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Entries towards a Society of Ramification

In 1993, Harun Farocki concluded an essay, published at the beginning of his California years, with the statement: “calculative operations [... are] a powerful development which excludes me and shuts me out. My only means of defense is to make films about it. I make films about the industrialization of thought.”¹ Written under the impact of a new kind of image-regime reporting from the U.S.-allied Operation Desert Storm in Iraq on the TV in Berkeley and elsewhere in 1991, Farocki exemplifies that development through an invented scene in Baghdad with a “man reading the newspaper.” He speculates that “[i]t will soon be possible to beam through the clouds and then the houses that receive reflections, and transfer them into images. For greater vividness, the satellite perspective will be translated into that of the young boy who is cleaning the man’s shoes while he reads his newspaper on the Baghdad streets.” Farocki speculates about a technology that allows information (or ‘data’) to travel through climate and built environments. It would ignore the laws of nature, move through walls, and cross borders as if it was an Israeli soldier, a mobile phone, a data-center, or an IP-address. While political filmmakers during the early 1970s analyzed the spatial politics of images between ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’ by perfecting the principle of montage,² Farocki proposes with this scene a spatial politics of an image-regime that refuses to provide the intellectual position between frames of two images. In other words, what we have here is the unprecedented intensification and stratification of a spatiality that certainly left the two-dimensional surface of the image-frame in favor of a picture-processing apparatus operating from a distance, in real time, on the ground—but not only. It also stretches the three-dimensional space of

1 Farocki, Harun, 1993. “The Industrialization of Thought”, trans. Wilson, Peter, in: *Discourse*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Detroit: Wayne State University Press. p. 77.

2 See the seminal essay-film *Ici et Ailleurs. Méthodes de pensée et de travail de la révolution palestinienne* by Dziga Vertov Group (Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin) and Anne-Marie Mièville, 1970/1974.

horizontal-territorial calculation towards the ramified texture of an amount of parallel spaces each with its own politics, infrastructures, technology, perspective, and materiality. The re-configuration of image-space must, in turn, affect the concept of the 'frame', which has served as a political image-instrument to define positioning. The 'frame' served to demarcate position, perspectives, relations, and control towards the 'image-space'. The well-rehearsed and secure position, e.g., facing an image, might still exist but is re-generated permanently, folded, and ramified into multiple dimensions: front but also back, above, and below. That means, the image does not operate through the two-dimensionality of the *frame* any longer, but through *volume* that asks for measurement and scaling. The man with the newspaper and the boy with the satellite perspective constitute together a trans-local spatiality conceived through a set of partial perspectives. We know that Farocki distanced himself from the 1917-revolutionary film-concept of 'montage' around the same time while he was working on *Interface* (1995) and recording the conversations with feminist and critical theorist Kaja Silverman for the book *Speaking About Godard* (1998). Both lead him to the idea of 'soft montage', which weakens the clear-cut position of a signified territory between images. Farocki arrives there by reflecting about the industrialization of image-technology of the 20th century towards an 'automized image' in the future: mobile video technology, electronic cameras, satellite images. Gradually, a 'next stage of rationalization' as Farocki named that process of automatization, would exclude the filmmaker's power of control, and thus, the power to claim authorship. On one side, such a process may lead to 'emergency cinema',¹³ 'selfie'-culture, Minecraft, 'big data' and Google Street View or Eigen-faces—all forms of popular image-processing that is based on consumer-generated content or viewer-producer quantity. It synchronizes the user with the camera eye's 'subjective shot', that means, the user produces the image while being part of operating the image. On the other hand, the 'automized image' makes it necessary to redefine the political contract

3 Abounaddara, a Syrian film-collective that operates as an online-platform.





of the image-maker with the image enacting/determining an anathema of alienation that 'excludes me and shuts me out'. What to do with it? Farocki proposed: "My only means of defense is to make films about it." This kind of image marks the pretext for the arrival of the 'principle of navigation' as a new image-regime in the 21st century. The following notes are a revised version of my talk "The Industrialization of Thought" for the conference *The Proxy and Its Politics* on June 24, 2017. These notes propose a set of initial entries to address the current paradigm shift in our relation to image-regimes, mainly regarding the formation of a new spatiality, which the 'proxy' implicitly proposes, and the constitution of a subject-under-erasure. In particular, the latter has been debated since computational processes have become forms of popular cultures. The subject faces now a re-enforced pressure under the spatial politics of proxies.

