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Response to the society of commentary: Editing as art

Following the publication of Benjamin's text "The *Author as producer*" in the last century the question of the position of an artist became one of the most discussed issues.¹ In fact with the proliferation of means and ideas in art the question is even more relevant today. In this situation commentaries made in order to understand artwork not only tells us more than works explained, but often works as the mode of production preferred to original work of art itself. Of course in conditions of capitalist production artists are often forced to reduce their work to the interests of commodity only. Because of this artists who positioned themselves as an "autonomous" are still providing the hope of the possibility of critical work. For example, non-profit art publications or the use of 'poor images' in filmmaking are still more interesting in terms of their criticality.² It has a lot to do with the fact that there is the poverty of the "critical" itself. The "critical" today is operating by using terms of early modernism or it is the *commentary* on the modernist critique. When there is the poor image and the poor thinking, commentaries become prominent.

On the one hand commentaries offer an alternative to the mainstream brainwash, but on the other hand "commentary is the world's greatest super power: one crumbles under statements of intent, diplomatic analyses, and interpretive biographies. Commentary has become a sort of star personality. But it's also a tremendous force of intimidation and standardization: *Comment (faire) taire* - How (to make) silent - that which escapes preset ideas."³

In this short text I would like to show how an artist can respond to the question of an artist's position as a producer by using the existing technique, in this case editing, combined with his/her philosophy in relation to commentaries. Walter Benjamin's text already underlines the significance of commentaries as they play an important role in becoming a producer and using commentaries as a mode of production. The producer in his understanding is an artist who mobilises available means to secure the position. In his case this is possible only if an artist is already distinguished in terms of aesthetics as well as technological skills.

Today commentaries are largely proliferated and dominating the culture industry. One needs to find the mechanism which enables us to articulate ideas and to produce critical statements. Editing is a good mechanism in order to cope with the proliferated images and ideas in order to give the traditional images a new meaning in producing space-time. Perhaps it is one of the reasons that in contemporary art there is an increasing interest in editing, which is adopted from filmmaking. We should note that the turn to editing is not motivated only by the question of what an artist may or not may have taken from the other visual form, but the "return" to the universally familiar phenomenon of looking at one image and having another image spontaneously come to mind. The German filmmaker and artist Harun Farocki calls it a double multiplication. In this double multiplication, consisting of two pictures, one doesn't replace the other, but both are standing side by side. "At the editing table, one gets used to thinking of two pictures at once".⁴ This is an event of editing which makes a difference. The question of difference here is not the question of "doing either one or other, but joining the two".⁵ Editing signifies the event of 'joining the two' separated subjects.

HarunFarocki: Thinking with two images

Harun Farocki describes his work as a way of documenting "the industrialization of thought": the development of technologies and artificial devices that encroach on the activity of the human mind and senses. He also uses his technique of editing in order to comment on the society, which is already saturated by commentary and to the society where the thought is industrialised.

Harun Farocki ‘makes films about the industrialization of thought’. Influenced by critical theory, which is engaged in the critique of industrialization of knowledge, as well as by the most critical filmmaking and other visual forms, Farocki’s work can be characterized, precisely as thinking with images. This kind of thinking is close to the work by Deleuze, who theorised cinema as the philosophy of images, in order to suggest the strategy for the “critical and clinical” work, when “sale promotions replace philosophy”.⁶ The explosion of visual means and their meaningful strata created space from which to speak about images. There is no space outside images, from which to speak about images. Cinema created the confrontation of images: on the one hand there is a visual environment, a space of images which we come across elsewhere; on the other hand there is a space of the filmic reality, where we see the same images through the prism of artists’ perception. Or it is the confrontation between the panoramic world and the discrete filmic world. On the one hand there is the machinality of perception of images surrounding us and on the other hand there is a space created by artists’ perception of this machinality. Farocki positions himself in between working like a machine and working as an artist. As a result his work is joining two separated elements of art: work and subject. Work ends up reproducing the subject.

In a filmic reality one aspect is providing continuous transformations: separateness of images. From its inception cinema is separated from its origin, which is photography. This separateness creates the possibility for cinema to turn the flow of images into a continuous world. Perception gives objects a status, but also distributes these objects out in space and in time in order to find the point of their interrelation, point where they are separated and where they can be joined again. In the age of industrialised thought the status of the image and its perception is different. Images separated from their origins have their place as different “lives”. Farocki privileges the lives of images as “lives next to our own”.⁷ Images in their “peculiar material immateriality” are reality in their own rights.⁸ They don’t exist as objects among other objects. They are perceived through someone else and are always destined for the perception of somebody’s eyes. Instead of perception there is an exchange of perception or perceptual exchange. It is because by the powerful impact of cinema the borders between the machinality of our perception of the surrounding visual space and the artistic vision became indistinguishable. As a result the link between those two is broken.

