notes that now “you cannot get footage from the military archives in which cars can be seen”, the proof of people on the site. The battlefield is empty (20). Machines and their images seem to perform all the action.

Other images Farocki considers are used to monitor a process, as in industrial production. Afterwards these images “appear so inconsequential that they are not stored — the tapes are erased and used again” (18). The image is used up, erased by use. Still, there was a need for its appearance, and now a need for its updating. Any automated process could be computed without the image’s display. These images exist for a human manager, watching the monitors. There is a reader for every image, even if only the technicians. There are “no pictures that do not aim at the human eye” (21). The very need for an image suggests a viewer, even if it’s someone absorbed in the activity at hand.

The rhetoric of operational immediacy is incorporated into the account of the war, told by military officials and news anchors. In their new contexts, these are unfamiliar kinds of images. Their apparent technicality performs a disregard for their half-comprehending viewership. Only an operator would understand these images correctly. The general public is shown the work of a specialist. The operational images’ absence of people suggests a war of technological precision, with minimal human toll in casualties or even endangered participants.

In this use, the images perform a sense of reality in their operational inscrutability. The directed character of the images change when brought into this public view. The media circulation of these images reworks them. The at-work immediacy becomes a kind of rhetoric.

They shift as well when introduced into Farocki’s artwork. *Eye/Machine* recontextualizes the operational images it depicts out of their original working context. The video still preserves

their strange independence, a perceived self-sufficiency. The operational images "challenge the artist who is interested in a meaning that is not authorial and intentional" ("Phantom Images" 18). The intertitles of *Eye/Machine* note that if "such images possess beauty … it is a beauty that is not calculated." It is not calculated, not intended to interest or enchant. Neither is it calculated in the sense of being processed, accounted for in the images' operation, their assessment and monitoring.

If such images interest us, it is because we are "weary of meta-language . . . of images custom-made to mean something to us" (18). The operational image is free of the settled *meaningfulness* of a more highly symbolized presentation. The operational image is absent the automated association of Barthes' mythologies. Their presentation and coding is fully focused on a task. Removed from this working context, they are freed from purposiveness. They are absent even the intentionality aimed towards beauty or visual appeal. They are free of any symbolic content, but from such a distinct mode of information that the recontextualization seems to abstract their code.

Throughout his work, Farocki often used preexisting images drawn from his research, or that he filmed in real-world milieus, such as a photography studio or an unemployment office. He treated the images made and discovered therein as found objects, striving to preserve the amazement of encounter. Even in recording new images, Farocki worked by "looking at something as it is being presented to me" and then made it "appear a little different from how it wants to be seen" ("History" 56). Farocki followed the preexisting presentation of his subject, its perspective, its wish or its operation.

This taste for the non-intentional links a broader aesthetic and working method to the properties of the operational image. Farocki's matter-of-fact presentation often appears to omit comment or judgment. Like the operational image, some of these videos appear unconcerned with persuading or moving their viewers. Farocki describes *An Image*, one such work:

> The television station that commissioned it assumes in these cases that I'm making a film that is critical of its subject matter, and the owner or manager of the thing that's being filmed assumes that my film is an advertisement for them. I try to do neither. Nor do I want to do something in between, but beyond both. ("An Image")

This is perhaps a canny working method, helping to simultaneously secure access to his subjects and funding for the project. It is still strange. The subjects of Harun Farocki's works — warfare, prisons, industrial manufacture — seem to have unavoidable political stakes, but his approach is not polemical, even at its most confrontational. He exhorts nothing, issues no demands. Farocki acknowledged that these subjects could "provide material for a comment, but I didn't want to add such meaning and nonsense, I wanted to evoke them … the comment that you omit has an effect" ("Rede" 27).[2]

Neither critique nor advertisement. Farocki focuses viewers' attention on subjects he has chosen. He follows the perspective of the object as it is presented to him, and so presents it to the viewer. What he depicts seems to just be what's there, without comment. Farocki's sense of

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[2] Harun Farocki wrote this original text, "Eine Rede über zwei Filme", in German. The translation is mine.

looking at something as it is presented appears in the self-sufficiency of the operational images he uses. It sediments in his found materials. This direct presentation characterizes the video Farocki shoots as well. These all evince a matter-of-factness, akin to the pared-back immediacy of Barthes' non-mythological reality. We have an immediate encounter with these objects.

