THE TERRITORY OF IMAGES

Harun Farocki, *Images of War at a Distance*
Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 29, 2011–January 2, 2012

My first encounter with the work of Harun Farocki was a mediated representation – Jill Godmilow's *What Farocki Taught* (1998). The film is a shot-by-shot remake of Farocki's hard-hitting *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969). In Godmilow's film, Farocki's systematic unpacking of the making of napalm by unwitting workers at the Dow Chemical factory presented as a direct address was remade in color, in English and with vintage, rather than contemporary, outfits. *What Farocki Taught* demonstrates Godmilow's admiration for Farocki's work and invokes the original film's explicit politics but it also asks questions: how do Farocki's images operate and where does the experience of documentary truth lie?

The show at MoMA is a cause for celebration – not only does it give access to much of Farocki's work in a video archive, and ample space to not one, but three different bodies of installation work, but signals the fact that the museum has undertaken to collect nearly all of his work. This unprecedented opportunity to watch so many pieces side by side presents an intimidating proposition if seeking to understand how his images operate, but a welcoming one for his many ardent fans in the media art and film worlds. *An Image*; *Videograms of a Revolution*; *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*; *How to Live in the FRG*; and *In Comparison* are among the many films available on monitors to play on demand. Much of the work involves serious research and the collection of archival material. Farocki is particularly fond of instructional scenarios (such as a demonstration of how to facilitate the birthing of a baby with a prosthetic pelvis and a resizable vaginal opening) and documenting pedagogical role-playing (play therapy, job interview practice sessions) in which social norms and ideologies are transmitted from one party to another. Despite the sometimes slow pace and stark structure that defies a more conventional narrative arc, Farocki's dispassionate and systematic look at everyday scenarios are not without humor or emotion. These scenarios often appear themselves to be performed quite dispassionately, but signs such as the sinking facial expression of the job interviewee, the Playboy model's stoic but perceptible discomfort as she gamely holds her pose through a series of tedious adjustments, and the halting enthusiasm of the Romanian citizen negotiating control of the television

Harun Farocki, *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), Frame enlargement, 16mm film transferred to video (color, sound). 106 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously in honor of Anna Marie Shapiro.

Harun Farocki, *Serious Games II: Three Dead* (2010), Frame enlargement, video (color, sound), 8 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds, 2011.

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station as the dust of the revolution tries to settle, reveal an unruly humanity in the subjects, while also tending to implicate the voyeuristic impulses of the unsuspecting art viewer.

Farocki's work seems to be always busy 'unmaking' representations, questioning documents and re-examining rote behaviors. In one work after another, he demonstrates that if you strip away the inessential and look at something with a fixed and steady gaze, it becomes strange. And if you continue to look, systemic machinations of institutional power are rendered visible. The unmasking of images depicting individual subjects gives way to the excavation of the larger subject of the institutional apparatus – the factory, the school, the corporate work environment, the prison, the state, the media. For someone whose work more often than not reads as critical of the subjects it lays bare, Farocki seems to have exceptional access. During his talk at MoMA he revealed his method for obtaining permission to observe and document his impressive array of subjects. The simple statement: "I find it so interesting what you are doing and would like to make a film," apparently enables the "productive misunderstanding" which we enjoy while watching each systematic unmasking of a particular situation.

After decades of making numerous, exemplary single-channel essay films and works of direct cinema, to be screened on television or in the film theater, Farocki has more recently turned toward multi-channel installation made for museums and galleries. Examples of these from the last ten years are the primary focus of the exhibition. These pieces, all made up of spatially arranged projections, are variations on what can be called "soft montage" – work in which images are simultaneously in the same space, rather than one image replacing another in succession. Chief curator Sabine Breitweiser suggested, during Farocki's talk at MoMA, that he is interested in "the horizontal relation of meaning," and in his essay "Cross Influence/ Soft Montage," Farocki writes: "A montage must hold together with invisible forces the things that would otherwise become muddled." The installation work is in some ways less successful than the single-channel work in that the attention required by the viewer to come to an understanding that is won from observation over time is more easily diluted. The exquisite experience of the unfolding of one of Farocki's filmic arguments can be undermined by sound bleeding from an adjacent installation, people walking by or the temptation to come and go at moments at odds with an intended beginning and end. Perhaps the format is appropriate, however to the exploration of our relationship to newer forms of a technological apparatus of vision – an apparatus that is computer and data-driven, automated and distributed across a network; one that can easily simulate and dissimulate; and one that complicates our relationship with what is being observed in profound ways, including our situatedness in time and space. After appreciating so many of Farocki's single-channel works, perhaps a recalibration of our attention is required. "The horizontal relation of meaning" that can be understood as a "this and this and this" syntagmatic signifying system can be expanded to included notions of geography and spatial relations.

The earliest of the installations, *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* (2001), is a two-image projection exploring surveillance in spaces of containment, particularly in a prison. Images from a camera in

Harun Farocki, *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* (2001), Frame enlargement, Two-channel video installation re-edited to single-channel video (color, sound), 25 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Film Funds. © 2011 Harun Farocki. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

the ceiling showing a moment of thwarted intimacy between an incarcerated man and his girlfriend is pitted against images of the prison guards casually enacting violence as they practice constraining prisoners in training exercises. The piece climaxes in a philosophical investigation of one incident: two male prisoners are fighting in a triangular courtyard – no space hidden from view, bodies vulnerable – and the fight is arrested by a deadly gunshot coming from the direction of the camera. Power is spatially inscribed and then doubly and triply inscribed by rote simulated enactments and the recording camera apparatus. In the trilogy *Eye/Machine I-III* (2001–03), three sets of double projections activate an intertextual play of images showing us how machines mimic and improve on human vision and replace human vision and workers in industrial production and military combat. The piece addresses interconnected operations in the spheres of labor, geography and warfare as they become newly reconfigured in potentially insidious ways with the use of automated and remotely operated technologies.