How can an artist cope with the absence of the link between the real and the imagery? Perhaps with the help of what is produced by the loss of the *linkage* itself? The link between the real and the imagery is broken because the time of the filmic reality is different from the time in the common sense understanding of it. This makes speaking of the world impossible and directs us to the use of images in order to speak about the world by using images of the world.

Because compared to the empirical movement-image based cinema, which constitutes time in the course of time, i.e. a succession present in an extrinsic relation of before and after, so that the past is a former present, and the future is a present to come by transcending:

“In the modern cinema the time-image is no longer empirical, nor metaphysical; it is “transcendental” in the sense Kant gives this word: time is out of joint and presents itself in the pure state”.⁹

The linkage between the real and imagery is also broken, because editing creates the image of time which is indirect. Because of this linking the real and the imagery will not be possible again. Is there any possibility to create something to reconstruct the link back? Harun Farocki’s work examines this moment in detail. From the late 1970s he started to use found images, as well as already existing material for his so-called *essay-films*. In the contemporary art world using found footage and found texts and turning them into films or into installations is ubiquitous. Harun Farocki started this activity long before the expansion of video and film into art began. He has been occupied with this question since the early 1970s. Farocki writes about making of his film “Between Two Wars” (1978):

“Eight years ago I read an analytical piece in the journal *Kursbuch* Nr.21. It was one and half pages long and I nearly had a stroke. It was as if I had found the missing shard that finally made up a complete image. The long process that led to this film begun at that moment and I was able to construct the image from these fragments, but the destruction was not thereby nullified. The reconstructed image was an image of deconstruction”.¹⁰

As I mentioned already, for Farocki editing always involves looking at two pictures. One of the pictures is the picture from the film, the indirect image of time; the second is the picture of time in its “common sense” understanding. His work then is the juxtaposition of the work with the *commentary* on this work. The image of time is separated from the time itself. In Farocki’s work time exists as the commentary only and it is by commenting on the image of time we can reconstruct the lost link. Yet Farocki is not interested in the linkage or simply linking these two pictures, but to discover the exchange between the eye

and machine, which is a sort of perceptual exchange between the subject and machine.

Harun Farocki's work marks a new understanding of editing and the question is not anymore how the subject *can* be perceived, but how it *is* perceived already? It can also be called editing images by thinking about images. Farocki understands very well that the contemporary world of images is always accompanied by commentaries. For the image industry the *commentary* exists as a mode of production. This is a reason why Farocki thinks with two images at the same time; the character of his film, "*Between two Wars*" the photographer (played by Peter Nau, *Filmkritik* co-editor) insists:

"One must, above all, make two images. Things are in such a state of flux and it is only when one makes two images that one is able to determine the trajectory of that movement".

Editing: fabulation of what is gone missing

Harun Farocki juxtaposes the found image with the media image, where the commentary mode of production is crucial. But he is not only interested to show, but also to discover why one needs to show those images. When Farocki states that 'one image doesn't replace the previous one' he also means that the image 'naturalised' for an art work is not limited to the naturalised image, but creates a spectrum of images condensed in one. He often chooses a single news image as the basis of his film. His work is about learning from images, as well as representing what he learns from them. Instead of judging them, he treats this work as the reproduction of the subject.

In his film "*Workers Leaving the Factory*" (1995) Farocki demonstrates 'how for over a century cinematography had been dealing with just one single

theme".¹¹ The original film sequence of the same title by Lumiere brothers demonstrates within 45 seconds workers at the photographic products factory in Lyon owned by the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière rushing out of the shadows of the factory gates into the afternoon sun. Only here, in leaving the factory, are the workers visible as a social group. But where are they going? Are they going to a meeting? Are they going to the barricades? Or perhaps they are simply going home? These questions have preoccupied generations of documentary filmmakers. For the space before the factory gates has always been the scene of social conflicts. Moreover, this sequence has become an icon of the narrative medium in the history of the cinema. Harun Farocki explores this scene right through the history of film. The result of this effort is a fascinating cinematographic analysis in the medium of cinematography itself, ranging in scope from Chaplin's *Modern Times* to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone*. Farocki's film shows that the Lumière brothers' sequence already carries within itself the germ of a foreseeable social development: the eventual disappearance of this form of industrial labour.¹²

