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Image (circum)volution: On the Installation *Schnittstelle (Interface)*

How does a filmmaker arrive at the artform of the museum installation? Farocki finds himself in a small, albeit eminent group of like-minded filmmakers. In their installations, Chris Marker, Chantal Akerman, Raul Ruiz or Peter Greenaway, whose films negotiate the relationship between word and image in equally radical fashion, conduct similar investigations into their own or each other's images, scenically bringing to account the metamorphoses of cinema through more recent audiovisual apparatus.

Perhaps it's about giving the images distance so that a question that threads its way like a leitmotif through Harun Farocki's films and videos {and whose formulation is to be found — somewhat programmatically — in film titles such as *Ein Bild (An Image, 1983)* or *Wie man sieht (As/how you can see, 1986)*} can be posed anew: what is an image? A question Farocki has long linked to the aesthetic changes of information technology, and which today more than ever is relevant to the cinema. With the installation *Schnittstelle (Interface, 1995)* an essential focus of this issue is touched upon, namely the organizational form of moving pictures. This from the perspective of an auteur, who these days profiles himself more as an engineer than a creator: “*What happens at the editing table, is this comparable to a scientific experiment?*”¹

Schnittstelle provokes the spectator's capacity to remember and to perceive in a double sense. Like the assembler of images, the spectator is first confronted with sequences of images running in parallel on two monitors which, in a further step (which is also a temporal one, because the visitor enters another space), are integrated on a third monitor, thus amenable to a new reading. Thus the viewer sees a series of takes from various films by Farocki (images, for example, of the Romanian Revolution, workers leaving the factory, the interwar years, inexpressible violence in the Vietnam War, or photographic constructions of the female body). Above all though, the filmmaker is seen at work in the process of arranging and manipulating his images. That this arrangement² takes place in the context of a museum is crucial. On the one hand, it becomes clear that an expression of thought is entrusted to an artistic form and on the other, that this thinking through filmic and electronic means is being made by someone into the object of his own observation. (It's probably no coincidence that this theoretical and aesthetic effort comes from somebody who has long been a consequential film and media critic.) The title *Schnittstelle* brings to a head the dual technical and poetic paths. It is a matter of both the initial filmic processes of the spatio-temporal arrangement of the image material, and the interval, the interstices of images (and sounds), as well as the bringing into play of analogue and model-like – digital – representation, ultimately the info- and electro- tising of montage. Thus, it is less about the old quarrel as to whether the computer image has to imitate the cinema, or whether it can lay claim to an independent existence; rather Farocki is concerned more generally with the binary principles of montage, with the power of abstraction arising from the motor processing of analogue images. Such is the perspective from which we are given to understand the pointedly pedagogical demonstration of the production of an electronically 'mixed' image (as opposed to the mechanically 'edited' one): as an exemplary research model. Thus even the most recent developments in virtual (digital) montage resonate in the media theory-directed interrogations of Farocki, even when they are not explicitly the object of this (re)presentation.

The installation *Schnittstelle* invokes an apparatus which permits the simultaneity of images which film in principle orders in succession, a well nigh perfect model of the solitary place where the author writes and processes images: “*Today I can barely write a word unless an image is visible on the screen at the same time*”. Or, rather, on both screens. In this imaginary laboratory, at the simulated workplace of the filmmaker, the spectator is linked up with the composition of the video differently than in front of a (single) large screen in the dark of the cinema. While a comparison is drawn in say, Farocki's *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* (*Workers leaving the factory*, 1995) through following Lumière's primary film of the same name with excerpts from other stories of the cinema – such as Marilyn Monroe at the factory gate in Fritz Lang's *Clash by Night* (USA, 1952) and proletarian masses in step with each other in *Metropolis* (Germany 1925/26) – the association of these films can now be directly called up. Here on the left, the first motif from the history of film: male and female workers leaving a factory, in this case a factory which produces photographic items. And on the right: a century of images which repeat, vary and further develop the first motif.