Yet these seem to be two different immediacies. Barthes' conception of immediacy describes the primary human activity which makes the world, the woodcutter's axe against the tree. Without the chains of already-settled mythological meaning, the object's representation serves to make it available for human making and transformation. The immediacy here strips away the associated meaning and metalanguage holding it stable and static. Its activity is now close to reality, bringing the world to hand. Political practice which aims to transform the world must then partake of this proximity.

For Farocki, the immediacy of the operational image is also tied to its primary orientation to use. These images are unconcerned with connotation but rather formed towards their function. They produce an effect, and so directly register that state. In its direct focus, the operational image detours rhetoric.

But if immediacy is a lack of a barrier or delay, here immediacy is closeness to distance. We encounter a proximity to one pole of management from afar. The operational images Farocki identifies are part of the 20th century's mesh of automation and control: missile systems, factory conveyor belts, prisons. Yet even aside from these particular contexts, an operational image articulates the delegation of an activity. These images are needed to monitor, to work on something at a remove. In this remove, they depict the distance which enables and necessitates management.

The operational image connects this distance. This is not a union of representation and action, object and subject. These images are needed for monitoring, management and correction. This differentiation is often spatial but not necessarily so. This distance is not objective remove, but the distinction of capacities and ability to act, the difference between manager and managed. The operational image is formed by and for this difference, a difference unlike the proximity Barthes described. These images may strike us as true, but it is in part the truth of this distance.

If the image itself appears effective, this representation has agency, even if processual and merely causal. Unlike the rustic directness of Barthes' woodcutter, here proximity to the operational image does not bring us closer to our own agency. It does not bring us closer to the people who manage it or those who are the objects of its operation. Rather, *it* continues to work, the representation operating.

Farocki's operational images are not addressed to us, and so sidestep the array of responses we may bring to images: appetite, skepticism, concern. *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts'* looks at California prison surveillance video systems. Intertitles in the work note that "[l]ike baking bread or slaughtering animals — power is no longer commonly exercised at close quarters." The operational image is embedded in the context of its use, by turns technical, political, social. We see the image which works, bound not in thicker symbolic coding but in more discrete technical function, positioned in its activity. The operational image brings us to a view immersed in this working context. We seem embedded as well, close in. But this context is not the entirety of the operational array, not the full scope of activity. The operational image brings us up against this distance. No longer at close quarters, the separate parts are both divided

and joined by a connecting apparatus. This is a form of mediation, brought here to our immediate attention.

In the beginning of his 1978 film *Between Two Wars*, Farocki describes financing the project with a job captioning commercial pornography. The video shows him seated at a desk, inventing names and preferences for the nude models pictured. The voiceover notes that "within the culture industry [this is] the conventional way: to cloak sensuality with words."[3] Language obscures the encounter with sensuality. But it is unclear if the sensuality evoked here is in the photograph or, via the image, with its subject.

This shape of this sensibility is homologous with Barthes' account of cultural mythology, where a primary object is overcoded by culture industry fable, a predigestion of possible meaning, an already-formed fantasy. However, what we are carried away from is not world-shaping activity. It's the sensuality of an encounter, even in the relatively closed pornographic loop. In its critical inflection, we hear even in this earlier moment Farocki's aversion to the comment, the additional significance prescribed to cover up.

As in this passage, Farocki often reflected on conditions of the works' production along with practical, formal and historical concerns. *Between Two Wars* proceeds to describe 20th century industrial capital's tendency to converge into quasi-monopoly trusts. Such a drive to full efficiency is characterized in part by the use of industrial waste as input for further production, ensuring that material is used as much as possible. The German economist Alfred Sohn-Rethel

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3 My attention was drawn to this section of the work by Thomas Elsaesser's "Working at the Margins: Film as a Form of Intelligence".

theorized this as the early 20th century German development of a *verbundsystem*, an economic trust. Sohn-Rethel saw this industrial dynamic as partially explaining the emergence of fascism. Farocki seized on this historical account of industrial development “as if I had found the missing fragment of an entire picture.” (Elsaesser “Harun” 28).[4]