By juxtaposing with this sequence other existing visual documentation of workers leaving the factory Farocki creates the commentary on transformations which occurred by the dynamic social events and are not necessarily visible. Because of that there is the need to visualise these events by discovering them from the existing data of images available not only from the film industry, but also from the other forms of the visual culture. It is made in order to learn from images and Farocki's endeavour is a kind of *visual critical studies*. His methodology is also close to the methodology created by the Frankfurt school and following cultural theories. In the work of critical theory it is not a theory that is privileged but the methodology which is based on principles of theory, especially of philosophical knowledge in order to be able to be critical of increasing standardisation of perception and knowledge. The form to represent

their ideas often is an essay, which doesn't privilege philosophy or other forms of writing, but using the very basic material of writing, which is a text.¹³ Harun Farocki doesn't privilege filmmaking over other forms of art, but instead uses the material of visual culture, which is an image. He developed the body of work which is based on principles of filmmaking and art, by using editing to create his essay-films. His essay-films are directed towards learning from images.

He explains that 'learning from images' is not so much a question of having power over the image or a consistent subject position towards the image. Usually this would allow the filmmaker access to complete knowledge. Instead he insists on pursuing photography's separation of reference and discourse, by proving this to be a separation of the subject as well as a separation within the subject itself. The collection of images from different resources creates the visual index, by repeating the same event in different situations and providing the viewer with the data of images. The contemporary person is capable of perceiving many images at once if these images are combined to tell the story. It is the index of events in their combination that creates the story.

Farocki juxtaposes the story with the artist's *commentary*. He sees the work in the edit suit *where there is no space outside images, from which to speak about images*. Farocki places himself quite deliberately in the dialectic between "working like a machine" and "working as an artist" and for him the question is not doing either one or the other, but joining the two. He treats images as the language: in order to understand the natural language one separates the mechanism of the language from its context: how one speaks and from which viewpoint is speaking possible? Speaking of the natural language one concentrates on the mechanism of language. Harun Farocki in his language of

editing concentrates on the context and as a result perception of the subject defines editing.

Farocki links what is represented to the perceiving subject in an act of confrontation and defines existence as being the process by which one places oneself in relationship to something other, as a form of taking up the position. As a result, the relevant concept of perception is based on the capacity of images to establish and validate a space in which the *mise-en scène* of a subject can take place. In other words he contrasts the subject with the subject's own radical 'other'.

Harun Farocki finds it necessary to create a visual archive of topics of cinematography in relation to the event, which he examines. "I have collected images from several countries and many decades expressing the idea of "exiting the factory", both staged and documentary - as if the time has come to collect film-sequences, in the way words are brought together in a dictionary".¹⁴ This is in order to receive the full picture of events and things, which are fragmented in images, lost and separated from each other in the tension of time and gone missing. His work as an artist consists of using the image and commentary in order to *produce* the fabulation and to bring together "what is gone missing".¹⁵

¹ Walter Benjamin, The Author as Producer, *New Left Review*, 1/62, July-August, 1970

² Hito Steyerl, In defence of the poor image, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/94>

³ Jean -Luc Godard, On September 11th, http://kinoslang.blogspot.com/2009/03/godard-on-september-11th_18.html

⁴ Harun Farocki, Kaja Sylverman, *Speaking of Godard*, New York: New York University Press, 1998.

⁵ Harun Farocki, Kaja Sylverman, *Speaking of Godard*, New York: New York University Press, 1998.

⁶ Giles Deleuze, *What is philosophy?* Verso, London, 1985

⁷ Harun Farocki, in *Working in Sightlines*, ed. by T.Elsaesser, Amsterdam University Press,

⁸ Harun Farocki, in *Working in Sightlines*, ed. by T.Elsaesser, Amsterdam University Press,

⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time -Image*, p.271

¹⁰ Harun Farocki, in *Working in Sightlines*, ed. by T.Elsaesser, Amsterdam University Press,

¹¹ Harun Farocki, *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik*, see: <http://www.farocki-film.de>- *Workers leaving the factory* is the title of the first cinema film ever shown in public by Lumiere brothers in 1895.

¹² Harun Farocki, , S. 49-55, see also, <http://www.farocki-film.de/>

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature*, volume one. Trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 3-4.

¹⁴ Harun Farocki, , S. 49-55, see also: <http://www.farocki-film.de/>

¹⁵ Giles Deleuze used this phrase elsewhere especially in relation to Bergson's notion of the fabulation. He insists that there are people and places missing from the narrative of history. Fabulation can bring it back. He elaborates this question again in his work on the cinema.