In *Eye/Machine I-III* (2001–03), as well as *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–10), Farocki takes on the problem exhaustively laid out by Paul Virilio in his book *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* – the unholy and symbiotic relationship between the development of technologies of cinematic spectacle and technologies of war. Virilio covers everything from the history of aerial reconnaissance through the 20th century; to Goebbel's insistence on improving Agfa film to match American Technicolor during WWII; to Reagan's fantastical idea for lasers-and-mirrors-in-space in the 1980s; to the videogame-like interfaces encountered by American military personnel fighting the Gulf War in the 1990s. Virilio's invocation of Merleau-Ponty in his preface to the English version with this quote speaks well to Farocki's interest in technologies of visualization: "The problem of knowing who is the subject of the state and war will be of exactly the same kind as the problem of knowing who is the subject of perception."

Twenty-first century iterations of technologies embodying relationships between war and cinema, those stemming explicitly from video game technologies are tackled in *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–10). James Der Derian, a scholar who has translated Virilio and written on the eroding distinction between war and game in American military as it adopts the use of gaming technologies, has addressed this as "the military industrial entertainment complex." The four pieces making up *Serious Games* look at the uses of simulation and role-playing in shaping American soldiers' experience of the war in Iraq both in training and in attempting to process the ensuing traumatic experience. Three screens hang at angles in the middle of the room bearing projections on either side. People are free to sit on benches for a few moments or mill about, moving from screen to screen, blurring the distinction from one work to another.

In *Serious Games II: Three Dead* (2010), the only single-channel piece, a simulated Iraqi village in Twentynine Palms, California is the site of role-playing exercises for American soldiers in preparation for real

combat. The setting of the "village" is intercut with video game flyover views. "Iraqis" (ostensibly played by actors) mingle with American military trainees, while going about their regular day, eating food from a buffet setup like a film crew lunch spread and going to the mosque to pray. During one animated conversation, a villager asks a soldier about whether or not he has kids or a girlfriend and it is unclear where acting begins. When lunch and conversation are interrupted by shooting, spurring the soldiers into action, the soldiers seem uncannily unmoved as they discuss protocol for responding to what would likely be an inflammatory event. Combat routines are projected onto the landscape in the same manner that streets of Baghdad have been given American state names by the military in order to make them easier to navigate.

In *III: Immersion* (2009), a soldier recalls a traumatic mission in Iraq while a therapist reenacts the scene for him as a virtual reality simulation with the goal of relieving his PTSD. The spatial dislocation of two screens allows the viewer to experience this scene both inside and outside the simulation, inside the head of the soldier and with distance, watching him experience what is played out by the VR system. It is uncomfortable to watch the intense emotional and even physical responses of the traumatized soldier until it is revealed that he is play-acting for a sales pitch demonstration with an audience of therapists who may purchase the system. It is difficult to locate where the "real" experience of war lies for the soldiers, therapists and by extension, American military strategists, policy makers and citizens at large. Farocki's narrative and installation architecture enables a productive confusion about which truths the documentary is revealing to us, the viewers.

In *I: Watson is Down* (2010), we see both the fresh-faced men interacting with the training software and the resultant simulation across two channels. This technique makes us cognizant of choices being made from the prescribed menu of options for possible Iraqi enemies, lighting, obstacles and other elements to be placed in the landscape that construct a plausible experience of warfare for young trainees. The scale and the horizontal pairing of screens makes the simulated landscapes and the room where the soldiers sit come spatially alive. Drawn algorithmically, according to a Cartesian spatial logic, the landscapes are identical to video games and in this context provide a striking and almost literal example of the social production of space theorized by Henri Lefevbre. "Adjusting the mood of lighting is easy," says the instructor as he changes the weather and time of day, and then goes on to demonstrate additional options available for designing the terrain, such as the clothing and skin tone of potential Iraqi enemy combatants. Ideologies and politics are inevitably and materially embedded. In a more didactic moment, Farocki's text notes that "the system for remembering is a little cheaper than the one for training," (since the software used for training soldiers incorporates shadows and the software for theraputic PTSD renactment does not), alluding to the underpinnings of commerce in designing warfare. Planning a war is more profitable than recovering from one.

Although the war in Iraq and the use of these technologies by the military are real, Farocki never shows any actual images of Iraq at all. His look at the software and images used to articulate topologies shows them to be not only myopic and curiously detached from the horrors of war, but bound up in economics. *Serious Games I-IV* provides evidence in support of what theorists like David Harvey might identify, at a global scale, as relationships between geography and the power dynamics driven by capitalism. What Virilio has described as "the military use of space whose conquest [is] ultimately the conquest of the image" reads here as particularly preemptive, and illustrates well his idea that in contemporary warfare "seeing and foreseeing... tend to merge so closely that the actual can no longer be distinguished from the potential..." By offering us a dispassionate look at these technologies played out in spatial arrangements, Farocki digs beneath the truism that "reality is the first casualty of war" and teases out some of the instrumental ways this becomes the case. If truth is the first casualty of war, and documentary is bound up in claims of truth, installation helps to combat an insistence that documentary is truth's platform.

RACHEL STEVENS