In 1975, Farocki described his own working method as an attempt at a *verbundsystem* on an individual scale:

> Following the example of the steel industry . . . I try to create a *Verbund* with my work. The basic research for a project I finance with a radio broadcast, some of the books I use I review for the book-programmes, and many of the things I notice during this kind of work end up in my television features. (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 82-3)

Farocki’s self-identified *verbund* describes the economic pressures on independent cultural work. This account models his activity within a broader intellectual and political horizon, across discipline and format. The jobs done to fund the work connect Farocki’s activities to the larger economy. The double-use of the materials above links his work to others’ theorizing and research.

Nora M. Alter suggests that, while Farocki’s lack of comment may in part be a necessary caution regarding his sometimes-clients, it is also a spur to the viewers’ thought. Without presenting an explicit judgment or explanation, the viewer is prompted to formulate their own.

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4 *Between Two Wars* draws heavily from Sohn-Rethel’s work. His influence on Farocki is described in Thomas Elsaesser’s “Working at the Margins”, *New German Cinema: A History* and conversation with Alexander Alberro at Artist’s Space in 2014.

Alter acknowledges that Farocki's work generally addresses relationships between the visible, the veiled and the unseen, a sense that things are present but not noticed or named. We expect the work to perform these strategies as well, "what classical rhetorics called 'sigetics,' the argument from silence" (Alter 186-8). This silence may perplex, especially alongside the frank description of Farocki's financial needs and commercial involvements. His embeddedness in the culture industry is written into the work, as its frequent source and occasional subject. How can this closeness offer something else, not an advertisement, in its silence? How could Farocki, modeling his personal economy on national heavy industry, produce works with another logic?

Arguing from silence, or from what's not present, may be arguing from a sense of implication. In the absence of comment, we sense the feeling of another part. A connection is suggested. This sense of relation is crucial to the aesthetic and the understanding developed across Farocki's work. Farocki wrote that "montage must hold together with invisible forces the things that would otherwise become muddled", not just sequences of moving image but their meanings as well ("Cross Influence" 144). Montage effectively implies a connection which, invisible, appears in the relation across or between images.

Farocki's silence, the use of others' theoretical research, the presentation of technicians and their operational images — these all produce a sense of understanding which is not held wholly within Farocki's work. Neither Farocki as author nor his works claim to hold every answer. Rather, understanding is generated from how the work relates between social phenomena, historical developments, archival images, theoretical propositions. A sensibility is formed across these places.

Inextinguishable Fire is from 1969, a relatively early work by Farocki. It is well-known, often cited for the surprising sequence with which it begins. Farocki sits at a desk, his body facing towards the camera and head turned down. He reads a document, a statement given by Thai Bihn Dahn to the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal. It is a first-person account of being grievously injured by a napalm bomb launched by the United States military. Finished reading, Farocki raises his face to the camera and asks "How can we show you napalm in action?" How can violence be shown without the viewer shutting their eyes, turning away? How can a condemnation be articulated which does not provoke defense? Farocki reaches out of the frame, retrieves a burning cigarette and extinguishes it on his forearm. He notes that the cigarette burns at a mere 400°C, compared to napalm's 3,000°C.

The aspects of Farocki's work I have discussed, which develop throughout the chronology of his work, are already present in this early scene. In one sense, Farocki's reading of the statement presents it. The survivor's experience is narrated. The author's first-person voice is evoked. And yet this remains too far away from the video and from its viewers. How is one to understand this suffering, whether within the room of Farocki's filming or wherever we happen to view the film? Farocki, narrator and director, offers his arm as an analogy, a stand-in for a fraction of destruction and suffering happening elsewhere. This unexpected metaphor, pulled from out of the frame, provocatively stages questions regarding distance, violence, speech, knowledge, and the connections which unite them.