Even if the visitor is not required to engage in any physical 'interactivity', as a reader, s/he develops a textual mobility when confronted with two audiovisual tracks whose arrangement is mutually dependent, as if in dialogue with each other. For *Schnittstelle* is a space in which various languages circulate, in accordance with a particular structural order. What the reader of this 25-minute long text, comparable with someone out for a stroll (in Barthes' sense)³, sees is multiple and irreducible, for each combination of events is unique to the one perceiving it and defines their promenade, which can only be repeated as different. Finally this is not about a closed text, but about an open form which simultaneously implicates variations and textual deviations, a possible film.

Differing from classical cinema setting, where the linear passage of images inscribes meaning diachronically, here the next best image to a moving picture or even a still is sought (and simultaneously shown) in a kind of horizontal montage. Hitherto, words, sometimes pieces of music, have commented on the images. Here images comment on images. The principle of this montage is complex. For the editing is not just articulated from right to left (whether it's a cut between sound and image, or between image and image), but gives rise to circulations through precisely calculated sequences of change and repetitions, not just within individual tracks, but above all between the two screens. A compositional structure typical of Farocki becomes instantly recognizable, one that functions via anticipation and repetition. An image is introduced (viz. the figure of a chemist) which is later taken up again and explained (here for example, to elucidate the aesthetic process of distanciation: “*The images say a laboratory doesn't look like that*”).

At the video-editing suite the variation of sequence matches can be achieved with the press of a button. One proceeds differently at a 16mm editing desk. In the second case (both are visually demonstrated by the author in *Schnittstelle*) each new edit has to be materially and physically prepared, such that the montage editor's fingertips may touch the spot of the cut or paste. What we see here is not, as still the case in Vertov's *Celovek s Kinoapparatom* (*Man with the movie camera*, USSR, 1929), an expert cutter at her work, but an author, who manipulates his film in remote and ruminating fashion, surrounded only by machines and a note book. This illustrates how filmic dimensions like time and motion are capable of tactile translation, and that the choice of images ultimately follows as a solitary act: a twofold thought which is taken to extremes by Jean-Luc Godard's radical self portrait *JLG/JLG – Autoportrait de Décembre* (originating in 1994), with the figure of a blind female cutter.

In spite of its sensuous quality, the strip of celluloid is primarily, like money, a means to an end: “*With a banknote it becomes especially clear how little the essence and the appearance coincide*”. As long as the film cutter is working manually on the other film, the celluloid strip, as the complete material basis of the 'actual' film, the one projected, the latter cannot be actualised in its projection. Video is different: here computerization allows montage – or better, mixing – a “direct” link up between manual editing operations and the appearance of the image. Beyond that a spatial replication of the images is possible, for the electronic image is constantly being reorganised. Ultimately, the direct temporal constitution of the electronic image allows for various viewing situations, for instance the illusion of the freeze frame that halts time, or the visual disorientation due to rapid sequences. Farocki bore this relationship of stasis and motion in mind in the construction of his film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Images of the World and Inscription of War, 1998)*. There, as he notes in *Schnittstelle* by means of a brief recombining of particular elements without further explanation, the moving images have no accompanying text.

In this way Farocki symbolically submits his films to a re-vision at the museum's electronic “mixing suite”, so as to radically ask of his own work the questions “What is an image?” and “How is a sequence of images put together?” What was hitherto examined in frequently found apparatuses and images, for instance the imploring gesture of an amateur filmmaker in *Videogramme einer Revolution (Videograms of a Revolution, 1991/92)* is now applied to the architecture of the films that arose out of them. Thus, with the sketchy montage of moving images from *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, Farocki parades before the spectator the evidence that these repeat themselves according to the rule of a permutation: “*when I was editing this film, I based decisions on a simple program, according to which the shots are combined and re-combined*”. This step, inspired (according to the author), by the rules of music composition or the rotors of one-arm bandits, can already be found in a film of apparently chronological observation whose structure is likewise based on the principle of repetition: Farocki speaks of the necessity of the unpremeditated gaze, in relation to revision of his apparatus film (Dispositiv-Film) *Ein Bild*, shot in the Munich “Playboy” studio and assembled without commentary.