(1)

It might seem outdated to refer to the early 1990s in a conference in 2017 that is dedicated to questions of image-technologies under current contemporary conditions of algorithmic architectures, drone-technologies, and the 'datalogical turn'. Not only, however, did the 'geopolitical change' on global scale around 1989⁴ profoundly alter the political order in a post-Cold War world, it also coincided with the beginning of the domestic usage of cybernetic power that soon will take the standardized forms of Email-programs, online search-engines, and computer-games manifesting a new popular culture of navigating and surfing. Much has been written about the ideologies of technology during that time.⁵ Farocki's practice alone offers an excellent archive for researching the shifts of image-regimes in relation to the development of technological systems in science and

4 See Smith, Terry (2009). "Questionnaire: Smith", in: Foster, Hal (ed.), "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'", *October*, October 2009. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 46-54.

5 Bender, Gretchen and Druckrey, Timothy (eds.), 1994. *Culture at the Brink. Ideologies of Technology*, Seattle: Bay Press. Deleuze, Gilles, May 1990. "Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle," in *L'Autre Journal*, Nr. 1.

warfare. For example, *Interface* (1994) investigates the mechanisms and semantics of image-making at the filmmaker's editing table. Or, *Eye/Machine* (2001) offers a form of visual research about the 'operational image' that does not narrate but operates an action.⁶ Farocki's commitment to a techno-realism always engaged with the technologies of the contemporary for studying the "dreams and nightmares of our epoch," as Walter Benjamin wrote. "Where does the world end," asks the female voice in Farocki's last installation *Parallel II* (2014) while the subjective shot perspective directs the viewer on the continuous flight across a digitized blue matter with geometric islands popping up and disappearing again.⁷ The frameless image is infinite: a line below and above articulating an image's *alterity*, as Serge Daney proposed to think the 'pragmatic distinction' between the 'visual' and the 'image' without abandoning the image as a concept in support of a new spatiality. In other words, starting with a reflection on that particular historical moment makes it possible to address the contemporaneity of the image through a shift from representation to non-representation.⁸ The image neither reports nor documents what will operate or process in the future anymore. The speculative question of "where does the world end?" in Farocki's *Parallel* offers a simple, almost naive, but poignant point of entry to the non-representational impact of the datalogical image.⁹ Each movement forward that the gamer activates, generates a pixel-element contributing to the emerging landscape of geometric islands amidst the blue oceanic matter, as if the computer-generated image itself wants to make sure that the 'subjective shot' does not move without land underneath. The 'subjective shot' seemingly got the permission

6 Farocki, Harun, 2004. "Phantom Images", *Public 29 Localities*. Toronto: York University, pp. 12–22.

7 Harun Farocki, *Parallel II*, 2014

8 See Vannini, Phillip (ed.), 2015. *Non-Representational Methodologies Re-Envisioning Research*, New York/Oxon: Routledge.

9 I am borrowing the notion of the 'datalogical' from Clough, Patricia Ticineto; Gregory, Karen; Haber, Benjamin and Scannell, R. Joshua, 2015. "The Datalogical Turn", in: Vannini, Phillip, pp. 146-164.

of air rights over land—it might not die from drowning. Here, non-representation is at stake and at play, literally, in practice, action, and performance. The image does not depict a scene in the past nor can it be anticipated in advance. Thus, the image ceased to represent and index but attaches itself to a contemporaneity and complexity that is closer to 'life' than to index and closer to process than to document. The operations of 'adaptive algorithms', as explained by Patricia Ticineto Clough et al., are constitutive for that complexity "that excludes me and shuts me out."¹⁰ They write that "[n]ew technologies such as parametric adaptive algorithmic architectures have given rise to a mathematics reaching beyond number to the incalculable and are no longer slowed by the process or practice of translating back to human consciousness."¹¹ In other words, the gamer's action in *Parallel* might only appear to be relevant for human perception. The industrialization of thought, however, puts pressure on *thinking* as an exclusively human capacity. Katherine N. Hayles most recent writing proposes the concept of 'unthought' in order to widen the spectrum of cognitive potentialities beyond human superiority of thought. She proposes to conceptualize the human-machine-relation by focusing on different kinds of cognitive processes.¹² The human's particularity is not her intelligence, necessarily, but her human form of cognition that stands neither below nor above machinic cognition. Such de-centering of the human puts pressure on the power of knowledge: we do know how to switch on the computer without knowing what it does while we sleep. What if the human only is the switch or its body operates like a battery for the computational process¹³ like Ted Pikul was for Allegra