But this does not exhaust the question. It doesn't fulfill the representation of napalm in action, the context of its genesis and use. Given the notoriety of this first sequence, it is almost a surprise that the film continues, that there is more to say. The remaining 20 minutes of the film

are a narrative reconstruction of Dow Chemical's development of a new napalm. The various characters are types — scientist, executive, State Department official — presenting something more parable than historical account. This sequence is grounded in reality but self-consciously formalized, articulated across the social roles it depicts. Farocki's opening sequence formalizes the difficult situation of political commentary, but the following quasi-Brechtian figuration skews that sideways. Out of the hermetic loop of Farocki-camera-viewer, we see an array of social positions. Each person pictured is implicated in the production of napalm, even if their discrete position within the larger process is intentionally obscured.

The chemical industry was specialized and therefore fragmented. Dow exploited these separations, assuaging concerned scientists with the ignorance of the final use of their individually produced components. Farocki shows both destructive and beneficial potential uses of the chemicals Dow developed. The technology did not determine its own fate. It's application was decided, determined by who understood the larger process and who was in the position to direct it. Political control was achieved via fragmenting individuals' understanding of their role in a larger process.

This is not just a problem of understanding. There is no inherent center to get to and no missing knowledge which could resolve these decisions. This process really is differentiated, industrially and socially. *Between Two Wars* ends with the alternating perspectives of worker, student, and engineer — all the same actor but insisting on the distinct involvements of each position. The question of different positions and their relative distances becomes the examination of connections, putting pieces together.

Farocki made repeated references to working with found objects, “composed . . . like a bird’s nest” (“Rede” 29), with “chances and the luck of a finder” (“History” 56). This sense of finding recalls the feeling of immediate encounter staged in some of his work. He does not create everything his works depict. Farocki’s use of operational images is instructive here, originating in some non-authored context, the independence of their strange at-work affect.

Farocki described running footage from *An Image* across his editing table until he saw the film: “I didn’t cut it out with my thoughts … the images are imprints of actual and representational objects” (“Rede” 28). The production seems led by the solidity of these worldly things, deferring to their agency. In working on these connections, Farocki followed the rhythm of the filmed situation or the logic of the images he encountered. In the 1980 text “What an Editing Room Is”, Farocki describes editing as a task “which draws the editor under its spell”, a process of “getting to know the material so well that the decisions taken . . . follow of their own accord”. In editing Farocki saw “how little plans and intentions have to do with producing pictures” (78). The editor experiences “the autonomy of the image” as the film’s structure emerges in reference “not to intentions, but to actual facts” (80). Making a film appears to come more from the actuality of what it depicts, the subjects’ rhythm, perspective, autonomy, than the decisions of its producer.

Farocki describes ceding a kind of authorial agency to his materials. They seem to make the work. Yet in and around his works, Farocki described funding, theoretical techniques, practical methods — emphasizing his own activity constructing the work. Farocki’s public account of the works’ construction emphasizes the mediation in his work, even as he strived to

preserve the encounter with his subjects' independence. Editing moves between this material and the work of forming it, holding this tension.

Farocki's 1995 work *Interface* was a commission by the Lille Museum of Modern Art for a video reflecting on his own work. This work was also Farocki's first gallery installation. It is a two screen examination of Farocki's editing process. Embedded within the work are segments from previous projects, contemplating Farocki's construction of them. This move from cinema to exhibition space directly influenced Farocki's subsequent work.

The installation format allowed for a work composed of multiple videos. This evokes video editing — choosing between images, choosing their sequence — and specifically allows the development of a spatial montage, a combination which could work not just on sequences of time but physical space as well. This became a recurring compositional strategy for Farocki, as he continued developing projects for exhibition contexts. He left the cinema as presentation space but continued to examine its logic, even while considering new imaging and video techniques as well. Farocki's approach of formulating connections via combination and repetition became spatialized.

In the same period, Farocki co-authored a dialogical book with Kaja Silverman, *Speaking About Godard*.[5] These reflections on another filmmaker's work roughly coincide with Farocki's transition from cinema to art space. The observations Farocki makes regarding Godard's films offer insight into the strategies and methods of his own work. The co-authors discuss Godard's

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5 The book was published in 1998, and the passage discussed below is adapted from an earlier essay, "In Her Place", initially published in 1996.