Here the author does not present himself biographically, but as the observer and maker of his films, as writer and reader, as cinephile and bibliophile – akin to Godard. Farocki then concocts a self-portrait which develops via metaphors and analogies rather than via narrative structures. His figure is represented in images, yet it dissolves into serially arranged bodily attitudes that are always similar to each other. The video camera and monitor serve him as a mirror, but less in the sense of any “aesthetics of narcissism”⁴ specific to video, than as technical means of fabricating temporal differences and short circuits. Even where Farocki breaks through his pose of rereading to show, via a close-up of the burn scar on his arm, the trace of his self mutilation in the pamphlet-film *Nicht löschesbares Feuer (Inextinguishable fire, 1968/69)*, it's not so much the real referent which is at stake in this rather actionist performance scene (an “it was really so”) but a temporal referentiality of the photographic, which is to say, filmic image (an “it was”). As indicated in the original film by the match-cut of a burning piece of flesh, it's a matter of the aesthetic means of producing a comparison with one of the animals in the research laboratories and referring to mere connection points to the real world. For, in the film, the images of Vietnam are precisely what is not evoked; it is rather this war as unrepresentable.

Farocki at the “mixing suite”, which he shows this time as a smouldering laboratory, implies forgery. It's no coincidence that he takes up again into his re-reading a shot from *Zwischen zwei Kriegen (Between two wars, 1977/78)*, in which one can see the figure of the author with paper and pen at his writing desk, symbolically arriving at new combinations of a montage. And when, in *Schnittstelle*, code writers and decoding machines are (re)presented and critiqued, the double

aspect of an installation is grasped which pretends to deal with a filmic work: “*Is it a matter of unravelling a secret, or keeping it?*”

There's nothing anecdotal about the new linking up of image shards. As soon as Farocki reverts to fragments of his films and videos, he analyses and dismembers the visual and acoustic image so as to usher the spectator into a mental space between the (acoustic and visual) images. In all the films this in-between space is valid for itself, where the cut is not a part of one or the other image, of one or the other sequence of images, which it separates and divides, as in films of linear narration, but the cut as it were “liberates”⁵ itself, as Deleuze puts it. This kind of montage principle, insisting as it does on the interval, no longer creates sequences but series.

Beyond the relevant technical armature, the staging apparatus of the montage process fuses temporal moments: the (past) original take (to be determined as a filmic element) with the (present) act of rereading, i.e. re-viewing. The difference between these times and essences is communicated on the one hand via the placing in parallel or inseting of two images, on the other hand, via duplication here and there at the level of sound. The visual regression finds its correspondence in Farocki speaking for instance of *Nicht löschesbares Feuer* as an echo of the person he once was (and who is rendered present through the projection). At the end of this layering comes the position of the visitor (transposed into the future), whose gaze and hearing are directed toward this serializing process of images and sounds, a process which perpetually repeats itself anew. To this, other than in cinema or on television, *Schnittstelle* runs in the museum as an endless loop and thus ideally — and in accordance with the principle of repetition — can be observed as long as one wants. The arrangement of the apparatus thus locates both the image literate viewer and the author in equal measure at the incisive divide (*Schnittstelle*) of observation and imagination.

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Notes & References

¹ This quotation, and all those which follow without full documentation, are taken from the commentary text spoken by Farocki in *Schnittstelle*.

² *Schnittstelle* was first conceived in 1995, in the arrangement described above, for the exhibition "Le monde après la photographie" in the Musée d'art Moderne de Villeneuve-d'Ascq (10.6. – 1.10.1995), and presented under the title "Section". The video of this installation, which brings together both sequences of images (A and B) in a second room and in a single image (C), was then shown on channel 3sat on 25.6.1995 under the title *Schnittstelle*. In a further variation "Section" was finally exhibited as part of the exhibition "Face à l'histoire" (19.12.1996 – 7.4.1997) in the Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Georges Pompidou. Here "Section" could be seen in an open cube, corresponding to the set-up from the first room of the installation in Villeneuve-d'Ascq.

³ On this concept of text, see Roland Barthes, "De l' Oeuvre au Texte", in *Revue Esthétique* 3 (1971), pp. 225-232.

⁴ Following the title of an essay by Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics as Narcissism", in *October* 1, Spring 1976.

⁵ Deleuze calls this the "irrational cut"; cf. Gilles Deleuze, *L'Image-Temps. Cinéma 2* Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985, p. 324