10 Farocki, 1993, p. 77.

11 Ibid., p. 148.

12 Hayles, Katherine N., 2017. *Unthought. The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

13 This idea is also present in George Dyson's writing: "We're asleep at the switch because it's not a metaphor. In 1945 we actually did create a new universe. This is a universe of numbers with a life of their own, that we only see in terms of what those numbers can do for us. Can they record this interview? Can they play our music? Can they order our books on Amazon?" Dyson, George, 2012. "A Universe of Self-Replicating Code", Edge (Blog).

Geller's reality video-game *eXistenZ*?¹⁴ What if the human is excluded from the main purpose of computing, namely, processing data that run through data-centers, Atlantic cables and financial markets? The latter is done best without the slowness and vulnerability of human subjectivity. It expands the cybernetic question to energy resources and the de-centering of the human perspective that Brian Holmes proposes to discuss as Third-Order Cybernetics.¹⁵

(2)

Parallel II exposes the mechanisms of the 'datalogical image', which is an image beyond the image. Sometimes, it even is under pressure to be recognized as an image. The 'datalogical image', following Clough et al., calculates the 'unthought' for its operational principle. Let us approach the 'datalogical image' through the claim for a new spatiality that we can understand as a 'navigational landscape' as Reza Negarestani proposed.¹⁶ He speaks of an 'initial commitment' that sets an orientation for taking the next steps. The 'initial commitment' means to set foot into a 'navigational landscape' as if one takes the decision for committing to a location. What if this location is an image? What if that image is both frameless and infinite? "Where does this world end?" Where are we? Who are we? The 'initial commitment' conti-

14 David Cronenberg's film *eXistenZ*, 1999, is another brilliant example for debating the paradigm-shift starting in the 1990s.

15 Brian Holmes proposed in his talk the emergence of a Third-Order Cybernetics that there is no longer a limited human collectivity, but a generalized interactionism on the earth-systems level, which necessarily includes but does not privilege technical machines.' Brian Holmes, „Bis drei zählen: Jenseits des kybernetischen Entweder-oder“, in: *Nervöse Systeme*, 2017, ed. Franke, Anselm; Hankey, Stephanie and Tuszynski, Marek, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.

16 Negarestani, Reza (2013). "Navigating With Extreme Prejudices (Definitions and Ramifications)", in: *Encyclonospace Iranica*, Vancouver: Vancouver Access Artist Run Centre. Negarestani is one of the few contemporary thinkers reflecting accurately on 'navigation' as a condition for contemporary thought processing, however, it also seems to prolong a philosophical ignorance towards gender, race and politics. In other words, it does hardly offer any trans-disciplinary crossing into fields of practice and politics, which needs to be done.

nues with asymmetrical consequences, which is similar to the search-process online, when one searches for a particular information, say the internal architecture of a mound built by termites and, led by a chain of hyperlinks, ends up looking at the Eastgate Centre in Harare/Zimbabwe. Discussing the 'navigational landscape' in relation to an image-regime of the 21st century, Negarestani certainly provides a vocabulary for speaking about navigation as the contemporary condition for re-thinking the question of reason in philosophy. Farocki's late projects, however, provide a practice analyzing navigation as a form of popular culture and its politics, for which a vocabulary needs to be invented and developed. To demonstrate the new spatiality, let us look at another sequence of *Parallel II*: a skater is driving across a landscape. He skates and skates, suddenly—as if trapped in a time-hole—he falls off 'the world' into another layer of ground. As if it was a bad accident or as if he hit the magic point on the earth's ground, he falls into the dark matter below the landscape, thick with ruins of an obsolete and exhausted mining industry. Is the dark matter the persistent underworld of industrial modernity, containing the invisibility of treasures of knowledge, present yet invisible to the skater's/gamer's eye? Or is, rather, the dark matter an industrial modernity exhausted by rare earth material extraction? Who is the skater capable of crossing borders, who could afford to take the risk of falling off the patterned industrial landscape and survive?