1975 film *Number Two*, which opens on a view of Godard at work in the studio. Most of the subsequent film depicts two video channels simultaneously. This is the typical view for video editing. Farocki notes that:

> [w]hen Godard shows two monitors, he makes one comment upon the other in a soft montage. I say "soft montage" since what is at issue is a general relatedness [which] does not predetermine how the two images are to be connected; we must build up the associations ourselves (Silverman 141-2).

This technique of soft montage is central in Farocki's subsequent work. Video installation in exhibition spaces affords combinations of multiple videos and screens. He theorizes this transition more fully in the 2003 text "Cross Influence/Soft Montage", where even the title is two. The combination of two frames, whether two images or image and text, allows for an easier positing and a softer commentary: "More trial, less assertion. Equivocality can be attained with the simplest means" (142).

As in his earlier work, "Cross Influence/Soft Montage" strings together conceptual and practical concerns. Farocki evokes Godard and mid-1960s expanded cinema, segueing into projector availability and audience reach. Farocki reproduced these spatialized exhibition projects as single channel versions (using an overlapping format similar to sections of *Number Two*) so that the work would be more easily distributed, "an inconsistency arising from financial and political reasons" (143). Besides the curiosity of these practical asides, this is consistent with Farocki's reflection on his working situation in *Interface* and prior. Farocki works with things out in the world, but the work is threaded through with a consideration of technical and practical

approaches. Editing is the interface between what's depicted and the work. Farocki describes how, after making several projects in this way, he sought to find a subject matter which could justify this two-image approach (143-4). He found such a subject in integrated missile images — operational images.

Operational images and the two-channel format for the work emerge together. These occur after Farocki had "'left' the cinema to enter 'the art space'" (143). These are linked in Farocki's account and coincide in the chronology of his works.

Farocki describes Godard's two monitors as a presentation in which one image comments on the other. In "Cross Influence/Soft Montage", he describes working with multiple videos' soft montage, presenting the easy "opportunity to use one track as the main text and the other track as its commentary or its footnote" (142). Farocki's theorization and use of the operational image emerges accompanied by a newly formalized technique of commentary in his work.

The two-channel videos refuse the coherence of the single image, even as they mobilize operational images' sense of closed sufficiency. In the *Eye/Machine* trilogy, Farocki pairs these images with their hardware, or the scenes they scan, or their operators. The second image comments on the first. Is this footnote a renunciation of Farocki's earlier strategy of omitting comments, his preference for silence?

The two-channel format opens up the operational images' closure, "that *they only* represent the operative principle of a process" ("Phantom Images" 15). But it does not counter them with an assertion of a completed reality, the countervailing wholeness. Instead, it offers Farocki's "general relatedness", a resonance that's both formal and critical. The work is organized on a principle of adding, supplementing, incompleteness. It's not fragmentary, but

neither is it whole. This is a rhetorical and aesthetic method. It's a political question as well, as shown in the early *Inextinguishable Fire*: the way differentiated social positions shape and limit understanding, or at least casts it necessarily in perspective.

Farocki criticized the practice of covering up the sensuality of experience with commentary. He worked to evoke a general relatedness while preserving the sense of encounter with his subjects, their worldly independence. Farocki's use of operational images brings us up against the distance which they effect and work within in. We are close to the farness they manage. In the starkness of these images, their uncalculated beauty, we encounter poles of activity not meant to be seen, the sight of which is incidental to their function. In their work we see the connecting of the world up close.

Through a window in the crowded control room, alongside the tour guide and group, I looked out at the floor of Power Plant #1. Below us, the water turned the wheels, the wheels turning the turbine shaft, turning the forceful movement of water into electricity. Across from this window was the mimic board, an image of options within a connected system. Its components were switched on and off. This type of panel does not prompt activity elsewhere, but records it, an aid and check on the memory of the worker.

This might not even be an image. In the panel's stiff materials, it lacks the graphic and visual plasticity of the materials Farocki uses. The mimic board in the heart of the control room shows how the administration over distance, running a complex system, needs information. There must be a picture of the current state, a switch slid to the right, even as the changes made erase it, a switch slid back to the left. The activity and its result are noted, reproduced in the

board. Operating at a distance means that distance is brought into the system's work, here in the control room, a representation where I expected to find a control.

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