(3)

Following this line of thought, what emerges subsequently is a new spatiality from the image, which functions as a navigational landscape "that neither faces toward the subject nor wants to tell a story."¹⁷ What does this mean? The 'datalogical image' is an absolute operation, i.e., one which is only logical to itself and may intend to be completely unrecognizable to humans. The datalogical condition has an effect on the subject-figure as Clough et al. propose: "the architectural algorithms of [big] data make use of the unknowable or the incomputable in a non-conscious manner that points to the

17 Ibid.

further *decentering* of human cognition, consciousness, and preconsciousness." It trans-forms subjectivity towards a subject that can neither be interpellated, nor resist interpellation. Can we go further, and ask whether that subject is e-jected from subjecthood—a subject without Subject? It can be speculated that in the 'navigational landscape', the 'I' is no subject in the political sense. Returning to the sequence with the skater will provide an entry here: the moment when the skater had fallen through the time-hole, he twists and turns around losing any sense of gravity. It is as if the unconscious would swirl around in disorientation. The interpellating call is all-immersive, pluri-directional, and invisible, neither grounding nor resisting. In navigation, the subject is e-jected from subjecthood like a DVD used to be e-jected from the computer's hard-drive. The writings of artist and theorist Susan Schuppli are helpful to think with here. Drawing from her long-term research in case-studies when computational space processes the image as a conflict zone, she recently argued: "Screen space has multiplied and refracted the 'frames of war' into complex field[s] of sensors, software and servers that track their targets across the electromagnetic spectrum."¹⁸ In other words, the subject-figure is a figure in a definitional crisis that continuously adapts its focus. It calibrates its vision; it re-frames its perception; it tries to read the pixel. A good example of an e-jected subjecthood is the blurred image: the blur perfectly feeds the desiring machine of a data-society in which the subject continuously tries to find entry, suffering from the Fear-Of-Missing-Out the non-human or inhuman forms of knowledge. The blurred image continuously produces the desire to see, to decipher, to project, and to index—habits, knowledge, and practices that humans have trained for hundreds of years in academic, cultural, and domestic life. Here it is the skater again, from a sequence of Farocki's *Parallel II*. Now he is leaving the so-called 'demo area' of the video-game. The demo area is the norm, the order, the front-end categorized. Desire drives him to cross the line to the forbidden area, hosting the PCU

18 Schuppli, Susan, "Media as conflict zone," talk for the conference Architecture and Wars, convened by Samia Henni, ETH Zurich, June 2017.

Library on the other side. Crossing the threshold comes with almost inaudible noise and a visible blur as pixelation that indicate the datalogical borders to the back-end where the datalogical happily records that what desire produces. 'We live montage', Jodi Dean wrote, in a period where images travel faster than words processing the infinite¹⁹ image. Distance is filled up with a political economy of pixelation that runs out of actuality (is obsolete) while continuously demands the labor of re-focusing, adapting, calibrating, re-calculating, regenerating, and archiving. Such technical visual processes in digital image processing can be observed in several most recent contemporary artistic projects.²⁰

(4) What if the 'society of control', as Deleuze brilliantly proposed in 1990, mutated into a 'society of ramification'? What if the mole has lost its power and the serpent exhausted its capacity to control, because the *termite* never comes alone?²¹

19 Dean, Jodi, 2016. "Faces as Commons. The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism," in: open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain, Amsterdam: Stitching Open!

20 Recent examples are Filipa César's "Transmissions From the Liberated Zones" (2015); Susan Schuppli's "Trace Evidence" (2016); Hito Steyerl's "How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File" (2013), and Oraib Toukan's "When Things Occur" (2016).

21 Deleuze, Gilles, May 1990. "Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle," in: *L'autre journal*, Nr. 1. For picturing Foucault's 'society of control' (1975), Deleuze uses the allegory of the mole regulating the vertical stratification of power, while he proposes the *serpent* meandering horizontally through space, fast and slippery, provoking desire to test the unknown and the monstrous. In my talk, I proposed the allegory of the *termite* to picture a multi-part entity living in clusters, collectives and colonies, partly invasive, refusing individualized architectures such as a nest and continuously carrying bits and pieces of environmental matter for building an architecture of ramification.